

A bronze horse sculpture is rearing up on a rocky ledge overlooking a waterfall in a lush forest. The waterfall flows over several tiers of mossy rocks into a pool of water. The surrounding area is filled with green foliage, ferns, and trees, creating a serene and magical atmosphere.

TAYIN MACHRIE

DARKBURN

BOOK 1 FALL

Darkburn

Book 1

Fall

Tayin Machrie

Copyright © 2023 Tayin Machrie

This is an authorised free edition from www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale, translated, or rewritten. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author.

Darkburn

Book 1

Fall

0

He had never seen one like it before, and he didn't know what to do.

It was so much bigger than the others he'd encountered. The heat and stink and fear were so much greater. It moved more slowly: it did not rush forward to hurl itself at him as the previous ones had. It crawled towards his horse, which was already in a total panic, twitching and trying to rear up – to get away. He struggled to hold her steady beneath him while he wondered whether he could tackle this one alone. Where was Arguril?

Dead, an inner voice told him. *And you next.*

He knew it was the terror speaking. Arguril mustn't be dead. No. He couldn't have failed that badly. He was starting to burn now, even through his cloak, while he tried to summon up the courage to wield his sword and attack the creeping thing. But his spirit shrank and shrivelled in its heat.

It had no head. It had legs, yes, to crawl, claws, yes, to grab, but no head, no reason, no compassion: only a demand for death. Where all the others had been charcoaled into midnight, he saw at this one's heart a red glow burning.

But that is not its heart, he thought, it has no heart. It has only hatred. Paralysing, monstrous, overpowering hatred. He was pinned in the saddle by it. He could not move. He could not raise his sword.

The mare took his decision for him. She reared up, crashed down through the undergrowth, and ran.

Chapter 1

There ought to have been nobody else here.

So what had caused that sudden rhythmic thudding, as if a frantic heart had started to beat in the grey depths of the forest?

Yaret felt the hoofbeats drumming through the ground before they became audible. It sounded like a solitary horse, but still... In fourteen years of travel through this slice of wilderness, where tangled forest met the lonely grasslands, there had never been a horse – or another human – to be seen.

The hoofbeats were coming closer rapidly, crashing through the undergrowth in reckless haste. Swiftly Yaret picked up the waterskin and stepped away from the bank of the Darkburn.

Here, the Darkburn was no more than a lively brook, not yet a river. After gathering itself upon the moors, it dived into this gnarled forest of ancient oak and hutila and greythorn. Apart from the constant chanting of the Darkburn's waters, this had always been a quiet place.

Until now. The hooves grew louder, faster, their vibration making the faded foliage quiver: the urgent thuddings of a heart that was about to break.

The horse burst through the bushes in a fountain of dead leaves and splintered twigs. It was riderless. And it was terrified.

Foam covered its snorting mouth: sweat ran down its heaving brown flanks from the empty saddle. Yaret stepped forward with vague thoughts of trying to catch it. But the horse barely slowed. Its eyes rolling, its breath harsh and rasping, it plunged away upstream to stumble noisily between the straggling trees at the forest's western edge, where Yaret had left the donkeys.

The two donkeys looked up in mild surprise, but the horse did not stop. Charging out from the trees, it galloped on, hoofbeats diminishing quickly now, across the open grass until it was out of sight and hearing.

As the quiet returned Yaret stood still, considering that empty saddle. She had no wish to go any deeper into the tree-meshed darkness from which the horse had burst in terror. But a fallen rider might be lying somewhere in those shadows.

She hesitated, unnerved, and irritated by her own anxiety. The horse was nothing to do with her. Easier to just walk away.

Letting out a long sigh of resignation, she stepped into the gloom cast by the trees, alongside the infant Darkburn. Although the stream still sang on to itself, like a child at play, all else was silence. No bird calls, no small rustlings in the undergrowth. The bowed trees waited.

Yaret was readying herself to find a corpse. But she was not prepared for what came next.

A hundred yards in, the stench hit her with an almost physical force. It stopped her in her tracks and nearly knocked her over. A thick miasma of soot and ashes, charcoal and decay, it was death made palpable. It bludgeoned the soul and wiped out any other thought. Her mind went numb with fear.

Sick and helpless, her legs turned suddenly as weak as wool, Yaret fell on her knees. What was this – this burning horror, this overpowering dread as if the end of everything had come? Was this death? It was surely worse than death: for it was rage, despair, grief, hatred of all things, herself included. The annihilation of all hope. It filled her with a roaring emptiness.

She huddled crouching with her head wrapped in her arms, trying to bear it. The grief and fury were telling her to dash herself against a tree, to find some cliff down which to hurl and break her body. Curled in a ball amidst damp stems and leaves, she was aware that nothing else around her – except the gurgling water – moved at all. The very trees seemed stricken.

And then something came. With her arms around her head, Yaret glimpsed it only past the corner of her elbow. Down by the stream it crept: a long, black, burning shadow, crawling in the same direction that the horse had fled in.

She could feel the heat that emanated from it, even at this distance: as fierce as if the thing contained a furnace. Yet there was no sound above the water's murmur. The dread grew more intense, unbearable. Time slowed and stopped.

Do not move, do not look, she adjured herself. Be a bird, be a squirrel, something unthinking, something not worth notice. Be neither man nor woman nor mind nor heart.

She did not move, did not look, but stared at the ground, tried to become the insect in front of her climbing a stalk, not worth a second's observation. That small brown beetle climbing to eternity was all there was. There was nothing else.

At last time restarted. The cloud of sickness seemed to lift, a little. The heat was dissipating. Trickle by trickle, the oily tide of hatred and despair

receded. High in the canopy, a bird gave an alarm call and flew away with a sharp clatter of wings; the beetle reached its leaf, and Yaret raised her head.

“The donkeys!”

They had been in the path of that thing. But as she shakily stood up and gazed towards the forest edge, there silhouetted against the light were the dear familiar shapes of Dolm and Nuolo. She could tell by their stance that they were afraid; but they had not panicked. They had simply moved out of the way. The burning creature had been hunting for a horse, not donkeys.

A horse with an empty saddle and full saddlebags: the proof that there had been a rider not so long ago. What had the thing been pursuing? Horse or rider? Did it know the difference?

It knew the difference between horse and donkey. It had intent and purpose. It had been hunting for the rider, surely, but had not known the rider was not on the horse.

So where was the rider?

With even more reluctance than before, Yaret made herself walk on into the forest, following the Darkburn as it skipped and swirled downstream.

It was easy to see the way the crawling thing had come. It had laid a trail of smoke and desperation along the water's edge. In places the wet ground had charred beneath it and the grass had shrivelled into thin dead stalks. On drier ground this would have been a trail of fire.

The dread and hate and horror lingered too, like the aftermath of a bad dream. The stench was fading but left an aura of decay. Only the Darkburn chattered blithely on, quite unaffected.

How big had the burning creature been? The length of a horse, thought Yaret; no, even longer; but much lower to the ground. All body and crawling legs – no head to speak of, just a bluntness. Creeping, but creeping fast. A thing burnt black: yet not entirely. Within the charcoal body there had been a deep, half-hidden glow like red-hot embers.

Enough. Don't think about it now. It's gone. You'll know if it comes back.

She tried to walk silently, following the brook's amber waters as they ran through the trees. The forest was shadowy and knotted but not threatening, although the Darkburn had a dubious reputation, further down – a hundred miles further down, once it had become a mighty river. Too far away for more than muddled stories to have reached Yaret's home, up north in Obandiro. She saw no fallen rider, only the scorched trail.

But where had the hoofprints gone? She realised they had disappeared.

Doggedly Yaret retraced her steps until she spotted hoofprints in the mud beside the water. She frowned as she deciphered them. It seemed the horse had slithered down the opposite bank just here; the crawling thing had come from further back downstream to cut it off.

So she leapt from stone to stone across the swiftly-flowing burn, and clambered up the far steep bank, following the trail of skidding hoofprints.

Before long, the ascent became less steep. The ground flattened out into a stand of huge, graceful hutilas still in their late summer greenery, their arched branches showing the first faint tints of brown and gold. Between them there was little cover, only a mat of leathery leaves and strips of peeled bark. No fallen rider lay there. Yaret kept walking, scanning the ground for half a mile, until she came to the northern margin of the wood.

There before her lay the plain – the Darkburn Loft, looking slightly unreal in a shimmer of watery sunlight. A place free of distinctive landmarks or indeed of anything remarkable, it was bumpy with small rocky outcrops and dotted with stooped and stunted trees.

Behind it rose the softly purpled mounds of the Coban hills; far beyond them, a mere haze in the pale sky, were the mountains. West of those mountains, Obandiro waited for her. Home. Yaret sighed and looked back down to scrutinise the ground again.

It was hard to make out any trail. Deer and wild goats grazed the Loft, criss-crossing the thin pastures and creating their own maze of random paths. A horse's hoofprints were not easy to pick out for someone who was not a hunter by profession. Yaret was no hunter: she was a weaver, and a pedlar of woven goods. Expert in woollen cloth, but not in tracking.

As she walked, she grew frustrated by her failure to see more hoofmarks. Maybe the rider had fallen off miles away. She crossed a sprawling streamlet fringed with watercress, and squinted at the muddy banks: no hoofprints anywhere. Not far away there was a rocky outcrop, so she made for it, intending to climb up and look out from the top.

By the outcrop's base, amongst large tumbled boulders, was a leg. It was almost hidden in the grass. Once she got closer she could see that the leg was bent at an unnatural angle, and was attached to a body.

At first sight the man appeared to be dead. There was a lot of blood. Two crows perched on a rock expectantly.

She shooed the crows away and knelt down to inspect the man. Some of the blood was caused by the thornbush the body had crashed through in its fall. But by the head, the blood had pooled, warm and sticky, on the grass.

A youngish face, eyes closed, a week's growth of beard; and in the tangled curls of black hair there was an ominous swelling, blood oozing from it, where his head had struck a rock. But the man was breathing.

Yaret straightened up. "Right," she said, and looked around, assessing her position. She was twelve miles from her last stop; and she knew that place could offer her no refuge. It was eighteen miles to the next settlement, the first of her stops in the Coban hills.

There was no other farm or village in between. The two of them were stuck here on the nowhere of the Loft, totally alone – apart from a terrifying creature in the nearby forest; and somewhere, a runaway horse.

Surely out on the open plain the horse would easily outrun the creeping monster that pursued it. With any luck, it would lead it miles and miles away...

The donkeys. Better fetch them soon, she thought, make sure that they were safe. It might be possible to move the fallen rider if he could be got across Dolm's back. Yet even so Dolm would not be able to carry him far. Two miles, if she was lucky. And two miles would be no use.

But the rider was already well concealed here, by the rocks; so perhaps she could just move him enough to get him fully out of sight, and then pitch camp and tend to him.

Why do that? Gather your things now and go! Find the donkeys and get moving. Don't hang about here, with a dying man at your feet, and that thing of fire and darkness lurking. Go now, go now, GO NOW!

It was her own voice urging her, loud and strident in her head. She did not care for what it told her. But she halted, undecided for a moment, before she answered it.

"No. We pitch camp, and keep him here."

Chapter 2

First she assessed the rider's injuries. Most likely he'd been thrown from the horse into the rocks, and then had tumbled through the thorny bushes to the ground. His twisted right thigh was obviously badly broken, but at least there was no blood seeping through his breeches; the bone had not ripped through the skin. His arms seemed to be intact although his ribs might not be, for the leather jerkin was badly scuffed and full of grit.

But to Yaret's thinking the head wound was more worrying even than the leg. It was still slowly bleeding, and the young man showed no sign of consciousness.

Behind her in the rocky outcrop was a deep cleft – almost a cave, though not totally enclosed; it was open to a narrow slice of sky. In there, the rider would be fully hidden. So she grasped him firmly by the armpits, and with some effort pulled him two or three yards in until he lay within the gap between the high stone sides. The space was wide enough for both of them to shelter there.

During this process there was no change in the man's shallow breathing. He was far away and sailing on unknown seas, which was probably just as well, since the crooked leg seemed to have got straightened in the process of dragging. At least that saved Yaret the difficulty of trying to do it. Now the leg needed splinting: with wooden laths if possible, bound on with strips of cloth...

Donkeys. All her possessions were on the donkeys' backs. She needed to retrieve them. Having checked that the man's breathing was not obstructed, she stood up and left him lying in the rocky gap.

She ran most of the way back to the donkeys. On coming to the forest she skirted round the edge, although she had to pick her way across the Darkburn where it danced into the shadow of the trees.

And then she had to leap the trail left by the burning thing, marked out in scorched and blackened grass – a trail unlike any that she had ever seen. But the sense of horror, like the odour of decay, had faded now; and of the thing itself, there was thankfully no sign. A little further on, Dolm and Nuolo were waiting.

“Come on then,” said Yaret, as the donkeys strolled over to her. Nuolo was nervous; Dolm wasn't, or wouldn't show it, or had already forgotten any cause of fear.

After giving Nuolo a sympathetic caress, Yaret led the donkeys back across the stream and past the stand of serene hutilla trees. There she paused, reflecting. Hutilla bark – which the trees shed in profusion – was tough and durable. So, entering the wood, she gathered several lengths of curved grey bark, and added them to the donkeys' load.

With relief she left the forest, to head across the breezy spaces of the Loft. When she approached the outcrop, a few goats were grazing near it; that was a reassuring sign. They watched her with wary yellow eyes while she halted and unstrapped the donkeys' packs. As soon as they were free, the donkeys began industriously grazing too.

The rider lay where she had left him. Yaret stowed the packs beneath an overhanging boulder by the entrance to the cleft. This was as good a place as any for a camp: the rocks gave shelter, while the boggy streamlet a hundred yards away meant there was no need to go down to the Darkburn to fetch water. Her raincover could be stretched between the stone walls of the cleft to protect the rider.

At the same instant as this thought, the rain came, light but steady, as if it was setting in for some time. It greatly comforted Yaret. A thing of burning charcoal would not like the rain. And the steady drizzle formed a veil; already the distant wood was growing filmy, and within minutes it was barely visible. The goats became phantoms. The donkeys munched with unconcern.

Standing in the rain Yaret at last let herself relax. Apart from the occasional lion or moorhound, she seldom met with danger on her travels. Only in certain towns did she need this state of high alert, where she put it on with her breeches.

Male mode. It was more than just the donning of masculine clothes and keeping her voice low. It was also the shrugging on of a readiness to fight.

Last year in Havvich market, her disguise must have slipped: she'd found herself being trailed around the stalls by a pair of persevering drunks. When they tried to pull her down an alley, she head-butted one of them, and kicked the other between the legs so that he folded up as neatly as an ell of worsted. Danger was to be anticipated in Havvich. She hadn't expected to meet any in the empty lands down by the Darkburn.

But this rain was friendly. *Be neither man nor woman; be yourself.* That was from Madeo, the greatest of travellers. Good advice.

Time to tend the rider. Unrolling one of the packs Yaret found first her own cloak, and then a soft green cape that should have been delivered to Bruilde at her last stop, but which would now do to cover the injured man.

Next she unpacked the raincover, a roll of oiled linen which she stretched between the rocks above him. It gave good enough protection from the drizzle.

Then, beneath its shelter, she opened the other pack. In here were all her grandfather's samples, large squares of finely woven wool in a variety of coloured checks and stripes.

She picked out the mustard check, her least favourite; and dampening it, gently mopped away the blood congealing on the man's bruised head. After rinsing out the cloth, she made a cold compress for the swelling underneath the curls of hair.

Now the leg. With her knife she cut a cross in his breeches to expose the thigh. As she had thought, the skin was not broken, merely discoloured and badly swollen. She felt along the bone, pressing down through a layer of muscle – plenty of it, not much fat – and eased the leg until it seemed as straight as it would ever be. Perhaps not quite straight enough. Still, it would have to do.

On trying out the strips of curved hutila bark against the broken thigh, she found two lengths that cradled either side quite neatly. They made as good a support as could be managed in the circumstances. After some consideration, she chose the blue striped sample – never popular – and tore it into strips to tie the bark splints on.

Finally she laid the spare cape gently over him. The man's own cloak and breeches were of dark, plain wool: a fine twill, greenish grey. His shirt was brown linen in a loose weave beneath the leather jerkin.

Camouflage clothing, thought Yaret, well-sewn and well-worn. He had been on the road for a while, judging by his clothes' condition. But he had found time to wash himself if not his clothes. He did not smell, at least.

With that thought came another. Standing up, she walked out to the patch of bloody ground where he had fallen and emptied the waterskin over it, watching the reddened water sink into the grass. There might be wolves around; and mountain lions were known to prowl the Loft. Quite apart from anything else...

It crept across her mind, unbidden: the crawling shadow, burning with hostility. Could it scent blood? Well, she would make sure there was none for it to scent. As she went over to the boggy streamlet to refill the waterskin, she surveyed the landscape of the Darkburn Loft. All appeared peaceful under the hazy veil of rain.

Down at the streamlet the water was clear. Yaret gathered handfuls of watercress from its verge to add to supper. There was plenty of food in her

packs for tonight – indeed, for four or five days if need be.

But how long would her need be? How quickly would the rider regain consciousness? What could she do with him when – or if – he did come round?

Squatting by the water in the rain, she shook her head. Eat and sleep tonight. Think about the rest tomorrow. She wouldn't starve. Although no hunter, she was skilful enough with her bow to take at least one goat down before the others fled. And there were rabbit droppings everywhere. No, she wouldn't starve. She'd just be late.

She raised her head and gazed beyond the Coban hills, to the far land where her grandparents were waiting. But they wouldn't worry yet. She was ahead of her schedule in any case; she had a few days to spare, because of the abandoned homestead in Deloran, her last stop twelve miles back.

And now she began to wonder about that...

Chapter 3

The injured man did not wake up to eat. So Yaret sat back against the rock face and shovelled porridge straight from the pan into her mouth. It contained shreds of dried apple, and a handful of furzeberries which she had gathered earlier in the day and which turned the porridge purple. It didn't taste too bad, apart from the watercress. Tomorrow she could shoot a rabbit, although that would take longer cooking.

The small fire was still smouldering underneath the raincover. As the space began to fill with smoke, she threw handfuls of earth over the embers. There was no point trying to keep it going overnight; and she felt that it was safer to have no smoke to give away her presence.

On her way to Deloran yesterday she had smelt the smoke a mile before she got there. As she approached the long, low, sprawling farmhouse, it had appeared intact despite the thin grey pall that hung above it.

Not until she was close up did she see why the stone walls looked so dark: they were black with soot. The place was now a shell, for several roof beams had collapsed in the fire. The outbuildings had been burnt down too. When she touched a blackened wall it felt warm and faintly greasy.

There was no-one there to tell her what had happened. All the carts had gone, along with the animals: the roof had fallen in on an empty stable. So Bruilde and her people had escaped. But they hadn't taken much else with them. Most of the goods and furniture were still inside the house, charred and useless, stinking of acrid smoke. There must have been no time to rescue more.

Yaret stepped over the remains of the door and stood in the stone corpse of the kitchen. Dishes still on the table held the ashes of some ruined meal. The wind blew through.

Maybe the fire had started here. A fallen lamp, a too-hot pan, even an unswept chimney... so many things could happen.

But seldom did in an establishment like Deloran. Bruilde's household was well organised; a strong-minded woman in her seventies, Bruilde kept everyone in line.

The farm had been one of the stops on Yaret's route where she had liked to linger for a day or two: safe in her female-hood, she would exchange gossip and collect tales to take home to her grandparents. Bruilde had been a friend of her grandfather, who always gave Yaret a long letter to carry to

her. The sealed letter was still in her pack with nobody to give it to. No-one to give her back a letter in exchange. Where was Bruilde now?

Despite all the gossiping, Yaret knew little about Bruilde's connections. She had no idea where the household – farmhands, their families, and animals – might have gone. But gone they were.

Thoughtfully chewing her porridge, she cast her memory back another week, to the market at Moreva. She liked the small town, which was friendlier than Havvich, and usually had a carefree, almost festive feel. But this time she'd found people edgy and preoccupied.

"No time to think about clothes now," said one passer-by as she set up her samples in the corner of the market.

"Why not?"

"More important things are going on." He was a workman with a sack of flour on his shoulder and a worried crease between his brows. "Kelvha is on the march, haven't you heard?"

"They're always on the march," said Yaret, who was in male mode. "Always fighting some border skirmish or other."

"This is different."

"Why? Who are they at loggerheads with this time?"

The man shook his head. "Not sure. There's some trouble going on down south, I think. This isn't the usual small-time raiders or clan brawls. It could be serious. Kelvha are buying up supplies: food, armour, everything."

"An army needs good woollen cloaks," suggested Yaret.

"And you can't supply them till next spring. Forget it. I'm laying up stores of food before they can buy the lot." He adjusted the sack upon his shoulder and walked on.

Yaret took only one order there, for a disappointing four yards of russet serge. She could learn little more about the trouble on Kelvha's borderlands. In spite of what the man had said, she suspected raiders, or else the usual clan posturing. The Kelvhans did a lot of that, although she wouldn't have dared to use the word "posturing" to any Kelvhan. Their squabbles were generally about land and rank: who owed tribute and respect to who. Hierarchy meant everything in that kingdom.

Not that she'd ever been properly inside Kelvha. Round the edges was close enough; she traded with the Outer Kelvhan towns like Moreva, who then traded on to the interior. She'd seen a few Kelvhan nobles in her travels, and had admired their fine horses from a safe distance. The Kelvhans were courteous in a lordly way but made no attempt to hide their weapons, be they jewelled dagger, ornate sword or decorative bow: and

they dressed well. Lots of embroidery in gold and silver thread. What they would do with her grandfather's homespun wool, Yaret could not imagine.

But that was the nobles. There must be plenty of homespun underlings in Inner Kelvha. Yaret had sometimes thought of venturing there to find out. Caution, and her grandmother's frequently expressed dislike of Kelvhans, had prevented her.

So: there was trouble in Kelvha. There was unease in Moreva. There was a burnt-out farmhouse at Deloran.

And further north, the week before, there had been some story of a burning, overheard at the Gostard inn... some remote village wiped out by fire, though nobody had seen it, and if there were no survivors, as reported, then who had spread the tale?

Yaret had asked the company, "What happened? Was it a lightning strike?"

"Naaah," said the tale-teller in a long note of contempt. "You're soft in the head, boy. Lightning burn a whole village down? It were sorcery, that's what."

"Whose sorcery?"

He put his face down level to hers. His teeth were bad. He took her for a gormless teenager, so she acted one, wide-eyed and ignorant.

"Liol's," he said. "You heard of Liol? The old Sorcerer? Nobody told you that bedtime story?"

Yaret shook her head.

"Lives on the mountain-tops," said the man with a happy snarl. "Eats babies. And small boys. Doesn't bother to cook 'em first."

"Leave the lad alone," said the innkeeper peaceably, polishing a tankard. He knew who Yaret was; she'd been stopping at his inn for fourteen years – half her life – first with and then without her grandfather.

"That wizard Liol is so old he's just a bag of bones," said the customer with a leer. "That's why he crunches up those babies. Always hungry. Yum, yum."

The innkeeper laughed. "Like you, Abrel," he said, and pushed the dish of fried bar snacks across the counter to him. Once Abrel was busy impressing the rest of the company, the innkeeper turned to Yaret.

"Best eat in your room," he said. "And lock the door." He handed her a slice of cold egg pie.

"Thanks, Rud." But she lingered to ask him, under the hubbub of the bar, "What really happened in that village?"

“Who knows?” Rud was a big, slow-moving, unruffled man. But now he was troubled. “Just rumours. There are always rumours.”

“Who’s that Liol that he talked about?”

“Leori. Can’t even get his name right. Abrel knows nothing about him.”

“But you do?”

“Leori’s stayed here a few times,” said Rud. “He’s old, I’ll grant. But burning villages or eating babies – that’s just nonsense.”

“He’s harmless, then?”

Rud hesitated. “I wouldn’t say exactly that.”

“Is he really a wizard?”

“Take your pie and go,” Rud told her. So she did.

Now, sitting underneath the raincover, she put down the porridge pan and thought about egg pie. It had been very good, with soft, crumbly pastry and herbs. And Rud: that easy-going, watchful man. She wished she’d had the chance to ask him more, but after a night kept awake by the noisy carousing downstairs – and the odd rattle at her door handle – she had left early, before anyone was up.

Leori. That was interesting. The old stories back home mentioned the wizard Lioru... But those had been set down by Madeo the Bard four hundred years ago, so it couldn’t be the same one. Perhaps it was just a name for wizards.

Twilight was coming: the misting rain was darkening to grey. She checked the sleeping man. There was no change, even when she shook his shoulder and tickled his cheek. His breathing was long and slow as if he were sunk deep in hibernation.

The donkeys ambled over to the rocky cleft, wanting their usual bedtime handful of oats. She rubbed their damp backs and shoulders and stroked their rough foreheads. Nuolo nuzzled back, while Dolm regally accepted her caresses as the homage that was his due.

After giving them their oats she put the remains of the porridge in a bowl for the morning. Then she set dried peas to soak in the pan. They needed a full day’s soaking, but she wouldn’t be going anywhere soon, not unless the fallen rider woke. Not even if he woke.

She checked him again – no change – before she lay down on her bedroll next to him. She placed her bow and three arrows ready on a low rock on her other side. Her knife was by her hand, as always. The donkeys stood sentinel outside the cleft: grey shadows stoic in the dusk. They would warn her if anything came.

Even so, it was a long time before she could allow herself to drop down into sleep.

Chapter 4

It was only a small noise in the darkness, but it woke her instantly. She'd snatched up the knife and was already on her feet before she worked out what had caused it.

The man was gasping. Laying down the knife, Yaret squatted by his side. There was half a moon and even underneath the raincover she could see the faint glistening of his open eyes. He was muttering something in a language that she did not know. It wasn't Kelvhan.

"Hallo?" she said to him quietly in Standard. "You hurt yourself falling off your horse. Don't try to move: you broke your leg. You're quite safe, but it's the middle of the night."

There was silence for a few seconds. Then he said, in Standard, "I need to pee."

So that was a good sign, although it involved a lot of fumbling with his breeches and the second cooking pan. Most of it ended up in there, as far as she could tell. It occurred to her that other functions might be harder to deal with. But hopefully that wouldn't happen in the middle of the night.

The man lay back again.

"Roth," he whispered.

"Is that your horse? The horse ran away." She listened to his laboured breathing. It sounded as if he were in pain, but she did not ask because she had nothing to offer him for it.

"Leg," he said after a moment.

"Your thigh bone got broken. It's splinted. Try not to move it. Do you want a drink of water?" When he nodded, she propped his head up in one hand and held the waterskin to his lips. He drank.

"Ah," he said at last, which she took to mean *enough*. Or possibly *it hurts*.

"You hit your head as well," she said. "Try to sleep now till morning."

As far as she could tell, he was asleep again quite quickly. Soon after dawn, when she got up, he was softly snoring.

So she left the semi-cave, emerging to see a feeble sun perched on the eastern horizon amidst long thin rags of cloud. As she performed the morning ritual of Haedath, she thought of her grandparents: how they would also at around this time be touching the earth, then putting their fingers to heart, lips, forehead in turn, murmuring the same words in Bandiran that she was now murmuring.

A sudden wave of longing for her grandparents washed over her. Someone to advise her, to tell her she was doing the right things. She let the feeling flow through and down to the ground that their feet shared. Then she imagined them setting out upon their daily tasks: her grandmother would go to feed the chickens, milk the goats and check the other animals. Her grandfather, still strong though somewhat stiff these days, would head straight upstairs to his loom.

They might exchange a few words about Yaret, and discuss where she was now— Grandda knew the route backwards, having made the journey to sell his cloth for so many years before he broke his hip. But their speculations would be routine. They wouldn't worry.

And in fact despite her affection for them both, she wouldn't want Grandda to be here with her after all. She had come to value greatly the solitude of these annual journeys. The visits to the towns – selling cloth and taking orders – had become almost the least important part of them. It was the lonely stretches in between that made her feel alive.

Yaret looked out across the Loft, at the landscape that seemed to hold so much hidden meaning although nothing disturbed its airy everyday tranquillity. To the west the clouds had cleared and were mere feathers, high and distant as if some giant white owl had been chased across the sky. Against them wheeled a single bird: no owl, too big, soaring far above a gang of rooks who were throwing themselves around in the air with reckless skill.

She washed and tidied up her things, greeted the donkeys, and walked down to the streamlet to drink and refill the waterskin. The quiet expanse of Loft around her felt both familiar and strange. Although she'd crossed this stretch of land so many times, she'd never stopped here overnight. Usually she camped a further eight miles on, at the Loft's northern edge. It was a long haul from the last stop at Deloran, but Grandda had never paused here either and she kept to his routine.

She remembered that she had once asked Grandda why he didn't linger on the Loft. That must have been after her first journey with him, when she was fourteen. He had hesitated before answering.

“Chance of wolves and lions, amongst other things.”

“That's true of half the places where we stayed,” Yaret had objected. “It wasn't a bad spot.”

For the Darkburn Loft – long and narrow, running parallel to the Darkburn river and the forest – was a peaceful place to travel through, barring its chill winds: it was high and wild and dry underfoot, the thin soil

barely covering its rocks. The Loft had water, wood and wildlife, the three requirements for a camp. Yet Grandda had always crossed it at its narrowest point, heading straight north towards the Coban hills.

“Does nobody live there, on the Loft?” she had asked him.

“Nobody.”

“Something does,” Gramma had put in, “but not people.” Grandda had given his small, stubborn wife a frowning look.

“What does live there, then?” persisted Yaret.

“Plenty of animals,” said Grandda, and this time Gramma kept her mouth shut.

The Loft, it seemed, belonged to nobody. Like the Darkburn forest that enclosed the river, not only was it uninhabited, but nobody laid claim to it. Possibly it was not worth the trouble of laying claim to. Its pastures were too poor, and its winter storms too bitter. The hunched posture of its scattered trees betrayed the force of those bone-freezing winds.

At this time of year, however, as summer slipped into autumn – and now that the rain had stopped – the Loft was not unwelcoming. Everything looked tranquilly uncomplicated in the cool, clear air. Sometimes, in traversing it, Yaret had had the vague sense of another, unseen presence, but that could just have been a result of her grandmother’s obscure comment. Certainly the Loft held no feeling of malevolence.

Walking back to the camp, she ate a slice of last night’s porridge and checked the rider. Asleep; although he woke ten minutes later.

“Hallo,” said Yaret. But he was only half there. When she explained to him, again, that he had fallen off his horse, he seemed to barely take it in. He just shook his head a little as if troubled by a fly.

Yaret made him drink more water. She noted that his eyes were moving oddly; the right pupil looked larger than the other.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Ah.” It came out as a sigh. Maybe telling her his name was too much trouble. Maybe he could not remember it. That was worrying.

“What’s your name?” she repeated.

No answer. He wanted to sleep. That, too, worried her; but there was nothing she could do about it. Perhaps sleep would be the best thing for him.

So Yaret changed the dressing on his head, causing no more than a vague murmur in that unknown language. The swelling was still large and angry but at least there was no fresh blood.

Once he was sleeping soundly, she left him again. Fetching Nuolo, the smaller and more amenable of the donkeys, she led her over to the Darkburn forest.

Half way there she turned to gaze back at the outcrop where the rider lay. Nothing gave away his presence. Dolm was standing guard beside the cleft, but to a stranger's eyes he could easily be a lone wild donkey. The raincover was hidden and her packs were tucked well out of sight.

The rider's packs, however, might still be attached to the runaway horse; and the horse might still be in the area. Yaret intended to search for it. She would not go far into the forest. But round its edge she could look for the missing horse and also gather enough firewood to keep her going for a while.

As she walked she glanced frequently at Nuolo ambling unhurriedly beside her, checking her for signs of distress. But the donkey showed none until they reached the point where the Darkburn stream plunged into the trees – the point at which the horse had fled the forest and the burning creature had crawled after it. And then Nuolo was only a little twitchy. There was no trace of the creature's dreadful stink; nor of the intense onslaught of hatred that had almost overcome her. Wherever the thing was, it was not here. So Yaret crossed the stream.

No further tracks had added themselves to yesterday's. The hoofprints and the trail of scorched grass looked the same. The landscape showed no other sign of anything unusual. Two goats sneered at her from a distance; a rabbit bounced out of a nearby clump of grass and scampered nonchalantly off.

Yaret began to follow the double trail of hooves and scorched grass west, away from the trees. She would go no further than she was comfortable with. And for a while she was comfortable enough. The trail ran alongside the stream for half a mile or so, before the hoofprints veered away and the blackened trail followed them.

They led to the escarpment – the long, low cliff that formed a natural wall to the western end of the Loft. Several rills tumbled down from it in miniature clouds of spray, to merge into the Darkburn. A few newly dislodged rocks showed where the horse had scrambled its way up towards the plateau at the top.

Had its pursuer followed? Yaret studied the cliff wall. No burn marks there. But further away she spotted a black scrape across the ground. The thing had crawled along the base of the escarpment, perhaps hoping to find an easier path up. Climbing was difficult for it, then.

“Come on, Nuolo.” Yaret began to scramble up the cliff where the rocks made a natural staircase. Behind her, she heard Nuolo’s following clatter and snort. When she reached the top of the escarpment the donkey was a few yards behind her, clambering onto the flat stone shelf with a reproachful look.

But Yaret, feeling exposed, lay down to gaze out at the landscape. She had been up here only twice in her life before today – both times alone; for her grandfather had never shown any interest in wasting his time to climb up here. On each of those occasions a haze had obscured the scene below.

This time it looked quite different. A strong breeze blew, and had cleared away the mist so that the landscape was laid out like a giant map for her perusal. A buzzard wheeled through the air on a level with her eyes: and behind it, dark and forbidding, lay the great mass of forest that concealed the Darkburn river.

The forest was much bigger than she had ever realised. It had the shape of a many-fingered hand, growing to a broad forearm as it wound away to the horizon in the east. Over the impenetrable mass of trees four birds circled, too big for buzzards. Perhaps they were sea-birds. Impossible to say, for she had never seen the sea: it was a thing of legend two hundred miles away to the south.

Also to the south, but much closer, she could see a wide stream meandering over open ground before it dived into the nearest finger of forest. Another Darkburn. She didn’t know which of the many streams were merely tributaries, and which the main channel: for here, at the birthplace of the Darkburn river, all water was Darkburn as soon as it entered the shadow of the trees.

Crossing the ground towards that wandering tributary was a line drawn in charcoal. The crawling thing had abandoned its pursuit, and left the cliffs to cut back towards the river. So maybe it was no more comfortable than she was about being out in the open.

It heralded its coming with the stench of death; it carved a void of fear in passing; it left behind a trail of blackened grass. And now it had headed back to... somewhere else.

Somewhere else was good enough, as long as it wasn’t anywhere near her. Yaret retreated from the edge and surveyed the dry upland behind her for the missing horse. She could not see so much as a hoofprint or a hair.

But there was a brightness on the sloping ground two hundred yards away. Something flashed briefly in the sunlight as she moved. Now she walked warily towards it.

It was a long sword, lying on the nibbled grass. Maybe its scabbard was still tied to the horse; for that was the only place such a sword could have come from, up here amidst the goats and buzzards.

She squatted down and looked at it. To the best of her knowledge, nobody back home in Obandiro owned a sword except the mayor and the miller, and those were for ceremonial purposes only. Although the blacksmith had a small collection in his smithy, they never left their hooks high on the wall. Bows and knives were much more usual. Only Kelvhans commonly carried swords, with bright bejewelled pommels.

This one's hilt was plain. When she picked it up, she saw the blade was badly scratched and notched. She stood up and swung it experimentally: it was too long for her, and heavy, and difficult to wield one-handed. The leather-bound hilt had room for two hands if required. It was double-edged: a war-sword, then. And when she ran a cautious finger down one edge, it was extremely sharp. Not something you'd want to have dangling unsheathed from your belt...

Which meant she had to carry it outstretched in her hand all the way back down the cliff, while Nuolo followed her. The sword was a dangerous encumbrance and she worried about tripping. What would you want to carry this thing around for? Who would want to carry this thing around, up here in the middle of nowhere?

When she stopped to gather firewood in the stand of hutila trees, she picked up more thick scrolls of leathery bark. Three pieces wrapped around the sword meant she could safely strap it onto Nuolo's back on top of the firewood. Then, leading the plodding donkey, she made her way thoughtfully to the camp.

Chapter 5

That afternoon the rider woke again, more fully.

“Roth?” he said.

“Is that your horse? You fell off it, do you remember?”

The man half turned his head. “Not horse,” he said. “Rothir.”

“Is that your name? Are you Rothir?”

He closed his eyes, as if in pain. “No.”

“What’s your name?”

No answer. But he wasn’t sleeping now.

“I found your sword,” Yaret told him. Possibly the sword was called Rothir. People sometimes gave them names, she knew. What was a suitable name for a cumbersome, ridiculously dangerous killing-tool? “It was on the ground a mile or two away,” she added. “But I couldn’t see your horse.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at the raincover, a yard above his head. “Where am I?”

“You’re near the edge of the Darkburn forest. I found you here. I’m Yaret, a travelling pedlar. You’d fallen off the horse and broken your leg and hit your head.”

“Ah.” That seemed to go in. But possibly straight out again, because half an hour later when he woke up a second time they had an almost identical conversation.

This time she persuaded him to drink a little water, and to chew a bit of purpled porridge. All he really wanted was to sleep. But his sleep was restless and disturbed. She sat down next to him cross-legged to sew, doing her repairs while he dozed and twitched. When he woke up for about the eighth time, with a jolt, he began to speak agitatedly in his own tongue.

“*Rothir! Parthenal, emal tero arguril...*” He muttered on disjointedly, in a tone of anxious warning.

“There’s nobody else here,” said Yaret after a while. “Only me. And I don’t understand you.”

He fell silent before speaking again, this time in Standard. “Where are the others?”

“I haven’t seen any others. How many others should there be? How far away?”

No answer.

She tied a knot in her thread. “The thing that scared your horse,” she said carefully, “the burnt thing that was chasing you, it seems to have gone

away.”

“Where to?”

“Further down the Darkburn river. I saw its trail leading from the bottom of the cliff to the edge of the forest.” She hoped it had gone further than that, right back into the forest’s dark heart, to whatever hole it had crawled out of. Her camp was still, potentially, far too close to it for comfort; but there was nothing to be done about that.

“Darkburn,” the man murmured. Next time she looked up from her mending, his eyes were closed again.

By late afternoon he was another stage further into wakefulness. This time he told her his name.

“I am Eled.”

She was aware that by now he was awake enough to lie, but she nodded.

“Welcome to my camp, Eled, such as it is. I am Yaret, a weaver and pedlar of woven goods.”

“Yaret.” He repeated it carefully.

“How are you feeling?”

“I think... I broke my leg?”

“You did. Does it hurt? I’m sorry, I’ve nothing I can give you for the pain.” She regretted her lack of bitterbark or even star-moss. A foolish omission.

“And I lost my horse?”

“Yes. I’ve looked for it but I can’t find it.”

“Oh!” His dismay was evident. “Then I’ve lost...”

She waited. “I found your sword,” she said after a moment. “I’ve got it here.”

But Eled shook his head restlessly and began muttering again in his own language. It was evidently not the sword that worried him. When Yaret asked if he was still hungry, he turned his head away. He did not want to talk to her.

So she stood up. “I’ll leave the porridge here, beside you. Try and eat some if you can. I’m off to shoot a rabbit, and I’ll have another look for your horse at the same time. The donkeys will stand guard. Dolm! Nuolo!” She called them from the entrance to the cleft.

Dolm was reluctant, Nuolo obedient. As the smaller donkey trotted over, Yaret put her arms around her neck to whisper, “Bray if anything comes close, you understand?”

The words would mean probably nothing to Nuolo; but Yaret’s tone would convey her meaning. The donkey understood how to guard the camp.

Nuolo would bray if anything happened that she did not like. And Dolm would bray too: possibly not to be outdone, but also to protect Nuolo. He was not the brightest of donkeys but he was fearless.

Picking up her bow, Yaret left the donkeys standing by the cleft and set out rabbit-hunting. She crossed the Loft to a higher stony outcrop where the rabbit droppings were the thickest. Crouching down behind a rock, she waited. It was late enough in the afternoon for them to come hopping out and within a quarter-hour she had bagged two. She said Oveyn for each of them, and then took out her knife and gutted and skinned them on the spot. Crows or a buzzard would clean up the guts as soon as she was out of the way.

Where was the rider's knife, she wondered? He must have had one; everybody did. Probably lost along with the horse and all his baggage. There was no sign of a horse up here. She would have to provide everything for him.

The weight of responsibility seemed to push her down as she walked back to the camp. On her travels she had no responsibilities except to her donkeys, and to the land – to leave it as she found it. In her absence from her grandparents it was easy not to worry about them, and she never wasted time worrying about herself.

But now she had to worry about Eled. What could she do with him? What if he grew worse? Better not to think about it. No point resenting him. Not his fault.

Yet her mind was heavy. At this stage of her journey it ought to have been light. She picked some clumps of cushion grass to stuff under her bedroll and tried not to speculate about how long she might be stuck here.

That evening's fire was built out in the open so that the raincover would not end up full of smoke. Both rabbits went into the pot. She could keep on cooking them up each evening, with the soaked peas, until the meat ran out. Which would not take long; but there were plenty more rabbits where those had come from.

She carried the dishes into the cleft and propped Eled up against her packs. Spooning a little rabbit stew carefully into his mouth, she wiped away the juice that dribbled down his chin.

"Who are you?" he asked, almost fearful: though maybe less of her than of his own forgetfulness.

She told him, again.

"Where am I?"

She told him that, again. Then she said, “How many others of you are there? How far away might they be?”

He was silent. So Yaret did not press him on the subject.

Instead, once he had eaten, she checked his leg; it was still badly swollen. She wished she had some star-moss to apply to it, and to his head, which felt warmer than it should. She had seen no star-moss anywhere, not even by the boggy streamlet. Down by the Darkburn river, perhaps star-moss might grow...

But no, it was not worth making the attempt unless she was sure that it was there – and that nothing else was. Her skin crawled at the thought of going back into those woods. With an effort she made herself ask the question that had been uppermost in her mind all day.

“Eled. That thing that your horse ran away from. The blackened thing that burns a trail. What was it?”

Silence. Then he muttered, “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do. What if it comes back?”

A pause. “How far are we from the forest?”

“A good half-mile.”

“Then we might be all right.” That meant they might not be. He closed his eyes, but Yaret persisted.

“Eled. Wake up for a moment. Is that burnt thing the only one?”

A pause. “No.” His eyes stayed closed. “The only one like that.”

It was the answer she had dreaded. Now she needed more. “So there are others, even if they’re different? What are they? That thing – what’s it called?”

Another, longer, pause.

“Darkburn.”

Yaret gazed thoughtfully at Eled’s tired face. It wasn’t a bad face. In other circumstances, without the bruises, she would have called it attractive. She suspected he was younger than he appeared; perhaps in his early twenties, younger than she was. But some dreadful knowledge seemed written on his countenance, even as it relaxed back into sleep.

Darkburn. If the charcoaled thing was named after the river – or the enfolding forest – it suggested that that was where it lived. Eled had implied that it would not stray far from the trees. There was no scorched grass hereabouts; so the creature had not crawled this way. The horse had merely fled here in its panic, and then in a confused frenzy of terror had stumbled back towards the river. Remembering the singed trail that led from the escarpment to the forest, she was somewhat reassured.

An hour or two later, however, once darkness had fallen, that reassurance seemed of little worth. Yaret lay awake listening to Eled's shallow breathing which sometimes seemed to be trying to form murmured words; but not words that she knew.

Darkburn. It seemed wrong to call such a horror by that name. It made her imagine the whole forest creeping, burning, tainted with decay. She had always thought of this land as essentially benign. After all, she'd crossed it alone for seven years without meeting any trouble. The Loft had seemed a place apart, with that air of remote suspense which high empty lands often seemed to hold.

As for the forest – it was a much greater forest, she knew now, than she had ever realised. Her grandfather's rudimentary maps did not go far enough. Grandda had never mentioned such a vast mysterious expanse of trees.

But then Grandda had never talked much about the Darkburn, just as he'd never chosen to linger close to it. She'd always assumed that he was merely anxious to get home on this last leg of the journey. Now she wondered if he'd been anxious about something else.

The injured rider's breathing grew steadier in the darkness. Still she could not sleep. In the distance, two or three miles away, a wolf howled. After a moment another joined it; they were hunting. Fully alert now, Yaret strained to listen, trying to judge how far away they were. Then she got up and walked out of the cleft, bow and arrow in her hand.

The moon was hidden: wishing to rest, the huntress of the sky had pulled a cloak of cloud across her home. The broad shining road laid by the stars along the great plain of the heavens gave Yaret some comfort, but too little light.

More howls came from the south-west; however, the wolves seemed to be no closer. After a while the howling stopped and she persuaded herself to go back to her bed.

There she lay awake, and annoyed at being awake. She felt too jumpy to let herself fall into the welcoming chasm where sleep waited. Hovering on its starlit edge, she caught glimpses of snatched dreams from across that hazy border without managing to tip herself over into its oblivion.

So much out there that she did not understand. She was not used to this anxiety. Only in the last year or two had concerns about her ageing grandparents nagged at her. The freedom from care – she realised now that it was gone – had been the journey's chief delight.

This new concern was heavy, and unwelcome. She felt trapped between the rider and the wolves. And what else?

The donkeys, she thought. *The donkeys will let me know*. The donkeys stayed quiet. So at last Yaret allowed herself to lapse into a fitful, fretful doze.

Chapter 6

The next day was a strange one. Yaret, short of sleep, felt fuzzy and slow-moving: once she had hauled herself from her bedroll, she couldn't seem to do anything right. She managed to kick over the waterskin, dropped her slice of porridge on the ground, forgot where she had stowed her second shirt, and was ridiculously surprised when the injured rider spoke to her.

He needed a pee. And this time, the other thing as well. He thought she was a man, of course, and in any case it was no problem for her. When Grandda broke his hip she and Gramma had had to do the same. So she tried to roll Eled over gently to deal with it and clean him up, although it was difficult with the splinted leg. He groaned. She realised that he was in severe pain, but that so far he had hidden it. Or maybe he hadn't felt it fully until now.

"Try and keep that leg still," she told him once he was again lying on his back, his face damp with sweat. "It doesn't look too bad this morning."

This was a lie. In truth the leg was slightly more swollen than on the previous day. She laid a cold wet cloth across it, since there was little else that she could do. The skin felt hot and tight, but not as hot as Eled's forehead. She put a slice of porridge in his hand, from where it fell in soggy crumbs on to his shirt.

He needed something that was easier to eat. But when she offered him cold rabbit stew, not much of it went in. So she persuaded him to drink more water, and then asked,

"Eled, where else do you hurt? Apart from the leg and your head?"

He touched his chest.

"Yes, your ribs," she said. "Anywhere else?"

He tried to smile. "Just everywhere." He was embarrassed, and sad, and his youth was suddenly evident. She tried to think of something that would cheer him up.

"Do you remember I told you that I found your sword? It was on the ground a mile or two away."

He looked at her questioningly, so she fetched the sword to show him, holding it carefully in its sheath of bark. Eled put out a tender hand towards it.

"Rothir," said Yaret experimentally.

He stopped and looked up at her. "Rothir? Where?"

Not the sword, then. “Earlier on, you kept saying Rothir. Is that a person?”

Eled did not answer. He touched the hilt caressingly and pulled his hand away with a sigh. What did men find to love so much in swords?

“How far away are your friends?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Far.”

“How many?”

“Some.”

Perhaps he did not trust her enough to say more. How long might it take to win his trust? She had a sharp image of day following day, every day the same, with the fallen rider still lying in this spot, herself still tending him. How many days?

There was no point in thinking about it. In any case she was too tired to think about anything properly. So she left him dozing and went down to the boggy streamlet to wash her clothes and the soiled woollen squares, carefully squeezing the soapy water into the ground so as not to contaminate the stream. Animals had to drink from it. And if other, not so friendly, things were lurking downstream, she did not want to send them any clues.

Then, since the air was mild, she stripped off and bathed. She saw herself from a distance, as if she were a hawk looking down on a small figure splashing in a puddle in the midst of a vast empty plain. A distant hare sat up on a rock to watch her. Further away, she glimpsed a fangol sneaking through the wispy grass before sitting up to watch the hare.

The water was too cold to make her want to linger. However, it woke her up a little. Once dressed again, she returned to the camp and draped the washing across bramble stems to dry. Eled was asleep. She put a full waterskin beside him, and then checked the donkeys. They were grazing happily enough. To wake herself up a little more, she decided on a reconnoitre of the area, continuing her search for Eled’s horse.

Since she had already been south and west to the escarpment, she set out on foot to the north and east. There was no chance of getting lost, even though the further she walked, the less she recognised the landmarks; for the Darkburn forest was a constant presence, marching alongside her half a mile away.

After three miles or so she stopped. The distant Coban hills had turned their shoulders to her and changed their shape, but otherwise the landscape was much as before; a rise and fall of close-grazed knolls and scattered trees all leaning south.

Sitting down against a lichen-covered rock that was warmed by the sun, she scanned the scene around her long and carefully, looking for any movement that might mean another rider, or perhaps a tired stray horse.

Something stirred in a distant thicket and she held her breath until she saw it was an antelope. Once she'd spotted that one, she realised others were grazing, heads all pointing north, well-camouflaged amongst the tumbled rocks.

Venison, she thought. She should have brought a donkey and her bow. Could have carried one back. Too late now. She'd been too tired to plan.

Closing her eyes against the sun, she leaned her head back on the warm rock, awarding herself a two minute nap. After that she would go back to the camp.

Yaret did not know if the two minutes turned to five, or ten: probably no more, but as her head nodded and jerked towards her chest she woke up with a start.

She scrambled to her feet. What was that? She stared and spun round: stared again. Now she could see nothing unusual. The distant antelopes still grazed. Nearer to her was an ordinary bunch of pitted rocks and roots and broken tree-stumps.

But surely something else had been there just a second ago: a small, solid... person? Creature? Object?

Lin.

But lins didn't exist. Except that they did. Only they didn't.

They existed enough for some people to speak to them and bow to where they thought they were and treat them kindly. They existed in children's tales and drinkers' songs and old folks' lore. In other words, they didn't exist. So what had she just seen?

A thing of the imagination, like the lin. It was several years since she'd last seen one, although as a child she'd seen – or thought she had seen – lins aplenty. Children generally did, and were humoured by the adults who knew better. Or believed that they knew better.

But the traditions persisted. So now Yaret bowed to where she thought she'd seen this lin, and recited the Lins' Grace, the words of courtesy that Gramma had taught her to say on the Dondel Bridge back home. Then, in case the lin in this country didn't understand Bandiran, she repeated the rhyme in Standard:

*“Woodwone, woodwone, hob or lin,
Grace to thee and all thy kin.”*

Nothing moved except the breeze in the grass. But it was strange.

A lin, she reflected as she set off walking back to camp, would not appear to her. It would stay hidden. As soon as humans looked at lins or hobs or woodwones – which were all related and possibly all the same thing – they changed to stumps of trees or plants or even animals. Badgers were a favourite, apparently. Some might be able to change to stone although her grandmother had disputed that. Coming from Ioben, Gramma took lins quite seriously.

Yaret looked backwards at the clump of rocks. Nothing. Naturally.

And what would a lin be doing here in any case, out in the open, far from woods or water? The woodwones were the ones who lived in forests. They were tall and branchy, supposedly. Lins were smaller, more compact; they preferred water and hung around bridges. The hobs hung around houses. Why, nobody could explain.

When she got back to the camp Eled was awake again, his eyes wide and darting. He looked anxious and yet not relieved to see her. His forehead felt feverish to her touch.

“Where are they?” he said, “Where did they go?” and then began to mutter in his own language, almost frantically. He was, thought Yaret in some alarm, bordering on delirious. She applied fresh cold cloths to his leg and to his head, which seemed to calm him after a while.

“You went away,” he said, as fretful as a child.

“But I came back,” said Yaret. “I just went to explore the land around here.”

“Did you see them?”

“I saw nobody. But no danger either. I saw a lin.” And to take his mind off his distress and pain, she told him about the lin, and about lins and woodwones in general. It seemed to interest him and to be a concept not altogether strange. Maybe his people had their own versions of lins.

At least her chatter woke him up in a better way than worry. So she sang him the children’s song about the lin under the Dondel Bridge, in a clumsy Standard translation. He listened carefully.

“But they’re not the real words, are they?” he said.

Yaret was impressed that he could tell. “No, you’re right. These are the real words.” She sang it again, in the original Bandiran, with the gestures and the little dance.

That amused Eled. He smiled, his face relaxing. She liked to see him smile, so she danced the Rannikan for him: the children’s dance – it got harder the bigger you grew – with all the tapping of hands to hips and heels, kicking and jiggling faster and faster until she was breathless and he was

laughing. There was just enough room to do it in the rocky space. She stopped to pant; and saw the lin again, above her.

But of course it wasn't. It was just a clump of thistles growing from a fissure in the rock. She was dead tired, imagining things that weren't there.

As she thought this, the donkeys brayed in unison, as harsh and loud as tuneless horns.

Yaret grabbed the sword – no, that was stupid of her, useless – dropped it, and snatched up the bow instead, throwing the quiver across her shoulder, already stringing the first arrow as she moved. She had it drawn up to her cheek before she emerged from the cleft between the rocks.

And saw the horse walking towards her. It looked at her and stopped in mid-step, hoof raised, ready to run. It bore a saddle, one ragged saddlebag, and no rider.

Chapter 7

Yaret sat on the ground with her arms around her legs. She had been sitting there, motionless, for a good half hour, and finally the horse was warily approaching.

It was a large brown mare; undoubtedly the same one she had seen three days ago. A fine-looking animal despite its nervousness. Nuolo wandered over to it and gave it a friendly nuzzle. The horse was twitchy and inclined to kick, so Nuolo withdrew. Dolm, after one long, speculative stare, ignored the horse entirely.

An empty sword-sheath dangled from the saddle, knocking against the horse's legs. That must be irritating; and the saddle too must chafe, thought Yaret, after three days strapped to its back. After a few more minutes she stood up. The horse twitched and stamped. She took half a dozen steps towards it and sat down again before it could work its way into a panic. Eventually it bent its head to graze, watching her at the same time.

She moved a little closer twice more in the same manner, until the horse set off cantering away and it became clear that she could do more harm than good in trying to catch it. So she went back to the camp, rebuilt the fire and set the pot on it for supper.

"Your horse is here," she told Eled. "It still has one saddlebag." The words didn't seem to register with him, which was concerning. His awareness had dipped dramatically since she had danced the Rannikan an hour ago.

Yaret decided that he needed food. He wasn't eating enough. So she concentrated on getting some mashed-up peas and shreds of rabbit inside him, spoon-feeding him with words of encouragement as if he were an infant.

Then she threw a handful of oats into the remaining stew in the pot to bulk it out. Tomorrow she'd have to find something to supplement this diet, hunt out some roots and vegetables. She should have done that today but the tired woolliness of her brain hadn't latched on to the necessity. The dried peas would only last a few more days.

She herself ate less than she would have liked, and then looked through her bags to tot up what food still remained. There was a flat pack of some dried meat from Havvich, but you might as well eat leather. She only kept it as emergency rations, because it reputedly never went bad, and might also do to sole her boots with. There were the rest of the peas, and two large

bundles of oats, which she had to share with the donkeys. Dried beans and apples made much smaller bundles.

Then there was one packet that she had forgotten: brown biscuit, another emergency ration. Eled could probably cope with it if it were soaked. Last were two little pottery jars, the smaller of salt, the bigger one of honey – a gift from a customer which she was taking home for her grandmother. That was all.

If she could get the saddle-pack off Eled's horse, it would probably contain some food. So she had one more fruitless attempt at edging closer to the horse before dusk fell. Still it would not allow her to come near.

Maybe a night with the donkeys would calm it down; though not if those wolves started howling again... Yaret sincerely hoped they wouldn't. She badly needed sleep.

Resisting the temptation to immediately find her bedroll, she set some biscuit to soak with a spoonful of honey in the water. Gramma wouldn't mind. How long before she would see her grandmother again? It could be weeks at this rate. The thought sneaked into her head that things would be much easier if the rider simply died.

"Oh no no no, not while I'm looking after him," she said aloud, and crawled over to check again on Eled. Still alive, for now, thank goodness. She did not want him to die.

The donkeys wandered over for their evening handful of oats. Yaret fed them quickly; for once she'd thought about sleeping she felt ready to keel over.

"Guard the camp," she mumbled to Dolm. It occurred to her that if anything came near the camp, now the horse would warn her too – by galloping away if nothing else. Comforted by that drowsy thought, she fell down on her bedroll, pulled the blanket over her and was instantly asleep.

When she woke it was, astonishingly, full daylight. She sat up and scratched. Eled was snoring faintly. Yaret crawled to the entrance of the cleft and saw the horse was still there with the donkeys, grazing.

She spent some time trying to lure it closer with a handful of oats before she gave up in exasperation. What was the point of the horse returning here if it wouldn't let itself be caught? Stick to a useful task, she thought: hunt for some roots to dig.

The likeliest spot to find edible roots was the richer pasture closer to the Darkburn. She took Dolm with her, more for the sturdy comfort of his company than anything else.

As the donkey plodded with a deliberate lack of hurry beside her Yaret wondered what she would do with the horse if she did succeed in catching it. It wasn't as if she could even ride a horse with ease. They hadn't owned a horse for years – not since old Mallie, who had pulled a cart around at the pace of a snail and had gone no faster with Yaret perched upon her back.

Yaret had ridden Dolm on occasion, although he didn't care for it and wouldn't go far. But even a recalcitrant donkey was nothing like a high-strung, kicking, galloping horse.

All the same... Maybe she could somehow get the rider up on to the horse and move him. Where to, though? Twelve miles back to Deloran – no, not Deloran, somewhere still inhabited. With a broken leg. And the next town to the north was almost twenty miles away.

“Well,” she said. “One thing at a time.”

And then she gave a cry of startled relief, because something was working in her favour here, at least. In a damp depression in the ground were growing not only wild carrots and nips but thick bushy spikes of spearweed, which was generally regarded as food for pigs but was perfectly nutritious for hungry humans too.

She spent some time digging out roots and harvesting the grainy spearweed; though when she looked around for star-moss, she found none. Then she ventured to the nearest finger of the forest, where she gathered more wood and kindling for the fire. Dolm was useful in carrying all this back.

A productive morning's work. Yaret spent the afternoon making overtures to the horse now that she had carrots to entice it with. Although it ventured a little closer, it would not allow her to walk towards it without cantering away.

When she went into the cleft to ask Eled for advice on approaching the horse, he could give her none. He was dismayingly sleepy and barely coherent, and felt almost as hot as he had two days ago. He was going backwards.

Yaret fed him more soggy biscuit laced with honey and sang him a couple of songs, since they had amused him earlier. The shadow of a smile crossed his drawn face. She cleaned him up and washed him down again, trying to make him comfortable. But she knew that he could not be comfortable.

Eled slept. Yaret washed out the cleaning cloths and tidied away her dried linen. Carefully avoiding the horse, she walked back down to the streamlet to rinse the roots and cut more watercress.

One day at a time. And another one was nearly gone...

How many more would pass before she could move on, move Eled, do anything at all? A parade of endless days seemed to march ahead of her, with nothing changing but the wind: everything held in suspension while she waited for the rider's leg to mend. It could take weeks.

And the head wound – Eled's drowsiness and confusion. She felt the sad weight of care increase; there was no escaping it. She had taken on this burden, and she could not lay it down and walk away. She could only do what she was doing. Rinsing roots and picking watercress.

Dolm brayed, and Yaret stood up with a start of shock. She swung around, a bunch of watercress in one hand and her knife in the other.

There was a man standing behind her, three or four yards away. How had he got so close without her hearing him? Was he a brigand, a highwayman?

This was no highway. She stood quite still, taking in the travel-stained cloak of grey-green wool, the long sword sheathed but clearly – intentionally – visible, the broad body and shaggy head and cold dark eyes. All this in an instant. The man was not threatening her; not yet, at any rate. But Yaret thought that she had seldom seen anyone look so thoroughly fed up.

He spoke in a deep, impatient growl. And in his voice the threat was there, if kept in check.

“Where did you find the horse?”

Chapter 8

“Where did you find the horse?”

He could not keep the threat out of his words. He was too tired and too desperately anxious after three days of continuous riding, searching. The young man standing by the brook was slightly built: despite the knife he held, he'd be easy enough to overpower if he didn't answer soon.

He made himself wait.

The young man gave him a long, curiously assessing look. He seemed to be in no hurry to reply. When he did speak, it was almost casually. His low, quiet voice was liltingly accented, sounding a little like the villagers around Melmet.

“I didn't find the horse,” he said. “The horse found me – or rather, it found my donkeys.” He nodded to where the three animals were grazing together on the far side of the boggy stream. “It turned up here last night. But it won't let me get close to it: that's the reason it's still saddled.” He paused. “Why? Is it yours?”

“It belongs to my friend and kinsman.” And now he knew he could not keep the weariness and disappointment from his voice.

“What is your friend's name?”

“Eled.” It didn't matter now.

The young man stood still, considering him for a few more seconds. His loose-fitting clothes looked as if they had been made for someone else. His rusty hair as well as his accent marked him as a northerner; that colouring could be seen around Ioben. The man shrugged, stuck his knife in his belt, stooped to pick up a bunch of carrots, and as he straightened up said,

“Your friend is over here.”

“What?”

The young man was already walking away as he continued to speak over his shoulder.

“I found him after he'd been thrown from his horse. He's quite badly hurt. His right thigh's broken, probably some ribs as well, and he hit his head on the rocks as he went down. He's got concussion; it seems serious. He's still not woken up properly. Not for long.”

Wary and astonished, he followed. The northerner walked up to a rocky outcrop and then straight into it, entering through a split between the high stone walls which had been concealed by thorny bushes.

Inside there was a tidy camp – a compact space with a thin oil-cloth for a roof. Lying stretched out on his back, part covered by a cloak, was the comrade for whom he had been hunting for so long.

“Eled!” As he knelt down beside Eled a surge of relief mingled with concern washed through him. He was aware that the young man standing over them had closed his hand on his knife hilt.

Eled opened his eyes and gave him a sleepy smile. “Hello, Rothir.”

The hand relaxed and left the knife.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” said Eled. “A bit hot.” His words were slightly slurred. When Rothir placed a hand across his forehead it felt decidedly hot to his touch. But Eled’s pulse was steady, if a little fast. Beneath a dressing of striped woollen cloth, the wound on his head looked ugly, with its clotted scabs, but at least was clean.

Rothir drew away the cloak and dressing covering Eled’s legs to reveal the broken thigh. Equally ugly. He felt a deep responsibility for this youngest member of his troop; and such a brave, eager member Eled was. His heart ached for him now, his anxiety rearranging itself into a different shape.

After inspecting the thigh gently he looked up at the northerner with creased brows. “Hutila bark?”

“It was the best thing I could think of to splint it,” said the young man with a faint note of defensiveness. “His leg was quite badly swollen. It was twisted when I found him so I straightened it out as best I could. Luckily he was unconscious at the time. The swelling seems to have gone down a little today.”

“When did you find him?”

The young man tapped fingers against his leg, counting. “Three nights,” he said. “This is the fourth day.” Rothir was astounded, again. “I found him fallen just outside this cavern. He’d been thrown against those rocks beside the entrance. I’d already seen the horse an hour or so earlier, running witless and riderless down by the Darkburn. It disappeared and I didn’t see it again until last night. But it had an empty saddle so I knew I had to look for a rider. So I looked. And I found Eled.”

Rothir frowned again. Three nights? The young man seemed unbothered. Time could not mean much to him.

He bent to ask his comrade a question in his own tongue. “Eled, do you remember what happened?”

“The stonemen,” whispered Eled breathlessly, also in Vonnish. “Ambush. I escaped. But they sent a darkburn after me. A big one.” He spoke in painful, urgent jerks, with a short pause every few words. “Arguril? Did he get away?”

“He’s safe, don’t worry. He met up with us and gave the alarm. Do your ribs hurt?”

Eled nodded. The northerner quietly picked up a pan from his side – a piss pan, evidently – and carried it away, as if to give them privacy. He did not re-enter the rock cleft while Rothir was there.

Kneeling beside his stricken friend, Rothir listened carefully to his disjointed account. There was not much more to learn from Eled that he had not already heard from Arguril.

On the way home from their mission, when the six Riders had split into their accustomed pairs, Eled and Arguril had been allocated the eighth branch of the Darkburn river to explore. A dozen miles down that branch they were ambushed by a large company of stonemen. Eled had fled west, upriver, losing Arguril in his flight. He had spent the best part of a day trying to elude the stonemen through the knotted labyrinth of the Darkburn forest.

“I thought I was safe,” he whispered hoarsely. “Thought I’d got away. Then... then the darkburn came. Big. Bigger than any we’ve seen before. Much bigger. Longer. Felt stronger. Worse.”

“Worse?” That was bad news. It was hard to imagine anything worse than the darkburns Rothir had already met.

“Much stronger. I couldn’t control Poda. She ran all over the place. Eventually she got up the bank. Out of the forest. I don’t remember after that.”

“How big was the darkburn?”

“Long. Low...” Eled’s eyes half-closed. “Strong.”

“Don’t worry about it now, Eled. It’s gone, and you’re safe,” said Rothir, although he was deeply worried himself, not just by his friend’s condition but also by his words. This was something new.

But he did not ask any more questions for the moment. He took a pack of star-moss from his inner pocket, and dampening it from the waterskin which lay by Eled’s side, he applied it to the head-wound and the swollen, blue-bruised thigh. A pity the northerner hadn’t thought to do that.

Then he stayed by Eled’s side a little longer, talking to him calmly, reassuring him that the other four Riders of the troop were all unhurt – or at least they had been a few days ago, when Rothir had last seen them.

Although he felt a deep and even brotherly concern for Eled, he took care to keep his tone light. As Eled's eyelids closed again, he covered him gently with the cloak and left him.

Some distance from the cleft, well out of earshot, he saw the young man – or youth, rather, perhaps little more than a teenager after all: for despite his leisurely self-assurance he was slim and beardless. He was slicing carrots into a cooking pot. A small fireplace had been built, and the wood within was smouldering.

“No room in that little space for all three of us,” said the young man as Rothir approached. “So I'll cook and sleep out here tonight. You'd better stay near Eled.”

“I have to thank you for your service to him over the last few days. I imagine he would otherwise be dead by now; or at least, beyond recovery.”

He got another long, assessing look. It was slightly disconcerting from one presumably so young. Rothir realised that despite his casual demeanour the youth's eyes were alert and searching.

“I take your thanks,” the northerner said formally, and then added in a rueful tone, “I wish I could have done more for him. I know the bark splint isn't ideal. But I had nothing better, and no star-moss.”

“I have applied star-moss. I should introduce myself. My name is Rothir.”

“Yes. Eled said it once or twice when he was rambling. He wouldn't say any names when he was lucid.” He stood up, wiping his hands on his breeches. Not a big youth, but straight-limbed enough. He had broken his nose at some point. “I am Yaretkoro Thuleikand of Obandiro in the north,” he announced, and watched for Rothir's reaction.

Rothir did not know what reaction was appropriate. Although he thought he might have heard of Obandiro, he did not remember where it was. He was certain that it was not somewhere he had ever visited on his travels. Nor did he recognise the patronymic form of Thuleikand. Did it indicate high birth?

“Yaret for short. I'm a pedlar of woollen cloth,” the youth added, immediately dispelling that possibility. “I pass through here every summer and then head home. Beyond the Coban hills.” He indicated the direction with a vague sweep of his arm. Beyond the Coban hills, Rothir knew, lay quiet, sparsely populated lands, prone to cruel winters but otherwise free of trouble. No reason for him ever to have been there.

“When you saw the horse that first day,” he asked Yaret, “did you see anything else?”

Yaret looked at him soberly. “I saw... something difficult to describe.”

“Please try anyway.”

So the tale was told, a little stumblingly. Rothir could tell that it was difficult to remember as well as to describe. It did not surprise him. A first encounter with a darkburn was always a dreadful thing to recall – if you survived. And this one sounded even more formidable than the others he had met.

“What I cannot explain,” said Yaret at the end of the tale, “is the feeling that the creeping thing put into me. The great fear – the despair. And anger; even grief. I can ascribe it only to the deathly smell.”

“Grief?”

“I would say even that.” Yaret spoke softly and with care, as though Standard was not his tongue of choice.

“I have experienced those feelings,” Rothir said. “Not the grief, but the horror and despair. They are generated by the creatures.”

“Eled said that it was called a darkburn, like the river. So it is not unique, then? There is more than one darkburn?”

Rothir nodded. “You described this one as being long and low,” he said. “How long?”

“As long as a horse. Longer. A horse and a half. Low to the ground, on four short crawling legs. It seemed to have very little head. Even less tail. And it was burning.”

“Burning? Not burnt? You said it was charred black.”

“With fire inside,” said Yaret. “I saw in its midst for a second a glow, like embers. After that I did not look.”

Rothir thought about this. “Can you show me exactly where you came across this thing?”

“Now?”

“Yes, while Eled is sleeping, if it’s not too far.”

“It’s little more than a mile. Dolm! Nuolo!” The youth called to the donkeys before turning back to Rothir. “What is the horse’s name?”

“Poda.”

Yaret nodded. Once the donkeys had ambled over he addressed them. The language he used was unfamiliar; not Kelvhan, at least. It might be Ioben, a remote tongue of which Rothir knew little.

He heard the words *Poda*, *Rothir* and *Eled*, as if Yaret were informing the donkeys of events, and he was faintly amused.

“They will look after things while we are gone,” said Yaret confidently.

“How well do they understand you?”

“Who knows? They get the gist.” Yaret set off striding towards the forest and the river. “You have your own horse? Or did you walk here?”

“I certainly did not walk. My horse is resting over there.” Rothir pointed east, to where a gorse thicket four hundred yards away was concealing his horse Narba. As soon as he had spotted the young man by the stream near Poda, he had dismounted and approached silently on foot, aiming to take him by surprise.

Now he scanned the rest of the landscape carefully, checking for movement: for anything that ought not to be there. All appeared to be calm and undisturbed. Such an empty, lonely land this was; it seemed always to be listening – not necessarily to him, but to something that he could not hear. Apart from the throaty complaints of scattered goats, there was no sound, not even of the wind.

By the time they reached the forest edge he had observed nothing untoward. There was no stink of darkburn; just the clean, deep scents of earth and water and damp leaves, the presages of autumn. Yaret followed the course of the stream as it plunged underneath the trees.

“Here I saw the horse. There I went in, by the way that the horse had come out.” They entered the full gloom of the forest and walked a short distance until Yaret stopped. “Here I stood. And there, moving by the water, I saw the thing you call a darkburn.”

Rothir went to inspect the ground beside the busy stream. The weeds were crushed and blackened, but no matter how minutely he looked he could discern no clear prints.

But then in general darkburns did not leave anything that could be called footprints, only occasional marks on the burnt ground. Here he noted some indented lines like claw-marks, but judging by the flattened plants it seemed this darkburn had chiefly slithered on its stomach. Nothing like the previous ones.

“Did you see it again after it crawled away?” he asked.

“No. When I came back about three hours later, I saw its trail crossing the loft. The trail went along the bottom of the escarpment – the cliff at the loft’s western end – and then headed back towards the trees.”

“The loft?”

“That is what we call this land above the forest,” explained Yaret. “The Darkburn Loft. It means a high habitation.”

Rothir looked at him. “Habitation? For whom?”

“A good question,” said Yaret. “I have always thought it was merely for itself. Now I don’t know.”

“Can you show me where you saw this trail?”

For answer Yaret turned and led the way back out of the shadow of the trees.

“To the left of those boulders.” He pointed and Rothir studied the escarpment. He ought to go up there to look around... but not today. He wanted to get back to Eled. Then tonight he simply needed to extract all the information he could from the pedlar before the youth moved on.

On the walk back to the camp it occurred to him that Yaret had asked no question of him apart from whether he had a horse. Maybe the pedlar was a little simple, although on further reflection Rothir was inclined to think that that was far from being the case. So maybe Yaret’s idea of etiquette meant minding his own business. That would suit Rothir, who had no intention of telling his business to any stranger.

They were half way back before Yaret spoke again.

“It is a relief to have you here, I must admit. Eled will need a long recovery, I think. How to move him was a problem.”

“Move him where?”

“Well, that is another problem. The next village I know of is eighteen miles north, in the Coban hills. There is nothing before that but ruins.”

“The southern edge of the Iarad,” said Rothir.

“Is that what you call the deserted land? But even in Coba they would not offer any medical care beyond the most basic – if they would take him in at all. There is no guarantee of that. And it’s a long way to travel for a man with a broken leg.”

“I know of somewhere closer,” said Rothir. “A dozen miles west of here there is a farmstead called Deloran, where–”

“There isn’t,” said Yaret. “Not any more. I came past it. It’s burnt out.”

“It’s what?”

“Sorry. It’s gone. Burnt and empty. It was still warm, five days ago. But I think the people got away.”

Rothir kept walking and said nothing. He was deeply shocked, although a grim interior voice muttered, *Why are you so surprised? The stonemen have encroached everywhere this year.*

“You saw nobody there?” he asked after a few moments.

“No people, and no bodies either.”

Bruilde will have managed, he thought. But it changed his plans. He could not take Eled there now. And without Bruilde’s help, he would never get the sick man all the way to Thield. He would have to go in the opposite direction.

“In that case, I need to get him to a rendezvous with my companions to the east,” he said.

“When?”

“In seven days’ time.”

“How far away?”

“At least two days hard riding.” That time would be twice as long with Eled, he was well aware – assuming that his friend could even be somehow got onto a horse. But if he missed the rendezvous, how long would the others wait?

He expected the questions to come then, but Yaret merely commented, “Very well. That will not be easy. We’ll eat first, and then think about it. Dinner is rabbit and roots: is that all right with you?”

“Any food is all right with me,” he said.

“Before we eat,” said Yaret as they approached the camp, “I would suggest you go and fetch your horse. Its presence may calm Poda down sufficiently for you to catch her and relieve her of the saddle and the bag. She had two saddlebags when she first ran out of the forest, so she must have shed the other one somewhere. We can look for it tomorrow.”

“*We?* You are not concerned in this.”

“If you want to move Eled I think you will need help.”

“Although I want to move him, in truth I don’t see how it can be done,” said Rothir wearily. He felt the extreme fatigue of the last few days fall on him like a heavy cloak.

Nevertheless he did not sit down yet. He could see the sense of Yaret’s suggestion, and the sun was already sinking rapidly; so he went to find his grey horse Narba, still waiting patiently amidst the gorse-bushes. When he led Narba to the camp, Poda whinnied in recognition and trotted over to meet him. Although she would not allow herself to be caught and handled, Rothir trusted that she would now settle down more readily.

He walked over to the fire, where Yaret handed him a bowl half-filled with some unappetising brown mush.

“This is for Eled. You may be able to persuade him to eat more than I can do.”

He sampled it tentatively: soaked biscuit sweetened with a little honey. It tasted better than it looked. Stooping to enter the narrow space where Eled lay, he woke his friend with quiet words. Then, murmuring encouragement, he spooned as much biscuit into Eled’s mouth as he could before Eled waved his hand to indicate enough, smiling faintly as his eyes closed yet again.

Rothir checked his dressings before sitting back to study him. Under the star-moss the inflammation of the thigh seemed to have abated even in the last two hours. But it was a bad break, and Eled's lethargy would make moving him doubly difficult.

If only Deloran were not burnt... He tried to shake off his fears about the people there. There was nothing he could do to help them: so concentrate on what was possible. But the apprehension clung.

Once Eled dozed, Rothir stepped out of the rocky cleft to join Yaret by the fire. He was handed another bowl, this time of hot stew with a tangle of watercress wilting on top. The rabbit and roots were good; a mysterious ingredient which looked suspiciously like spearweed proved to be slightly gritty but palatable.

As he emptied the bowl Rothir felt belatedly aware of his hunger. It was days since he'd bothered to pay attention to whatever food he ate; he had shovelled in just enough fuel to keep going, as fast as he could. Had taken as little rest as possible. Now he let himself slow down and taste the stew. A feast, of sorts.

"Would you like some more, Rothir?" Yaret spoke his name with a rustic, burring intonation. It made him sound like a stranger to himself; and indeed he did not feel fully himself, but a little light-headed, as if the rabbit and roots had made him drunk.

He shook his head, for he knew there could not be much food to spare, and he had few enough provisions left in his own saddlebags. But Yaret handed the pot over to him anyway, and then sat back propped against the warm rock, crossed legs stretched out towards the fire. The setting sun gleamed gold across his meditative face and made the rusty hair leap into sudden redness. Rothir refilled his bowl.

"I have some dried meat in my pack," he told the northerner. "You could cook that up tomorrow."

"Is it from Havvich?"

"No, thank the stars."

Yaret laughed. A companionable sound. It made him realise that he was not alone.

"I'm fairly sure they all escaped the fire at Deloran," Yaret said. "All the carts were gone."

"Were they? Good." It relieved his mind a little. He ate, more slowly now.

"I've been thinking," Yaret said after a moment in his quiet voice, "that if we could get Eled up on your horse we might be able to rig up some sort of

prop for his leg with lengths of hutila bark. I know he's sleepy. But if his leg's supported he might be able to ride with one of us on the horse behind him."

"One of us?"

"However, we don't need to make a decision yet. If the rendezvous is two days' hard riding, that is perhaps four days' steady ride. It gives us three days to see if he recovers his senses before we need to set out."

"You said *we* again," said Rothir.

"And there's an alternative. You ride to your rendezvous and find help, while I look after Eled here. Or if we can get him to the Coban hills, we could bribe the villagers to take him in. Although I would not recommend you leave him there alone, I could wait there with him."

Rothir thought about this as he ate his second bowl of stew. They were options, if not good ones. But no option was a good one. He shook his head. "You've been here long enough."

Yaret shrugged. "I'm ahead of my schedule. I've got time to spare." As the donkeys strolled towards them he got to his feet and began to feed a handful of oats to each, pulling their ears and talking to them affectionately in his own soft tongue.

Rothir took a last mouthful of stew and lay back against the warm stone to savour it, watching Yaret with the nuzzling donkeys. Beyond them, the two horses grazed tranquilly together against the setting sun. He'd get that saddle off the mare tomorrow. Give Narba and himself a day to rest.

Rest! It had seemed so far away for so long. He knew that it was not just the effort of the last week, but all the weeks and months before that made him weary. The frequent fights against the stonemen: the constant risk of ambush: the endless – often fruitless – scouting, long days spent in the saddle.

The tents of Thield had moved four times already since the spring, trying to escape the stonemen and the darkburns that ran amok before them sowing fire and devastation. No matter where the Riders went, the stonemen always seemed to find them. There had been no rest all year. But now he felt himself beginning to unwind at last.

In the last few hours his fortunes had turned round, from grim alarm to some variety of hope. Eled was safe: that was the main thing. Somehow he would find a way to get the wounded man to his companions. Although he would have preferred the company of Parthenal, this northern pedlar hadn't done too badly. By some miraculous chance the youth had rescued Eled; and in doing that, he realised, had rescued Rothir himself.

Exhaustion washed over him in a huge, slow tide. But along with it, like the hush of waves on sand, came something unexpected; almost joy. He recognised the feeling as relief, which in his opinion and experience formed a major part of happiness. Failure was his greatest fear. But thanks to the pedlar, he had not failed his comrades nor Huldarion. He had not let them down.

As if in answer to his thankfulness, a sudden parting of the clouds sent a fine sheen of golden light across the peaceful land, painting it for immortality; an endless moment when earth and heaven met. It seemed a country known in dreams, so bright with hope and promise.

Rothir did not believe in signs and portents. None the less he allowed his tired limbs to relax and his weary mind to drink the beauty of the landscape in. There had been so little hope for years, but against all reason he glimpsed the edges of it now, like the light around a door. Tomorrow...

Well, tomorrow there would be much to do. But meanwhile this evening was enough.

Chapter 9

“Do you want a slice of porridge?”

Rothir opened his eyes. The sun was high. Yaret stood over him holding out a mottled slab. Beside him Eled yawned and smiled. Eled had been quiet all night; or perhaps Rothir himself had been too worn out to notice.

“I’ll try him on some peas and biscuit while you wash,” said Yaret.

“That would be good.” Rothir stood up and stretched, as much as he could in the narrow space. Then he carried a bundle of clothes and his strangely purple-dotted slab of porridge out of the rocks and down to the streamlet where the horses grazed together.

Last night’s gold had turned to lemon in the hazy sunshine: it felt like a veiled, enchanted land, both wild and peaceful. He’d ridden across this plain a number of times – always in a hurry to get somewhere else – and had never stopped to look around. There had never been much here to seize the attention.

Nor was there now. A fangol basking on a rock was the most notable sight: the peace was punctuated only by the rasping of the grazing horses and one of Yaret’s donkeys munching on a thistle. Prickly things seemed to thrive up here. Not much else did. There was just enough thin grass for the horses.

Poda was much calmer now. All the same Rothir did not approach the mare, but simply sat down near her while he ate his porridge. Then he stripped off and, standing in the cold water where the streamlet pooled, rubbed himself down thoroughly with his dampened linen shirt. Poda, watching this familiar activity, drew a little closer.

After he had dressed himself in his spare clothes, he threw the grimy shirt and underbreeches in the pool and scrubbed them briefly before he rose and greeted his own horse – Narba remaining as stolid and unbothered as usual.

Finally he turned to the mare, speaking softly to her in Vonnish. At last she let him stroke her shoulder and take hold of the bridle. Carefully he unstrapped the saddlebag, released the saddle and freed her from her burden. He was pleased to see that her back was not too chafed. After a few more murmured words and pats of reassurance he left her, retrieved his wet clothes from the pool and carried all the gear back to the camp.

There, even before he laid out his clothes to dry, he unpacked the saddlebag. He immediately saw that this was not the one he wanted. None

the less, the food inside it would be useful; stale bread, plenty of biscuit, dried fruit and a few hard-boiled eggs. He walked into the cleft to tell Yaret.

He was used to moving silently and Yaret did not hear. He saw the youth kneeling beside his fallen kinsman, gently offering him a spoon of sludgy biscuit with a murmur of "Try and eat a little more, Eled," in a voice that sounded higher than before; raising a slim hand to brush away Eled's hair with such a tender touch that Rothir froze.

The world shifted slightly. He saw kneeling before him not a beardless boy, but a female, age unknown, ministering to his friend. But why think that? Men could show tenderness too.

Yaret looked up and saw him. There was a flicker of alarmed awareness. That was what convinced him. He – she – knew that she had given herself away.

They stared at each other. Rothir began to frame a question, but Yaret got in first.

"What does Eled usually have for breakfast?" The voice was low and brisk again, the tenderness hidden so instantly that he could not be sure it had been there.

"What? Bread. Fruit. Whatever's quick."

"I have no bread," said Yaret. "I suppose biscuit is no worse."

She was signalling him to ignore it. In front of Eled the discussion could be postponed at least.

"I have some bread," he said. "Not fresh, but still edible. Also eggs, fruit and biscuit, from Poda's saddlebag. I've just got it off her." He addressed Eled. "Poda is safe and settling down now. She let me unsaddle her."

"She's not hurt?" asked Eled.

"No. She was only scared."

"A little later, Eled," Yaret said, "we can try to stand you up between us, and then if you can take a few steps out of this cave, with our support, you can see Poda. And she will see you. That will help her settle down some more."

"Later," murmured Eled, his eyelids already drooping.

Once they had left him and stood outside the cleft, Rothir tried again.

"Yaret. I understand that you—"

She cut across his words severely. "We should go and look for the second saddlebag, if you think it will contain anything useful." Her gaze was cool and distant; her hand a casual inch from the knife in her belt.

"I intend to go and search for it now." He saw that there would be no discussion. He could force her to admit her disguise, but what would he

gain? He needed her help and did not wish to forfeit her goodwill. “Since you say Poda ran off to the escarpment, I’ll ride Narba up there to look around,” he added, reflecting that it might be politic for him to distance himself for a while. He was aware his breadth and looks could be intimidating – an impression which he knew was fully justified, but which at this moment was slightly to be regretted.

When she nodded he whistled his horse over. After saddling Narba, he buckled on his sword belt and slung his bow over his back, because he never rode unprepared. Then he cantered off towards the Darkburn forest. Such a short, unhurried ride counted as rest and recreation for both horse and rider.

As he rode he tried to analyse the disturbance he had felt. That sudden sense of things shifting. He did not like to find himself so easily deceived, although he fully understood why such deceit was necessary.

Indeed, it was practised by some of the female Riders of the Vonn – those who could pass as male – when they were on the road. Two members of his own troop were women, from one of whom he took his orders. Maybe he could tell Yaret that.

But no, he couldn’t. Say as little as possible to as few people as possible: that was one of their rules, and a wise one, because you could never be certain who would talk to who. And he knew nothing of Yaret. She might not even be a pedlar, although he was inclined to think that that at least was true. All those woollen samples backed it up.

When he reached the Darkburn stream he examined the ground more carefully than he had the previous day. Leaving Narba by the forest edge, he followed the trail on foot where it led further in beneath the groping trees.

No saddlebag lay on the ground. All was perhaps more silent than it should be. The tracks had not been overlaid by any others. Crucially, there was still no sign of any stonemen, which was what he had chiefly feared to see. Nor was there any lingering aura or scent of danger, although after a few moments he had the curious sensation that he was being watched.

Rothir had had that feeling before. In a place like this it was as likely to be wrong as right... or as likely to be right as wrong. He turned round in a full circle slowly: nothing moved. He looked overhead: a squirrel sat curled up on a branch. Maybe that was all.

Nevertheless he stood against the tree and watched the forest, quite motionless himself. After five minutes he decided he was wrong this time. On turning to leave, he stumbled over an old tree-stump and apologised to it

before he knew what he was doing. He must be still more tired than he had realised.

Out of the wood the wind was brisk and the sun bright. He led Narba along the trail of hoofprints and burnt grass that headed to the cliff. There it diverged into two: the snaking scorch of the darkburn was easy to see, moving away from the exposed side of the escarpment where the thing had crawled back to the trees. That was the trail he followed first.

It led along a small, deep stream which flowed into the forest to meet the larger Darkburn. At the narrowest point the trail crossed the stream; so this creature could cope with a little water at least. Such a shallow stream would not put out its fires.

Then the creature had turned right as it met the main stream, heading deep into the wood. Rothir followed the trail for another mile in case there was some lair; but the blackened path did not halt. The darkburn had returned the way it had come, along its namesake river. Was it blind, he wondered, and simply following the scent or sound of water?

His knowledge of darkburns was too limited. Since the first one had appeared twelve years ago – he still shuddered at the memory – contact with them had for a long time been thankfully infrequent, but devastating when it happened. In this last year, however, it had happened more and more.

Even so, he did not know how many different types there were. Some that he had come across had been smaller than a human although far more deadly. Things of smoke and darkness, they were fast-moving and could out-run a man – or rather, out-rush him: for often they appeared as a rushing whirl, a spinning, smoky, indistinct mass of fear and dreadful heat.

Only once destroyed – for they could be destroyed, if your sword was strong enough and the fire did not eat you first – did they acquire some sort of substance. He remembered the first time he had managed it: the shards of charcoal left on the smouldering ground had been hard and brittle, white-hot in temperature if black in colour. For the darkburns' heat was never expressed in light.

Except for this new sort. That red inward glow that Yaret had reported. And crawling legs... A few darkburns appeared to have limbs, of a sort; but he didn't recognise this type at all, with its heavy slithering track and occasional claw-marks. This was something big, and new.

They are like corpses, he thought, burnt and desiccated corpses given animation, but hotter than a blacksmith's forge. Not alive in any normal

sense. They are artifices created purely to cause fear and destruction – to create horror. Overwhelming, disabling, fatal horror.

Contemplating the sooty trail he shook his head. He was a mile into the forest now and that was far enough. So he returned the way that he had come.

On leaving the trees he made for the long austere barrier of the escarpment. He could see where Eled's horse had scrambled its way to the top, so he sprang up its rocky side by the same route. As he stood on the plateau and looked back at the dark mass of the forest fading into the distance, he thought of his companions somewhere beyond that obscure horizon.

If only he could send a message to Parthenal. Speak it to the woods, perhaps, and let the leaves carry the whisper long mile upon mile... No doubt the Farwth could easily arrange something like that.

But the Farwth would not do it here, for this was not its realm. The only way to get a message to his fellow Riders was in person.

"All the same," said Rothir aloud, "I wish that you were here with me, Parthenal. One female pedlar's not enough." Then he shook his head again wryly at the pointlessness of his words, and resumed his hunt.

He tracked the signs the horse had left in its flight across the grass and stony slabs towards the higher ground. Its trail betrayed its panic as it zigzagged, sometimes widening to a gallop, its hooves leaving white scrapes on the rock; then slowing to a trot, before something spurred it to another gallop.

And there in the middle of the gallop, lying on a slab of orange lichen-painted granite, was Eled's second saddle bag. Rothir let out a breath of relief as he walked over and picked it up.

It was still tied closed and intact. It wouldn't have mattered if the saddlebag had been lost, except that Eled would have been distraught; but there was no guarantee that it would have stayed lost.

Eled's scabbard was there too, still attached to it, but no matter how carefully Rothir looked, he could see no sign of the sword. That was a frustration. Still, Eled was in no condition to use a sword right now. Unlikely to be for some time. Soberly he climbed down from the escarpment and went to retrieve Narba.

Halfway to the horse, something caught his eye. He strode over to inspect it: a shredded mess of skin and bones. It was the remains of an antelope, two or three days old, much chewed and torn – by wolves, most likely,

judging by the toothmarks. A reminder that the darkburn was not the only thing out here to be wary of.

And now he had the responsibility of the helpless Eled, and a female – who might not be so helpless, who in fact seemed quite resourceful, but who was certainly not a warrior.

When he got back to the camp and dropped his haul on to the ground, Yaret looked at the scabbard.

“Oh,” she said, “there it is. I’ve got the sword. I forgot to tell you. It’s rolled up in hutila bark underneath my packs.”

Rothir was exasperated and hoped it did not show. He stowed away the saddlebag without unpacking it. He knew what it would contain. Eled looked at it anxiously and said nothing.

“We’ve got both bags now, both undamaged,” he told Eled, and saw the relief in the younger man’s eyes.

Yaret hitched up her breeches and squatted next to Eled. “How do you feel about trying to stand up?” she asked him.

She? He? Rothir was unsure again. Yaret acted very like a boy, with a faint brusqueness and casualness of movement that made him wonder. Was it possible that he’d been mistaken?

“You don’t need to put any weight on that leg,” Yaret was saying. “We can support you on either side, and set you down again if you feel dizzy.”

The voice was business-like rather than gentle: in that middle register where it could be either a young man’s highish tenor or a low-toned woman. Rothir studied the face, noting the total lack of beard and the smooth throat. The slightly crooked nose and strong lines of the bones were good camouflage. As were the attitude, and the shapeless clothes. But no, he thought, he was not mistaken.

“I’ll try to stand,” said Eled, looking up at Rothir.

So Rothir went on one knee at his right side – the side of the broken leg – and with a “One, two, three” the two of them hauled Eled up together. Leaning on him heavily, the injured man stood trembling on one foot.

“All right,” said Eled breathlessly, and they were able to move him a few steps forward to the entrance of the cleft. Yaret released him and let Rothir guide him through the narrow opening.

“Ah.” Eled breathed deep and looked around. “Poda!” The horse came over at a trot to nose and snort at him. With Rothir supporting him, Eled put up a hand to touch Poda’s head. “Not your fault,” he said in Vonnish. “You were right to run. There’s nothing else you could have done just then.”

He remained standing for a few moments before a sigh told Rothir that he needed to be let down. They sat him gently against the most forgiving of the rocks near the fire.

“In an hour or so we’ll stand you up again, and have another go,” Yaret told him. “It’ll be good for your muscles. Try to stay awake a little longer now. Watch the horses. Poda will be happier while she can see you.”

On moving away, she murmured to Rothir. “What do you think? Is there any chance of getting him onto a horse within the next three days?”

“I think so.”

“Really? With that leg? But he would not be able to ride far.”

“He would be able to go as far as needed,” Rothir said. “You don’t know him.”

“True. Is he always so... gentle and quiet? I mean, when he is well?”

“He is a quiet man,” said Rothir, “and yes, gentle, and formidably brave. If he can, he will ride with a broken leg.”

“If he can,” she repeated. “Well, possibly he can, but there is the head wound too. You may well have to go to your rendezvous alone, after all.”

Rothir stared out across the empty-seeming plain. “I am reluctant to do that,” he said. “Not because I fear your ability to look after Eled, but because I do not know what else there is to fear.”

“You mean that creeping thing. The darkburn.”

“Yes.” There was no point in mentioning the stonemen to her. Where darkburns were, the stonemen were usually not far behind. But not in this case – or not so far. He did not know if that was merely down to luck.

“Do you think the darkburn might come hunting Eled?” she asked.

“Possibly. And there are other dangers besides the darkburn... Wolves, for instance.”

“I know. I heard wolves howl the other night. They came no closer than two miles, however.”

“Two miles is nothing in a wolf pack’s range. And there may be lions.”

“Seldom,” answered Yaret. “I have only seen a lion here twice in many years of travel.”

“That’s twice too often.”

“True. The second time I was alone,” said Yaret thoughtfully. “The lion circled me. I have never been so frightened in my life – that is, until I met the darkburn.”

“What happened to the lion? Did you shoot it?”

“No. I didn’t want to unless it became unavoidable. And it would have had to be a very good first shot, better than I was capable of at the time. It

went away after a while: not hungry, I expect.”

They both gazed out across the loft. It looked undisturbed and undisturbable. A flock of goats scampered briefly, chased by nothing but the wind. Clouds scudded in the sky. But everything could alter in a moment, Rothir knew: a lion could suddenly appear. Everything could go wrong so easily, the way it had a week ago.

There had been no more than the usual cause for care, no signs of any stonemen when the troop of six set out. They had left the cloud-bound land of Farwithiel after holding the council – if it could be called that – with its sovereign. Maeneb was the only one of the troop with whom the Farwth would communicate, and she did not tell the others everything that she had learned. Safer not to know, again. But she had written down the Farwth’s counsel and put a copy of the scroll in the saddle-pack of each pair of Riders, so that if she were lost, all would not be lost.

Then they had set off, in their pairs, exploring the northern fringes of the great forest of the Darkburn for signs of the stonemen’s hideouts on their way back home to Thield. They had arranged to rendezvous every three days.

On the second rendezvous Arguril had ridden up alone. He was unhurt but stuttering with shock. Stonemen had attacked, he told them, and they had barely managed to escape, the thickness of the forest hindering their horses. At last, after many miles, Arguril had lost his pursuers; but he had also lost his riding-partner Eled.

So since then, they had all five of them been hunting for Eled. Now that he was found, Rothir did not want to let him go again.

He had to make the rendezvous in one week’s time. And he would prefer to take Eled with him. Perhaps he could manage that alone; but a glance at Eled propped against his rock – his eyes already closed once more – told him that the prospect was not a likely one. Eled would need someone up behind him to hold him on the horse. Poda was too nervous to bear the wounded man in safety; and even Narba, strong and willing though he was, could not carry two full-grown men for such a distance.

He glanced at Yaret, who stood scanning the landscape, her face somewhat sombre since the talk of lions.

There is, of course, a lighter option, he thought resignedly. Which means I have to take her at her word; and take them both.

Chapter 10

That afternoon they managed to get Eled on his feet and hobbling around on another three occasions, only for him to drop down exhausted after ten minutes or so each time. Rothir was frustrated.

“It’s the head injury,” said Yaret, almost apologetically. “A man I know back home was the same after a cow kicked him in the head. It changed him. He spent three days asleep, and then he turned aggressive.”

“I trust that Eled will not turn aggressive,” Rothir said. “That’s not something I would want to have to deal with.” All his earlier relief at finding Eled had vanished, replaced by this new problem. It was not Eled’s fault, nor Yaret’s; but it made him impatient all the same.

After looking at him keenly Yaret said, “I’m off to shoot a rabbit.” She picked up her short hunting bow and walked away. Rothir found that he was glad to be alone.

Once she was at a distance he went into the cleft and unrolled the saddlepack that he had recovered up on the escarpment. It contained Eled’s spare clothing, some more biscuit, mostly crumbs, and a pack of cobnuts: old, last year’s. The new ones would be ripening at Farwithiel... He wished that he were back there now, in the protected peace of that old forest, its great columned spaces so different to the untidy knotted jungle of the Darkburn.

Perhaps at Farwithiel he could find some help for Eled, if the Farwth allowed it. But if he did not meet his companions at the rendezvous they would be searching vainly for them both... No, whatever happened afterwards, he had to make the rendezvous.

Beneath the clothes he found a leather tube, and inside that, the scroll. Rothir checked that it was still intact and dry. He was not tempted to read it. Safer not to know; and whatever it said would not help him with his immediate problem. He replaced it carefully inside the bag, covered it up and stepped back out into the open. Eled was still slumbering.

Yaret was a hundred yards away, kneeling up behind a rock, bow drawn. For some minutes she was motionless. Rothir could not see the rabbit until she shot it, when it became visible as a sudden tumble of brown and white against the grass. Yaret went to pick it up, and as she stooped appeared to make some sort of gesture to it, touching her hand to her forehead and saying unheard words.

Rothir walked over to Poda to continue his task of taming her. He could handle the horse without much difficulty now; she did not resist when he

walked her up and down beside the streamlet. Tomorrow he would try to get the saddle on her. If Poda would allow herself to be ridden it would be one less problem burdening his mind. Others still preyed on him, however.

“I will sleep out here tonight,” he said over the remnants of the rabbit stew, “beside the fire.”

“Because of wolves?” asked Yaret.

“Because of wolves or anything else. You sleep next to Eled in the cavern.”

“No,” said Yaret mildly. “I will sleep out here also. If there is danger it will be better to have two of us out here to face it. And I have to protect the donkeys. Eled is well enough to call now if he needs us.”

He made no more than one attempt to persuade her. It was her camp, after all. When she spread out her blanket beside the cooling fire, she carefully laid next to it her bow and three arrows, and then her knife, within inches of her grasp.

And when in the night a wolf’s call threw its long mournful rope across the land, Yaret was on her feet as swiftly as he was himself.

“Less than a mile,” she muttered, standing with her bow drawn and aimed into the darkness. Rothir’s sword was in his hand, for there was only a quarter-slice of moon to light the shadows and an arrow could easily miss its target.

To the south the Shieldholder stood in the sky, his sword also ready and marked out by stars. Rothir was aware of how full the night was, a world unto itself, one not entirely familiar to him even though he had walked through it so often. Here it seemed like another land where the stars reigned supreme.

Through its great silences he listened carefully for the scuffle of approaching paws. There were none. And when another long howl came, and then its answer, they had moved further away eastward. The wolves were hunting deer or antelope most probably.

Minutes later, the next howl was more distant yet; and then it was followed by a whole series of snarls and yapping cries before the starry silence once more filled the night.

That was not a normal hunt, thought Rothir.

“Perhaps they met a rival wolf pack,” murmured Yaret.

“I expect so.” But he did not like the unusual nature of the sound made by the wolves. He stood and listened for another quarter-hour before he allowed himself to assume that all was safe. Yaret had already lain down

again. So he lay back down himself beneath the guarding Shieldholder and slept lightly until dawn.

He was awake before Yaret. When she arose, he noticed her performing some brief ritual, touching ground and chest and face while she mouthed unspoken words. He pretended not to see, just as he pretended to pay no attention when she wandered off for her ablutions. She in her turn was careful to afford him equal privacy. Evidently nothing was to be said about her gender.

Once Eled had been fed and washed, Rothir saddled Narba and walked him around sedately. After seeing that, Poda allowed herself to be saddled also; and when Rothir swung himself up carefully on to her back she neither bolted nor tried to fling him off. His spirits lifted as he rode her up and down.

“Will you try and get Eled up and riding next?” asked Yaret, watching by her donkeys.

“No,” he said, swinging himself down from the saddle again. “I’ll try you.”

She looked faintly alarmed. “Really? If I have to ride, I’d prefer Narba. The last horse I sat on was thirty years old and slower than a cow. Even trotting was beyond her.”

“I meant for you to try out Narba. He’s level-headed; he won’t give you any trouble. We’ll take both horses for a ride.”

Before leaving he checked that Eled was comfortable. When Rothir said he was going for a short ride, Eled smiled and nodded, with a mere trace of anxiety.

“Don’t be long,” he said.

“We won’t be,” Rothir promised, patting his shoulder.

It was a shame, he thought, that Yaret was not a practised rider. When he hoicked her into Narba’s saddle, she was light; so that was something. But she was not happy.

“Too high,” she said. “I’m used to donkeys. I feel like I’m about to slide off.”

“We shall only walk at first,” he reassured her. Mounting Poda once again, he set off walking at a steady pace and instructed Narba to follow. “Let your legs relax,” he told Yaret. “You don’t need to pull on the reins. Leave them loose. That’s it; you’re doing fine.”

“No trotting,” said Yaret.

“Have you ever cantered? It’s actually easier than a trot.”

“No cantering,” said Yaret.

Nevertheless, she did allow Narba to break into a trot after a while, saying “ow, ow, ow,” under her breath as she bounced resolutely on his back. When Rothir accelerated into a canter he looked behind and saw Narba following eagerly. Yaret’s face was set in a grimace and her body looked tense.

“Relax!” he called back. “You don’t need to grip so tight!”

“I do,” said Yaret breathlessly. Rothir slowed down to a walk again, turning Poda’s nose towards the east. He had a destination in his mind, although he did not know exactly where it was.

They rode on for about three miles, Yaret practising a trot for short stretches on the more even ground, while Rothir surreptitiously scanned the terrain until he thought he saw what he was looking for: a black patch on the green-grey Loft.

“Wait here,” he said, and spoke a word of command to Narba. “I’m taking Poda for a gallop.”

The mare stretched out willingly while Narba stood obediently motionless and was soon left behind. A hundred yards on, he slowed down to inspect the spot.

On the ground lay two wolf corpses, both horribly burnt. Rothir studied them and then gazed over to the heavy brooding mass of the Darkburn forest. It was still no more than a mile distant: too close for comfort. There was a scorched trail running across to it. Without dismounting he followed it for a little way towards the trees. The wolves had come too near to darkburn territory, perhaps.

But in that case the camp was too near also. Far too close for comfort. He pulled away from the forest edge and returned at a gallop to Yaret, who was still at a dead stop on Narba.

“How do I get him to start up again?”

“Give him a gentle squeeze with your legs.” Rothir spoke in Vonnish, giving his horse permission to move, and Narba obligingly set off.

“Donkeys are different,” explained Yaret. “Especially Dolm. He just does what he wants mostly. What did you find over there?”

“Two dead wolves. You were right; it looked as if two packs had fought each other. Let’s go back now, and see if we have any chance of getting Eled up onto that horse.”

Once back at the camp they helped Eled to stand up again, and manoeuvred him onto a low stone platform to make it easier for him to mount Narba. Even so, Rothir had to effectively lift him up into the saddle.

It was lucky, he reflected as he heaved, that although tall, Eled was slim and less thick-set than he himself was. He would not have cared to try to lift himself into a saddle.

Yaret had a support ready for the splinted leg: a construction of hutula bark and chequered cloth which they propped beneath Eled's right thigh. It stuck out at an awkward angle but seemed strong enough to protect the leg. Eled laughed.

"Not too bad," he said, and Rothir was encouraged.

"Now you get up behind Eled," he told Yaret, and helped her to climb on to the horse's back. "Try not to kick him."

"Who? Narba or Eled?"

"Narba. You can kick Eled all you like."

"It might help me to stay awake," said Eled, which Rothir took as another encouraging sign.

They managed to walk up and down several times before Eled began to slump in the saddle. Yaret, who was grasping him round the waist, said "Help!" with sudden urgency, and Rothir sprang to assist both her and Eled off the horse's back. He laid his friend down against the supporting rock.

"That's a good start," he told Eled. The young man nodded, smiling, before his eyes closed again. It seemed to be involuntary: willpower was not enough to keep him awake.

"He's heavier than I expected," Yaret said in an undertone. "To hold upright, I mean. If he loses consciousness up there I'll be in trouble."

"I can ride up behind him myself if need be," answered Rothir. "But not all the time; the weight's too much for Narba."

"We need a cart," said Yaret ruefully.

"A cart would only work where the ground is level. This is the most practical way to move him. You did well there."

"Good," she said, with an unexpected smile. It made her look full of mischief. He wondered how old she was: not the twenty he had thought at first sight, when he had assumed she was a young man; but probably under thirty.

He did not ask. Better not to make such personal enquiries. Yaret seemed more at ease now, presumably having decided that he wasn't going to jump on her. In truth, jumping on her was the last thing on his mind. His love life – such as it was – he kept strictly separate from his life as a Rider of the Vonn.

But to say "Don't worry, I'm not interested" would be intrusive and, he hoped, unnecessary. Instead they discussed provisions, and debated whether

it would be wise to shoot a goat.

“I know they’re tough, but we could cook the meat overnight,” said Yaret, “if you think a fire would be safe. Or do you fear more wolves?”

“I think we’ll do without the fire overnight. Or the goat, tempting though it sounds.”

“One rabbit won’t go far with three of us. And Eled needs to eat better food than biscuit,” Yaret said.

“We can add my dried meat to the pot.”

She nodded. “Yes, it looks more edible than mine. I wish Eled would wake up a little more.”

“When I try to talk to him it puts him back to sleep,” said Rothir wryly.

“That’s because your presence calms him,” said Yaret. “I expect he also finds the thinking that conversation requires is too hard at present. But music goes where words cannot. I can try singing to him. That seemed to work on him the other day, before you found us. He liked it, I think.”

Rothir shrugged. “Well, why not?”

“Because I don’t sing very well,” said Yaret with another grin. But she got up and went to sit cross-legged by the fire beside the dozing Eled, where she began to sing in a low voice; a cheerful children’s song, from the sound of it, with a repeating chorus. She didn’t have a trained voice, it was true, but it was pleasant enough and in tune. Eled woke up and seemed to listen.

“Now, you have to clap to this one,” said Yaret. “Clap, clap!” Eled appeared to have forgotten how to clap until she put his hands together, as though he were two years old.

Rothir was dismayed all over again. Would Eled ever recover? Would he ever be fully himself? He feared that he could see little prospect of it at the moment.

But with the fear came determination: all the more reason not to abandon his friend. Whatever became of Eled should not come through his neglect.

And Eled was clapping properly now, almost with enthusiasm. After the song he said, “Do that thing you did. With the feet.”

“The dance? The Rannikan?” Yaret stood up and began to chant and dance at the same time, clapping her hands and then tapping them onto heels and hips and heels again, in a complicated pattern that went faster and faster. Eled laughed. Yaret finished, panting, and looked over at the top of a rock. There was nothing there but a clump of thistles, but it seemed to hold her eye.

“Oof! Enough of that for now,” she said. “I will teach you to dance the Rannikan once you are back upon your legs, Eled. Everybody back home learns it.”

“Sing something else,” begged Eled. It truly was as if the music turned him to a child again.

“Wait a minute.” Going over to rummage briefly in her pack, from it Yaret pulled out a small rounded object. It was made of half a dried gourd; or rather, two quarters, stiffly hinged with metal handles on the underside and with a single string across the top from edge to edge. Yaret squeezed the handles underneath to pull the two sections of the gourd apart, and twanged the string. It created a hollow plinking note which was almost comical in its melancholy. By squeezing and releasing the handles she could produce hollow notes in different pitches.

Then she sang again, another simple song in her own language which was full of soft consonants, accompanied by plinks and plonks at every second beat. Her face was alive with happy concentration.

Although Rothir thought that by this time her femaleness was fairly obvious, Eled did not appear to notice, or possibly to care. He was smiling. The music made him focus in a way that nothing else seemed to do just now.

“You must be musical,” Yaret told him after the song had ended.

“I don’t know,” said Eled.

“There’s never been much chance to find out,” Rothir added.

She studied them both. “You play no instruments?”

“Back home some people do.” This was her cue, thought Rothir. Now she ought to ask, *Where is home?* or at the very least, *What instruments?*

Yaret asked nothing. She simply nodded and put her gourd away.

Eled was happy, which was something. He seemed to live in the moment now: he knew where he was and why, but it did not go deep enough to worry him. That was perhaps a good thing in the circumstances, Rothir reflected. He would have preferred the old Eled back – but not an Eled riddled with guilt and fear.

Evening cast its violet curtain over them. Eled became a drowsing shadow, disconcertingly insubstantial. The donkeys, more sure and solid, trotted over for their customary oats. Once the porridge had been cooked up for the next morning, Yaret carefully killed the fire with handfuls of damp earth, and then lay down with her bow and three arrows within arm’s reach and her knife by her hand. She appeared to be asleep within five minutes.

Rothir lay awake as full darkness fell upon the land. There were fewer stars tonight: only the Shieldholder strode across the sky, while the slender moon slipped in and out of high-fleeing clouds.

He was half listening for wolves, half running the tune back through his head, with all its accompanying plinks and plonks. Happy, mournful notes. A shepherd's instrument. No, Yaret was no shepherd. What was she, again? As the notes began to slow and run awry, he also fell asleep.

He woke to the donkeys' strident braying. It tore through the night, ripping his sleep apart: a few seconds later both horses joined in. The terror in Poda's neigh was obvious. When Rothir sprang to his feet he felt the judder of their hoofbeats shaking through the ground.

The horses were fleeing, but something was coming. As he gripped his sword in readiness he could smell it – the smoke and something worse. The stench of death. And with the smell came the horror: the anguish and dismay and sense of all things ending. Familiar now yet always new, always worse than you remembered, worse than you could imagine.

Against the dark of night and the streaking shadows cast by the moon it came towards them, a darker shape, a big one this time, taller than a man, and whirling. It seemed to have long limbs although he could not tell how many. It made no sound. The stink and heat were almost overwhelming but it was the fear that he needed to fight off.

Yaret loosed an arrow. It did not slow the darkburn. Rothir leapt over the cold fire and wielded his sword.

Ignore the whirling and the blur and heat. You had to move fast, even if you could not see what you were striking: you had to slice and hack without stopping because the darkburn would not stop.

When he sliced off a limb it was like slicing through burnt wood. The same sharp jarring crack. The limb flew through the air and landed somewhere unseen. He slashed again: the thing did not slow down, but flailed and lunged towards him. He had to jump back, feeling the heat from it fiercer than the sun, a dark sun already burning its way through his clothes and singeing his hair. Pain flared across one hand. As he leapt forward to strike again, he felt his face scorch and thought of Huldarion.

More pieces of the darkburn fell and still it flailed and spun. Yaret threw something over it which instantly began to glow red, smoking with the odour of burnt wool. But for half a second the darkburn was caught: and Rothir hacked and slashed and smote, hearing the harsh smack of the sword and his own grunts of effort, until finally the dark shape crumpled to the ground. There it lay still.

Chapter 11

They both stood there gasping. Somewhere a donkey snorted. Rothir stepped forward to prod the hard remnants of the darkburn with his foot: it did not move. Gathering the corners of the smouldering blanket, he tried to drag it away. The blanket disintegrated into ashes, releasing bits of darkburn that fizzed and hissed against the dewy grass.

He waited: above him in the huge sky, the Shieldholder waited: still nothing moved. Rothir had not heard of darkburns regenerating from their shattered limbs, but he would not put it past them. Too much about them was still mysterious.

This one, at least, seemed fully dead. The smell of decay was already waning – proof that it was an artifice, he thought – and the terror was sliding down from reality to memory. He walked back to the fire, where he could just see Yaret standing like a statue in the moonlight, clutching her bow.

He wanted to reassure her: but what reassurance could he give? He did not even know if the darkburn was alone. All too often another attack would follow. He was listening carefully for the sound of stonemen but heard nothing. None the less, they were likely to be around.

“Eled slept through that,” said Yaret. “I would not have thought it possible.” Her voice was hoarse.

“I’ll watch for the rest of the night,” said Rothir. “Dawn will come in two hours or so. We’ll leave as soon as it’s light enough. How long will it take you to pack up and be ready?”

After a few seconds she replied. “About a quarter-hour. But it may take us longer to get Eled awake and up onto the horse.”

“We must do it as quickly as we can.” He sat down in front of the cleft, facing west, the direction from which the darkburn had come; while Yaret sat down facing east.

“I’ll watch too,” she murmured. “I can’t sleep after that.”

“It was not the same as the creature you saw chasing Poda?”

“No. Quite different. The smell this time was not so bad, I think. This one was taller. But it felt different as well. The sense of – what shall I call it? Grief. Horror. Dismay. That was worse this time. There was grief in the other one too, but more hatred – a whole world of hatred; and less fear.”

“I do not distinguish so many shades of feeling in them as you do. It is all horror and despair.”

“Yes.” After a pause she added, “This one felt like a thing in torment.”

“They are things designed to make us feel torment.” He spoke into the night. “Don’t take those feelings as real. They are imposed on us by the darkburns, and they disappear when the darkburns are destroyed. But this one is powerless now.”

“Will there be others?”

“It’s possible. If you are going to stay awake, we may as well sit back to back. It’s easier.” They shuffled together.

“So you think it may not have been alone?” Yaret muttered over her shoulder. “Do these creatures travel in packs, then?”

“Occasionally,” said Rothir. “And also...” He thought of telling her about the stonemen, and decided against it. Stonemen did not usually, in his experience, attack in darkness. And the darkburn was enough bad news for one night.

“Are they alive?” Her voice was small in the shadows. “How can such a burnt thing be alive?”

“They’re not alive in the way that we are.”

“But they feel. Only living things can feel.”

“They make us feel. That’s not the same.”

“Is it not? They smell like death,” said Yaret, “like decaying flesh. A burnt tree does not smell that way.”

“Yet they are burnt through and through. There is no flesh in them to decay. They are made of ash and charcoal. The stench too is designed, I believe, to cause us horror.”

“Made? Designed? By who?”

Rothir was silent. But a moment later Yaret answered her own question.

“By wizardry, I suppose... Or something like it.”

Assuredly, he thought. And he thought the wizard’s name, as well; but he would not speak it.

Yaret said nothing more until a donkey wandered over to them, a heavily breathing shadow that snuffled in enquiry. She reassured it with a few quiet words in her feathery language. Rothir hoped the horses had not fled too far – particularly Poda. If she had been badly frightened it might be back to the starting post with her.

However, there was no use worrying about that until it was light enough to see. Once the donkey wandered off Yaret was silent, her back tense against his own. He hoped his presence would give her some feeling of being shielded, at least. He was confident that he could protect them against another darkburn, even against two.

But if a horde of stonemen followed... No, that was unlikely. Stonemen could see in the darkness no better than himself. To cross this land they would need torches, which would give them away. Even if they were close by, they would wait until the morning to attack. Listening carefully, he heard nothing but the ordinary small noises of the night.

Slowly the eastern sky turned from black to a thickening blue, as heavy as a velvet cloak, before fading to a wan, exhausted grey: the rich velvet was transformed to worn-out wool, threadbare and thin. He stood up and looked for the horses.

There they were, only a few hundred yards distant, Narba close up to Poda with the donkeys by her other side. The male donkey – Dolm – stared east belligerently as if he had spent the last hour watching too.

Rothir looked down at the shattered darkburn. It was hard to tell what shape it might have had. The fallen shards of limbs were twisted like charred branches. It might have been the remnants of some old burnt-out tree that had been hacked up and strewn around.

He did not touch any of the pieces. As he went to fetch the horses Yaret began to drag her packs out from their shelter in the cleft.

It took a quarter-hour, as she had predicted. The raincover was rolled; the waterskins were full. The packs were strapped onto the donkeys and to Poda, because Narba would have a heavy enough burden. Eled was hoisted up onto the horse, and his leg made secure with its support of bark before Yaret climbed up behind him, wincing slightly. She had handed Rothir a slice of porridge to eat as he rode. They set off well before the sun rose, through the thin grey dawn.

He led the way on Poda, restraining himself to keep her to a steady walk. The land seemed changed now, no longer empty and benign but full of ominous hints. Every breath of the wind seemed to carry a warning. Things flickered at the edges of his vision, unresolved. The sense of something watching had returned although there was no watcher that he could detect. Annoyed at himself for being so suggestible, he concentrated on the path ahead.

They walked for two hours, Rothir leading, and the donkeys trailing in the rear. They were heading east by northeast along the length of the empty region for which he had no name and which Yaret called the Loft. His heart sank as he noted how slowly they were travelling and calculated how far they had to go.

By the time they took their first halt, Eled was already slipping sideways in the saddle. Yaret's face was tight with the effort of keeping him – and

herself – in place. It was beginning to rain.

“Rain is good,” Rothir assured her as he dismounted and then lifted Eled down. “It may reduce the power of the darkburns. It certainly won’t help them.”

Yaret looked as if she wanted to ask something; but she withheld her question until Eled was lying on the grass with his eyes closed. They had agreed to give him half an hour’s rest. Then she addressed Rothir in a low voice.

“What else should I know about the darkburns?”

He considered what to tell her. “They take many shapes; but can be hard to make out. They seem to spin and blur somehow.”

“Smoke?”

“Not just smoke. I think perhaps they distort the vision as they do the mind. Some seem to have no limbs, and some have many. A few look vaguely human, although often smaller, and headless.”

“The first I saw was almost serpent-like. But shorter and with legs. Closer to a giant lizard, perhaps. What else?”

“They come singly, as a rule; although occasionally others follow. They seem to not like heavy rain. They don’t avoid watercourses, but do not cross them easily, it seems.” Although the stonemen evidently had ways of getting them across water, he would not go into that. “They attack humans unerringly, but not animals.”

“The first one I saw was, I guessed, hunting not Poda but her rider. So that means they can see; and have intelligence.”

“A dog can do as much,” said Rothir. “And the darkburns have no eyes. They may use scent or some other sense to find us.”

Yaret looked around. They could only see for about a mile in any direction before the landscape drooped into an indeterminate grey canvas. The drizzle was light, but hemmed them in with blank walls of mist.

“The name you give them. Do they originate from the Darkburn forest?”

“Probably.”

“And these things are always... burnt?”

“Entirely. Some are brittle. The thing this morning broke in pieces easily enough, although your arrows just bounced off it. Others are tougher; but can still be broken, if you have the strength.”

“Why do they attack?”

“That I cannot tell you.” There was no point delving into a complicated account of his people’s history. In any case it did not concern her.

She studied him and nodded. “Very well. I have two observations.”

“Yes?”

“Firstly, the lizard-shaped thing that I saw was not just burnt, but actively burning.”

“So you said.” Even though Eled had suggested the same, Rothir was not sure if he believed them. How could she be sure about that inner glow when she had only glanced at it for a second before hiding her face? And Eled might merely have picked up what she said to sharpen his own hazy memory. “Your second observation?”

She hesitated. “The darkburn this morning, Rothir. Was that attacking us?”

“Yes, of course.” He was puzzled by the question. “What else could it be doing? It didn’t come across us by chance. That wasn’t random. It sought us out.”

“Exactly. And felt like a thing in torment.”

“I told you – those are feelings created to cause terror and confusion.”

“If you say so.” Yaret sighed. “You burnt your hand in fighting. I’d better bind it up for you.”

He looked at his left hand, which he had been ignoring until now.

“There’s no blistering. It’ll do without a bandage.”

“No, it won’t. It needs something to protect it,” she said firmly. “Why risk damaging it further? Your face too. Though I suppose you won’t let me bandage that.”

“Indeed I won’t. You sound like my sister,” said Rothir, without thinking about it; until he saw the reproving look she gave him at this careless admission of her gender.

She dressed his hand with star-moss and bandaged it in green-striped wool without a word. Although he was very aware of her proximity and touch he decided to think nothing of it.

By the time she had finished, Eled was struggling to get up.

“I’m ready,” he said.

“You need to eat first,” said Yaret, and Rothir was reminded that it was still better for Eled to believe her male while she was performing much more intimate tasks for him.

They gave Eled some dry biscuit and a drink. Before the half hour was up Rothir mounted himself on his horse behind Eled, with his cloak covering them both against the steady drizzle.

“Narba will bear our weight for a little while,” he told Yaret. “You ride Poda.”

“I’d rather ride a donkey.” But Poda allowed her to mount with only the faintest twitching of her haunches. Rothir thought that the mare might be becoming inured to darkburns to some degree. All their horses had suffered repeated exposure to them this last year. Even his own stoical Narba had, on his first encounter, tried to rear and bolt; but slowly Narba was being trained to bear the stench and horror, just as Rothir was training himself.

Perhaps the hatred emanating from this one had been less fierce than some. Yaret’s question recurred to him. *Had* it been attacking them?

Of course it had. Why else would it rush upon them in that way, except to bring them death by fire?

“Leg hurts,” mumbled Eled.

Rothir was immediately alarmed. The leg must be very painful for Eled to have said anything about it. He adjusted the bark support carefully until Eled sighed and said, “Better now.” Possibly he was lying, but Rothir would take his word for it. They had to move on.

To distract Eled and to keep him awake, he began to talk to him in Vonnish, secure in the knowledge that anything Yaret overheard, she would not understand. Even so, he stayed off the subject of their recent mission, and kept to a more soothing theme by talking about their home – if you could call Caervonn home. The Vonn had many homes, and none. Their headquarters, Thield, was a town of tents, always temporary, always moving. But Caervonn was the home they still aspired to, despite their twelve-year exile. Rothir had not been there since he was a young man. He no longer considered himself young.

Eled was young, though; he had been only a boy when they had left Caervonn. To him it was still a place of dream and hope despite the threats that now assailed it. Or probably assailed it – for in truth no-one was sure how things stood there at present. Much would have changed.

But he knew that Eled saw Caervonn as a shining place of half-remembered legend; so as such he described it. The young man listened with unusual concentration as Rothir spoke of the city’s six high towers, its long streets lined with ancient cobbles; the odd, appealing angles given to its structures by their hexagonal design. It was supposed to be a tribute to a bee-hive, but since Caervonn had been built twelve hundred years ago there was no way of being sure if that was true.

None the less it was part of Rothir’s own shining legend. As he spoke of the warm summer evenings when the terraces were full of music and the clear deep sky above them full of swifts, he was filled with a terrible sense of grief and loss so strong that it made him feel physically sick.

Eled sighed with a different sort of pain. “The women are beautiful in Caervonn, they say.”

“As beautiful as anywhere,” said Rothir. “And courteous and cultured.”

Briefly, he allowed himself a glimpse of his own dream, the one that had accompanied him on several particularly cold and lonely journeys. The dream of one day entering Caervonn, riding triumphant in the line behind Huldarion, and seeing the people cheering from the balconies. They would be smiling, welcoming: one would throw a handful of petals, catching in his hair, and he would look up to see a woman as dark and lovely as a rose... She was a woman entirely of his imagination, but the promise of her brought him comfort.

Rothir was aware that such hope was essentially illusory. He did not indulge in these dreams often. Nonetheless, it was important to keep Caervonn alive in his mind. He pitied the younger man whose teens and adulthood had been spent in exile. As a wandering Rider of the Vonn, Eled had been a patroller, hunter, and warrior, as Rothir had himself, yet a citizen of nowhere.

At times the Vonn had hired out other skills; in Rothir’s case, blacksmithing. But at least he had had a life in Caervonn before this one, even if it had been a life of increasing strain and conflict and finally battle, before Huldarion and all his kin were driven out of paradise... Although Caervonn had been no paradise those last two years.

All too soon, Eled’s questions and attention lapsed. Rothir held him upright on the saddle for as far as he could before he had to call a stop.

“Another half an hour to rest and then we’ll switch horses again,” he told Yaret. She nodded mutely underneath her dripping hood.

And so it went for the remainder of the day: crawling, crawling across the empty landscape like ants across a vast barnyard. They spoke little, for the weather was not conducive to conversation and Eled seemed to need all his energy to stay upright on the horse. The stops became increasingly long and the spells on horseback shorter.

At last, before he really wanted to, Rothir called a final halt. It was not yet even dark and his heart urged him on; but he knew he must not risk exhausting Eled on this first day of travel.

So they camped in a dryish hollow sheltered by a lonely tree. Eled was asleep almost as soon as Rothir laid him down; he had to wake the young man up again to make him eat.

Yaret said little. She merely nodded when Rothir told her, “We will set no watch tonight.” Despite the slowness of their travelling – or perhaps

because of it – he felt drained of energy. They both needed sleep after the previous night’s disturbance.

Yet for all his tiredness he lay awake, listening, unable to relax. *The donkeys will warn us*, he told himself; *they did last night, after all*.

But he would not have been surprised to open his eyes in the morning and find the donkeys and their owner gone. Why would Yaret bother to continue on this thankless journey? She could easily take her own route north from here.

In the end he made himself sleep; and woke to find the donkeys were still there. Yaret was already attending to Eled, who looked a little better than he had the previous night.

“Which horse shall I be on today?” he asked Rothir.

“Still Narba,” answered Rothir. “With Yaret up behind you.”

“Ah! She clutches on to me too hard,” said Eled, and then tried to smile at Yaret to show it did not matter.

“Do I? Sorry,” said Yaret contritely. “I’m just trying not to fall off myself.”

“That’s all right,” said Eled. “Shall we start? I’m ready.”

Initially he seemed strong and they made good progress. Soon they left the high grassed plains behind, and began to cross the Hayle. This was a land of boulders, huge inexplicable rocks that dotted the ground and hindered any rider. The travellers could not have galloped here even had they wished to do so. The boulders had sat there for centuries or longer: trees grew from some, and had split them into smaller flocks of jagged stones.

Rothir noticed that Yaret kept looking around, wary and puzzled.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. It’s only... I keep thinking that there’s something here.”

“There’s something everywhere,” said Rothir. “We just don’t spot them. Plenty of rabbits: maybe antelope. Fangols. Moorhounds. Hares. The odd wolf, but not too close, I hope.”

“Is that still the Darkburn forest to our right?” She pointed to a shadow marching parallel to their path, indistinct through the continuing thin drizzle.

“Yes. Our route runs parallel to it.” The forest was perhaps two miles away. He would have preferred to take a route away from it, but that would mean a longer journey with no benefit of easier ground, and he did not have the time. The Darkburn river and forest would not begin their long curve

round to the south and then the west for another fifty miles or so. They were stuck with it.

“So we are still on the Darkburn Loft,” she murmured.

“We call this area the Hayle.”

“It still feels like the Loft. A habitation.”

“Whatever else is here with us, is harmless.” He had been watching his surroundings carefully, and there had been nothing to perturb him on the field of boulders. The only lion spoor he’d seen had been weeks old. No sign of wolves – nor, thankfully, of darkburn trails.

In the afternoon, as they struggled over the uneven ground, Eled’s strength began to wane. His leg was obviously troubling him; so they took another long halt to let him rest.

While the other two shared some biscuit Rothir climbed the highest of the nearby boulders to look out from its top, five yards above the ground. It was not high enough to see any great distance even though the rain had almost stopped. He observed no darkburn trails. No distant Riders of the Vonn either... But then he had not expected that; he had merely hoped.

Hope, he thought as he gazed out towards the mountains, which seemed hardly closer than before. So many years trying to live on hope, and for what? When will any hope be fulfilled? When will we come into our own?

He shrugged the thought away and slid back down the boulder. He had asked himself that question so many times, and the answer had always come back the same: don’t think about it. Put it in a box. You have a job to do. The nature of the task before him had changed over the years, but the necessity had never gone away. Right now his task was to get Eled to the rendezvous in safety.

He had less certainty about what it might be best to do with the injured man after that. Farwithiel, perhaps... But that was a problem for the future.

The day dripped past them and fell imperceptibly into dusk before they halted for the night again. In spite of his worries about Eled, and his half-expectation of the donkeys disappearing, Rothir slept soundly. He awoke to the rasp of donkeys grazing; to a sky thick with clouds but free of rain: to a land of dull, washed stones, and a clear horizon that was still too far away.

Chapter 12

The certainty that they were not being followed was Rothir's only consolation for their slow progress. Time was so short...

He knew that he could leave the other two behind if need be, and gallop onward to the rendezvous, but he was reluctant to abandon them. Yaret's bow would be of little use against the darkburns; and Eled could not fight.

Yaret evidently felt she had a duty to Eled as well. While she was mounted behind the injured man, she copied Rothir's example in trying to keep him awake by chattering about this and that.

"The other day you talked about Caervonn, I think?" she said after a while, quite casually. "I've heard about the city of Caervonn."

"And what have you heard?" Rothir demanded. He knew he sounded stern. The history of Caervonn and the expulsion of the Riders was in itself no secret; yet he hated to hear it spoken of lightly, as an idle rumour.

She shrugged. "I'm told it's far away down south, towards the sea. There was a battle, or a civil war, or something. Now its people are split in two. That was just a bit of tavern gossip in Outer Kelvha. They said the Vonn who had no homes would sometimes aid the Kelvhans in their battles, or send wolf-hunters to the north."

"That much is true."

"So you are one of the homeless ones? The ones they called the Riders of the Vonn?"

"We are." He hoped his tone was sufficiently forbidding. Perhaps it had been a mistake to mention Caervonn in front of her, even though the conflict there was common knowledge. But it was more important not to mention Thield or Huldarion – or rather, their current location, which was secret.

However, she asked nothing else. Instead she spoke again to Eled.

"Shall I tell you about the town I come from?"

Eled nodded.

"It's north of the hills and west of the mountains," she said. "A very long way from the sea. None of us has ever seen the sea. There are some small lakes a dozen miles away where people can catch fish; but they are muddy lakes, and the fish are even muddier. Not many people venture so far from Obandiro in any case. They are content at home."

The homeplace that she described was very different to Caervonn. It sounded as if Obandiro were barely even a town – more of a large,

sprawling village, with no tall buildings except a bell tower at the marketplace. Its greatest glory seemed to be that marketplace, an area where three hundred people could gather; in Yaret's awed tones, an enormous number. Rothir suppressed a smile.

"How large is your population?" he inquired.

"Perhaps a thousand and a half."

"That's not many."

"No." She was silent for a moment. "There have been setbacks through the years. We have suffered blight and famine, and endless winter storms that blow down from the north, and of course the fever... But for the last twenty years or so, Obandiro has thrived."

"I'm glad of that," he said, feeling a little ashamed of his former amusement.

"And what is your house like?" asked Eled.

"It's outside the town," said Yaret, "a couple of miles away. I live on my grandparents' farm – well, just a small-holding, really. A few sheep and goats and chickens. But they have a large house. It has three floors! It's built of wood and so old that it's mostly held together with ivy. Everything creaks, especially at night. The stairs play tunes when you use them: one tune for up, and one for down."

Eled laughed.

"Downstairs are the kitchen and the living quarters, and upstairs are the looms, because the light is better there for weaving. That's where my grandfather will be busy right now, clattering away at his loom and making the whole house shake. Once, when I was about eleven, I tried to climb up the ivy on the outside wall to surprise him at his work, but the ivy wasn't strong enough; that's how I broke my nose. And my collarbone as well."

"You're a weaver," said Eled experimentally.

"Yes. Grandfather is the main weaver. I help him in the winter, but I'm not so skilled as he is. His cloth is always perfectly smooth and even. It's in great demand. Gramma spins the wool, but downstairs to avoid the racket of the looms. Half a dozen of her cronies in the town spin wool for us as well. I do a bit of spinning, and look after the animals."

"What about your parents?" asked Rothir.

She looked past Eled at him. A cool, withdrawing gaze.

"My mother died of fever along with my small brother, soon after he was born. I don't remember much about it; I was only three. My father died when I was six. A lion got him while he was out hunting. I remember that. But I've had a good life with my grandparents."

Rothir's inclination to smile had gone entirely. A reminder that Caervonn's was not the only tragedy, he thought: every family had its own disasters, often barely visible and managed without fuss. People just got on with whatever had to be done, because what alternative was there?

"You said three floors," said Eled. "What's on the third floor?" Rothir was pleased by his attention to this detail.

"That's the cellar," Yaret answered with some pride. "My father and grandfather dug it out. In winter it's full of piles of roots and sacks of oats and boxes of apples and shelves of cheese. My grandmother makes Kelvhan cheese; it lasts for ever."

"And smells worse the older it gets," Rothir commented. "How close are you to Kelvha, then? I thought your town lay further to the east."

"It does. We're a long way from Kelvha. But my grandmother is from Outer Kelvha – very outer – where our distant kinsmen settled many years ago, after our people migrated from further north."

"Your people," said Eled enquiringly.

"The Bandiran. We came south about four centuries ago. Many settled where I live at Obandiro, north of the Coban hills. Others kept going west past Melmet, to Ioben. That's where my grandmother is from."

"Very outer Kelvha, indeed," said Rothir.

"You know it?" she asked in some surprise.

"I've travelled through both Melmet and Ioben; in the past some of us have hired ourselves as wolf-hunters to the Baron of the Broc. I have travelled a good deal, though more to the west than in the direction of Obandiro. If I have passed close by, it was without realising Obandiro was there. I admit that I'm not quite sure that I have ever heard its name."

"Good," said Yaret. "That's the way we like it."

"Where did your people come from, when you migrated from the north?" asked Eled, impressing Rothir again.

"Up in the hills, behind a land called Horva," Yaret said.

"I know Horva. It's a hard life they have there," commented Rothir. It was an unyielding land of semi-nomadic herdsmen with scrawny cattle and bad-tempered sheep. "I didn't see any settlements in the hills beyond," he added.

"I don't think anyone lives there any more. There was an earthquake – more than one: a series of them. The town was destroyed and the waters changed their courses. The Bandiran decided to leave and settle elsewhere, but the Horvans didn't want us. So we kept going. We have no written records from the time. But there are plenty of tales and ballads about it,

especially by our bard, Madeo.” She said the name with a kind of reverence.

“I have not heard of Madeo,” said Rothir.

“I expect not. But Madeo was one of the leaders of the exodus and after that a great traveller in the new lands, whose songs have gone down through the generations.”

“Could you sing any of them?” asked Eled eagerly.

“Not while we are riding. Maybe later.”

Rothir found himself somewhat dejected by the tale. Did the Vonn also face four hundred years of exile, with no hope of return? If that were to be the case, what was the point of anything that he could do?

We can try to make things better, he reminded himself. Just stick to now. Do whatever needs to be done, without fuss.

He plodded on, the muffled thud of Poda’s hooves beating a leisurely rhythm: too slow, too slow, too slow.

Mile after weary mile they walked, their progress snail-like even once they left behind the giant boulders of the Hayle; for they needed to halt every hour or two when Eled began to slump. Once he nearly fell from the horse before Rothir, reacting to Yaret’s sudden cry of alarm, quickly moved across to hold him up.

“I’m all right really. I can go a bit further,” said Eled apologetically. So Rothir agreed, although he knew that this long ride could not be good for his companion.

When they stopped for the night Eled’s leg was red and swollen. Rothir tended to him, trying in vain to engage him in gentle conversation while he reapplied the star-moss dressing. Meanwhile Yaret built the fire and cooked up a mix of oats, biscuit and dried fruit – fast if uninviting food. She unpacked small pots of salt and honey, but Rothir, seeing her prepare to add a spoonful of honey to the mix, said, “Save it.”

“It’ll make it tastier for Eled.”

“Save it.” He could not give a reason. He just had the feeling that some unforeseen emergency or need might yet occur; though what sort of emergency could require a small pot of honey, he did not know. But he was uneasy with foreboding and could not have spelt out why.

Perhaps it was the rank and rotten smell that pervaded this whole area. Now, with the Hayle left far behind, they were beginning to traverse swampier ground. The land was pitted with numerous small ponds and shallow, reedy lakes which were fringed with sad bedraggled trees. The wetness of the surroundings should have been reassuring, if Rothir’s

theories about the darkburns were correct; but the place stank of rotting vegetation.

After a little searching they found a spot that was dry enough to spend the night. However, there was no refuge from the smell. It was not as bad as the stench of darkburns, but bad enough.

“Is this still the Loft, in your parlance?” he asked Yaret as they ate their limited provisions.

She shook her head. “I doubt it. It feels too depressing.”

It is our situation that is depressing, Rothir thought. They finished eating in near-silence and Yaret set aside the remnants for the morning. She did not sing any ballads as she had promised; nor did Eled ask for them. Indeed, as soon as he had eaten he fell restlessly asleep.

Rothir studied him with concern. As his anxiety for Eled grew, so too did his affection and respect for the young man. He must not fail him.

While he unpacked his gear he had come to a decision. Now he turned to Yaret.

“I’d better tell you who it is that we are fleeing from.”

“Apart from darkburns? Rothir, you don’t have to tell me anything that you would prefer to keep to yourself.”

“I know that. And I thank you. But I think it would be wise, so that you’re prepared.”

She pulled a face. “All right. Go on.”

“It is not just the darkburns that we have to fear,” he told her soberly. “It is the people whom the darkburns lead – or at least who follow after them, and who are much more numerous. The darkburns sometimes act as trackers for them. Also the terror instigated by the presence of a darkburn gives them a significant advantage in a fight. These people are called stonemen.”

“Stonemen... I think I may have heard of somebody like that,” she said slowly. “Odd drunken tales in inns, again. Men who worship stone, or are made of stone, one story said. I didn’t believe it.”

“They are certainly not made of stone,” said Rothir. “They are human. But they do worship stone, after a fashion, and have their own strange rituals.” He did not want to go into detail. “It is enough to say that recently – in the last dozen years or a little longer – they have become much more aggressive. They nurture hatred of all other peoples, and hunt down those who don’t share their beliefs.”

“Why? What’s changed to make them start doing that? Have they been persecuted?”

Rothir shook his head. “Not by us. In the past they were simply a secretive tribe in the lands towards the sea; they kept to themselves. It’s not clear what has altered.”

“Have they attacked Caervonn?”

“They have in the past, twelve years ago.” He thought of those first bloody battles underneath the city walls, and decided not to elaborate. “Afterwards, once our group of Riders had been exiled, a truce was called between the stonemen and Caervonn. It did not include us exiles and they have hunted us down ever since. But Caervonn itself has been peaceful, until lately: however, it seems that now the situation may have changed.”

“You don’t know?”

“No news comes out of Caervonn now,” said Rothir sombrely. “The stonemen have also had several encounters with Kelvha, whom they hate. This year there has been a marked increase in their attacks on Kelvha’s south-east borders. But they attacked Kelvha first, not the other way around. And perhaps *hate* is the wrong word. The stonemen simply regard all those who don’t share their culture and beliefs as not fully human.”

“That’s always dangerous,” commented Yaret.

“It is. It seems that over the years their beliefs and practices have become much more extreme,” said Rothir carefully. “Also, they drug themselves. That may account for some of the change.”

“But not all of it?”

He considered before saying, “There may be somebody behind it. The same somebody who is behind the darkburns. For the appearance of the first darkburns twelve years ago coincided with the rising of the stonemen... and with other things.” The towers of Caervonn stood in memory before him, no longer beautiful but burning.

“How would I know a stoneman?”

“You’ll know one as soon as he comes running at you with an axe.” At once Rothir wished he had not said that. “They wear red tunics and they often paint their faces. Daub them with grey. And they wear a crown of stones. Like the darkburns that they drive before them, they are an increasing threat across an area that grows wider by the year.”

“But you do not know what the darkburns are,” said Yaret.

“No.”

“Yet you think the same wizardly power may have instigated all these attacks?”

He was silent for a long moment. “We think so.”

She nodded. “I thank you for your confidence.”

“Don’t thank me,” Rothir said. “It’s not good news.”

“I have one more question, if I may? It’s not about the Vonn.”

“Ask.”

“I have now seen two darkburns,” said Yaret. “Yet no stonemen. So the one does not always follow the other?”

“It usually does, in my experience at least. When the lone darkburn attacked our camp I assumed a dawn attack by stonemen might be imminent. That is why I made us leave.”

“And the creeping thing in the forest? I saw no stonemen there.”

“Luckily for you.” Rothir felt suddenly very weary. None of this was easy to explain; not least because his own understanding of events was so incomplete. He did not like not knowing what was going on.

“Well,” said Yaret, “we had better copy Eled now, and go to sleep.”

“I wish that I could sleep as soundly as he can,” Rothir answered.

“Ah...” She made a movement of her hand towards him, almost as if she would have patted his arm, before thinking better of it.

Definitely female, he decided, before recognising his own prejudice: for neither Tiburé nor Maeneb would ever have done anything of the sort. Indeed he expected no such tenderness from most of the women that he knew. His riding-partner Parthenal would be more likely to give him a kind pat.

The night was cold, and frequently disturbed by plaintive bird-calls. The donkeys stamped noisily and huffed in uneasy indignation. When it was barely light Rothir arose and woke his comrades. Yaret stood up and, still half asleep, did her usual morning ritual, not bothering to conceal it this time as she touched first the ground and then chest, lips and forehead with a floppy hand and her eyes closed.

Rothir urged them both to get moving. Despite his urgency, he felt bad about giving them so little rest. The fact that neither of them complained did not reduce his sense of guilt.

They ploughed through mud and splashed around the reedbeds. The stink of decaying vegetation grew stronger the further east they went. Far to their right, the dense bulk of the Darkburn forest still marched alongside the swamplands, keeping pace with them. Yaret’s troubled gaze was often drawn to it.

“I never realised that it was so big,” she said. “My grandfather’s map only showed a little scrap of woodland. But it just goes on and on.”

“In a dozen miles or so it will start to bend increasingly round to the south, following the Darkburn river. But we’re at a safe enough distance

from it here.” Or so he hoped. Yet to move further from the Darkburn would slow them down.

And Rothir now judged, with a deep wrench of his gut, that they were not going to be in time to make the rendezvous. Tomorrow – however little he liked the idea – he would have to leave the other two and go on ahead alone.

“Oh,” said Yaret. Her horse had stopped. Eled swayed in front of her, eyes half-closed; but it was not that. She was staring down at one of the stagnant pools, her face stricken.

“What is it?” Following her gaze, Rothir jumped down from Poda to take a look. Under the pool’s surface there was a dark, thick shape which after a few seconds he identified as an old tree stump with some roots still attached. Perhaps she had taken it for a drowned person.

“It’s only a piece of wood,” he said.

“It’s... burnt.”

“Perhaps. But it’s not human.”

“I didn’t think it was,” said Yaret, still staring. He could not work out why. “Is it a darkburn?”

He reached into the cold water and fished it out to reassure her that whatever it was, it was innocuous. The object was half as long as he was. Tangled in the weed, it came up draped with wet green strands: a twisted lump of blackened, sodden something that might have once been either wood or charcoal.

“More likely a bit of tree; although I suppose it’s possibly a darkburn,” he said. “Or was once. It could have been in there for years.” He tipped it back into the pool and dried his hands on his breeches.

“How would a darkburn end up in the pool?”

“Unknown,” said Rothir, climbing back onto the horse. Yaret’s face held a tight expression, almost of pain, despite the harmlessness of what he had pulled out of the water. He realised that the pain was reflected on Eled’s face, although for different reasons. Best to keep moving while they could.

“Let’s get on,” he said, and urged Poda to a swifter walk.

“Eled is not well,” said Yaret’s voice, about five minutes later. “I think he’s going to—”

Rothir wheeled Poda round quickly; but not fast enough. Eled had gone limp. He abruptly collapsed forwards and sideways in the saddle, and in trying to hold him, Yaret slid off too. They fell together heavily onto the damp ground.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” cried Yaret, scrambling to her feet. “I couldn’t hold him. Is his leg all right?”

Luckily the ground was soft; and Eled had fallen on his good side. Nonetheless the splint had twisted round his broken leg. The bark support had flown off somewhere.

Rothir lifted him gently and carried him to a dryer spot, where he laid him down. The weary eyes had opened and were bewildered and ashamed.

“I’m not much use,” Eled whispered. “Like an old man.”

“Does your leg hurt badly?”

“Not really.” Eled was lying. His pain was obvious, and there was nothing that Rothir could do about it apart from trying to settle him more comfortably where he lay. He cursed himself for driving Eled on when he knew that he was suffering.

“I’m sorry,” Yaret said again.

Rothir stood up. “I should have been paying more attention. I was trying to lead us on too fast. No; lie still, Eled. Take a rest. You may as well rest here awhile as anywhere else.”

“I’ll find the piece of bark,” said Yaret, and she ran back a little way to where the bark support lay floating in a pool. She lifted it out and then dropped it, withdrawing sharply from the brink.

“Rothir.”

“What?”

“It’s another one.”

He walked over to look. “It’s another dead stump,” he said, gazing down into the brown water. The thing was a twisted trunk maybe a metre long.

“No,” said Yaret. “It’s not.”

“If it’s a darkburn, it’s drowned, inert, just like the last one. I’ll show you.” He rolled up a sleeve, reached in and heaved the charred, twisted lump of wood out of the water. He heard Yaret’s sharp intake of breath.

And in the same instant he became aware that the stump was warm beneath his hand. Its gnarled, black, broken limbs began to steam even as they dripped water back into the pool. Belatedly, he realised that the water had felt warm too.

“It’s not dead,” said Yaret hoarsely, and it writhed suddenly in his hands. He dropped it as if it had burnt him. Another moment, and it might have.

The darkburn fell at the edge of the pool, twitching. Rothir kicked it back into the water. Seizing a large stone from the bank in both hands he dropped it in on top of the thing. There was movement for a while beneath the surface; and then stillness.

When he turned round Yaret was crying. At least, tears glistened in her eyes although she did not move a muscle nor make a sound. His instinct was to put his arms around her. He kicked the urge down as firmly as he had kicked the darkburn. Not the right place, nor time, nor the right thing to do. He decided to feel mild irritation instead. There was no need for tears.

“We’re safe from it,” he told her. “It can’t hurt us from in there. It couldn’t even get out on its own, let alone with that rock of top of it.”

She did not answer. He saw her swallow as she picked up the bark support and passed it to him. It had cracked down the middle, but was still usable.

“What is this place?” muttered Rothir as he took it. “A darkburn graveyard?”

“Yes.” She murmured something that he could not catch.

“What was that?”

“I was... saying words for the dead.”

“For darkburns?”

“For any dead.”

Rothir felt his exasperation grow, although part of it was with himself. “These aren’t dead, because they were never alive. Graveyard was the wrong word to use. Better to say they are inactive.”

Yaret did not reply. She walked over to the donkeys and put her arm around Dolm’s neck, as if to draw comfort from his sturdy nonchalance.

Rothir shook his head and went to offer Eled a drink of water. It was fortunate that they were carrying plenty, for he was unwilling to fill the waterskins from these peaty pools. How many of them held darkburns – inactive or otherwise? Did some of the ponds steam, or was that simply his imagination?

While Eled rested, he took a brief stroll around, pretending to scan the landscape but in fact surreptitiously checking the many pools near his feet. He thought he glimpsed half-hidden in their brown waters more submerged and twisted shapes. Had some fight involving darkburns happened here? Or were there so many darkburns wandering through this area, and so much water, that some inevitably ended up in it?

He wondered how long the writhing thing had been underwater for. How long it would take before it died... Or became inactive, rather.

On rejoining the others, he said briskly, “I can see a drier path ahead of us. Do you feel able to go on?”

Eled nodded, although he was clearly still in pain. Nevertheless, Rothir helped him to stand up without further delay. He wanted to be out of this

place of drowned darkburns as soon as possible, and to get away from the Darkburn forest.

There was no getting away from the river altogether – its tributaries were everywhere: every watercourse within thousands of square miles ended up feeding the Darkburn. But once they reached the Gyr Tarn he would breathe more easily.

He pictured the still lake that lay cupped in its shallow bowl within the bleak, bare foothills of the Gyr. There were caves on its perimeter where Yaret and Eled could shelter, while he himself rode on to the meeting-point behind the craggy hills. The Gyr tarn would be a safer place than here to leave Yaret and Eled – if it came to that.

So, his urgency still stronger than his guilt, he helped them mount the horse, and led the small troop on.

Chapter 13

By evening they had left the watery flatlands behind and were back on drier if more hilly ground. From the summit of the nearest hillock Rothir could already see the Darkburn begin its long slow curve towards the south. Eventually it would double completely on itself, not once but twice, before surging south and east again, making for the sea.

On the far side of those vast loops of river lay the lands around Caervonn. Within the protection of the first bend, the stonemen had their hideouts, but exactly where was anybody's guess. The river was uncrossable at most points; and the forest all but impenetrable.

However, the stonemen had a few well-defended crossing points, where the waters slowed and broadened and boats could be manoeuvred over them. Rothir knew that some were not too far from here, so he was not surprised when shortly before dusk he saw the tracks of stonemen. The only surprise was that these were the first that he had found.

The rope-soled footprints were unmistakable: about a dozen stonemen had passed this way since the last heavy rain. They were heading south towards the river, maybe after giving up the search for the Riders. He hoped so, and did not point the footprints out to Yaret, since she appeared not to have noticed them.

They halted for the night in a dip between hillocks, the best shelter that offered itself. Although the ground was dry enough, the chill thin breeze of evening warned of the approaching autumn. He wished it would hold off a little longer; but Yaret at least did not seem to feel the cold.

"I'm used to it," she said. After her cloak had been incinerated by the darkburn, she had produced a spare one from her pack, and now she unparcelled from amongst her woollen samples a finely woven blanket to wrap around Eled. Despite its lightness it was remarkably warm to the touch.

"Made with goat hair," Yaret said, with a wistful reverence that made Rothir think it must be her most valuable piece of goods. Eled smiled and nodded as he pulled it round his shoulders; yet he looked worn out with the slow labour of this journey.

They feasted on stale bread and Rothir's tough dried meat. There was probably abundant game to be shot nearby – he had seen the spoor of deer and, more worryingly, wolves and moorhounds – but he felt no inclination to waste time trying to hunt any of it down.

“Tomorrow we should reach the Gyr Tarn,” he told Yaret, “which is a lake within those westward hills that you can see. There I think I shall have to leave you with Eled and go more swiftly on alone to meet my friends. But there is good shelter at the tarn: there are deep, dry caves, and streams with clean water, and it’s a long way from the forest.”

She merely nodded and went back to tending Eled’s leg. The man’s young face looked old and lined, and while she applied fresh star-moss to his leg, she began to sing to him. It was some low, soothing chant: a lullaby perhaps, and reminded Rothir unexpectedly and painfully of his own mother. She must have sung one like it, long ago, before she left.

Once Eled appeared to be asleep Yaret stood up and gave her twilight greeting to the donkeys, feeding them a meagre handful of oats. Meanwhile Rothir rubbed the horses down despite his own fatigue. He was worried about the strain the double load was putting onto Narba. It could not be good for his horse, carrying two riders day after day.

Perhaps he would have to risk mounting Eled on Poda instead... But no. The mare was still too liable to be startled, veering or stopping suddenly. The risk to Eled was too great.

Let tomorrow’s problems wait until tomorrow. He set himself to sleep.

It was a broken night, punctuated by the faint rasping shrieks of moorhounds: thankfully they were far away. Between his few hours of sleep Rothir was calculating times and distances. How long would it take to carry Eled to the Gyr Tarn on this uneven ground? He turned over restlessly.

“Could you send a signal to your friends?” asked Yaret in a whisper in the dark. “Smoke, perhaps?”

“They might think smoke meant a darkburn,” he murmured back. “And it would have to be a big fire for smoke to travel far enough.” He did not add the objection that to him was obvious: any signal that could be seen by his friends would also be visible to enemies. “We still have many miles to go,” he added. “Try to sleep now.”

Then he lay awake some more worrying about Yaret. He was grateful for her willingness to help although he did not fully understand it. For some reason she had volunteered for this journey, and had not balked at the prospect of being left to care for Eled on her own. Until today she had shown no sign of weakness. Yet he doubted her resilience; not because she was a female, but because she was a village pedlar with no experience of fighting or of stonemen.

And those unshed tears beside the pool could signal that she had had enough. He knew that she was tired: she had her own timetable to keep to,

and might well still decide to just abandon Eled if the journey became too difficult or strayed too far from her route home. Could he blame her? No. But he would.

When he woke, however, Yaret was already up and performing her usual morning ritual. When she turned to greet him she appeared eager to move on. If it was a pretence, it was a good one.

Eled, by contrast, was exhausted and could scarcely eat the biscuit that was offered him. In one way this made Rothir's decision easier: he would definitely leave them both at the Gyr Tarn.

It was a long trudge through a drab, scrubby, bumpy land, much inhabited by tenacious flies. He expected at any time to see the tracks of stonemen – or the men themselves.

The bumps in the ground became mounds, then small hills, growing ever steeper and higher. At last, as they rounded one, the true hills south of the Gyr revealed themselves, suddenly much closer than before. Their barren slopes appeared as grey and smooth as lead, although they were actually clad with stony scree that slid treacherously beneath the feet. But he would not need to cross the hills that way.

“How far is this lake you spoke of?” asked Yaret.

“Not much further. In fact, you can see it now. That's a corner of the tarn just edging into view.” The still water, mirroring the hills, looked like polished metal. He was impatient to reach it. All the same, they had to stop twice more for Eled to lie down on the ground and rest.

“I don't think he can take much more of this,” said Yaret in an undertone, while Eled lay drowsing. His fingers and eyelids fluttered. “No matter how great his courage, no man can defeat his body indefinitely.”

“I know. I'm driving him too hard. But we're almost there now.”

“Leave us here, and ride on to your friends,” she said.

“It's not safe here. It's too exposed.” Rothir gazed to the hills north of the tarn, greener and more rugged than those to the south. That way lay his path. They had perhaps three miles to go to reach the water and the shelter of the caves.

He knew those caves well: one made a particularly good resting-place, with its entrance hidden in a deep clough – as narrow as an alleyway – where a thin waterfall hurtled down towards the tarn. Inside, the cavern had been worked by miners long ago, hunting for copper: the blue-tinged rocks could still be found strewn around the deserted lake. In the high-roofed cave they had created, there was room enough for twenty people and even for a dozen horses, if you could only persuade them to go in.

“One last haul,” he urged. “Then you and Eled can rest, while I go on.”

“How long will it take you to find your friends?”

“A matter of hours. It is only another five miles or so, but some of the terrain is hard.” He pointed northward of the tarn. “Up there is a pass that leads between those hills and over high ground to an area of tall crags. One of those crags is called the thumb; if you saw it you would know why. At the base of the thumb is our rendezvous. It’s easy to remain hidden there, yet there are long views in all directions.”

“And you’ll bring your friends back here to find us?”

“As quickly as possible,” he promised.

“And then what?”

“And then... we have some other friends further to the north, where we might be able to take Eled,” said Rothir.

“How far?”

“A good distance.” There was no need to mention Farwithiel. The name would mean nothing to Yaret, and in any case they would send her on her way home before they reached that stage. She asked no more questions, but merely nodded and got ready to remount.

“I’ll go up behind Eled again,” said Rothir. “You take Poda.”

“All this is hard on your horse.”

“It is. But Narba will be able to rest soon; I’ll ride Poda onward once we reach the Gyr tarn.”

On these bare hillsides the cold wind nudged and tweaked them, insinuating itself into his clothes. He worried that despite his cloak and blanket Eled was growing chilled. As they made the final descent towards the water, he had to hold the young man up. Eled seemed barely conscious; he would slump, and then struggle to sit straighter for a few brief moments before beginning to collapse again.

Rothir glanced back. Yaret was not far behind, glancing back herself at the laden donkeys which plodded slowly after them at a distance. It seemed the donkeys were enjoying this journey no more than he was. Then Eled began to slump again, so that he had to concentrate on holding him upright.

It was Yaret who alerted him.

“Rothir. I think there’s something moving over there.”

He looked south, and cursed. “You’re right. It’s a group of people.”

“Yours?”

“No.” Even at this distance he could see the red of their tunics. The stonemen did not bother to disguise themselves. The group was too far

away to count accurately; it might hold about a dozen. Stonemen tended to travel in squads of ten or more.

And that dark blotch in front of them... He knew without being able to see it clearly that it was a darkburn.

If we can see them, they can see us. But there was no other path that they could take down to the tarn. His only hope was that they themselves were better camouflaged both by the drabness of their gear and by the roughness of the land along their trail. They would not stand out against the hillside: but that was the best that could be said for their position.

They had just one last mile left to go. Yet it would surely be only a matter of time before they were observed. He thought they could not have been spotted yet, because the distant group was not moving quickly. The stonemen were on foot but would be marching much more speedily if they had already seen their prey.

He could not spur the horse on any faster. Even the donkeys had caught him up. His mind was moving more swiftly than his steed.

"They're stonemen," he told Yaret. In front of him he felt Eled stiffen. "But I don't think that they have seen us yet."

"What can we do?" she asked.

"From the cave it'll be possible to hold them off: its narrow entrance means they can't attack more than one or two at a time. Give me Poda's right-hand saddlebag."

She unstrapped it and handed it over.

"Now you will ride to the rendezvous," he told her. "Turn left at this mound and you'll see where you need to follow the pass over the hills. Watch out for bogs in the moorland. You can't miss the crags or the thumb. Find my troop and tell them we will be inside the Gyr cavern."

Her eyes were wide. But after a second all she said was, "How will I know them? What are their names?"

"Tiburé is the leader. Parthenal. Arguril. Maeneb. Now go."

Still she hesitated. "But how will they know that they can trust me?"

"Say... say the dwarf sent you." She blinked in bafflement. "Go!"

Yaret kicked at Poda's flanks to drive the mare ahead. She turned round only once to say, "Look after the donkeys!" and added something in her own tongue which he assumed was meant for the donkeys themselves.

"Rothir," said Eled, his voice full of doubt.

"Yes, I know." He watched her disappear round the bend of the track. By the time he reached it himself, Poda was already moving ahead in a swift

trot towards the pass, hooves scraping and rattling on the stones. He almost shouted to Yaret to be careful. But there was no time to be careful.

There was no time for anything. He urged Narba on and his horse began to scramble downhill, struggling to find a good footing on the stony ground.

“Can you stay on if I dismount and lead him?” asked Rothir.

“Yes,” said Eled. “Stonemen?”

“They haven’t seen us yet.” But of this he could no longer be sure. When he glanced that way, he thought that they had speeded up.

At least Eled was fully awake now, so that he stayed more or less securely on Narba’s back as Rothir led the horse down to the tarn’s still shores. Only one long, slow ripple crossed the water: the legacy of some unseen fish.

He guided Narba to the narrow valley cut into the hillside with its thin tumbling stream. Up that stone crevice, two yards from the stream, was the entrance to the cavern. It was concealed until you came right up to it.

Narba seemed to recognise the place and walked up to the cave without needed to be persuaded. The two donkeys did not want to follow. They stopped by the stream, and let Rothir unload their packs, only to shy away when he tried to urge them towards the cavern. Instead they kicked and frisked their way back down the valley to the cold waters of the tarn.

He took the packs inside. Then he helped Eled descend in a controlled fall from the horse before carrying him in his arms through the narrow entrance, into the echoing shadows. It occurred to him that he might be walking into a tomb.

He shrugged the thought away and settled Eled on a dry section of the earthen floor. Narba walked sedately in behind him; but by the time Rothir went out again to look for the donkeys, they had disappeared.

Probably gone after Yaret, he thought. Well, he wasn’t going to venture into open view to hunt for them; and he couldn’t keep them safe in any case. If the stonemen saw them, they might take them for wild donkeys... provided they hadn’t already marked them earlier on, walking behind the horses.

The stonemen might know about the Gyr cave: or they might not. But he had to assume the worst. And he had to be ready. He unsheathed his sword and stood it up against the wall inside the entrance.

“Sword,” said Eled, and although Rothir knew it could be of no practical use, he fetched his friend’s sword and laid it by his side. Then he propped Eled up to give him a drink of water.

“Now what?” breathed Eled.

“Now we wait.”

He had, he thought, perhaps half an hour at most before the stonemen reached him.

At least an hour for Yaret to find the other Riders of the Vonn. Probably more like two. Another hour for them to return here.

That was assuming she got there at all. It was not an easy path through all the bogs and crags, especially for an inexperienced rider on a nervous horse. Once more he wondered if she might just decide to abandon the task; would she consider Poda a fair exchange for her two donkeys?

No. She wouldn't leave the donkeys.

They are the only things to hold her to her word, he thought, with a sudden sinking of his heart. If they were here, she would return for them. But once the donkeys catch up with her, there is nothing to bring her back. No reason for her to find Parthenal and the others. She can go home, or go wherever she likes. I really needed to hold on to those donkeys...

Well, now it was too late.

Chapter 14

Poda huffed and snorted as she scrambled up the gravelly slope towards the head of the pass. Yaret needed all her energy to cling on to the sweating horse. At one point she looked back briefly: she could no longer see the tarn beyond the swell of rising land, nor the distant group of stonemen; but the donkeys were following her, fifty yards behind. Even from here she could recognise the indignant set of Dolm's ears.

She waved them away and gave all her attention to the track ahead. Although she had told Dolm and Nuolo to look after the two men, it seemed that the donkeys were intent on looking after her. Or just looking after themselves. Well, that was fine – so long as they stayed away from any stonemen.

Stonemen. The name filled her with bafflement and a vague dread. All she knew about them was in the form of grimly muttered rumours. She should have asked Rothir exactly who they were, how to elude them, and what they might do. She had asked very few questions out of courtesy, because Rothir's business was not hers.

Except that now it was. Her heart was pounding as hard as Poda's and she realised that as well as being frightened, she was angry. She was furious with herself for being afraid, because she hated being afraid.

And even greater than the unformed fear of stonemen was the over-riding dread that she would fail in this supposedly simple task. You can't miss it, he had said. But of course she could miss it. She had no idea where she was. She was angry with Rothir for sending her away; for putting her into this position, where she might so easily fail.

Or where she might be tempted to escape – to abandon him and Eled to the stonemen and head home. She could gather the donkeys and just leave. The temptation was there.

But it was not strong. Rothir was trusting her to find his friends: and she did not want to fall short, because over the last few days she had come to trust Rothir. A tough, indomitable man, but also one who looked after Eled with painstaking care...

So where in this wilderness were those other friends of his? And what if she did find this crag he called a thumb? How could she stop his fellow riders from shooting her the minute they saw her galloping up on their lost comrade's horse?

Gallop. That was a laugh. As the slope flattened, Poda chose her own combination of scrambling and cantering. It was hard enough for Yaret just to hang on to her back – and it was painful. She was already saddle-sore, and the soreness seemed to have suddenly increased four-fold. Her thighs hurt, her hips hurt, her back hurt, everything hurt. It had seemed irrelevant while Eled was hurting so much more. But now that she was alone she could not ignore it.

Poda slowed as they again ascended. She plodded upwards for half an hour or so, until they reached what must be the high point of the pass: a broad, rounded, grassy bridge between two hills. On either side the land fell away steeply. Yaret looked back over her shoulder: the donkeys were no longer visible.

But something else was. There was a movement down below her, on the west side of the pass.

Yaret looked for one second, and then said a quiet “Stop” to Poda, who instantly obeyed. If her heart had been thumping before, it was racing now as she swung herself carefully out of the saddle. Holding the bridle, she led the horse down the eastern slope as quietly as she could. It was too treacherous to risk riding down. She guided Poda as stealthily as possible – which she felt was not nearly stealthily enough – and as low down the slope as she dared, before the ground beneath her feet became too steep for safety.

Then she cautiously led Poda on ahead, afraid of slipping further down the slope yet equally afraid of climbing back up to the top. As it was, she still felt horribly exposed; anybody could be watching her from the eastern hills. Those jagged peaks seemed to gaze down at her, stern and cold and disapproving.

Despite never having seen one before, she knew it was a stoneman that she had glimpsed below the path. Thankfully he had been facing the opposite direction. He had been looking out for anyone approaching the high pass, not for somebody already on it.

He had been only about twenty yards away. The red of his tunic was the same as that of the distant group which Rothir had identified. He had carried a short sword, and an axe was slung from his belt. She had seen only the back of his head, which was shaved, and bore some kind of studded circlet. That was all that she had taken in; but it was enough.

Fearful of making any noise, she continued to lead Poda on what seemed an endless crawling track. Not until she was another mile away and hidden from the pass by rising ground did she dare to remount and return to the main path. Or what she hoped was the main path.

She must be going in the right direction at least, for a set of distant crags came suddenly into view, rising untidily into the sky. None of them looked like a thumb. Yet surely one of them must be? She urged Poda into a bone-shaking trot, and then, as the ground continued to level out, into a canter. Conscious of the thudding of Poda's hooves, she prayed that nobody was close enough to hear them.

How long had she taken now? Close to an hour, surely; and still none of the crags seemed to be the right one. There were no trees growing up here – tall rocks and low, stunted bushes provided the only cover. A harsh east wind bit through her clothes and flattened the grass.

Abruptly the grass turned darker, longer: no longer grass at all, but reeds. As Poda began to splash and flounder, Yaret pulled her up in alarm. Although the water was only an inch deep, below it she could feel Poda's effort as she detached her hooves from sucking mud.

Again Yaret dismounted. She retreated squelchingly, leading the horse back to dryer land, trying to avoid the reeds and jewel-bright moss of the bog. Plenty of star-moss here, she noted dismally, now that she had no time to gather it. Following the dry ground meant a wide detour to the left, in the lee of the highest hill, the crags slowly turning to present new faces to her.

She guided Poda past the reeds, testing the path constantly. At last she looked up with a weary sigh: and saw the thumb. From this angle it was obvious, nail and all, pointing straight up at the clouds. It was about sixty feet high.

But it was still some distance away, and she dared not ride on this uneven ground. Instead she ran, pulling Poda alongside her. At times they pulled each other.

It must be well over an hour by now, she thought, as the thumb loomed higher and closer. It seemed to perch on the edge of a cliff; below it was a plain patched with different greens that stretched away for many miles, and far beyond that a mountain range that she had never seen before, blue and purple and streaked with distant rain. Dark clouds were filling the sky. She was at the rendezvous – and she was alone. There was no-one here.

Panting and breathless, she trudged the last few yards up to the thumb: a huge stone signal to nobody. Despair filled her like an ache. She was too late. Rothir and Eled had been depending on her to fetch help. And she had failed. This land was empty of people and of hope. What should she do now?

A man stepped out from behind the thumb, although surely there was no space there for him to have hidden himself. Tall and stern of face, he

gripped a long sword as if he was strongly tempted to use it.

“Where did you get that horse?” he demanded.

She stared at his clothes, realising that in style and colour they were like Rothir’s.

“Which one are you?” she asked him, still breathless. “Are you Tiburé?”

“Tiburé? Hardly.” He looked her up and down, his eyes narrowing in a way that made her wonder if he had in those few seconds seen straight through her male mode. She felt surreptitiously for her knife. Just because Rothir seemed a decent man did not mean that all his friends would be.

“Rothir sent me,” she said. She saw no belief in his cold imperious face, and added urgently, “He said to tell you that the dwarf sent me. Which one are you?”

His expression changed. “Parthenal. Where is he? What’s happened?”

“He’s with Eled in the cavern by the Gyr tarn. He said you’d know it. Eled’s badly injured. Broken leg, head wound. Rothir is unhurt but there was a troop of stonemen coming when I left. He sent me to find you.”

“How many stonemen? How far away?” This was another speaker who had stepped out from behind the thumb of rock: one who was older, with greying hair, not as tall nor as well-built as Parthenal. Yaret realised with a faint shock that this one was a female in male clothing, although not too bothered about maintaining the voice or manner of male mode.

Yaret herself made sure to keep her voice low as she answered.

“There were maybe ten or twelve of them. I don’t know if they saw us, but they were little more than a mile away and heading for the tarn. And I saw one lone stoneman on the pass, high up on the west side. I think he was guarding it. He was looking the other way. But it’s taken me too long to get here. You need to go and help them.”

With the last two words her voice began to shake. She clamped her mouth closed.

Again as if by magic, two more of them appeared: a younger man and woman, leading a string of horses. Only when Yaret stepped aside did she see the hidden dip they had emerged from – a shielded hollow scooped out of the cliff behind the crag, high above the plain.

With a few terse words in their own language, all four mounted their horses. All carried long swords and bows, and probably other, less conspicuous weapons. Parthenal was already beginning to spur his horse away when the grey-haired woman turned in the saddle and spoke to Yaret. She must be Tiburé, the leader, for she was the eldest and had an air of command.

“You can stay here if you wish.”

“I don’t wish,” said Yaret, indignant. She did not intend to abandon Eled and Rothir at this point. Swinging herself up onto Poda’s back she winced and set herself to endure the saddle-soreness once again.

Poda was still reasonably fresh, having walked so much of the way up here. She needed to be, for the troop set off much faster than Yaret had dared ride on this terrain. They skirted the bog surefootedly and then rode at a canter towards the pass. But they did not take the high path where Yaret had seen the stoneman. Instead they dipped down to the east, picking a lower route across a stony slope.

Poda scrambled behind them, seeming to be comfortable following horses that were familiar to her. Yaret did not need to try to steer her. Now and then she risked a look around, hoping to see her donkeys, but the craggy hills seemed bare of any life apart from a single distant antelope.

They descended into a narrow, steep-sided valley where they had to ride in single file alongside a leaping stream. This wound down and round small hillocks until Yaret had lost all sense of direction. The constant sound of the stream overlaid the occasional mutterings of the riders. They moved quietly, but even faster than she had realised: it was a shock to catch a sudden glimpse of the iron-grey tarn ahead.

The valley opened out on to its pebbly shores. Before they emerged into the open, the riders stopped: the two women took up their bows, and the two men unsheathed their swords. Tiburé looked at Yaret.

“Stay here if you wish,” she said again, and again Yaret replied, “I don’t wish,” though with less confidence this time. Unclipping her own hunting bow from the saddle she gripped it tightly in her hand. She had never used it to shoot men, and did not particularly want to start now. Her stomach clenched as the rider nodded and led the way out of the valley to the tarn.

Yaret threw her quiver across her back and then spurred Poda after the others. Although she now felt horribly afraid of what might lie ahead, her worst fear was for Rothir and Eled. What if she had indeed been too late, and both of them now lay dead inside the cave? It would be her fault. She did not think that she could bear it.

There was no life to be seen as they cantered along the edge of the dark water. But as they approached a fissure in the hillside, the sound of shouting became abruptly audible. It was almost a relief.

She rounded the corner behind the others and saw the group of men – seven or eight of them, all with studded circlets round their heads. Then there was no time to think about anything other than trying to stay on Poda

at the same time as drawing her bow. There was not even time to aim properly: the nearest stoneman was turning towards them, shouting as he charged, raising a curved sword in one hand and an axe in the other.

He staggered and then fell with an arrow in his chest before Yaret could release her own arrow. The younger woman was already restringing her bow.

And then Parthenal, on horseback, was swinging his sword at the remaining men, striking down the nearest with swift and ruthless skill. The man toppled over with his head almost detached from his body. At the same time an axe flew through the air, narrowly missing Poda. Yaret took quick aim and fired at the thrower. Her arrow landed in the man's shoulder an instant before Parthenal cut him down too.

The remaining stonemen rallied and charged again: but they were also under attack from the other side. For Rothir leapt seemingly straight out of the hill, blood-streaked sword in hand, and laid about him with grim efficiency. It was immediately clear that his skill with a sword, like Parthenal's, was greater than the stonemen's. They swung their swords and axes with indiscriminate clumsiness as if relying simply on their strength of numbers.

But their numbers were becoming fewer. There was no more shouting. The only sounds were grunts and wordless cries: the twang of bowstrings and the hiss and grating crash of swords. The younger woman had dropped her bow and was using a long knife: another stoneman staggered and collapsed as she pulled it from his chest.

Yaret released several more arrows without being able to tell if they made any difference. Although three more stonemen fell, she doubted if any of them were due to her. Now there were only two wounded stonemen left on their feet.

"Give yourselves up," commanded Parthenal. The two panting, bloodstained stonemen looked at each other. A second later, to Yaret's horror, they ran onto each other's outstretched swords. One of them was still alive as he toppled over, blood bubbling from his mouth, hands groping at the blade that pierced his body.

With a swift downward stroke Rothir finished him off. Then he let his sword fall clattering to the ground and leaned back against the rocky wall, as if in weariness and disgust at what he had just done.

Chapter 15

“You didn’t have to kill him. We could have kept him for questioning,” said Tiburé severely.

“You know how that’s always gone before,” answered Rothir in a husky growl, sounding spent. He bowed over in exhaustion, hands on his knees.

“It’s still worth trying to get information out of them.”

“He would have died in any case,” murmured the other, younger woman.

Yaret unobtrusively said Oveyn for the dead stonemen, fleetingly touching her forehead and barely mouthing the words. It was not unobtrusive enough. The grey-haired Tiburé gave her a mistrustful look.

Rothir, straightening up, looked at her also, with a brief nod of acknowledgment.

“I’m glad you made it,” he said gravely.

Yaret nodded back. She too was very glad to have arrived in time, but her stomach seemed to have tied itself into a tight knot and her throat had closed up.

She had seen dead men before. She had never seen one deliberately killed. Across the dead stonemen’s red tunics a darker red was spreading. Their faces, streaked with daubs of grey paint, were now doubly streaked in blood.

These were only human beings, she thought, not made of stone at all, but flesh and skin, their breath extinguished in an instant. The only things of stone about them were the ones studding the circlets round their heads.

Yet when she lowered her eyes to the stoneman lying nearest to her feet, it was not a circlet that he wore. There was no band of cloth or metal: only stones. They must be glued somehow to his scalp.

“Anyone hurt?” said Tiburé briskly. “Arguril, your hand is bleeding.”

“It’s just a small cut,” said the youngest man.

“Rothir, how much of that blood on you is yours?”

“Some. Not too much,” said Rothir. “And Eled is safe inside the cave. He was untouched.”

Tiburé looked around. “Can we assume the stonemen are all dead? None ran off to get reinforcements?”

“Stonemen don’t run off,” said Rothir heavily. “It was a troop of twelve, led by a darkburn, but they split up before they arrived at the tarn. I killed four men at the entrance to the cave. The others didn’t get here till a short while ago: they’d been distracted by the donkeys.”

“What donkeys?”

“Oh,” said Yaret, “are they all right?”

“I have no idea.” Wiping his forehead on his bloodied sleeve, Rothir bent stiffly to pick up his equally bloodstained sword. “All I know is that as the stonemen came around the tarn, your donkeys set up a mighty braying from the far end of it. Most of the stonemen set off to pursue them. They probably thought that we were with them: and the donkeys must have led them a fair dance, because it took a long while before they came back here to find their fellows dead.”

“What happened to the darkburn?” Tiburé asked.

Rothir shrugged. “I didn’t even need to fight it. It ran straight past me and up the track.” He gestured to the far end of the fissure, which narrowed to a steep upward path leading to higher rocks above. “Perhaps it got confused by the cave or the shadows. I don’t know. I didn’t have the chance to check: the stonemen followed right behind it.”

“I’ll go and have a look for it now,” said Arguril eagerly, and he strode up the fissure and began to nimbly climb the steep path.

“Be careful,” Parthenal called after him. Arguril waved a casual hand in answer.

Tiburé was counting corpses. “There are eleven dead men here. Maeneb? What do you think – is there a twelfth man nearby?”

She was addressing the younger woman, who to Yaret’s bemusement did not look down at the bodies scattered around her feet. Instead she turned her face upward. Her solemn features were perfectly symmetrical, giving her the appearance of an idealised yet emotionless statue as she stood there with her eyes half closed, seemingly listening to the sky. The other riders waited, expectant, until at last she shook her head and muttered something in their language.

“Maeneb thinks that at least one stoneman may be still at large,” said Rothir, glancing at Yaret; evidently he was translating into Standard for her benefit. “Did you see any others?”

“I saw a watchman just below the pass on my way up,” said Yaret. “If he’s lying dead here, I might know him.”

“How?” said Parthenal sharply.

“By the pattern of studs around his head. Two very close together behind his left ear, and none behind his right.” She made herself bend down to examine the bloody head of the last stoneman to die. “Not this man. Nor that one.”

As she moved over to inspect the next few corpses, she had to push down a surge of revulsion. It was not just the fact that these men were so newly dead: there was something about the studs stuck to their scalps that turned her stomach. Each was a worked and rounded stone. The skin around them looked so sore and red that it was almost as if the stones had been driven straight into the flesh... but that surely was not possible.

“Not these ones either,” she said, trying to ignore the nausea that was swelling in her throat.

“There are more over by the cave,” said Rothir. The bodies were tumbled just inside the narrow entrance; he and Parthenal pulled them out for her to examine.

“No. None of these. The watchman is not here.”

“Are you sure?” demanded Parthenal.

“Yes.” She swallowed. “Those stones around their heads. They look as if they’re...”

“Sharpened, and drilled through the skull,” said Parthenal.

Yaret stared up at the tall man, appalled. “But why? And how could anyone survive that?”

“They don’t all survive,” said Rothir. “For those that do, that’s what makes them stonemen. In their own minds they become invincible. As cold and unbreakable as stone. It appears to be a rite of passage.”

“But who would endure that? What must it do to them? The pain! And the infection, and the damage. Who would want to – to promote such an idea?”

“You may well ask,” said Rothir grimly.

“They drug themselves for infection and the pain,” said Parthenal. “They seem to be impervious to pain when fighting too. It’s apparently a mark of rank and courage for them to endure as many stones as possible.”

Yaret looked down at the dead men and away again. Courage? Why waste courage on such pointless agony?

“Are you all right?” said Rothir tersely. It was clear he would have no patience with any squeamishness.

“Yes. None of these men have the same pattern of stones as the watchman that I saw.”

“Very well. There’s not much that we can do about him,” said Tiburé in her no-nonsense manner. “He’ll be far away by now. But I doubt if he’ll be able to find his company and bring reinforcements back here quickly. Let me see Eled. Meanwhile, get these bodies out of sight.”

They began to drag the corpses further up the alley, so that no sign of them was visible from the tarn. The bodies left long trails of blood. Yaret helped the younger woman, Maeneb, move the last of them, the man who had impaled himself upon his comrade's sword. Maeneb dropped him just before they reached the pile of bodies, her revulsion seemingly even greater than Yaret's own.

Yaret said Oveyne again, underneath her breath, because once did not seem to be enough.

Maeneb looked at her aloofly. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Yaret amended this, because it was not nothing. In some circumstances it was everything. "It's just something we say after a death."

"Even an enemy's death?"

"Any death." But particularly for a death that you had caused, thought Yaret. It was an acknowledgement if not quite a plea for pardon.

Arguril came striding back down the slope at the end of the alley. At Parthenal's enquiring look, he shook his head.

"I could see the darkburn's trail for a little while," he reported, "but then it disappeared as it crossed the higher ground. And there's no scent of it that I can follow. It's headed out into the wild."

"Very well. Can you take the horses to the tarn to drink?"

The younger man began to gather the horses, with Rothir's help, and led them down towards the tarn. Yaret followed, guiding Poda to the water's edge.

There she gazed around in the forlorn hope that she might catch a glimpse of distant donkeys. The tarn looked like a great bronze mirror; the falling sun painted amber fires across the bleak hills to the south.

But they are cold fires, she thought, and this is a cold world. Some bird circled way up overhead: apart from that, there was no life visible beyond the noisily drinking horses. She scanned the slopes again, in vain, for donkeys. The sickness in her throat increased, and she turned to stroke the mare, murmuring words in Bandiran.

Seeing Rothir glance at her, she said, "I am thanking Poda. It was she who fulfilled the task, not me."

"It was both of you, I think," said Rothir. "You did well. Don't worry too much about your donkeys. I expect they will look after themselves."

"Yes. If they're alive." She found that it hurt to speak.

"Those donkeys saved my life most probably, and Eled's too, by drawing away so many of the stonemen for so long. I am grateful to them."

Yaret nodded and bit her lip.

“I can only tell you that when the second group of stonemen arrived at the cave,” said Rothir, seeming to pick his words with care, “there was no blood to be seen on their weapons or their clothes.”

“Well,” she said, “that’s something.”

“Arguril? Give the horses another minute to drink, and then we need to get back out of sight.”

So after a last long look for the donkeys she turned back into the stone alley, and entered the cave.

It was much bigger than she had expected: the narrow opening led into a high, vaulted space. Even the horses – once they had been persuaded to squeeze in through the entrance – had ample room to wander round inside. As her eyes adapted to the dim light she saw that the cavern appeared to be part natural, part worked by tools. It was cool but the floor was largely dry.

Well beyond the entrance, in the shadows and lit by a pair of candles, Eled lay, with Tiburé kneeling down beside him to inspect his injuries. Yaret crouched by his other side and touched his hand.

“Eled. How do you feel?”

“Weary,” he said with a half-smile. “Although Rothir was the one doing all the work.” His sword lay beside him, untouched and unbloodied.

“You will do the same for him some time,” said Yaret.

“I hope not,” said Rothir, looking down at them. “I’d prefer not to be in this situation again.”

“I’ll give you a little ethlon,” said Tiburé. “Only a few drops, mind. But it will be enough to quell the pain and make you more comfortable.”

Holding a small vial to Eled’s lips, she trickled a minute amount of a brown liquid into his mouth. It must have acted as a stimulant as well as a painkiller: for within a few seconds, his tense face relaxed yet paradoxically became less sleepy. Once again he looked suddenly much younger.

“Rest now, Eled,” said Tiburé. “We will take counsel outside the cave. We’ll let you know what we decide.” She stood up and looked at Yaret.

“You may stay here with Eled.” It was not a suggestion but a command.

“Yaret should join our counsel,” Rothir told her.

Tiburé, frowning, put a question to him in their own language.

He answered her in Standard. “It was Yaret who found Eled after he fell from his horse, by the Darkburn river head, and looked after him for several days before I got there. Eled had been pursued by a darkburn of a new sort.”

“What sort?”

“Ask Yaret,” said Rothir shortly, “but not in Vonnish.” He turned away, looking very tired. Parthenal put a hand on his shoulder, speaking gently in

their tongue.

“Yes, I’m fine,” said Rothir, as the two men left the cave together.

Tiburé raised an eyebrow at Yaret. “Come, then,” she said brusquely, so Yaret patted Eled’s arm and followed her out into the daylight. Even though twilight was imminent, it seemed momentarily dazzling after the deep gloom of the cave.

Tiburé sat on a rock, an austere, authoritative presence; the others stood, with Maeneb some way apart from the others. It was a strange counsel with the bodies of their slaughtered enemies lying so close and being ignored by all.

When Tiburé questioned Rothir in Vonnish, he answered in Standard – presumably for Yaret’s benefit. Briefly he told them how he had found Eled and Yaret near the Darkburn forest and how together they had cared for Eled until the camp had been attacked at night.

She noted that he referred to her only by her name, not mentioning her gender. Yet she was sure that he knew. He was leaving it up to her to say – or not. At the end of his account he added, “Stick to Standard: Yaret does not talk Vonnish.”

“Then we’ll save it for our secrets,” said Parthenal, with a twist of his mouth. Standing next to Rothir, he was the taller of the two men; not quite so broad, but darker and more handsome. Indeed, he was very good-looking: as his assessing gaze moved up and down Yaret, she again felt that he had seen straight past the crooked nose and journeyman’s clothing. She had experienced that sort of look before, but only when she’d been in female dress back home.

“You had better introduce yourself, Yaret, and tell us your account,” said Tiburé without a smile. Yaret wondered if the grey-haired woman was always this dry and stern.

“I am Yaretkoro Thuleikand, a weaver and pedlar of cloth from Obandiro in the north,” she said. Then, since the presence of the two women seemed to make it safe, she added, “daughter of Hath, grand-daughter of Thuli.” And she bowed as gracefully and formally as she could manage, first to Tiburé, and then more generally to the others. “I am glad to have been of use.”

“Of great use,” put in Rothir, “as should already be plain.” But Yaret observed without looking at him that Parthenal’s gaze had chilled.

“Rothir guessed my gender very quickly,” she explained, “but was wise enough to say nothing, for which I am grateful. It was easier for Eled to think me male.”

Then she described her first sighting of the riderless horse and the finding of Eled. They listened in grave silence to her description of the creeping darkburn she had seen down by the river. As before, she found it difficult to describe something she had seen so briefly, yet had felt so strongly.

“Burning inside?” queried Tiburé with a frown.

“Red, like an ember.” Yaret could tell that they were sceptical.

“We have come across nothing like that,” said Arguril, digging impatiently at the ground with his sword. “A crawling darkburn?”

“Yet Eled said the same of it. And I saw its trail,” Rothir answered.

“And when did Rothir find you?” Parthenal asked her.

“On the fourth day,” said Yaret. “I made camp and tended to Eled in a sheltered opening in the rocks near where he fell. He regained some consciousness on the first night but was not lucid for a day or two. Since then he has remained largely as you see him now: he cannot maintain detailed thought or even stay awake for very long. The head injury must be severe. I also feared infection of his leg, and I still fear that the enforced travel of the last few days will have inflamed it.”

Tiburé was staring at her with a faint frown. “Why did you do all this?”

Yaret was silent. Surely it was obvious that she had had no choice?

“What am I supposed to say?” she said at last. “Because I am some sort of hero? That is not true. What else could I do? He needed help, and I was there.”

“Well, we all owe you our gratitude.”

Yaret bowed again. “I take your thanks,” she said, although she could still sense Parthenal’s suspicion of her.

“So, what next?” asked Tiburé of the group in general. “Do we follow the stoneman sentry, and hope to intercept him? Do we keep looking for the darkburn that ran off? Do we just leave now? And if we do, where can we take Eled to be cared for and be safe?”

Each began to speak in turn; Maeneb entirely in Vonnish, and Parthenal and Arguril in a mixture of Vonnish and Standard.

Yaret watched them as they spoke. Arguril was proud, frowning and heated; Parthenal cooler and more measured. Maeneb was more detached still, speaking without looking at anybody and sounding as if she plucked words out of the air at random. As far as Yaret could discern, Arguril was eager to pursue one of other of their enemies, while Parthenal wanted to ensure Eled’s well-being above all else. Where they could carry him to seemed to be a matter of debate.

Only Rothir spoke entirely in Standard. “We might convey him to a village. Go east to Herval: perhaps they would take him in. But then what? What if Herval were attacked? In any case, how could we just leave Eled there, not knowing when he might recover? No; my vote is for Farwithiel. There we know he would be safe.”

“Only if the Farwth allows us back there, and lets us stay,” countered Tiburé in a tone of doubt.

“And it’s a long way to backtrack,” said Parthenal. “At this rate it could take us another month before we can return to—” He stopped for a moment before resuming his argument in Vonnish.

“I’ll go back inside the cave if it’s easier,” offered Yaret.

“You understand that we cannot fully trust you,” said Parthenal, still cool.

“Of course. I cannot fully trust you either,” said Yaret equably, turning to depart.

“This is unnecessary,” said Rothir with some impatience. “Yaret has gone out of her way to keep Eled alive for over a week now. We cannot doubt her goodwill. But I expect she would like to go home and has no further interest in our doings or our destination.”

“I certainly ought to go home,” she agreed.

“And tell no tales there?” demanded Parthenal sardonically.

Yaret shrugged. “I am not given to telling tales. If you wish me to say nothing on my return home, I will say nothing.”

“And what will you tell your people?”

“I got lost. A donkey fell down a hole. I fell in love in Moreva. I got ill at Deloran and had to stay there for an extra week.”

“That wouldn’t work,” said Rothir. “Tell them what you told me of Deloran.”

“What?” said Tiburé sharply. “Deloran, the farmstead a dozen miles from the Darkburn head? Bruilde’s place?”

“Yes. You know it too, then?” asked Yaret. “Just over a week ago, when I called there, it was deserted. The whole place was burnt out. A recent burning: its stones were warm.”

“What happened to its people? Did you discover that?” asked Tiburé with fierce urgency.

Yaret saw that their faces were now turned to her with anxiety – and in Maeneb’s case, possibly with horror.

“I assume they got away,” she said. “The carts were gone as well as all the animals. They didn’t take many of their possessions. But I saw no evidence that anyone had died.”

“Could you tell what caused the fire? Where it started?” Parthenal demanded.

She shook her head slowly. That had worried her, until other more immediate worries had pushed it right out of her head. Now she recalled the scene.

“The outbuildings were burnt as thoroughly as the house,” she said. “The area around Deloran was unharmed, so it was no wildfire. The flames could perhaps have leapt from one building to another on a high wind.”

“Not without burning the woods around as well,” said Tiburé. “The look-out platform in the cedar tree? Was that burnt?”

“I do not know the look-out,” she said, startled. But there was much about Bruilde that she had not known. She remembered her grandfather’s letter, still sealed and buried deep in her pack inside the cavern. Although that was private, she could perhaps look at it now. Grandda would not mind in the circumstances.

“What about elsewhere? Was there anything unusual?”

“I heard rumours of fire and war,” she said a little hesitantly, “on my journey south, at Moreva and elsewhere. And I found that things in some places were... not quite as normal.”

“Explain,” said Tiburé severely.

“Please,” added Rothir, which earned him a half-amused look from Parthenal.

“Just let me get my map and order book,” said Yaret. She went into the cave to retrieve them from her pack, and tucked the letter to Bruilde into her pocket.

Back in the dimming daylight, she spread the map open on a flat rock and pointed out her route. She had copied it from Grandda’s old worn map, adding her own notes and observations.

“Here I started, at Obandiro.”

“Never heard of it. I thought there was nothing there,” said Parthenal, before Tiburé shushed him.

“Here are the towns and villages I passed through on my way to Outer Kelvha. At Moreva I found people to be edgy and anxious. There was a shortage of supplies; Kelvha had been buying them up. The same at Gorod. Nobody knew quite why, although I heard tales of fighting on the borders. There is always something going on in the Kelvhan borderlands, but this time it seemed worse than normal; yet there was a lack of definite news.” She thought for a moment. “I did not see the usual number of Kelvhan traders.”

“What do the Kelvhans trade there?” asked Arguril.

“Leather-work: saddlery chiefly. Horses, but not their best ones. Flashy war-gear – ornamental breastplates and badges and whatnot that would be useless in an actual battle.”

“You don’t like them,” said Parthenal, half amused again.

“I don’t like what they sell,” she said. “They keep all the most serviceable stuff and trade what’s inferior. I think they see the Outer Kelvhans as lesser people than themselves.”

“Did you speak to any Kelvhans on this journey?”

Yaret shook her head.

“You said your grandmother is from Ioben, in Outer Kelvha,” Rothir said. “Do you know the language?”

“I know my grandmother’s language, Ioben, which is similar to our own. I can get by in Kelvhan. I don’t speak it well.”

Parthenal said in fluent Kelvhan, “But you speak it just well enough to trade, perhaps.”

“Yes,” answered Yaret, also in Kelvhan. “And order food, and talk about the weather. I find their tenses difficult.”

“They are complicated,” said Rothir, in Standard. “Where else did you go?”

Yaret consulted her order book, reminding herself of where she had heard what. Only vague tales for the most part; they sounded like nothing in the retelling. She told them anyway, in case they meant more to the Riders than they did to her.

“In the Gostard Inn I heard rumours of a burning.” She recounted her visit there and the story spread so eagerly by the unpleasant man. “He blamed a wizard called Liol,” she added.

“Liol?” repeated Parthenal, and laughed. Rothir looked indignant.

“That seems unlikely,” said Tiburé, inscrutable.

“He did not know what he was talking about,” said Maeneb, very quietly.

“So the innkeeper told him. But I heard more rumours of burnt villages elsewhere, before I got to Deloran and found it razed. All in all, there was a general sense of wariness and fear: of drawing in of horns, and stocking up, and hunkering down, and readiness for war.”

“War against who?” said Rothir.

Yaret shrugged. “Unclear. Kelvha got mentioned, but perhaps purely because they are the most warlike people around those parts.” She folded up the map and put it back inside her order book.

“You travel a wide range,” said Tiburé. “Why is that?”

“I suppose I do. But my grandfather liked to travel, and selling his cloth gave him a good excuse. Once he became unfit I just kept following his route. I enjoy travelling too.”

“Why?”

Yaret considered. “I like the solitude. Only it is never solitude, walking the land.”

“What about the towns?”

“I have never seen one I prefer to Obandiro,” she said. Parthenal laughed.

“You never meet with trouble?” Maeneb asked her. “Being female, I mean, even if you are disguised?”

“We call it not disguise, but male mode. There are some who choose it permanently in Obandiro. When I am travelling it usually keeps me safe enough. I don’t have to maintain it the whole time, because there are several on the route who have become friends and know me; like Bruilde.” She put her hand inside her pocket and felt the folded sheets of paper.

What would Grandda want her to do? Coming to a quick decision, she pulled the letter out.

“My grandfather wrote me a letter every year to give to Bruilde,” she said. “He knew her from a long time ago. And she would send back a reply. I never read any of the letters, although he would tell me bits out of them. Gossip, mostly, little anecdotes. So I expect this one is much the same. I will read it out and see.”

“How did he know her?” Tiburé asked.

“Through trying to sell her a nice plaid cloak, I expect.” Yaret carefully broke the seal and unfolded the sheets. It gave her a small wrench of the heart to see her grandfather’s familiar slanting handwriting. It was almost as if she had him next to her, tall and smiling; stooping now – always leaning on a stick – and saying the words along with her as she read aloud.

“ ‘My dear Bruilde,

‘How time goes on! I wonder sometimes on these cold spring mornings how many more letters I will write to you; how many more winters my old bones will carry me through. Ah, but we were young once, weren’t we? And I remember as if it were last week that summer evening with the swallows darting above us so wild and free – do you remember too? With the scent of cut grass sweet in the air, when I carried you to the hay-barn and we–’ Oh,” said Yaret, staring at the letter in her hands. “Oh my. I had no idea.”

Grandda had vanished from beside her. The others waited, silent, until Tiburé said dryly, “It seems he knew Bruilde very well.”

“Yes... Better than I thought.” Some re-ordering of her assumptions would be necessary. Later on. She looked down at the letter again, glad now that Grandda was not here beside her after all.

“I think I’d better skip that bit.” She turned the page. “But here is the news, such as it is. ‘The apple harvest was good this year and our roots practically leapt out of the ground, so our cellar will be well-stocked. Just as well, as trade has thinned from the west, whence tales come with every traveller of blight and fire. I have had this story from a pair of stockmen and three shepherds hunting for work as well as various pedlars of small goods. Of course they want to think it’s more than ordinary disaster. Yet the blight is nothing out of the ordinary, I think, it sounds like common root rot after all their rain.

‘But the fire... now that is something else, Bruilde. Something unexplained, and it makes me very uneasy. Even in a stormy season, lightning does not strike three, four, five times and hit a homestead or a forthouse every time. Not many survivors seem to have been left; and those that did escape tell garbled tales. The places were fired by black monsters, they say, by stinking ghouls. Make of that what you will.’”

“Darkburns,” muttered Arguril. Tiburé gave him a look and he fell silent.

“ ‘Thuli has another view of all this,’ ” read Yaret, before raising her head to explain, “Thuli is my grandmother. I wonder if she – well, anyway.” She bent to read again.

“ ‘According to her, it is only to be expected because of the lack of reverence that people have nowadays for the hidden ones and the old ways. Obandiro, of course, being the exception; so we shall never suffer from these blights. Thuli does enough obeisance to protect the whole town – well, our side of it at least. She is always putting food out for them. When I tell her it’s a pointless task – because the hidden ones don’t eat – she says that they appreciate the act. Thuli is a sensible woman in so many ways, yet quite irrational about this.’ ”

“Hidden ones?” asked Tiburé.

“Oh,” said Yaret, who was pondering her grandparents’ relationship, “you know. Lins and hobs and woodwones. My grandmother takes them very seriously.”

“I’ve never heard of them,” said Arguril.

“That’s because you don’t have a grandmother,” Parthenal told him.

“But what are they?”

“Your territory, I think, Maeneb,” said Tiburé.

“Spirits of the land,” said Maeneb in a clear, silvery voice. She seemed distracted, as if she were listening for something else. “Spirits of water, trees, and earth. They exist in many legends. People give them gifts and honour them. I have never seen one.”

“Well, you wouldn’t,” Yaret said. “They’re hidden. Look at them and they disappear.”

“I have never felt one either,” added Maeneb.

“You believe in them,” Rothir said to Yaret, his face grave while Parthenal’s was still amused.

“I... don’t disbelieve. Certainly I would never say aloud that lins don’t exist.”

“In case they hear you?”

“Quite.”

Tiburé sighed. “Well, whether they exist or not, I think we can dismiss them as the cause of burnt-out homesteads. What else does your letter say?”

Yaret turned to the last page. “‘I wish you would tell me what you think about all this, Bruilde. Have you heard such stories in your own parts? Could it have anything to do with the one you call ignoble? It is all a long way from you, I know, and probably has no relevance.

‘I also am too far away from you. I wish I could see you. I am keeping well enough, apart from the old bones, and am well looked after. Thuli is a good wife – at least she often tells me so – but I miss your wickedness, Bruilde. I miss your...’” She let the hand holding the letter fall. “He never intended me to see this. Read it yourself if you wish.”

Tiburé took the letter from her. After a moment she said, “You can hear this bit. ‘I know you will take care of Yaret, as you always do, and I think you can trust her with more information than you have in the past. She has led a sheltered life but her judgement is good....’ And then he writes his farewells. He signs the letter, Ilo. What is his full name?”

“Ilodi Juleikend.”

The older woman shook her head. “Bruilde never mentioned him. Not by that name, at least.”

A sheltered life, thought Yaret. Really? Sheltered from what – apart from her grandfather’s secrets? She felt a spike of disappointment and resentment towards the old man who had cared for her so well all her life, and had concealed so much. Some of the resentment was on her grandmother’s behalf. She thought of the solid, clever and commanding but otherwise unknowable figure of Bruilde. Then she broke her usual rule and asked a question.

“How do you know Bruilde?”

Rothir answered. “She is one of us.”

“Bruilde? One of the Vonn?” Although Yaret was startled into the second question, she did not really expect any further explanation.

Nor did she get one. Tiburé, directing a look of reprimand at Rothir, said sternly,

“Enough of gossip. We need to decide on what to do with Eled. Where do we take him? Where do we go next?”

Chapter 16

“Home would take too long. Eled would never make it,” said Rothir decisively. “I vote for Farwithiel.”

“Farwithiel,” said Maeneb, nodding.

“You think the Farwth will allow it?” Tiburé asked her.

“I don’t know. But it’s worth a try.”

“I vote for Herval,” said Arguril.

“Parthenal?”

The tall man was silent. “There is no good answer,” he replied at last. “But if the Farwth will permit it, Farwithiel is the safest place for Eled.”

“It’s not where we need to be,” said Arguril impatiently.

Tiburé cut in. “We have voted for Farwithiel. We shall set out at first light tomorrow. But the journey there does not need all of us.”

“In that case,” said Arguril, “I offer to go back home as messenger.”

“I will bear that in mind. However, to begin with, we shall all travel together. Yaretkoro: you had better accompany us on the first part of our journey. Judging by your map, you will be able to turn northward after two or three days and cut across country to your own town. But initially you will be safer with us than travelling alone.”

Yaret bowed.

“Really?” said Rothir. “Safer?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“What would you have voted for, Tiburé?” Arguril asked her.

“That is irrelevant. Let’s eat now, and rest while we can.” Tiburé looked up at the dimming sky. “Night will fall soon.”

“And tomorrow the stonemen will come,” said Maeneb.

They retreated into the cave. Arguril busied himself in setting out food; bread and salted meat and fibrous dried fruit. Yaret contributed some of her own supplies, but had to force herself to eat. Concern for her two donkeys gnawed at her, along with wonder and revulsion every time she thought about the stonemen.

And as for her grandfather... She did not think she was naïve. With adulthood had come the awareness that her grandparents must have some secret elements to their lives. She had just not expected this particular secret.

And he thought she’d had a sheltered life! Yaret tried to consider this objectively. Although she saw herself as adventurous, it was true she’d

never ventured very far from her grandfather's route.

All the same, she'd had to learn to look after herself. If she was sheltered – from stonemen, from war, from the woes of the world – then it was because Obandiro was sheltered. Was that a bad thing?

Well, let it be. She tried to put her grandfather out of her head, and listened to the others talking.

They spoke quietly in Vonnish, their voices echoing around the space. Maeneb said little and sat back from the others. Rothir attended to Eled, who was propped up against the cave wall, feeding him bread and talking to him in a deep, reassuring murmur. Eled still looked exhausted: barely awake enough to eat, let alone reply.

Of the other three, Arguril seemed the most voluble – he was keen to make his voice heard, she thought, although he deferred to his elders. Parthenal and Tiburé seemed to speak as equals. Some of the time she had the feeling that they were discussing her.

But she had no proof of that. When odd words that she knew leapt out from their conversation, they were chiefly place names. Kelvha was mentioned, and a place, or thing, called Thield. That recurred several times. Huldarion was another word that sprung out as being a likely name; there was something in the way they said it, with respect and even awe, that marked it out to her.

Other words caught her attention too. The Vonnish word for bread, she realised as they offered it around, was not so different from the Standard, except that the consonant was softer and the vowel had slipped and become long and low. As the waterskins were passed from hand to hand she discovered that the same applied to the Vonnish word for water – and when they talked about the drowsing Eled, she thought she recognised the words for sick and sleep. It seemed to her that Vonnish might be a dialect or relative of Standard rather than an entirely separate language.

If so, however, it was not a dialect that she could easily understand. The words that echoed gently round the cave for the most part meant no more to her than the wistful chatterings of the Darkburn. She remembered those bubbling waters, the grasses and dead leaves at its verge... the leaning trees, a cage of branches... an insect clutching at a stem, climbing, climbing... and her head rolled forward, waking her with a start.

She opened her eyes, to see Tiburé looking at her with a faint, thin smile. "Lie down before you fall over," she advised; so Yaret did.

She awoke to grey light and movement around her. The Riders were getting ready to leave. Despite the cloak that someone had thrown over her,

she was cold and stiff. She had to flex each of her aching limbs in turn before she could rise and gather up her gear.

What should she do with all her baggage? There were no donkeys to carry it for her now; and it hardly seemed fair to burden the Riders' horses any further. They could take her bedroll and remaining food but not everything else.

"Leave what you don't need," said Tiburé, seeing her staring down at her packs.

"I don't carry stuff that I don't need," she answered shortly. No doubt Tiburé would see no necessity for her pile of woollen cloth and samples; but she couldn't leave them all behind. Quickly she picked out the best of the samples and folded them into her light canvas backpack, along with a bit of extra clothing and one or two other precious possessions – the map and letter and Gramma's honey included. She would carry that pack herself rather than burden one of the Riders. It was not heavy.

She left behind her second pan, the undelivered cloth and the less valuable samples, her oldest shirt, the inedible dried meat and – with a wrench of regret – her musical gourd. It was not heavy, but it was an awkward shape to carry. She hoped some future visitor to the cave would appreciate it.

Rothir came up while she was still staring at the gourd on top of the pile.

"Are you ready?" he asked. She nodded. "Then can you bear to ride behind Eled again? Tiburé is light enough to do it, but you're used to him, and Narba has become used to you. Later, when we're on easier ground, others can take a turn."

"All right." She turned resolutely away from her belongings, shouldered the backpack and walked out to where the horses waited. "Which way are we going?" she asked Parthenal.

"North." He pointed to the head of the fissure, at the steep uphill path.

"I would like to look for my donkeys first, if there is time," she said.

"No time, no point," said Parthenal. Emerging from the cavern, Rothir added,

"Parthenal has already scouted the side of the tarn to check for any pursuers. None were visible. Neither were your donkeys."

Yaret bit her lip. How could she leave without Dolm and Nuolo? How could she abandon them without even knowing what had happened to them? She almost felt inclined to say that she would stay behind and wait for them to reappear, foolish though that would be.

“We might have a better chance of seeing them from higher up,” suggested Rothir.

She nodded. Then she helped him to mount Eled onto Narba’s back and settle his leg into its support, before climbing up herself.

“How do you feel?” she asked Eled, and got the reply “Better.” She doubted if it was true.

They were the only two on horseback. All the others led their horses rather than ride them up this steep and dangerous path. When Yaret looked down into the valley on her right she could pick out the trail left the previous day by the darkburn, and imagined it racing through the tussocky grass. Although there was no lingering smell or taste of fear, the mere sight of the charred trail made her stomach clench.

Rothir, who was leading Narba, took it slowly, pausing at times to choose the easiest way.

“It’s lucky he’s such a stolid horse,” he said.

“Yes,” said Yaret. She was clinging tight to Eled, not through fear for herself but because of the awareness of her responsibility for the injured man. Once more he bore his trials stoically. Yet she could tell when the jolting hurt him – not by any sound he made, but by the frequent tensing of his body.

She began to sing to him, softly, a travelling song whose repetitive phrases were meant to match the rhythm of a walking horse. It seemed to help to distract Eled: the tensing became less noticeable.

“I like your songs,” he said.

“Do you? What do you like best about them?”

“It’s... I... They’re just nice.”

She felt like weeping for the childishness of the comment. He seemed a man simplified and stripped down. What remained was, she thought, a very likeable man; but there was not enough of him.

At least the songs carried them up the narrow, winding path without Eled beginning to slide off. As the hillside rose the stream beneath them did not, but became increasingly distant, a thin flickering ribbon held by a gash in the ground. She tried not to look down at that alarming drop: but none the less her attention was caught by a long, sparse waterfall which threw itself from a rocky shelf to break into a sparkling haze of droplets before reforming as the stream below.

“Look there,” said Tiburé suddenly, pointing to the waterfall’s base. Yaret gazed down at the pool where it landed, but could see nothing strange until Arguril said,

“Is that the darkburn?”

“It looks like it,” said Rothir.

And then she realised that the black stone almost submerged in the water was not a stone at all: and that the curling spire of mist above it was not spray but steam.

“It must have fallen from the path, or simply stumbled the wrong way,” said Tiburé.

“Not very clever, are they?” commented Arguril.

“They have no thoughts that I can decipher,” Maeneb said in her bell-like voice. “That is not to say they have no thoughts.”

Nobody volunteered to go and check the drowned darkburn. They moved on, up to the brow of the hill. But as they neared it, another, higher brow appeared.

“Wait here,” said Parthenal. He strode up to the further ridge and when he reached its top lay down on the ground to look over it at a view she could not see.

“All seems clear,” he reported on returning, “but we can take nothing for granted.”

No donkeys, then. She might have to resign herself to losing them for ever.

If they were alive, they could, it was true, look after themselves; there were probably wild donkeys in the area that they could join with. They might even be capable of making their way back home. Although it must be a two week journey from this spot, Nuolo and Dolm were used to long expeditions and always seemed to head off in the right direction. But she would not know where to begin to search for them in this wide, bleak, chilly landscape.

“Maeneb? What is your opinion? Can you detect the stonemen?” asked Tiburé.

Maeneb tilted her head reflectively and then spoke in Vonnish. Yaret was able to pick out a word that might have meant movement – Maeneb said it twice – and another word that she thought might be ‘west’.

“Then we will not go west,” said Tiburé in Standard, confirming her impression. Arguril began to object until Tiburé quelled him with a look. “I’ll ride behind Eled now,” she said. Yaret dismounted with relief.

The respite did not last long, however. After a short rest for Eled’s sake – during which Tiburé administered a couple more drops of the medicine she called ethlon– they all mounted their horses and continued at a much faster pace than before.

This time Yaret found herself seated uncomfortably on Tiburé's wiry black horse, which was surefooted enough but showed no inclination to respond to any of her instructions. She used legs and reins in vain before giving up and letting the horse choose his own path.

Looking west she saw the crags where she had found the riders; she thought she identified the distant pointing thumb, but it was already retreating as the troop rode on. Arguril was muttering impatiently.

"We can't go any faster," Tiburé told him.

"You could try."

"I could try," added Eled. "The ethlon is doing its job. I do feel better now."

"Well..." Tiburé urged the horse into a gentle trot, and then into a canter. It lasted only a few moments before she pulled up again, saying something about Eled. Yaret could see that despite his assurances he was trembling.

"It's not good for the horse either," said Rothir.

"But we're too slow," said Arguril obstinately, and continued with a stream of Vonnish in which Yaret again noticed the word 'Thield.' At the mention of it, Tiburé shook her head.

None the less Arguril kept making the same plea, or something like it, until they reached a cliff edge that descended steeply to the plain which Yaret had glimpsed briefly from the thumb.

When she paused to gaze down at it now, she saw that apart from the Coban hills far to her left there was nothing in this landscape that she knew. It was twined with streams, and dotted with strange bulbous trees. The distant mountains showed their edges like stone knives. Between the mountains and the plain, but far away, there was a strange blank patch of white: an enormous fog bank, maybe. She wondered if it hid some lake.

"Come on," said Parthenal sharply, and she followed the others as they descended from the land of crags by a rough staircase cut into the cliff. It was a long, awkward descent, and no less awkward when they reached the bottom. The plain was punctuated with rocks that stuck out of the ground at all angles, smaller than the thumb but no less singular: grey fingers reaching from the soil. The bulbous trees squatted amidst them but their needle-thin leaves gave little cover.

The group wound their way through this land for some hours, crossing and re-crossing the meandering streams, always heading towards the mountains. By the time they halted, the summits were tinted pink by the falling sun. They looked like giant flint arrowheads.

That made her think of home: of sitting on a wall while Colne the fletcher showed her how to knap stone into an arrowhead, and his son Dalko – her lover at the time – stood laughing at them nearby. A very long time ago it seemed now, and in a different world. A softer world of easy comfort and long meals and Dalko’s over-ready laughter. This world was altogether sharper and more vivid and there was nothing she could see in it to laugh about at all.

As they unloaded the horses under one of the bulbous trees, some discussion was going on. Arguril looked pleased; it seemed that he had at last won his argument.

“Arguril will leave us tomorrow morning,” Rothir told her. “He’ll head west.”

“Is it not dangerous for him to go that way? I thought that Maeneb said...”

Both Parthenal and Rothir turned to look at her. Parthenal’s eyes had hardened.

“She said what?” he demanded. “Maeneb said nothing in Standard.”

“But your Vonnish word for west is similar. Also *path*. And *movement*. And *tired*, and *sick*. And a great number of your other words, I think. They are like the Standard words turned round and shifted.” She spoke several of the Vonnish words that she had heard, to demonstrate.

Parthenal raised one eyebrow. Rothir was silent for a moment before saying,

“You’re right, they are related. Most people don’t realise; not that quickly, anyway. It is true that there may be stonemen to our west, but they march on foot. Arguril will be reasonably safe on a swift horse, on open ground where he can see them coming.”

Yaret was tempted to ask the meaning of *Thield*, or of *Huldarion*. Instead she nodded and held her tongue.

Turning to attend to Eled, she tried both to make him comfortable and to keep him sufficiently awake to eat and drink. Rothir handed her some sops of bread and shredded meat which she offered to the sick man, feeding him by hand, for when he raised his own arms they were shaking. It worried her. Even the sodden bread seemed difficult for him to swallow.

And it was cold in the darkening air: again, they risked no fire. She sat with an arm around Eled beneath the goat-hair blanket, hoping to give him extra warmth. Parthenal sat nearby and watched them, his intent gaze unsettling. Maeneb stood apart, looking out on sentry duty.

“Any sign of stonemen?” Rothir asked her. Maeneb shook her head.

“Perhaps they’ve given up,” said Arguril.

“That does not change our plan,” said Tiburé severely.

“How many days to this place called Farwithiel?” Yaret asked, and heard the resignation in Rothir’s voice as he replied.

“At this rate, three or four.”

“We’re going backwards,” muttered Parthenal.

“You don’t have to come backwards with us,” Rothir said. “Go on with Arguril.”

Parthenal shook his head. “I’ll be needed more here.” *You need more than one man*, Yaret thought was the implication, though between them the three women and Rothir could surely handle Eled.

But Parthenal might think that they would need to fight. Tiburé was obviously capable with a sword, and she had witnessed Maeneb’s skill with a knife as well as bow. None the less they would not have Parthenal’s strength or reach.

And as for she herself... she had not been fast enough with her bow in yesterday’s fight. She needed to sharpen up. To not be a liability, which was how Parthenal undoubtedly saw her at present.

“Why are the stonemen pursuing you? Are you at war?” she ventured to ask.

“Yes,” said Parthenal at the same time as Rothir answered, “No.”

“Undeclared,” said Rothir.

“Long-standing,” said Parthenal. “We have been enemies for a dozen years.”

“Since we left Caervonn,” said Rothir, earning a dubious glance from Parthenal.

“That’s a long time for a war to come to no conclusion,” Yaret observed.

“We are not at war,” said Rothir. “Call it a series of incidents, if you like.”

“But much more frequent over the last year,” said Parthenal.

“And the darkburns? Have they also been at war with you a dozen years?”

“Not independently. They are used by the stonemen.”

“We think they were created twelve years ago,” said Parthenal, “as instruments of war.”

“No, the darkburns are much older,” said Yaret without thinking.

“Older? What makes you say so?”

“Ah...” She shook her head. “I don’t know. Or at least, I can’t explain. It’s just a feeling.”

“Then don’t hypothesise. It doesn’t help,” said Rothir abruptly. “We need knowledge. Feelings are no use.”

Parthenal looked at him keenly and said a few words in Vonnish. One of them was ‘tired.’ Rothir shrugged and nodded.

Yaret became aware of her own tiredness. The rising moon was brightening as the sky darkened.

Huntress of the heavens, look after my donkeys, she thought. Waves of weariness and sadness rolled over her as she began to unroll her bedding. The Riders too were stretching out, wrapped in their cloaks, seeming oblivious to the hard chill of the ground. But to her it felt harder and chillier than it ever had.

She was trying to set her mind to sleep, when the peace was broken by a sharp cry from Maeneb. Somewhere behind her there was a clatter of stone on stone and a faint snort of breath.

All the other riders were instantly on their feet, swords outstretched and ready. Yaret scrambled upright, fumbling for her bow and quiver – too slow again, she thought.

Then Parthenal laughed. Trotting out of the dusk towards them came two shadows that hardened into a pair of donkeys: first Dolm, and then Nuolo. Dolm wandered up to Yaret and stuck his head in her pack, hunting oats. Nuolo butted her gently in the chest.

Yaret stroked the donkey’s rough back and hugged them both, not caring what Rothir or the other Riders thought. Her feelings for her donkeys might be of no use to anybody but she would not be without them. Gladness flooded through her. She gave her silent, heartfelt thanks to the huntress of the sky, even though the donkeys must have been already close by when she had made her plea.

But that didn’t matter, for here they were, unharmed. They were safe; all of them, safe now. She would take the donkeys home with her and Eled would be cared for at the place they called Farwithiel. As Nuolo nuzzled her, Yaret smiled into the dusk. The donkeys’ reappearance was a sign that everything would be all right.

Chapter 17

Parthenal, as usual, was awake before the others. Rothir was still snoring gently beside him. There was a rustle from Arguril, getting ready to wake; but Parthenal felt no inclination to jump up himself. He lay on his back and looked at the last stars in the western sky before the daylight overwhelmed them.

As he watched them fade into the blue glow of dawn he allowed himself, for a moment, to think of the person he had wanted for so long. Still did want, too often, he admitted to himself, since he could admit it to nobody else. Certainly the only person he had ever loved. If he could love, as opposed to simply want: that seemed sometimes doubtful.

And these were stupid thoughts for a cold dawn, with a day of hard activity ahead. He sat up and Rothir snorted into wakefulness.

“Get up, dwarf,” said Parthenal.

“Urgh,” said Rothir, his broad back emerging from his blanket. Parthenal thought that perhaps he was wrong about being unable to love. He loved Rothir, if affection and respect and familiarity were love. Maybe they were worth more than love. Then, for a second time, he pushed all such pointless thoughts away.

Once the troop woke there was little time wasted. They were all ready to set off again within a quarter-hour: indeed, Arguril was mounted before that, impatient to be gone. There had been some debate the previous evening as to whether he should take with him Eled’s scroll. It had been decided that he should. It was a risk, but the risk of Huldarion receiving no word at all was worse.

And the word of the Farwth was what they had been sent all this way to gather— along with any information they could get about the current positions of the stonemen. Hence they had scouted the area, trying to ascertain where the enemy bases were, and how great their numbers.

Too great, was the answer. As for their bases... They were growing, constantly shifting along vast stretches of the Darkburn, chiefly to the river’s south but increasingly crossing the water to move north and west. Parthenal had seen their tents, flimsier than Thield’s but more far numerous. Their camps seemed better organised than he had expected; for their stone crowns, and the drugs they took to endure them, did not encourage independent or coherent thinking. The stonemen’s aims – as far as he could

gather – were to hunt, to fight, to kill, or else to die. Organisation was not a strong point.

However, they were adept at tracking. Or at any rate, the darkburns that ran before them were. The only advantage of that, he thought, was that it meant the stonemen could not ride: horses would not tolerate being so close to a darkburn for so long. The stonemen only tolerated it because they were drugged by ethlon or whatever else they dosed themselves with. But they had to hunt on foot.

The strange woman had got up and was talking caressingly to her donkeys in some unknown language. It bore no relation to Standard; and he felt suspicion all over again of her swift grasp of Vonnish. When she saw him looking she gave him a smile, as if she couldn't help herself.

"I'm telling them to keep up with us today," she said. "They haven't got as much to carry now, so they should cope."

Parthenal nodded. Talking to donkeys? She wasn't that simple, surely. Was she really just a pedlar? What pedlar chose to cross the wilderness around the Darkburn – let alone a female one? And she knew Bruilde. That ought to be in her favour. But it wasn't.

"We won't be travelling fast," said Tiburé, carefully mounting her own horse onto which Rothir had already lifted Eled. The injured man looked tired and drawn: when Parthenal spoke to him he seemed hardly to be there.

Parthenal felt a small ache of compassion and fear. He was fond of Eled, who was usually so cheerful, thoughtful, keen to please. But Eled was better off at the moment if his mind was somewhere else; so Parthenal let the compassion slide away.

Tiburé was right – they did not travel fast. Despite his tiny dose of ethlon, Eled was sleepier than on the previous day. Once they left the crags behind the going was good, yet Tiburé's only attempt at cantering was quickly curtailed when Eled began to slide off the horse.

It was frustrating, for Parthenal knew that they would soon arrive at the more difficult terrain along the Thore – the river which ate its way down through the northern hills to wind east of the Gyr, and eventually meet and swell the Darkburn. On the rocky cliffs above the Thore they would have to dismount and lead the horses; and then trek miles upriver to find the crossing place, for there was no bridge across the chasm.

"Too slow," muttered Rothir.

"I know." Parthenal glanced over at him sceptically. "Do you think that Narba gains any benefit from having only you on his back instead of the other two, dwarf? I'm not sure he feels any difference."

“Just because you’re a beanstalk,” said Rothir. Then he looked back at the woman, who was in turn looking back at her donkeys trailing in the rear. “Are you all right, Yaret?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m just keeping an eye on the donkeys. I can’t believe they actually found me.” Again she smiled, and Parthenal recalled the joy with which she’d greeted the returning animals last night. It had transformed her face. Some of that light and gladness was still there. It might have made her attractive if other attributes had been different.

He trusted that he had not shown his brief disappointment at the Gyr cave when he had realised Yaret was a woman, rather than a slight and not unappealing young man. It had been a jolt to his consciousness, and not a pleasant one. How could he be attracted to a woman? Even one in breeches.

“We don’t want those donkeys holding us up,” he muttered to Rothir in Vonnish. “I hope they won’t give us trouble.”

“Why should they?” Rothir countered.

“They’re already lagging behind. And we could really do without a passenger.”

“Eled is the passenger – and he wouldn’t be here without Yaret. She’s cared for him tirelessly, without a word of complaint. She’s asked no questions either.”

“Why not? Stupidity or cunning?”

“Neither,” said Rothir tolerantly. “Just common charity, which you’re a little short of at the moment.”

“Maybe I am.” Parthenal sighed. “I’m frustrated. We should all be halfway home to Thield by now.”

“You voted for Farwithiel.”

“I did. But it’s going to take forever to get there, and then get back home again.”

Rothir studied him. “It’s not like you to be so impatient.”

“It’s not like you to be so resigned, dwarf.”

That was a word that was almost the same in Vonnish as in Standard. Yaret, riding just behind them, must have heard it; for in the pause that followed she asked,

“Why do you call him dwarf?”

Parthenal slowed so that she could catch them up: a reluctant attempt at common charity.

“Rothir *is* a dwarf,” he said.

“But he’s not that much shorter than you are,” she objected. “And he’s probably heavier.”

“Much heavier,” said Parthenal. “He’s disproportionate. Too broad in the body, legs too short.”

“Hardly,” said Yaret.

“Thank you,” said Rothir.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, whether in amusement or puzzlement he could not tell.

“So what does he call you?” she asked Parthenal.

“I am unfailingly polite,” said Rothir.

“Hah,” said Parthenal. “Any name he can think of. But he doesn’t have much of an imagination.”

“Give me some ideas. What should I call him?” Rothir asked her, surprising Parthenal; for Rothir was not generally so open with new acquaintances. After a week on the road together she must seem like an old one. It would take more than that for Parthenal to trust her.

“Oh... Well, I suppose most people could be labelled as some sort of animal,” she said, looking ahead at the others. “So Arguril is a hunting dog. Tiburé is a lioness. Maeneb is a hare.”

Parthenal was momentarily taken aback by the insight of these assessments.

“And Parthenal?” said Rothir.

“Polecat,” said Yaret, evidently without thinking, because her smile faded as she looked at his forbidding expression. He let all his suspicion and disapproval show. Polecat?

“And I suppose I’m a bear,” said Rothir.

She considered this. “No. I’m not sure what you are. Silly idea, forget it. Do you think it’s going to rain?”

“Not for a day or two,” said Rothir. “But it’s always foggy around Farwithiel.”

“Is that the place we saw from the crags that was covered in cloud?”

“Yes.”

“But you won’t be going that far,” said Parthenal.

“I know. It’s a pity,” she said. “Back home in Obandiro we have a story about a strange land that is always surrounded by fog.”

“And what is inside the fog, in your story?” asked Rothir, with interest.

Yaret glanced back at the donkeys again, seeming to give herself time to think before she answered. “Well, there is a tree.”

“A tree,” repeated Parthenal.

“Yes.” She shrugged apologetically. “I am allowed to say so much, but the rest of the story is Ulthared. That means, in our land, it is a thing

forbidden to speak of openly. Like Thield is for you.”

“What?” At once, by instinct, his hand was on his sword hilt.

“What do you know about Thield?” asked Rothir. He did not seem to be angry.

She spread her hands. “Nothing. I don’t know who or what it is, except that you keep mentioning it in your conversations. And Parthenal’s reaching for his sword proves it is both significant and Ulthared. If you want to keep it secret you should really call it something else.”

“You should really stop noticing so much,” said Rothir drily. “How do you talk about things that are Ulthared without calling them by name?”

“There are ways.”

“And how many things in your country are Ulthared?”

“Some.”

“I expect you cannot tell us how many, because it is Ulthared.”

“Quite.”

Rothir grinned. “Well, we are paid back for our secrecy,” he said.

“I have not asked to know any of your secrets,” she replied. “I merely mention that they are not quite secret enough.”

“Acknowledged.”

She turned to Parthenal. “Nor yours,” she said formally.

What was that supposed to mean? She couldn’t have guessed that fast. Although his secret was not a secret in this company, it was one that it was not always safe to tell elsewhere – in Kelvha, for example. It was certainly Ulthared where some people were concerned.

“What sort of tree?” asked Rothir.

She shrugged again. “Ulthared. All I can tell you is, the tree has a place in the stories by our bard Madeo.”

“Stories, plural?”

“There are a number of them, stories within songs, all about the same thing,” she said after a moment.

“Which is....”

“Ulthared.”

“Of course,” said Rothir. He seemed to be enjoying himself; whereas Parthenal wasn’t. He felt like cursing every time Eled needed readjusting on the saddle or Yaret hung back to urge on her donkeys. It was all so slow; and he was aware of growing snappy.

Yaret looked at him sidelong and moved forward to talk to Maeneb – or rather, to try. Parthenal noted with grim amusement that she got little encouragement from her new companion. He could have told her

beforehand that it would be a wasted effort. The hare: it fitted. Maeneb was not exactly timid, but she was apart. Aloof. Quick-moving, distant, wary. After a while Yaret gave up.

They meandered on until Tiburé called a halt. Eled needed yet another rest. So they stopped beneath a grove of barrel-trunked trees in milky sunshine, and tried to relax while Eled slept.

Feeling too restless to keep still, Parthenal left the others sitting while he strolled around. When he was a little way past the trees, he became aware that Yaret had followed him.

He turned to face her. "What is it?"

"I did not mean to offend you by anything I said before." Her face was earnest. "I would not want to make an enemy of you."

"We are not enemies," said Parthenal, although an inner voice still growled, *Really? Polecat?*

"I'm glad of that. You would not be a good man to have as an enemy."

"Why not?"

"Because you're dangerous," she said, as if it was obvious.

"Despite my secrets?"

"I do not ask about your secrets." She looked at him steadily. "Although I think I may know one of them."

He thought, if she makes a derogatory remark I may just kill her. "Go on."

"I think you might be what in Obandiro we call sideways."

"Sideways."

"So that you look sideways for a partner, towards your fellow-men, not opposite towards women."

"I see. So what is the opposite of sideways?"

"Well, it's opposite," she said, "or occasionally both."

"And which are you?"

"I am opposite, I think," said Yaret.

"You're not sure?"

"Who is ever quite sure, in all circumstances? But if I have offended you by saying this I am sorry, again. It is not a matter for offence in Obandiro and none is intended."

"What made you think I might be sideways?"

"The way you looked at me," she said, "when you thought I was a man. I've seen that look before, but not while I've been wearing breeches. Is Rothir also sideways?"

"Rothir? No."

“I only ask because he is your partner.”

“Not in that way,” said Parthenal. He did not know whether to feel annoyed or not. There was no condemnation in her manner. But within the troop only Rothir ever referred to the matter openly. “And you cannot be sure that I am sideways either. Do not think that.” Nonetheless he knew he had already as good as admitted it.

“Of course not.” She gave him a slight bow.

“Donkey,” added Parthenal, as a small revenge.

She smiled. “Thank you. I am happy to be a donkey.”

“Really?”

“Of course. You could have said much worse. I think they’re getting ready to set off again.”

“Wait. Why did you follow me to tell me this?”

He could not read the expression in her eyes. Yet her tone was gentle.

“Because you need to be more careful,” she replied.

As they remounted the horses Parthenal wondered if she really wanted to demonstrate some sort of power over him. But it was also true that he should have been more careful. It didn’t matter this time, but it might have. She had detected it so fast. Would everyone be able to see the desire that flamed into his eyes? *Polecat*. It was too perceptive, and he didn’t like it.

This time they rode on with Maeneb holding Eled up on the horse before her; unwillingly, Parthenal could tell. Maeneb’s aversion to touching other people was not so great that she could not overcome it, but it meant that she did not keep as firm a grasp on Eled as she should have done.

Or possibly Eled himself was not coping so well. Time after time he slipped and had to be hurriedly readjusted in the saddle, and all too often needed lifting down so that he could lie exhausted for a few more moments on the grass. Rothir knelt next to the young man, talking quietly to him and trying to reassure him that they did not need to hurry.

But all the time Parthenal was conscious that the stonemen might still be on their trail.

“This is taking far too long,” he muttered to Tiburé while Eled dozed. “If we are being followed, they could catch us before sunset at this rate.” When he scanned the landscape, it was impossible to see far through the scattered clumps of trees.

“Maeneb? What do you hear?” asked Tiburé.

“I can hear nothing while I’m riding up behind Eled,” complained Maeneb. “It’s too distracting.”

“But now?” coaxed Tiburé.

Maeneb tilted her head, her eyes half-closed. Parthenal listened to the wind in the trees; the snuffling of a horse: tried to hear what Maeneb heard, and failed.

“I hear them,” she said at last. “A great number, I think, many more than we expected. But they’re quite distant to the south and west, many miles away.”

“Well, that’s something,” said Tiburé. “Is Eled ready? Let’s move on.”

Parthenal helped Eled back on to the horse with a pang of pity, which he suppressed. Were he in the same situation, he would not want pity. If pity had its way they would not move Eled at all. He slapped Eled’s good leg and said,

“All right?”

“All right,” said Eled, who clearly wasn’t. The pity surged through him again.

Once they were moving on, Yaret said quietly, “What does Maeneb listen for? Can you say, or is that Ulthared?”

Parthenal thought it probably was, but Rothir answered.

“She can sense where people are.”

“You mean... sense their minds?”

“Yes.”

“Is this a common talent amongst you, reading minds?”

“Oh, definitely,” said Parthenal. “We can all do it.”

“You are joking?” She looked alarmed.

“We don’t read minds,” said Rothir. “And neither does Maeneb. She senses people’s presence and their moods. She may read the tendency of their thoughts, but I think that’s all.”

Parthenal said, “Maeneb is half of a different race. So she is not quite the same as the rest of us.”

“No, that’s obvious,” said Yaret, turning to check for the donkeys. They were a long way behind, and she pulled on her horse’s reins. “Dolm! Hurry up. What is it?”

“They will come if we ride on,” said Rothir.

“But they shouldn’t be this slow. I think there’s something wrong with Nuolo.”

“She looks all right to me,” said Parthenal impatiently.

“She’s uncomplaining. Donkeys don’t show pain the way that horses do.”

“We can’t afford to stop, and waste more time,” he said, exasperated.

Reluctantly, Yaret continued to ride on; but with many a backward look. After another mile the trailing donkeys were almost out of sight. She

whistled several times and then stared hard at them.

“It’s Nuolo,” she said under her breath, and before Parthenal could try and stop her she had dismounted. She ran back over the uneven ground towards the donkeys, with greater swiftness and agility than was currently possible on horseback.

“Can we not just leave those dratted donkeys?” muttered Parthenal. When Yaret reached them she began to carefully examine Nuolo, checking her hooves and running a hand along her legs.

“Eled needs to get off again,” warned Maeneb. Parthenal let out a sharp sigh of vexation, and went to lift Eled from the horse and set him down to slump against a tree.

The donkeys and Yaret came straggling up to meet them at a snail’s pace. It was obvious to him now that Nuolo was going lame; she walked haltingly, her head dipping.

“Have a look at her,” said Rothir to Parthenal, so with another sigh of exasperation he went over to examine Nuolo, handling her gently; more gently than he would a horse, for her legs felt fragile by comparison.

He straightened up and stroked her. Her delicacy touched him in a way that he did not bother to define. Delicacy was weakness. “She’s got a swollen knee joint,” he said. “She may have twisted it.”

Yaret, her face full of distress, said, “That’s bad, isn’t it? She really needs to rest.”

“We cannot slow down for the donkeys,” Parthenal told her.

“But Nuolo can’t keep up,” said Yaret. She gazed at her donkeys. “Perhaps I should stay here with them while she heals.”

“No. That would not be safe,” said Tiburé emphatically. “You would have no means of escape if the stonemen caught up with you. You’d be far safer to continue with us to the cliffs along the Thore. From the far end of the cliffs, if all is clear, you can continue northward towards your own country.”

Yaret gazed at the donkeys. He saw her face changing, turning resolutely grave.

“I shall have to leave them here,” she said at last.

“You can still bring Dolm,” said Rothir.

“I can’t. He won’t come without Nuolo. And I can’t leave her on her own.” She began to unload the donkeys’ packs and strap them on to Poda. The smallest bag she transferred to her own back. “I should have looked after them better,” she murmured.

“How?” demanded Rothir.

“They’ll be fine here,” said Parthenal bracingly, because he was desperate to move on. “The stonemen won’t hurt them. They aren’t interested in donkeys. And this is good pasture for them. They’ll thrive while Nuolo recovers. In a few weeks when all danger is past you can always come back and look for them.”

“Yes.” She knelt and embraced Nuolo’s long pale head, talking to her in a low voice. She did the same with Dolm, stroking his ears as she spoke to him. Then she stood up and climbed back onto Poda.

“Let’s get moving,” she said, and looked straight ahead, expressionless, as they began to ride away. All her former joy had vanished.

Chapter 18

They were two or three miles further on before Yaret finally looked back over her shoulder. By that time the donkeys had long vanished. Parthenal had already been checking more surreptitiously, and had seen them disappear with a feeling of relief.

“Parthenal’s right; they will be fine,” said Rothir.

“Yes. I’m sure they will,” she said, expressionless. “I shall just have some explaining to do to my grandparents.”

“Well, your grandfather will also have some explaining to do to you, I believe.”

“Yes. You had better tell me where these cliffs are that we’re going to.”

“In another ten miles or so,” said Parthenal, “we will come to the chasm cut by the river Thore. The gorge is many miles long, and hundreds of feet deep. It’s quite a spectacular place.”

“I am sure.”

“You cannot help but admire it,” Parthenal went on, aiming to distract her from the vanished donkeys. “But there’s no bridge. The chasm is too wide. So we’ll continue along the cliffs on this western side until they drop down low enough for us to descend to the river. You won’t need to cross it with us. If you continue along this side, after another five miles or so you’ll see the Coban hills to the west.”

“Very well. I can work out the route from there. And you?”

“Meanwhile we shall ford the river and go east to Farwithiel,” said Rothir.

“And what if the stonemen are still after you?”

“If they haven’t caught up with us by the time we reach the Thore,” said Rothir, “they have little chance of doing so, and they will know it and most likely give up. East of the Thore is not a good place for them.”

She did not ask why not. She merely nodded.

“Without the donkeys you won’t be able to carry much gear,” said Rothir thoughtfully. “You’ll need a horse. Tiburé?” he called over. “I think that Yaret should be allowed to keep Poda when she leaves us.”

Tiburé paused, looked at Eled, and after a moment’s consideration nodded. “That seems fair payment for your service.”

“I don’t want payment,” Yaret said.

“Take it,” Rothir told her.

“Well... A horse would certainly make things easier. But what about Eled? Won't he need Poda to ride home, once he is healed?”

“It looks as if that won't be for a while. And they have horses in Farwithiel,” said Parthenal, watching Eled drooping yet again in front of Maeneb.

“But she's a very fine horse. It's too valuable a gift,” said Yaret reluctantly.

“Eled's life was a valuable gift,” said Rothir. “It merely repays the debt.”

“There is no debt.”

“Do you want the horse or not?” demanded Parthenal impatiently.

After a moment's silence, Yaret said, “Thank you.” Rothir looked over at Parthenal with his eyebrows raised. Parthenal shook his head. He was feeling rattled. Nothing was going as it should. He hated the constant stop-start of this journey. And it was so *slow*.

They trudged on, now climbing gradually but steadily. The sun began its long slide through the cool afternoon, yet its lengthening light conferred no warmth to the scene around them. The grass was yellow and the stocky trees dropped sharp needles on them as they rode.

This is a land prepared for winter, thought Parthenal, and he shivered.

At last Tiburé said, “Ah! Here is the Thore. I thought we'd never get here; but there is the path that leads to the cliffs. Maeneb? Is there anyone behind us?”

Maeneb looked back and listened briefly. Then she shook her head.

As they continued riding, a wide fissure in the ground became visible to their right, snaking towards them until their path lay parallel to it. This was the top of the famed cliffs above the Thore.

Parthenal dismounted and approached the edge of the ravine to take a look. Only once he came close could he hear the surging rumble of the waters, so far down were they.

He had been here on a few occasions and the sight and sound never failed to impress him. At the bottom of the gorge, the Thore looked small and thin, hardly more than a stream; but he knew that despite appearances it was a wide, strong river and that the drop down to it was even further than it seemed to be. The sides of the gorge were sheer red sandstone, perpendicular in many places; yet a surprising number of stunted trees or stubborn thorn bushes dotted the walls, clinging perilously to narrow perches.

“I have heard of this place,” said Yaret sadly, “but never imagined that it could be so...”

“Majestic?” he suggested.

“High.”

“It is certainly that. Are you afraid of heights?”

“Not normally,” she said, “but this is something beyond my experience.”

“We will not ride, but will walk the horses along this section of the path,” said Tiburé.

So only Maeneb and Eled remained mounted, with Rothir guiding their horse along the track while keeping as far as possible from the cliff-edge on their right.

At first that sheer edge was still several yards away. Before they had travelled very far, however, more rocks intruded to their left and pushed them closer to the brink. The rumbling of the river from below became more audible: a ceaseless, threatening thunder.

They moved carefully. Parthenal, leading the group, did not try to hurry on this path, although without a two-hundred foot drop by his side it would have felt easy enough. One slow mile they went, then a second, slower mile; every step a measured one, taking constant care, although the roar of the river gave him a strange sensation as if this place was not quite real. As if he could float away across the cliffs unharmed, aloft on unseen wings...

Don't let yourself be hypnotised by it, he thought; and he paused to gaze down, sternly fixing in his mind the long sheer drop to the tumultuous water.

Then he looked up and across the chasm to the far side. A haze lay over it. Otherwise it appeared much the same as the land they had just walked through, with a patchwork of thin trees and bushes fading into mist.

That similarity, he knew, was deceptive. They might be permitted to find a path through to Farwithiel... and they might not.

But they still had to cross the river to get there. They were now above the chasm's deepest point, and there was a long way yet to go. Not wishing to pause, Tiburé had taken over at the front of the group. Parthenal moved back from the river's roar and was following the others when Maeneb cried out suddenly.

“Eled is slipping again!”

Quickly he pushed forward to assist her, holding up the slumping Eled. Meanwhile Rothir steered the horse to a less narrow section of the path, for this would be a dangerous spot for Eled to fall.

“Wake up,” Parthenal told the young man. “Hold on tight, Eled. Just a little further, and then you can rest.”

Ahead of them, the trail was crossed by a broad rock platform that overhung the gorge by a foot or two. It was the widest section of the path for some way; so here Rothir halted Maeneb's horse. Carefully he and Parthenal together lifted Eled down and laid him on the stone slab to recover his strength.

Parthenal feared that it would take a while. Eled was barely conscious; his eyelids were fluttering.

"I should not have done it," said Rothir quietly. "I should have taken my chances with him in the Coban hills. I should not have brought him all the way to the Gyr Tarn."

"So now you would be stuck in some benighted Coban village, while we hunted high and low for both of you," said Parthenal.

"There were other options."

"Forget them. This is now," said Parthenal. Kneeling down to pull the woollen blanket closer around Eled – he did not know where it had come from, presumably the pedlar – he saw how Eled tried to lift a hand to aid him, only to let it fall aside as if the effort were too great.

Parthenal felt a sudden lurch of his heart in case Eled should die here, on this hazardous blade of rock above the beating waters and so far from home. An unusual sense of fear and panic washed through him. From Eled's drawn face, he thought the young man must feel the same anxiety.

"Take it easy, Eled," he said, raising his voice over the rushing river of sound. "You're just tired. Don't worry; there's no need for haste. You can rest here for a while."

Even before he finished speaking he could smell it.

"What?" he said, at the same time as Rothir shouted harshly, "Darkburn."

The stench of burning and decay enveloped them like sudden night. Parthenal sprang to his feet, drawing his sword with a swift ringing hiss, but his limbs had already become weak. He was ensnared by a swelling fear which was expanding swiftly into a storm-cloud of horror: a spreading flood of blind despair, which filled him with the certainty of imminent disaster – of fast-coming oblivion – of death. It almost overwhelmed him.

The darkburn was on the path ahead. He had not expected anything to come from that direction. It was rushing at them, tall and dense in its smoky indistinctness and moving on what might be ragged legs. He felt the heat pour from it as it whirled onto the stone platform. Behind it clumps of weed burst into flames. The very rock seemed to crackle with the heat.

Parthenal's hand around his sword-hilt felt as feeble as Eled's. His mind was a chaotic mass of fear and loathing and dreadful grief and anger. He did

not know how to untangle the emotions nor how to deal with them. He was aware that somebody was wailing and hoped that it was not himself.

He saw Rothir lift his sword as if it weighed as much as a tombstone and swipe it at the darkburn, which spun away for a second. That reminded him of what he had to do although he did not know where to find the will or strength. He thought of the man he loved, and the will came: with the will, the weakness lessened enough for him to raise his sword and try to cleave the darkburn with it.

The darkburn charged, hurling itself between the two men in an onrush of unbearable heat. The horses panicked: Poda tried to flee, neighing wildly, and Parthenal was aware of Yaret attempting to control her so that the horse would not trample Eled in her fright.

He hacked at the darkburn and it seemed to pause although it did not break. This one was not to be so easily broken. Both he and Rothir struck again, in unison, and then had to leap back from its heat.

But caught between his sword and Rothir's the darkburn seemed to flounder. Throwing itself forward in a hurtling rush, it missed them both. Before he could strike at it a third time, it spun to the edge of the precipice and went straight over. It fell in a long dark blur towards the churning waters far below.

In his weakness Parthenal did not dare to look over the edge after it in case he fell too. He collapsed to his knees on the warm rock and tried to regather his strength. But the rapid thinning of the cloud of horror told him that the darkburn must have truly gone.

"More," called Rothir's urgent voice, and he raised his head to see the stonemen running down the path towards them in the darkburn's wake. Seven or eight. Before he was on his feet they had already charged the Riders.

Tiburé, wielding her sword against the first one, almost sliced the man's arm off: Maeneb had her long knife out and was slashing at another. As usual the stonemen had little concept of self-defence – it was all attack, brutal and direct. Parthenal's sword clashed heavily on an upraised axe as two stonemen leapt over to assail him. He had to fight against the feebleness that still made his limbs as lax as reeds.

They would not get Eled, he told himself furiously, he would not let them: and filled with wrath, he smote again and again until first one and then the other stoneman crumpled underneath his sword-blows, painted extravagantly in their own blood.

But two more ran forward to replace them. And behind them yet more stonemen were arriving, howling and yelling now that secrecy was no longer needed. Where had they all come from? Why hadn't Maeneb detected them?

No time to think about that. Get ready for the next onslaught. The panicking horses helped him, unintentionally, by getting in the attackers' way. One stoneman was kicked under the chin by a flying hoof and was hurled backwards into Rothir, who picked him up and threw him off the cliff. Another was knocked down and trampled by Tiburé's horse: Tiburé made short work of him.

But on the stone slab, close to Eled, Poda neighed and reared up frantically while Yaret tried to pull her away from the injured rider. Hooves slipping on the rock, the horse fell over on her side. She landed heavily, close to the cliff-edge, neighing in distress.

Yaret was beneath her. She was trapped by one leg which was held fast under the weight of Poda's body, right next to the precipice. Parthenal had to slash at a stoneman, sending him flying with a thump of his sword-hilt, before he could risk another glance Yaret's way.

Her head was over the edge. She was trying to pull herself free: but the weight of the horse on her foot was immovable. Rothir hacked the head half off a stoneman and shouted something. Parthenal could not decipher the words over the harsh clatter of metal on stone and the pounding of the waters far below. When he tried to move over to help Yaret, two more stonemen ran forward to assail him.

He parried the blow of the first, ripping the sword from the man's hand to spin high and glittering in the air before it disappeared over the cliff. But meanwhile the second stoneman leapt up onto Poda's belly and swung his axe down fiercely, to where Yaret lay trapped and helpless.

The axe smacked into rock with a crunch. The stoneman jumped off Poda and kicked Yaret, hard.

Parthenal saw only the sudden flailing of her arms and legs as she was thrown over the precipice. Then she was gone. Time stopped. He stood with his mouth open, trying to take it in.

There was a roar next to him. Rothir charged like a madman; three seconds later the stoneman standing triumphantly by Poda had followed Yaret over the edge and down into the chasm with a sword-wound through his heart. Rothir was yelling incoherently as he laid about him. Two more of the enemy fell to his sword, while Parthenal, coming swiftly to his senses, finished off another. Maeneb cut the throat of a fourth.

He ran to Tiburé's aid: there was blood on her face as she fought off the last of the stonemen. An instant later the man lurched forward and collapsed with Parthenal's sword embedded in his back.

"Is that all of them?" said Tiburé, panting. She did not seem to realise what had happened.

Nor, fully, did Parthenal until Poda rolled over and finally struggled to her feet, her hooves skidding on a pool of blood, and they saw the booted foot that had remained trapped beneath her. Then sickness and horror lurched over him, as dreadfully as if the darkburn had just reappeared.

Rothir flung himself on his stomach at the cliff's edge and looked over. Parthenal knelt there too to gaze down, although he had little hope.

There was no hidden ledge still holding Yaret. She was not clinging to any of the small gnarled shrubs that dotted the cliff face. No outreached hand stretched up for them to haul on. Her body was not even visible down below; the river might have already swept it away, along with the dead stonemen and the darkburn. He listened to its constant, busy noise which was itself a kind of silence.

At last Rothir sat up and wiped a hand across his face.

"I'm going down to look for her," he said.

"Rothir. She's dead," said Parthenal.

"She might not be. I have to make sure." Rothir was having difficulty speaking.

"She won't have survived that fall," said Tiburé. "Quite apart from her foot."

"I don't know," said Maeneb with a kind of wail. "I don't think she's alive. I can't hear anything. But I didn't even hear the stonemen coming. I was listening in the wrong direction. And then Eled..." She made a despairing gesture.

Parthenal walked over numbly to check on Eled, who still lay motionless where they had laid him down. He was, miraculously, untouched by the fight. The stonemen had evidently not thought him worth attacking. Perhaps they had assumed him to be dead already, for he was only half conscious at best.

"I'm going down to look for her," said Rothir again, his voice hoarse and almost unrecognisable. "I have to."

"There's no way down to the water," said Tiburé, "not for another five miles. And then after fording the river you would have to backtrack downstream. The only path along the bottom is on the far side of the water."

And we cannot move Eled yet. And even if we could move him now, it would be almost dark by the time we finished our descent to the ford.”

“I’ll go alone, now,” said Rothir.

“It would still be dark,” said Parthenal, “before you could reach this section of the Thore.”

Rothir, sitting by the cliff edge, put his head in his hands.

“I’ll try and get some food into Eled,” said Parthenal after a moment. “That might help. So might some more ethlon.”

“His mind is more awake than his body,” said Maeneb mournfully. “But it wanders.”

Rothir raised his head. “We told her she’d be safe! She was our responsibility. We told her she’d be safe!”

“We could not have foreseen it,” said Tiburé, although it was perfectly clear to Parthenal that they both could and should have foreseen the ambush. They had looked behind for their pursuers and not ahead. They had placed too much reliance on Maeneb when she had Eled on her mind.

Numbly he reached for the bag that was still strapped to Poda, to find some food for Eled. It was Yaret’s bag. She had been wearing her backpack when she fell: her most precious possessions had gone down with her. Such as they were.

Her foot still lay there on the rock. He did not know what to do about it. In the saddlebag he saw a shirt and dropped it on the bloody foot to shroud it. Then he found oats and biscuit and made a mush of them with water to feed to Eled. All this time Rothir sat with his head in his hands.

“Something happened,” murmured the sick man, his eyelids fluttering.

“We were attacked. But the stonemen are all dead. You rest, and we’ll move again in a little while,” said Parthenal. He did not want to be the one who told Eled.

“We may as well all eat now,” said Tiburé. Almost as if nobody had just fallen over the cliff. But Tiburé was always practical. Tough as granite. She began to distribute the last of the bread – stale and hard – along with cheese and dried apple.

Everything felt like stone and sawdust in Parthenal’s mouth. Rothir looked at the food in his hand as if he did not know what to do with it. Then he began to eat, determinedly, the muscles of his throat and jaw working. He looked like a man in dreadful pain. Parthenal’s own grief and horror were focused on Rothir: he tried to spare some grief for Yaret too. He hoped it had been quick. Surely it must have been. A few seconds at most before she hit the bottom. Or drowned. That would have taken longer.

He wanted to stop imagining it. This is now, he thought, but I wish it wasn't. I wish it was back then, before it happened. I wish it could be stopped. I didn't know her. But there will be no forgetting this.

No-one spoke. They listened to the snarl and roaring of the waters down below. Tiburé gave Eled a few drops of ethlon, and he roused himself.

"Had we better move on? I'm ready now," he said, lifting his head to look around. "Are we all here? Where's Yaret?"

"Yaret went ahead," said Tiburé. Nobody contradicted her. Rothir hoisted Eled to his feet and Parthenal helped to lift him on to Tiburé's horse. They walked past the dead stonemen and slowly, carefully along the cliff with the waters echoing in their ears.

After a mile or two the sound grew louder; the sides of the gorge were becoming less high, or else the river had not cut a way so far down. Parthenal watched the water rushing closer: grey, fast and careless except where it swirled into great pools before dancing its way out again. Its song was an unremitting blur of noise. By the time they descended to the crossing place it was almost deafening.

Here the water was at its broadest and less than a yard deep. None the less they had to ride the horses across with care because of the swirling current and the rocks underfoot. A slip could mean being swept away through the deepening gorge for many miles, all the way down to the Darkburn...

That name now seemed to grip like an iron clamp on Parthenal's chest. He saw the ragged darkburn falling with its burden of despair. And Yaret falling after it. He had the sense of a door closing, of some light shut out.

By the time they reached the far side of the swiftly-flowing Thore, twilight was cradling them. Its soft blue presence was no consolation.

"I need to go and look for her," said Rothir again, dully.

"At first light tomorrow," said Parthenal, "we will go together."

Those must be splashes from the river crossing that marked Rothir's face, for Rothir never wept. But as darkness covered them, Parthenal to his dismay found himself weeping a little, silently, for his friend.

Chapter 19

The weight of the horse was unbearable. Yaret could feel the bones of her foot cracking beneath it. But she was trapped.

She was frantically pushing at Poda's body with her left foot to try and free her right, all the time aware that the edge of the rock platform was just behind her. Her head was already lolling in thin air and the roar of the water below pummelled her ears. She needed to pull free and get up and join the fight. She could hear the shouts and clash of swords but she could not see what was going on.

When the stoneman leapt up onto Poda's belly her first fear was for the poor labouring horse. She thought his axe would fall on Poda's neck. She did not fear for herself until it was too late: the axe's sudden crunch had freed her leg, though she was conscious of no pain. As she struggled to sit up the blow of the stoneman's boot in her chest was a heavy jolt. It sent her helplessly backwards, flying, tumbling, falling.

Strangely, her only coherent thought was "the donkeys!" Then something hit her painfully on the head and shoulders, tugging on her clothes and ripping at her skin. As she tore past and through it she realised it was a thornbush and tried to grab it; but too fast, too slow, it was gone upward and she was going down again. This time she was not head first but still did not see the second shrub as it rushed up and caught her by the legs.

It held her for about a second, maybe two. Then with a strident crack it let her go, spilling her from its hard fingers, and she bounced off rock and fell again for a bewildering long moment until there was sudden water, so cold that it shocked her more than anything so far. She had not heard a splash.

But she knew she must not breathe it in – the instinct to breathe seemed to have stopped in any case during the fall – so she thrashed and thrashed and willed the water to let go, to give her up as the bushes had.

It did not want to. But then she found the surface, or the water freed her. There was air. With her first gasping breath she recognised where she was and what had happened to her foot.

Her brain began to work, after a fashion. The icy water might help to slow the bleeding. But she had to get out of it. When she tried to stand, her left foot met a stony bed. She realised that she was very close to shore.

But then the water swept her up and away again in strong cold arms and it wasn't until a rock hit her that she was able to stop herself. She realised

that her pack was still strapped to her back and could not remember why. She clung on to the projecting rock and tried to stand again – no, that was stupid, not enough feet – so she threw herself towards the bank and found herself sitting in the shallows. With her arms and her left leg she levered herself further out.

Not far enough. Further, further. The river dragged at her. She shuffled higher onto the narrow stony shore above the water's roar and rush. As she felt herself starting to shiver she thought, No, no, not yet, not yet, there are things I have to do!

Backpack. Get it off. Open it. Don't look at your foot yet, it's not there anyway, unbuckle, unstrap, that's it. Now. Find the samples. Any of them. That one. Fold it. Fold again.

Her fingers were cold and clumsy but they managed to obey. Then she allowed herself to look. Blood was pulsing but not leaping from the new end of her leg. It was a clean cut apart from a ragged flap of skin that had been left dangling underneath. This flap she took hold of, and pulled over so that it covered the stump. Nothing hurt much yet. That must be the cold, or shock, or some wonderful decision by her body.

Now the cloth. She pressed the folded woollen cloth over and round the stump and tried to tie it. Her fingers fumbled. Done, sort of. Now fold another strip: no, no, something else first. She tipped up the pack and her pots of salt and honey tumbled out.

Salt. She threw it at the cloth-bound leg. Most of it missed. She put her fingers in the honey and smeared it round the edges. She still felt nothing. Extraordinary. Now fold another sample.

It was harder this time: she was beginning to shiver badly. Not only her fingers had grown clumsy but her hands, her arms, her shoulders: none of them wanted to do anything. Somehow she managed to fold the cloth and make a pad. Another strip to hold it on: she wound it round and over. Tie. Tie. Tie. Her hands would not do it.

Yet at last it seemed to be done. At least, the strip did not fall off. Her fingers were sticky and she fell back with relief and licked them while she could still move. Delicious.

She scooped the remains of the honey from the pot, dipped them in the remains of the salt, and licked again. It was odd licking honey from her own fingers. It might help, though. Salt and sugar.

Water. There was plenty of it if she had the energy. She could feel herself weakening fast now, all her muscles seeming to go into spasm. Her leg was stinging and everything was starting to hurt much more, not just her leg but

hips, knees, elbows, back, her whole body. She reached out with the empty honey jar and dipped it in a pool of water. Drank. Cold, too cold, but necessary. Dipped and drank again.

Her mouth was numb now, with the cold or something else. She hoped that everything would go numb as it had been before. But it refused. It was getting worse. Her leg was fiercely angry and growing angrier, as if a lion were biting off her foot. But there was no lion. She had imagined the lion although she thought she heard it growling. No, that must be the river. She turned her head and looked at the water to make sure. Thought of reaching out to touch it although her hand did not respond.

But now she had done everything necessary. She felt almost exultant as she lay and let the shivering take over. She was shaking uncontrollably, despite the exultancy. But the shivering would pass. The pain would pass. Everything would pass.

Then she must have slept, because it was twilight, and then a little later on it was fully dark. She wasn't sure how that had happened. How long would the night be? Would there be a morning? The shivering had stopped but she was cold and achy yet she couldn't move. She felt helplessly limp and there was a dense burning pain somewhere. Try not to notice.

But now it resolved into a clear pain of the mind as she thought of Rothir and the others high up on the cliff. Would they be able to see her from up there? Would they still be there to look? Or had they...

The thought of them also falling, cut down, was too dreadful. That made her sob in anguish until she told herself not to be so stupid. She had seen how they could fight. Whether they would be in any state to find her was another matter.

In any case she was not sure that she could be found. With the cliff towering above her on one side and the stars above and the rush of water past her on the other side, she was surely untouchable. Inviolable. Pristine.

There was something that she ought to have done, that she had missed out. What was it? She remembered, and said Oveyn. She wasn't sure who for. Maybe it was for herself. Some of the words seemed to have changed and she hoped it wouldn't matter.

The pain seemed further off now. It was walking away with her foot. She stared up at the stars that were shining high above her, a slice of them visible at least with the blackness of the cliff trying to shoulder them aside. But it could not do it. The stars moved but they could not be moved, they were faithful, they were always there. Thank you, stars. She stared at those

pale points and felt herself hurtling upwards to meet them, pierced on their thin spears until everything was light.

Chapter 20

He did not think that he had slept at all although the sudden presence of the bruised-blue dawn told him that sleep must have stolen an hour or two from his waiting. At once he was on his feet, looking for the horses.

Parthenal stirred and sat up. "I'll come with you."

Rothir nodded. It seemed all too clear to him now, in the cold dim light, that he was going only to find a corpse at best. At worst, nothing. And then he would never know where she was. Last night he had held on doggedly to hope. This morning, even as he pulled himself up onto Narba, he knew that hope was pointless.

All the same he would try to find her. He motioned with his hand to Tiburé, as she woke and blinked and scratched her head, and then he rode away before she could start to dissuade him.

He was thankful that Parthenal did not try to either comfort or to disillusion him. His friend accompanied him in silence as Narba picked a way along the narrow trail beside the busy, hurrying Thore. He wished that he could hurry likewise. He had five miles to go; at least an hour at this rate. Too long. But it could not make a difference now.

The thundering of the Thore was too tremendous to permit much speech. In any case what was there to say? His mind kept turning to the same images: a crumpled, broken body lying by the river, or disappearing downstream, vanishing as he tried to reach it. Carried far beyond his grasp.

Accept it, he thought, there will be nothing to find. But something rebelled inside him. He would not accept it. He had to accept it. No. Sickness welled up within him.

So he forced himself away from those thoughts to guess at distances while the horses walked on carefully. Sometimes they were in the water, sometimes out of it, as the path dipped in and out of the shallow margin of the river. Gradually the slopes above him grew and steepened and the echoes of the hoof-steps lengthened.

"It can't be far now," said Parthenal eventually. "There's the split crag we saw from the other side. So that must be the stone platform jutting out up there."

Rothir nodded. It was an appallingly long fall. All this way he thought he had been slowly hardening his heart and will in readiness. Now his efforts seemed to have had no effect. He felt sick again as he began to scan the opposite bank of the river.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. The water rushed and roared beside him. It did not care. He checked the landmarks above his head; moved a little further on, and checked again, Parthenal always following.

Nothing. He walked Narba on, and scanned the far shore again.

Nothing. He had known this from the start. It was hopeless. Yet he had to keep on looking.

Nothing. And again here.

Nothing. Further down. Keep going. Even if there's no point.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

And then a...

On the far side, a bundle. A huddle of clothes and limbs and straggled hair. It wasn't a stoneman.

"That's her," he said, in utter disbelief, and flinging himself off the horse he thrust his sword and cloak at Parthenal to hold before immediately beginning to wade into the river.

Despite his haste he knew he had to test its depth. Here it had widened into one of its smoothly swirling pools, but was not too deep: so he went back for Narba.

"I'll wait here," said Parthenal. "Wave if you need help." Rothir nodded and led his horse into the water. At its deepest it was barely chest-high. He did not need to swim, although he could only make his way slowly to avoid being pushed over by the icy current. Narba moved strongly and confidently by his side. He had to concentrate on the tumultuous river and watch where he was wading. When he emerged on the gravelly rocks of the other shore he was shocked all over again by the sight of the body.

She was lying on her side with her back to him. When he rolled her gently over she was cold and still and wet. He drew away the clinging strands of hair. Her face was bloody and bruised and seemed to be sticky with something; but it dawned on him that she was breathing.

His heart seemed to give a great leap in his chest. He felt her throat for a pulse and after a moment found it: fast but weak. Now for the first time he noticed the bundle of cloth that was wrapped around her right leg, untidily but firmly tied. It had a thin green check running through it where it was not soaked red with blood. Her pack was lying open next to her, its contents spilled. Cloth and empty jars. He could not imagine how she had survived the fall well enough to do so much.

But he did not know what other injuries she might have suffered in that fall. Under the ripped clothing her arms and legs seemed scraped and battered but not broken, as far as he could tell from running his hands swiftly down them. He could afford to spend no more time checking. Picking her up carefully in both arms he deposited her face down across the saddle, hanging over Narba's back. It was the safest way to carry her across the river.

Then he held her on as he led the horse back, through the rushing, whirling, grasping Thore. Her hands trailed in the water. Still he did not dare to hope. She could die at any moment. Not yet, please, not yet. Narba snorted and stepped purposefully out onto the other side.

"She's alive," he said to Parthenal as soon as he was across.

Parthenal stared, incredulous. "How can she be?"

"I don't know. She is." He checked that she was in fact still breathing, and then left her in the same position dangling over Narba's back. Undignified, but it worked. He took his dry cloak from Parthenal and threw it over her to try and warm her up.

Narba walked sedately along the path as if totally unbothered by his freezing dip. Ignoring his own chilled and sodden limbs, Rothir held Yaret's bandaged leg away from the horse's jolting body. It was dripping blood but not too much. Keep her alive, he thought, keep her alive, without knowing whether it was himself he thus implored or someone else.

They were half way back along the shore path when the cloak began to flap and flounder. Rothir swiftly removed it, and lifted the struggling Yaret down. With Parthenal's help he laid her on the path. Her eyes were closed and she was shivering convulsively.

"Yaret?"

No answer.

"She's cold," said Parthenal, "and you're too wet to help." He lay down alongside Yaret on the stony ground and put his arms around her, pulling his cloak round them both. Rothir draped his own cloak on top. Then he knelt and dripped on her other side and willed her not to die.

After five minutes the shaking lessened. Her eyes half-opened although her mind did not appear to be there. She gazed up at Rothir for a long moment, yet she seemed aware of neither him nor Parthenal, who now stood up.

"You're safe," said Rothir to her none the less. "You're safe, Yaret. We found you."

The saying of it seemed finally to make it true, and he was astounded that it had been possible. That they had done it. That she had survived. He did not want to allow himself to believe it yet.

“Ah.” Yaret let out a long breath and closed her eyes. “Stone,” she whispered.

“The stonemen are all gone. You’re safe now. We’re taking you back to the others.”

“Safe?”

“Everyone is safe,” said Rothir.

While she was still conscious he propped up her head and held a waterskin to her mouth, although not much went in. Then after a brief discussion with Parthenal, he said,

“We’re going to sit you on the horse. I’ll go up behind you.”

They lifted her back onto Narba, this time semi-upright in the saddle. Parthenal suggested binding his rolled-up cloak underneath the truncated leg to stop it bumping into Narba’s flank; so this they did. Then Rothir carefully swung himself up behind her, praying that she would be easier to keep in place than Eled had been.

She was. Her head soon dropped down on her chest as she lost consciousness again, but she was lighter than Eled, and with one arm firmly round her Rothir was able to hold her on the saddle as he rode.

He felt as if he had been given a reprieve from a death sentence. Yet he dared not place too much trust in this sudden hope. She could still die at any time. Take her last breath in this saddle, on this path.

He tried to will life into her through his own body. Lungs, keep breathing. Heart, keep beating. Narba walked on steadily; he was well used to this exercise by now.

She was unconscious but still alive when they arrived back at the ford. They lifted her carefully down and deposited her at Tiburé’s feet, like a defiant offering.

Tiburé looked up at him, startled. “She can’t be!”

“She is,” said Rothir. He felt exhausted but he could not rest just yet. “I don’t think she’s broken anything obvious, but you need to check her over. She may have internal injuries, in which case I’ve just made everything much worse. And we need to look at her foot.”

“Who put that bandage on?”

“She did.”

“What? How?”

He shrugged.

“I never heard her,” said Maeneb, sounding shattered. “I never heard her.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Rothir said. “It made no difference. I had to look for her in any case.”

Tiburé undid Yaret’s damp clothing and felt gently down her trunk and along her limbs.

“Gashes and bruises,” she said. “She’s going to be black and blue in a few days.” Rothir’s heart turned over at her assumption that Yaret would still be alive by then.

“I can’t be sure about internal damage,” Tiburé went on, “but her limbs seem to be intact. The left knee’s swollen. As for her foot...” She looked carefully at it but did no more than gently touch the bloodied woollen wrappings. Her finger came away sticky. Putting it experimentally to her nose and then her mouth, she smiled and shook her head in disbelief.

“Honey!” she said. “And salt, I think. Well, better than nothing. I wouldn’t want to attempt to take that bandage off. Removing it will do more harm than good. It’ll just start the leg bleeding again; at the moment it’s almost stopped. There’s some oozing there, around the edge, but that’s all. We’re better leaving the whole thing in place until we reach Farwithiel.”

Rothir nodded.

“I’ll give her ethlon,” said Tiburé. “It ought to wake her up.” She took out the vial and dribbled a few drops into Yaret’s mouth. Although Yaret did not visibly swallow, after a couple of minutes she stirred and tried to turn over.

“Open your eyes,” commanded Tiburé. “Look at me. At me. You need to drink.”

“Let me do it,” said Rothir, faintly disgusted with her peremptory demands. He lifted Yaret with one arm under her shoulders and again offered her water. She drank this time, but messily, water spilling down her shirt.

“Ah,” she said, looking up at him. Then she craned her head to peer at her foot. After a moment she murmured “Ah well,” and her head fell back on to his arm.

“We’re going to take you to Farwithiel,” he promised. “They have healers there. They’ll look after you.”

“Ah.” A faint smile twitched across her pale lips. Healers would not be able to replace her foot, he thought.

And it would be at least a two days’ journey. It would have taken only one more day to reach Farwithiel without the invalids. But they had two invalids now: this expedition had turned into a disaster. He glanced across

at Eled, who was sitting up and staring, with a question in his wide dark eyes.

“We’ll tell you later,” said Parthenal to him quietly. “Tiburé? How soon can we move on?”

“The sooner the better,” answered Tiburé. “Assuming that the Farwth will allow us in. What do you think, Maeneb?”

“I don’t know,” said Maeneb, her voice desolate. “I think that I know nothing any more.”

“Well, you will have to persuade the Farwth to let us in,” Rothir told her. He heard the roughness in his own voice and did not care. “Or I will.”

“Persuade the Farwth?” queried Parthenal, his eyebrows raised.

Rothir nodded grimly. He knew the Farwth was not persuadable. But if he had to, he would force it to admit them. He had no idea how – for the Farwth was greater than any earthbound power that he had ever met – but right now he felt as ruthless as a whirlwind, full of a turmoil of fear and impatience and some other, indefinable, emotion. He was not to be denied. Somehow he would get the Farwth to agree.

Chapter 21

It was a relief to Maeneb not to have Eled up in front of her this time. She was fond of Eled and grieved for his state; but she also found his close presence irritating to the point of pain, and a distraction from her foremost task of listening.

This was nothing to do with Eled's character, she knew. It was the same with everyone. They were all too noisy and too near. Even her riding partner Tiburé talked far too much. This travelling in close company, albeit only with a few others, was difficult; Maeneb would have much preferred to ride alone.

At least now, on the far side of the Thore, she was a little ahead of the rest so that she could listen for her route without much interference. Around her stretched the unremarkable landscape of spindly trees, their thin branches netted together, and tall clumps of common weeds disappearing into shrouding mist. Unremarkable to look at... but these were the borderlands of Farwithiel, where nothing could be taken for granted.

She reined in her horse Shoda, and closed her eyes, feeling for the Farwth. Surely the Farwth must be aware of the Riders' presence now that they had crossed the Thore. But she heard and felt nothing of its will.

That did not mean to say that its will was not active. The signals were there, even if intended for the Wardens. As a half-Warden herself, she could detect them. Opening her eyes again she concentrated on listening to the land.

"We need to avoid that beech copse to our left," she reported.

"Really?" queried Tiburé behind her. "I thought we came straight through it last time. That was less than a month ago. How can it have changed so fast?"

"It has," said Maeneb obstinately.

And as they passed to the right of the clump of trees Parthenal said quietly, "There are two stonemen in there, lying dead. What could have killed them?"

"We won't stop to find out," said Tiburé, who had Eled on her horse in front of her.

"Poisonous vines, perhaps," said Maeneb. That was one of the methods the Farwth used to keep out unwanted strangers from its land.

Another method lay a little further on. She felt its presence before she saw it. Possibly, by making the trap so plain to her, the Farwth was allowing

them to enter...

Or maybe it was warning her off. She would not find out for a while which one it was.

“Avoid those bushes,” she said. “Those are not ordinary thorns.”

“Poisonous, again?” asked Parthenal.

“I’m not sure. But there is a threat around them.”

“I feel nothing,” said Tiburé. “Would the Farwth let us merely barge on into them, if you were not here with us?”

“I don’t know,” said Maeneb. “Stop talking, please.”

Her words were addressed only to Tiburé and Parthenal. Since they had left the banks of the Thore, Rothir had not spoken. He had the air of a man stunned and trying to work out what had stunned him. Maeneb could hear his thoughts moving round and round in ever-widening circles. What those thoughts were, she could not guess.

The woman Yaretkoro was up in front of him, drooping and semi-conscious in the saddle. Now and then she sighed and leaned back against Rothir. She did not speak; but Maeneb could hear her too, a faint whisper somewhere far away.

Yet not as far away as Eled. She had the feeling that a part of Eled had departed permanently, and it saddened her. As she looked back, the two injured passengers were like ill-matched twins, each with a leg stuck out at a strange angle. And one of those was her fault.

Looking away again, Maeneb concentrated on the path ahead. She had already failed her companions on the cliff top by the Thore: she must not fail them here. The weight of responsibility was like a heavy rope around her neck. Miss anything now and it would tighten.

“Here we turn towards the hill,” she said, seeing a fork in the rough trail.

“Really? We went the other way last time,” said Tiburé.

“Really,” said Maeneb, trying not to mind. Tiburé had the right to ask. But she had to trust that the Farwth would not try to mislead her – not treat them like that stoneman whom she now saw from the corner of her eye, impaled on a cluster of sharp reeds. He was long dead; very long, to judge by his appearance, and she assumed the reeds had grown through him since his death. She hoped so, at any rate.

“He’s got a lot of stones,” Tiburé muttered. Although the skin was largely gone from the yellow skull, the stones remained. “At least twelve.”

“High rank,” suggested Parthenal.

“Hmph,” said Rothir. In front of him Yaret stirred and sighed.

“It really does not help me if you talk,” said Maeneb, and the others once again fell silent. They passed the small tree-covered hill, so unremarkable apart from the dead man. Flies buzzed around his head; bees shot through the warm air on their errands; warblers sang to each other unseen in the bushes.

At the bottom of the hill a browsing deer looked up in mild alarm, before skipping away into the mist. Their progress was hardly secret. Indeed there was no way it could be secret from the Farwth.

“Stop,” said Tiburé suddenly. “It’s Eled again.” Maeneb had expected it for a mile now; she had felt Eled’s mind drifting, floating away – where to, she did not know.

They lifted down the injured pair to lie beneath a group of undersized oaks. None of the trees here on Farwithiel’s fringe were large; not like further in. The pattern of trees seemed to change every time Maeneb visited Farwithiel – which was more often than the rest of the Riders, but not as often as perhaps might have been expected, given that her father lived here in the shade of the Farwth.

But her father had never given her much incentive to visit. He was always mildly pleased when she arrived, and did not invite her back.

Of course, she told herself, it was not for him to say. Even as a Warden of Farwithiel he had not that power; it was for the Farwth to decide who came here and who left alive.

After a few minutes Eled revived enough to be propped up against a frail tree that was only a quarter the width of his back. He looked up at the rustling leaves not very far above his head.

“Nice,” he said dreamily. “Where are we?”

“Farwithiel.”

“Oh, yes. I knew that. Will we stay?”

“Some of us will,” said Rothir. Maeneb thought there was a catch in his deep voice. But he looked exactly the same as always: stern and slightly fearsome. Yaret lay beside him, curled up on the grass like a sleeping child. The woollen dressing round her lower leg was entirely bloodstained now, with no hint of a green check visible.

“The Farwth has allowed us in unhindered so far,” said Tiburé. “Have you agreed anything with it?”

This galled Maeneb. Tiburé ought to know that the Farwth could not be addressed as one might petition a human lord or overseer. One could say things, certainly, and the Farwth would hear them; but might then just shut them out. The Farwth did not answer questions – not from her, at any rate.

“There has been no communication,” she said stiffly.

“The fact that we have been allowed this far is hopeful, but no guarantee of anything,” put in Parthenal. He understood more fully than Tiburé did, thought Maeneb, and she was grateful. Parthenal in general understood her better than the other Riders did; and he was never caustic to her, as he sometimes was to them.

Yaret uncurled herself. Although she had appeared to be asleep, Maeneb saw that she was staring from her prone position at a clump of flowers nearby, as if she were puzzled by them. They were only some kind of ragwort, Maeneb thought, nothing out of the ordinary. Yaret said several words in her own language, like an incantation, and kept staring. Maeneb suspected that she was hallucinating.

“What do you see?” Rothir asked her quietly. At first Yaret did not appear to have heard. But then she answered in a murmur.

“Lin.”

Definitely hallucinating, decided Maeneb. Lins did not exist. Probably. Certainly she had never seen or heard one. All the same she felt a faint stab of apprehension in case there was something present that she was failing to detect. Just as she should have detected those stonemen back by the Thore.

Rothir felt Yaret’s forehead. “You’re hot,” he said. “How do you feel?”

“Bit strange,” said Yaret. Her voice was blurred. Her gaze kept wandering to things that were not there.

“Let’s move on,” said Tiburé briskly.

Nobody else was brisk. That was an effect of crossing the borders of Farwithiel: it slowed you down. It sharpened some instincts and blunted others – amongst them, the desire for speed. Even Rothir was almost languid as he lifted Yaret back up into the saddle.

But now Yaret seemed wider awake despite her feebleness and fever. She turned her head to look about her as they passed through the scrub, which now gradually increased in size and strength until it was true woodland.

The mists thickened. They could still see as far as they needed to but through a fine pale film. Yaret stared and stared as if she were endeavouring to penetrate the veil; at times Maeneb heard her mutter. Then she leant against Rothir and closed her eyes again.

No-one else spoke. The horses snuffed and snorted: twigs cracked beneath their feet, and birds’ alarms rose in short-lived protest as they passed. Maeneb guided Shoda steadily through the woodland. Tomorrow it would become a greater forest.

Now the mist was darkening; it must be evening, although she had lost all sense of time when finally she halted in a large open glade. She had the feeling that the trees had only just moved aside, to make a space especially for them. But that was ridiculous. Even the Farwth could not do that.

Don't judge of what I can and cannot do.

Maeneb froze. It was apparent that nobody else had heard. The voice had been in her head only: speaking in no language she could name, yet its meaning was quite clear. It was nothing like the muddled, whispering human voices that she was used to listening for. It was like wind calling through immense branches. A deep echo. A mighty resonance.

She gazed at the ground and made silent apologies. And then she made pleas that they might be admitted, and would not simply find themselves leaving the far edge of the forest with nothing gained and much time lost.

But the Farwth was now silent.

“We may as well stop here for the night,” said Tiburé. The presence of the glade seemed to indicate to Maeneb that they were allowed that much. In any case the others were already unloading the horses and setting out the bedrolls.

Tiburé administered a few meagre drops of ethlon to each invalid to dull their pains and wake them up enough to eat. Maeneb busied herself with the food so that she would not have to help the helpless. It was Rothir who assisted Eled behind a tree so that he could pee, and Parthenal who carried Yaret into the bushes, with Tiburé on hand to help, so that she could do the same. Maeneb could not endure all these bodily functions. Her own were bad enough.

As for what the others called love – she didn't even care to think about it. Why would anyone want to get so horribly close to another human being? Yet she sensed that they all wanted to, at times, in different degrees. Especially Parthenal, whose thoughts often veered that way, as she could tell from their colour. Thankfully she could not discern their content. And Tiburé was almost as bad.

Not for the first time, Maeneb wondered if her own aversion to human closeness was an inheritance from her father. Yet her father was a human, if a strange one. And her mother...

Well, it was hardly an inheritance from her. Maeneb knew that she was nothing like her mother, a fiercely self-willed Rider. Thirty years ago, Daneb had been one of a company from Caervonn who had visited the Farwth. She had come away pregnant. There had been no question of a

marriage: for the Wardens would not leave Farwithiel, nor would they permit outsiders to stay – not permanently, anyway.

So Maeneb had seen her father for the first time when she was eighteen and already in exile from Caervonn, along with the rest of Huldarion's people. During the infrequent meetings of father and daughter since then, they had grown no closer. To her he seemed an aged, distant man and her mother's choice grew even more mysterious.

Maeneb felt herself to be quite different to the Wardens. But she heard the voices of the land: and the Farwth spoke to her, as it did to the Wardens; sometimes heard by all, sometimes by her alone. She supposed it ought to be a reason to be proud. It felt more like a burden.

Parthenal was carrying Yaret back into the glade. When he placed her gently on the ground, her face was grey.

"*Yed, galeth,*" she said huskily.

"Is that Bandiran?" he asked. "What does it mean?"

A pause. "Thank you, brother," Yaret whispered.

"Thank *you*, donkey," said Parthenal. He looked taken aback.

"And what does *Har en thoni* mean?" asked Rothir.

It was Yaret's turn to look faintly startled. "Why? Where...?"

"You said it earlier."

"Did I? Means... Keep me here." Her voice was fading.

"We'll do our best to keep you here," said Parthenal. "She's still too hot. Tiburé? Can she have more ethlon?"

"No," said Tiburé decidedly. "Neither can Eled. It's too addictive."

"The Wardens will be able to provide their own remedies and medicines," Maeneb assured them.

"If they're allowed to," Rothir said. "Do you have any indication of that yet?"

"The Farwth has already let us come this far," Tiburé pointed out.

"As Parthenal said earlier, that means nothing. We are not yet properly inside Farwithiel. It may wish simply to observe us," Maeneb said sharply. The uncertainty made her edgy.

Rothir bowed his head where he sat beneath a leafy branch. His thoughts concentrated themselves. Maeneb had the impression that he was praying.

"The Farwth is not a god," she told him. "Do not think of it as one."

He raised his head sharply. "Don't worry. I don't." He stood up again and went to dole food into a dish for Eled.

Then they all ate, and helped the sick to eat, and tried to sleep beneath the gently hushing trees in a pattern that was becoming painfully familiar. At

least they did not need to set a sentry here, thought Maeneb, as she began to build up the mental barrier that she would need in order to sleep properly. Too often lately she'd had to leave it down and her sleep had been broken frequently by stray voices in consequence.

But tonight she would shut all external voices out, and allow herself to fall deep into restful sleep. For tomorrow she would fall deeper into another kind of dream: into Farwithiel.

Chapter 22

Yaret thought that she might be awake. It was hard to be certain. It was hard to be certain of anything except the throbbing of her leg, a dark burning pulse that beat its way through day and night. It had been louder today. Or heavier, or something. Pain. That was the word. It was pain.

But now that she seemed to be lying still it was not so bad as earlier. *Was* she lying still? The ground was gently rising and dipping underneath her as if she were on the horse. Maybe she was still on his horse and dreaming. His arm around her. But she could hear the steady breathing of sleepers on all sides, like a protection. So maybe she too was asleep.

To test this theory, she tried to open her eyes. Were they open, or had she merely dreamed of opening them? If they were open, all was dark, so she might as well close them again. Much easier. So tiring to be awake and trying to remember things.

She had forgotten where she was. A forest: that seemed to fit. She heard the rustling of faint leaves. The sound was something to hold on to.

But there were so many forests. Was this the Bander, near her home? A journey chasing after strayed sheep that preferred the forest to the pasture. Huge oaks. Shafts of light hurled deep between them. The trees shed comfort along with acorns. No wonder the sheep liked it. She had to persuade them home but she didn't want to leave the place herself.

And Gramma Thuli. Stepping between trees she had disappeared in her brown cloak. Then reappeared a little further on. Gathering something. Acorns. No. Squirrels. No. Sunlight. No. Mushrooms. That was it. Mushrooms.

Then she became aware that Thuli was quite close to her, and speaking. Saying to her not her name, but some other words that she ought to know. She could not recognise them although they were very familiar.

"Gramma?" she said. "Were you looking for me? I found the sheep." Then she realised that the sheep were in a different time, and that this was not the Bander forest. It was too dark. It felt older. She was here for a reason but she could not remember it. It was somewhere far away. Far, far.

"Have you come all this way to find me?" she said. "Did they tell you that I hurt my leg? It's not that bad, you know. It'll stop singing soon."

Tell me the song, said Gramma Thuli.

It was winding through her head, along with the beat of the pulse and the pain, and when she followed it she discovered that it was a song by Madeo.

Of course it was. So she sang it, as best she could. Probably not aloud because she could not hear a voice. And she did not have her gourd. It was about a path. Where did it lead, that path? The song must tell it somewhere but she could not remember the end.

“I forget,” she said. “But you know it, Gramma. You taught it me. And your gramma taught it you. Grammas all the way to Madeo.” The idea pleased her and she was laughing.

The gramma liked the song and remembered it well. But this was not her gramma after all, it was someone else’s. Still now that she was here, she enjoyed the song.

“I am honoured,” Yaret told her. And then she fell asleep.

Chapter 23

Today she was inside the dream.

That was what it felt like to Maeneb, although it was perhaps not so much dream as memory. Once the Riders left the close-knit woods behind, and the trees lengthened and become more widely spaced in stately isolation, it was like some clear, sharp recollection of when she was a child and everything was giant. But she had never come here as a child.

On that first visit, eleven years ago, Farwithiel had filled her both with wonder and a sense of drowning. Maeneb had had no consciousness of coming home. Nor did she now. She was stuck between two countries, two heritages, and belonged to neither.

All she had left to her was her task. Farwithiel stripped everything else away. The trees grew still more massive, more majestic: she saw before her striped ranks of great pillars, pale gold and red and grey and silver-white and earth-brown. Trees that grew nowhere else, that had no name that she knew of. Some rose above huge buttresses of roots; others held out enormous horizontal branches in defiance of gravity; a few tall ones had no boughs at all save at the top where they rose into the mist that kept them hidden.

It was not silent. There were small animals: Maeneb saw the signs of darrowfox and badger, cat and slinking fangol, although the muffled voices that she detected from them – with more colour and less shape than human voices – were subdued and wary. Even the horses knew that this was no ordinary forest. Yet the birds were carefree, half-seen flashes of brightness that swooped and frolicked high up in the branches.

She glanced round at the other riders. Rothir had Eled in front of him today, and all his attention seemed fixed on his friend. But Parthenal gazed upwards with a slightly stricken look upon his face. He felt it too, then: the awe that turned an individual to nothing. You had to fight it or accept.

In front of Parthenal and held up by his arm Yaret swayed in the saddle, pale and sweating. Her eyes were closed but her lips moved, murmuring inaudible words. She looked more feverish than yesterday.

Tiburé too was pale, though not with fever; and it would hardly be with fear. Tiburé was a fighter, not an accepter. Maeneb knew that submission was difficult for her, even to the Farwth. Perhaps especially to the Farwth. But you could only be here on its terms.

At least it seemed they had its leave to enter. They had not been sent through wayward paths to the outer reaches of the forest. That had happened to Maeneb once, on a previous visit; the Riders had not been allowed in, but had found themselves back in the thin scrubland east of the Thore. Both she and the land had felt desolate: abandoned and alone.

But this time they were not abandoned. They were approaching the heart of Farwithiel, the horses' soft tread muted by the dense mulch of leaves underfoot. And still the trees grew silently before them and made them diminish in comparison. Maeneb realised with something of a shock that the path that opened to the Riders between the mighty trees seemed to be leading not to the habitations of the Wardens but to the Farwth itself. She bowed her head and mentally prepared what she must say.

There is no need, the Farwth said. I know it.

They all stopped. That meant they had all heard it, perhaps even the horses. Yet the voice had been soundless. It was the strongest and most unforgettable of all voices that Maeneb had ever known, yet she heard it only in her mind.

She looked round at the others. They were all staring, except for Yaret. Even Eled's eyes were wide and wondering.

"What do you know?" said Rothir aloud. Tiburé made a shushing gesture at him with her hand. But he ignored her and went on. "Do you know our plight? Will you help us?"

I know your needs, the Farwth said. I cannot help them all.

"We do not ask you to help them all," said Maeneb. She found that she was trembling, and had an idea that if she had not been sitting on the horse her legs would have given way beneath her. This was worse than the last time, which had been only a few weeks ago. But last time, the Wardens had been here to mediate.

She felt the path beckon. The Farwth was inviting them further in.

"Come on," she said breathlessly, and with a surge of resolve she made Shoda move. They walked on, a small, thin string of horses with too many riders. Too much damage in their midst. The Farwth could not help them all.

Still, they were here, and there was a wonder in that fact alone, because she was closer now to the Farwth itself than she had ever been before. The tree trunks had grown to the breadth of houses, their bark engraved with intensely intricate patterns of cracks that were many inches deep. The lowest branches, close above their heads, were thicker than the horses' bodies. Maeneb felt alarm at that vast tonnage of timber just overhead; she

knew that it was in the Farwth's control. If it wanted to release a branch and crush them all, it could. She had to trust that it would not.

And then ahead of them the forest seemed to close in and to concentrate itself. Between the massive trunks rose a thickening multitude of stems and looping vines and twining creepers and aerial roots and clustered leaves, all forming a dense, impenetrable gathering of wood and stalk and foliage. It might have been all one tree were it not that there were so many varieties of leaf and bark. It was perhaps six hundred yards across: a mile around. It smelt strongly sweet and earthy, fragrant, wet. A fine rain dripped from the outer trees. Everywhere was damp.

The heart of the Farwth, she thought; although the Farwth was much greater than this. They had already been walking through it for hours, for the Farwth was in part Farwithiel, although Farwithiel was not the Farwth. It extended for many miles in each direction; and deep underground, by its roots, it reached much further – for it was connected to all the land north of the Darkburn and east of the Thore, and maybe beyond that too. Thousands of square miles. From those long linking root systems it gathered knowledge, accumulating it in its slow store. How old the Farwth was could not be told. Ten thousand years perhaps. Maybe much older.

Maeneb had never had a home. She had fled Caervonn with her mother when it fell. But even before that, her mother had never been accepted fully by the aristocracy of Caervonn, because of her strange half-breed illegitimate child. By Huldarion she had been accepted: and to Huldarion they went when he set up his base in exile in the tents of Thield. But that was hardly a home either.

Now, standing before the rustling mass of the Farwth, she had stepped inside a dream where the strange became familiar, a long-known, long-lost, forgotten part of her. She was so used to seeing herself as of little importance that submission to the Farwth came easily. Not that it actively demanded submission. But its size and power were humbling.

She could not help herself. "I am nothing," she said silently.

You are Maeneb. That is more than a name. The words must have been for her alone to hear, because there was no reaction from the others.

"I have often felt less than a name. Less than a Warden. Less than a Rider." She could say this because she knew that only the Farwth heard it.

But she was aware that it was foolish of her to make that confession, especially now. It was not what she was here for. She had a job to do. So she spoke aloud.

"We come to beg your mercy, Farwth."

Behind her Rothir stirred.

“We do not beg for your mercy,” he said strongly. “We ask you for your hospitality, for two of us who are badly wounded.”

I know it. This time it was evident that all could hear the voice, including Eled who looked up in awe. Only Yaret still seemed oblivious.

“Then you know that they need care,” said Rothir. “Will you send your Wardens to us?”

They waited.

Do you command me?

“You know what I am thinking,” Rothir said.

Do you think that you can bend the forest to your will?

“I can if necessary.” The way in which he said this frightened Maeneb.

You would risk that damage for the sake of two sick people?

“For whom I am responsible,” said Rothir.

“For whom we are all responsible,” put in Tiburé, with a frown at Rothir, “and for whom we—”

I see your heart, the Farwth said, *which is more than you do.*

“Then you see my resolve,” said Rothir.

You do not understand it yourself. And forcing me to do your will would not benefit you in the long run.

“We are not trying to force you,” said Tiburé, with another admonitory frown.

Rothir ignored it. “I am not interested in the long run.”

You should be. Humans often forget to look the longer distance.

Rothir stared at the Farwth. He drew in a long breath and said evenly, “True. I will not try to force you. But will you help us now?”

The Wardens will be sent. Lay the wounded ones down over there.

Maeneb turned around. As if stirred by an unfelt wind, vines and creepers moved aside from the trunk of a gigantic tree that might have been a beech if it were smaller. She saw that it was partly hollow: inside its wide mouth there was enough shelter for several people to lie down or even stand in.

This type of shelter too was something new to Maeneb. Last time they had been permitted to stay only in the Wardens’ cottages: strange structures woven out of living willow, two or three miles away. She had never expected to be allowed to linger this close to the Farwth.

“Why?” said Tiburé. “Why are you doing this?” She sounded almost accusing.

They will rest better here. They are harmless. I know them both.

“You know one of them,” said Maeneb. “You know Eled, who came here with us recently. But the other one is called Yaretkoro, and is a woman from a far land—”

Near the Bander Forest. I know it also. And I know her through her ancestor that was called Madeo.

“The bard?” said Rothir. “Her ancestor?” He looked at Yaret who seemed not to be hearing any of this. Her head was lolling and her body was held on the horse only by Parthenal.

“Help me get her down,” said Parthenal roughly. Rothir jumped off Narba and together they lifted her to the ground where she lay in an untidy heap, ragged and bloody. They carried her inside the hollow tree, which was lined with moss, and yet was dry where everything else seemed to be damp. After setting her down, they next helped Eled in and propped him on the cushioned mossy floor beside her. He winced; a rare groan escaped him as Tiburé tried to ease his broken leg.

Maeneb felt superfluous. She could not assist the others. She was useless to the injured. There was nothing for her to do here: it had all been done without her, even the negotiations.

“Thank you for getting us this far,” said Parthenal quietly to her, and she nodded. At least she had not failed in that.

And now she could see a group of Wardens walking towards them through the trees: so the Farwth must have sent for them some time ago. To her relief her father was not amongst them.

You are more than your father's daughter.

Maeneb stood stock still. Nobody else seemed to have heard. She thought there was no more to come, but after a while the great voice added, as if thoughtfully:

A human is of many parts, just like a tree.

Chapter 24

Tiburé did not know whether to be thankful or exasperated. Rothir had no right to go barging in like that, over-riding her authority. It was totally unlike him. What had he been thinking of? He could easily have ruined their chances of getting any help. She would have approached the Farwth quite differently, with more show of respect. And as for Maeneb...

Well, Maeneb had got them here at least. And luckily the Farwth had not been offended. Tiburé was not sure if it could be offended in the same way as a human; did a tree have emotions? But the Farwth could certainly have shut the Riders out.

Now she walked forward to greet the approaching Wardens. There were three of them: two men, one woman, all of them much older than her, and she was over fifty. There must be two hundred or so Wardens altogether, but if any of them were younger than Tiburé she had not met them. And she had a strong impression that they were all even older than they looked.

“I am Walen,” said the woman. “I am a healer.”

She nodded. “Tiburé,” she answered briefly. The Farwth would no doubt have already told these Wardens everything that they needed to know.

“Baird and Golen will see to the injured man,” said Walen. Like all the Wardens, she spoke a quaintly antique variety of Standard; although not as antique nor as remote from Standard as the Vonnish tongue. “After that, Baird will help me with the woman. He is expert with broken bones. Golen is expert with men’s minds.”

“What about women’s minds?” said Tiburé. It was not altogether a joke. The Wardens lived such an isolated, secret life here that she doubted their ability to understand the minds of those outside – whether men or women. Even the Warden she had become close to on her last visit, despite being an intelligent man, had seemed baffled by her sense of self-determination.

Walen did not respond. She was already opening a bag of instruments and dressings.

“Water, please,” she said. Tiburé looked around for a container that might hold water, but in vain: yet even as she looked, the ground nearby began to bubble and then produced a tiny fountain. From this new small spring, clear water pooled neatly in the grass.

“Thank you,” said Walen. Dipping a bowl into the pool, she carried both that and her bag into the hollow of the tree. “Has the woman had any drugs?”

“They have both had a few doses of ethlon, but only two or three drops at a time. She had no apparent fever until yesterday.”

Walen’s lips compressed. “Very well.” She began to cut away Yaret’s clothing from her leg with narrow-bladed scissors. Then she gently dabbed the bloodied woollen bandages with water before beginning to cut through those as well.

On the other side of the wooden hollow Eled was moaning again as the other two Wardens examined his broken thigh. Kneeling next to him, Rothir took his hand and pressed it. At a terse word from the Wardens he reluctantly stood up and moved back to join Tiburé, out of their way.

Parthenal sat by the entrance to the hollow, watching the Wardens with fierce concentration. Tiburé thought that if they hurt Eled unnecessarily he would not hesitate to throw them out, no matter how old they were. Maeneb had not come in at all.

Even from here Tiburé could see that Eled’s leg was still swollen. It looked slightly distorted. Was that a result of all the enforced riding? No doubt. It could have been much worse, she thought, but even so, it was bad enough. The leg was unlikely ever to be as straight again as it had been... She felt a strong pang of regret for the young man who had once been so active and cheerful, and would now be lamed. He would have a lot of adjusting to do.

“How long ago did this break happen?” asked the shorter, stockier Warden, Baird.

“Two weeks.”

Baird shook his head. “It’s not been setting as it should. He’s been moved around too much,” he said with disapproval.

“You know the circumstances,” Tiburé answered tersely. “Or the Farwth does, at least. We had to get him out of danger. What else could we have done?”

Baird merely shook his head some more. Tiburé was intensely irritated. These Wardens knew nothing of the Riders’ lives and the perils that they faced. It took her a few deep breaths before she could acknowledge that much of her annoyance was with herself.

If only she had not agreed to that expedition by the two least experienced members of her troop, things might have turned out differently. She had not realised how far north the stonemen had come, and none of them had known about the new type of darkburn; but ignorance was no excuse. The whole point of their journey was to find out more about the stonemen. They should have been more careful.

And she had been in charge. Ultimately it was her fault. She would have to stand before Huldarion and explain the crippling of a good and faithful soldier. She doubted very much if Eled would be standing there beside her.

However, Eled would not be even lying here, but would be having his bones picked by crows on some far-flung moor, were it not for Yaret. Tiburé was conscious that she ought to feel the same concern for Yaret as she did for Eled, although there was nobody in Yaret's case that she would have to answer to. She acknowledged her own bias against a foreign pedlar compared to one of her own kindred. It was unfair of her. No matter what her origins Yaret had shown remarkable resourcefulness.

She looked over at Yaret now, and winced as Walen carefully withdrew the blood-soaked dressings from the stump. The leg ended several inches above the ankle – or where the ankle would have been – in a mess of black and clotted blood.

“Does it look badly infected?” That was Rothir, who was also watching Walen's cautious movements with a frown.

Walen did not answer immediately. She gently swabbed the skin around the stump: without the dried blood it looked both better and worse. Better, because cleaner. Worse, because the damage became all the more obvious.

At last Walen looked up. “It's not infected at all, I think. Her fever is probably simply due to trauma, blood loss and over-exertion.”

“That was also unavoidable,” said Tiburé, in anger.

Rothir touched her shoulder. “What do you need to do to help her heal?” he said to Walen.

“Possibly nothing,” replied the Warden. “The leg's already showing initial signs of healing around this flap of skin. Covering the bone in that way was probably the best action to take. Who did it?”

“She did it herself.”

Walen froze, staring at him. “Extraordinary,” she said, her composed, lined face showing some surprise for the first time.

“You have no idea just how extraordinary,” said Rothir. “What can you do to help?”

“To attempt further repairs now may add to the damage and increase the risk of bleeding and infection. The residual limb's not pretty, but it's tidy enough. It may prove functional.”

“Functional in what way?” said Rothir.

“To take a prosthetic.”

“You mean a wooden leg,” said Tiburé. Rothir turned round abruptly and walked out of the tree.

Tiburé remained in her place. It was her responsibility to see that Eled fared as comfortably as possible. It was clear that Rothir also extended that responsibility to Yaret's welfare, and she could not disagree.

She had to keep everything under her control. That meant she needed to make sure that Rothir's outspokenness to the Farwth would not be repeated. It was lucky that Rothir and Parthenal were more reasonable men than some. Her husband, Solon, for instance... She and Solon couldn't survive being in the same troop for more than a day. They found they had no patience with each other: better to stay apart.

But poor Eled. She would have to leave him here. Both he and Yaret would need to remain here, with the Wardens, probably for some time, while they healed. She thought the Farwth would not be unwilling – since, strangely, it seemed to think it knew Yaret. Or knew her ancestor. Descended from the bard Madeo... What had that been all about? What could a bard mean to the Farwth? Thield had bards. Maybe she should have brought them here.

“Food will be delivered to you soon,” said Walen. She had applied a fresh bandage to Yaret's leg and was beginning to pack up her bag.

“Thank you.”

“And you may all sleep here in this chamber. Blankets also will be brought.”

“Again, I thank you. May I visit the Wardens' habitations?”

Walen looked surprised. Then she considered this, and nodded. “The Farwth permits it.”

“I would like to speak with Habend. To consult with him.”

“Habend is a wise man,” said Walen, with a sidelong look at Tiburé.

Tiburé looked back at her steadily. “Yes, he is.” She didn't really care if Walen knew. The Farwth surely knew, in any case, which was all that mattered here.

But if the other riders guessed – and she thought that Parthenal might have – they did not say. She was certain Maeneb did not know. And it would hardly be diplomatic to inform Maeneb that her mother was not the only woman of the Vonn to have sought love in Farwithiel.

Chapter 25

Parthenal was performing his sword drill for the first time in many mornings. Although he aimed to do it every day, circumstances had been against him lately. So now he stood beneath the mighty branches and went through the whole array of exercises, progressing from the guards onwards through the strikes and feints to the upper swings. As he whirled the sword two-handed round his head, slowly gathering speed but never losing accuracy, the movements had a paradoxically calming effect. It was like a complex dance with a lethal partner that was just waiting for a chance to stab you if you didn't concentrate.

So he concentrated, until he realised that Rothir had come to watch him. He was holding a basket of food which the wardens had left the previous evening.

"You should be doing this too," Parthenal told him as he lowered his sword and paused to rest.

"Later on. I'm too stiff now. After breakfast." Rothir regarded sword drill as a duty rather than a pleasure. For Parthenal it was both: a ritual of skill and beauty rather than a mere rehearsal for the battle. But then he knew that Rothir had never anticipated combat with the same enthusiasm that he did himself.

Laying the sword aside he cast a sardonic eye on Tiburé. Another one whom he guessed disliked battle, although she was ruthless enough. But practical; no sense of glory.

His leader was currently emerging from the hollow tree to sit down next to Maeneb, who tried to shuffle away. He had heard Tiburé return to their wooden cavern in the early hours of the morning. Despite the darkness she had required no lantern; for some sort of phosphorescence made the forest visible in an eerie, faintly-glowing way, even when there was no moonlight visible through the lofty canopy.

Tiburé had been accompanied by a man – Habend, he assumed – whom he had seen through half-closed eyes kiss her at the doorway before departing.

"I hope you learnt something useful last night," he said to her now.

"Habend is not a naturally talkative man. None the less I learnt several things," Tiburé answered calmly, "perhaps not immediately useful, but they may be in the future." She took a bite of the Wardens' coarse flatbread and looked at it doubtfully. It was made not of wheat, but in Parthenal's opinion

of something more like spearweed: food for horses. Although he was not a fussy eater he found this right at the boundaries of edibility. However, the fruit supplied by the Wardens was plentiful and good.

“What sort of useful things?” he asked.

“For one, what they gave Eled to help him sleep. It is not ethlon but a herb called belvane, less effective as a painkiller and stimulant but also less addictive. I aim to take some back with us for Huldarion.”

Parthenal thought about those scars: the daily, unforgettable suffering that Huldarion endured. He said nothing of that, feeling that he had no right to. Instead he commented drily,

“Eled needs no help sleeping. It’s staying awake that’s the difficulty.”

“Yaret was awake for much of the night,” Rothir informed Tiburé.

“Everyone in the tree got woken up by her,” said Parthenal. “Even Eled.”

“She was mumbling in her own language for a long time,” said Rothir. “I think she might have been trying to sing.”

“Like a frog with bronchitis,” added Parthenal. “So what else did you learn from your wise but taciturn Warden, Tiburé?”

“That there have been numbers of stonemen encroaching on the southern edge of Farwithiel, even in the short time since we last were here.”

“By numbers, what do you mean? Dozens, or hundreds?”

“Not hundreds. Certainly dozens. Habend was not sure of the exact number. The Farwth deals with them in its own fashion. None that came in went out again.” This sobered them all.

“What about darkburns?” Rothir asked. “Have they had any of those?”

“Habend didn’t know. He has never seen a darkburn and did not fully understand my description of them. But he has come across no burnt areas that might be ascribed to them.”

“The Farwth is aware of darkburns,” said Maeneb, speaking now for the first time, “but none have come here yet.”

“I expect the Farwth could deal with them too,” muttered Parthenal. “In its own way. I need a shave.” He stood up.

“Of course you do,” said Rothir. “What could be more important right now?”

“Your having a wash, dwarf. That river water did nothing for you.”

“Ah. Probably true,” said Rothir ruefully.

“We’ll be able to wash and rest today at our leisure,” said Tiburé, “but tomorrow we must leave.”

Rothir looked at her sharply. He seemed a little shocked. “That soon?”

“We have already been away too long.”

“And what about Eled and Yaret?”

“They will stay here as long as is needful.”

“That could be a long time,” said Parthenal.

“Habend assured me that they may remain here and will be tended until they can be moved elsewhere, or are able to ride away.”

“Ride away? Where to?” demanded Rothir. “Eled can’t ride anywhere on his own.”

“His condition may improve.”

“Then why don’t we wait a few days and see? We might be able to take him back to Thield with us.”

“It will not improve that quickly,” said Tiburé firmly. “The Warden yesterday, Golen, thought Eled would recover – eventually. But it will take some time for both his mind and leg to heal. The Wardens will take care of him meanwhile.”

“Why?” said Rothir, frowning. “Why would they bother looking after Eled or Yaret? The Wardens don’t need all the disturbance. And they owe us nothing.” Parthenal glanced at his friend. Rothir was not usually so argumentative. He was upset.

Well, we are all upset, he reflected wryly. We are all in the wrong place. None of this should have happened.

At Rothir’s words, Maeneb stirred. “You think the Wardens slow and self-absorbed,” she said, with more vigorous self-assertion than Parthenal had heard in her voice for some while. “But the Wardens serve the Farwth diligently. To determine and carry out the will of the Farwth is no light thing. It takes all their attention. They are born to it, and it is the core and meaning of their lives. If the Farwth wills it, Eled will be safe here.”

“And Yaret?”

“The same. And do not think they owe us nothing. Our enemy is their enemy, and they and the Farwth look to us to keep the stonemen from ravaging the land. Not just Farwithiel, but the land it speaks to, all the lands beyond.”

To Parthenal’s surprise, Rothir stood up and bowed to Maeneb.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I meant no disrespect to the Wardens nor to the Farwth. I am just anxious.”

“I know. And also foolish. Yesterday, you thought of using fire.”

“I did,” said Rothir. “But I only thought of it. I would not have used it.”

“I know that too.”

“*Shave*,” said Parthenal. “Come on, dwarf.” He tugged Rothir away to take a path that twined between the trees and past a number of small pools.

“What are you thinking of?” he muttered at him once they were well away from the others. “Admitting that you threatened the Farwth with fire?”

“I didn’t threaten. I did consider it. I knew that it was pointless.”

“Not just pointless,” countered Parthenal. “It was extremely dangerous.”

“I know. That’s why I would have not used it. In any case, the Farwth knows what I thought.”

“Yes, it knows more of your mind than you do, apparently,” said Parthenal. “But, Rothir, never admit anything aloud that might compromise you – whether you think it is already known or not.”

He thought Rothir gave him a look of pity and understanding. But then his friend turned away, saying merely, “There must be somewhere we can wash, with all this water hereabouts.”

“It’s all in tiny pools,” said Parthenal. “Perfect for a mouse to bathe in. Or a smaller dwarf than you are.”

They walked further in amongst the trees. He thought that Rothir truly was a dwarf amongst them: their size and silence were both humbling. The men’s feet made practically no sound, for although the forest floor was covered with all types of leaf, they were softly pliant underfoot. There was not a crunch nor a rustle. Butterflies and long, iridescent whirring insects wavered or shot beneath the branches, finding and losing themselves amidst the shadows.

Parthenal felt himself swallowed up by the monumental vastness of the forest. But no stone monument could equal this palace of great pillars, he thought; for they are the work of nature, not of man, and accordingly so much the more to be revered.

A hundred yards from their home tree, he spotted a much larger pool, which looked the perfect size and depth for a man to wash in. He was fairly sure it had not been there yesterday. When he stripped and sunk himself into the water, it was pleasantly cool without being cold.

“This water’s so clean I could drink it,” he remarked after a while, floating and feeling himself relax. “That is, if you hadn’t just been washing in it.”

“Ah! That’s better. It’s been a hard two weeks.” Rothir pulled himself on to the bank and stretched out his wet limbs.

Parthenal studied him. There was no desire in his gaze; he had long since decided not to think of Rothir in that way. Too hairy in any case. So Parthenal merely noted that his friend’s arms and chest were marked not just with old scars but with a number of new gashes and bloody scrapes.

“You ought to put something on those,” he said severely.

“I’ll filch some of the ointment that the Wardens gave to Yaret.”

“Don’t filch. Just ask them for more. That Warden – Habend. Do you think it’s wise of Tiburé?”

“I expect she gets far more information out of him than he could ever get from her,” said Rothir.

“That’s not really what I meant. I was thinking more of the emotional ties created there. They could clash with her other loyalties.” Parthenal reflected on Tiburé’s husband Solon; sometimes a difficult companion, for he could be cuttingly scornful; but a clever man too, and one who stood at Huldarion’s right hand.

“I don’t think Tiburé has any emotional ties,” said Rothir, “except maybe to her daughters. She and Solon haven’t been a couple for a while as far as I can gather. And as for Habend, he’s surely old enough to know what he’s doing.”

“They all are, all those Wardens,” remarked Parthenal. “They ought to have acquired enough wisdom by now, surely. Not that I feel any wiser the older I get. And soon I will be middle-aged.” He did not really believe that, however.

“Never mind – you’ll always be a mere youth to me,” said Rothir, who was the elder by a full five months.

After dressing they strolled back languorously to the hollow tree. They found it changed since they had left it. Roots had burst up through the ground inside the space to make two low benches of smooth if strangely twisted wood.

Propped up against one of these, Eled and Yaret sat together. They were both fully awake, to Parthenal’s surprise; and talking. They seemed to be playing some sort of game. Yaret was listing animals, and Eled was hesitantly repeating them.

“Shrew, rat, mole, rabbit, fangol,” Yaret recited. “Now you say them back, and then add one to the list that’s bigger than a fangol.”

“Shrew, rat...”

Yaret made digging motions with her forearms.

“Oh! Mole, badger...”

She put her hands up to her forehead.

“Ears,” said Eled. “Rabbit. What was after that? I’ve forgotten.”

“Polecat,” said Parthenal. Yaret turned to them with a smile in which there was also some dismay.

“You’re both looking a lot better this morning,” said Rothir. “How do you feel, Eled?”

“Better,” said Eled. The former lines of trouble on his face had been smoothed away. His leg was held in a proper wooden splint with clean, neat bandages; two pairs of wooden crutches lay nearby.

“The wardens have been here while you were out,” said Yaret, “and have given us some medicine.”

“Belvane?”

“I don’t know what. They didn’t say.”

“They should have told you,” said Parthenal sternly. It must have been powerful stuff, he thought.

“They said they’d come back in a while to see how we go on,” said Yaret. She was not as pale as she had been before; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were wide and black – as were Eled’s, although hers seemed to focus more easily than his.

“Hm.” He did not approve of the Wardens dosing Eled with unknown drugs and then disappearing. “It seems to have woken you both up, at least.”

“I feel – reborn, almost,” she admitted. “Well. That’s overstating it. But certainly surprised to be alive. I believe I owe my life to you and Rothir. For that I have to thank you both.”

She reached for a crutch and began to pull herself to her feet – no doubt to bow her thanks; but Parthenal, amused, motioned her to sit down again.

“No thanks are due to me,” he said. “It was Rothir who insisted that we go back down the riverbank to try and find you. I have never seen anyone so relieved as he was.”

Rothir in his turn made a brief gesture of dismissal. “We all were. How does that game go, Eled?”

“You have to say them in order of size,” said Eled. “Shrew, mouse, rabbit, polecat.” He seemed happy, with glimpses of the old Eled as he asked them what they’d had for breakfast and what the weather was like outside the tree. When two of the Wardens entered, he greeted them as old friends. Yet he could not remember their names.

“That’s Golen; and I’m Walen. I’ve come to change the dressing on your friend’s leg,” the female Warden told him.

“Let me just check your eyes,” said Golen kindly, laying a hand on Eled’s head. Parthenal found himself annoyed at the Warden’s patronising tone. He recognised that his irritation had its origin in worry, but that did not diminish it.

Meanwhile Walen sat down next to Yaret and began to carefully unwind her bandages. As she drew away the dressings she seemed to be positioning

herself to try to hide the stump from Yaret's view.

"Stop," said Yaret. "I'll do that. I need to see what it's like." Her voice was firm. Reluctantly Walen sat back.

Her face set in determined composure, Yaret carefully peeled away the final dressing. Then she examined the stump without any change in her expression.

"All right," she said eventually, and leaned back against the bench again. "How long before I can wear a wooden leg?"

Parthenal wanted to laugh. But nobody else seemed inclined to. Rothir's face was grim.

"Perhaps we could try to fit one in two to three weeks' time," said Walen, looking a little startled. "That's if it continues to heal cleanly. But you mustn't expect to be able to walk around much. That will take longer."

"How much longer?"

"A few more weeks, perhaps. It is not something I have experience of. But you are younger than my usual patients, and should both adapt and heal quite quickly."

Yaret nodded, licking her lips. Despite her apparent equanimity, she looked suddenly extremely tired and Parthenal felt an unexpected wave of pity for her. She was hardly delicate, and yet compared to him she was a fragile thing; a donkey to his horse. He became conscious that she might not want an audience for the tending of that ugly stump.

"I'll leave you to it," he said, and went back outside to wander amongst the great pillars of the trees.

Maeneb was standing fifty yards away. She was staring into the intricacy of trunks and stems and clustered foliage that was the Farwth. It created a pattern that he could not read: its complexity and density nonplussed him, giving him a sensation of faint dizziness.

But it absorbed Maeneb. He stopped and watched her, and then began to feel that this was something else that he ought not to be watching. Maeneb was almost in a trance, evidently in some sort of private communion with the Farwth. Her lips moved yet no words came out.

He became aware of the faintest whisper of leaves, like the softest sigh. But he heard nothing inside his own head. The Farwth's meaning was for Maeneb only.

Parthenal stepped away, intending to leave her alone; but just then she let her head fall in an exhausted salute, and turned around. When she looked at him her face was alight with exhilaration – a sort of dazzlement. But her voice was urgent with anxiety.

“Where’s Tiburé?” she asked.

“She went to check the horses.”

“I need to talk to her,” said Maeneb. “Everything has changed.”

Chapter 26

Shrew, mouse, rabbit... how did it go again?

Eled shook his head in frustration. Then he looked guiltily at Rothir. But Rothir was not watching him just now. Instead he kept taking glances at Yaret's poor leg. So he didn't realise how Eled had failed. It should be easy. Shrew, mouse...

Maybe it didn't matter. He didn't think Rothir cared about this game. He had never heard Rothir play it. But he wanted to please Yaret, because Yaret was kind.

He couldn't remember the next animal. It filled him with a nagging anxiety. And he was aware that there was something else that he could not remember, that was very important, that he had to look after.

His sword. He turned his head. There it was, in the corner under a root. What was this place? He didn't remember coming in here. He only remembered a lot of riding. But he could see through the wide entrance to the cave and knew from the size of the trees that this must be Farwithiel. He had been here before. He was almost sure of that, anyway.

But why were they back here now? He looked down at his leg and remembered that it was broken. Not broken off, like Yaret's, only broken. He had forgotten because it had stopped hurting. So perhaps that meant that it was nearly better now and they could all move on.

He didn't remember breaking it. One more thing that was hidden in the fog. Things would appear, and disappear, and he didn't understand why they didn't stay.

Shrew. Mouse. Rat. It was such an effort. And what was the other thing?

Not his sword. Not his name. He knew his name. Then it came to him in a rush of sudden fear.

"The scroll!" he said.

Rothir looked round at him. "It's safe with Arguril. Don't worry about it, Eled."

"I won't," said Eled, relief flushing out the fear. He did not need to worry. Rothir would sort things out. He always found a way through difficult places. Rothir had found him after... after what?

Poda sweating under him. He remembered galloping beneath trees, scared of crashing into a low branch, but unable to rein her in. Had that been here? He looked out of the cave and saw big trees; it looked rather like Farwithiel. He thought he had been somewhere else.

The Darkburn river. A shadow crawled across his mind. The beating hooves: the stench of smoke – of something worse. It had no name. He realised that his fists were clenched and trembling and he made himself unclench them, carefully, before the others noticed.

Because now the troop was all in here, filling up this wooden cave, although he didn't remember seeing them come in. Time seemed to slip past him unnoticed. That was another worry.

"The scroll," said Tiburé. So she had remembered it as well. Maybe he didn't need to worry after all, because the others would do the remembering and the worrying. When he was better he would remember better too. He knew he had something wrong with him. His leg, that was it. It was in a splint. But it wasn't hurting any more. So he was getting better. He felt a small surge of relief.

"One scroll is with Arguril. I have the second scroll safe here," said Parthenal.

"We may as well destroy it," said Tiburé curtly.

"Why?"

"It's obsolete," said Maeneb. "It's no longer relevant. The information that was in it has been superseded, according to the Farwth."

"In what way?" asked Rother.

"The scroll described the settlements and movements of the stonemen as they advanced north of the river. It drew a possible connection with... the one we call ignoble." She glanced at Yaret. "It surmised his plans."

"But now?"

"Now those plans have been set in place. The stonemen have already formed an army and are marching swiftly across the Iarad wildlands, west of the Thore. I felt something of them, from the cliffs... but the Farwth has a longer reach, across the waters of the Thore. In places the trees touch across the river: their roots can penetrate beneath it. Even from the treeless Iarad some tidings come back to the Farwth. They tell of hundreds, maybe thousands of stonemen heading north. And as they cross the wilderness, they are starting to lay a trail of destruction."

Stonemen. He remembered those now. Chasing and yelling. And something else. Something darker. His fingers clenched helplessly around nothing. Where was his sword? Where was his horse?

"What sort of destruction?" demanded Parthenal.

"Attacking villages. Killing. Burning." Eled could see Maeneb swallow. "They are meeting little resistance, the Farwth says... because they take with them so many darkburns."

Darkburn. That was it. The thing that he could not remember. Now it leapt back at him in a cloud of fear: he vividly recalled the smell, the smoke, the dread, the glow embedded deep in charcoaled horror. The burning thing that crawled towards him.

Darkburn. Forget, forget, forget.

Chapter 27

Yaret was trying to remember everything. Although the tiredness was starting to creep over her again, yet still she tried to notice every gesture, every look and word; because in moments of sudden startling lucidity, she was aware that she was about to lose the Riders from her life and that it was a loss that would be difficult to bear. She already felt a strange sorrow in the anticipation.

For what had she ever lost in her previous life? Her parents; but she had been too young to have much memory of them. Although she remembered her grief for her lost father, the man himself was no more than a tall smiling shadow. She had lost her lover Dalko, a year ago and more, but that had been by choice. At some point she would lose her grandparents, but she assumed it would not be for several years yet.

And now she had lost a part of her body. Even a foot seemed a smaller loss than that of the new intensity that had lately flooded through her life. Ever since she had found Eled bleeding and unconscious on the Darkburn Loft, subsequent events had imprinted themselves with force upon her mind. She seemed to have been living in a heightened state where everything mattered. Everything glowed: luminous, sharp and memorable.

That was the side-effect of danger, Yaret thought. It took over, it made sure you paid attention. Otherwise you died. And she had so nearly died.

But she had not died, because of the Riders: because of Rothir and Parthenal especially. She had merely lost a foot. It could have been far worse. That was surely a small price to pay for life; although somewhere inside her was an ache that mourned for that lost limb. She repressed it firmly.

Harder to repress was the ache of knowledge that the four Riders would be leaving soon, tomorrow at first light. The doorway into that bright if sometimes terrifying world of quest and risk and battle, which had been briefly opened to her, would close again. It felt like an abandonment although she knew that it was not.

She was still weak, Yaret told herself. Walen's medicine had, for the moment, removed the pain and fever and restored her to alertness, but she had been warned that the weakness would remain for a considerable time. There would be a long wait before she could hope to get back to her old life – or as much of it as she could manage. So it was no wonder if she felt a little wretched. The important thing was not to show it.

Once Maeneb had revealed her news from the Farwth, Parthenal had been all for riding off that very afternoon. Handsome of face, strong of body, decisive in his speech, he seemed to her to epitomise the perfect warrior. Or one type of warrior at least. He spoke in an eloquent, persuasive mixture of Standard and Vonnish which her over-active brain quickly untangled: he was desperate, it seemed, to get after the enemy, hating the idea of lounging around in Farwithiel when his task lay elsewhere.

Tiburé dissuaded him. Or, rather, she had the final say in the decision.

“We all need the rest,” she said, “especially Rothir. And the horses need the rest too after their double duty. An extra night here will make them fresher and faster tomorrow. We also need to gather provisions: that can’t be done in ten minutes.”

And then there followed a debate about where they should go once they had re-crossed the Thore. Should they pursue the stonemen to assess their movements, or go back to the place called Thield? At that point the discussion moved over entirely into Vonnish, even on Rothir’s part. Yaret felt herself estranged from them. She leaned against the ribbed wall of the tree and closed her eyes.

Then she heard another voice. It was not a Rider, nor a Warden. It was clear and resonant inside her head: but maybe it was a result of the drugs, for she could not tell if the words it spoke were Standard or Vonnish. It spoke only meaning, like a voice within a dream.

Yet within the meaning one word was distinct. It was a word she did not know. The voice spoke the same thing twice, and then fell silent.

“Oh,” she said. “What?”

The others stopped their discussion to look round at her.

“What?” said Rothir.

“I heard someone. But it might have been the medicine.”

“It was the Farwth,” Maeneb said. “I heard it too. It said, *Look for the – something.*”

“*Look for the skeln,*” said Yaret.

“Skeln?” repeated Tiburé.

“I’m sure of it,” said Yaret. “But I don’t know what a skeln is.”

“Neither do I,” said Maeneb. “I shall ask the Farwth.” Her face took on a look of concentration. Yaret wondered if she also ought to ask the Farwth, but she did not know how.

Skeln? The word meant nothing to her. For some reason she thought of her tough old grandmother Thuli, back home in the long low room that was

both kitchen and parlour. She was rummaging in a cupboard with her back to Yaret.

“Gramma,” she said silently, “what is a skeln?”

In her mind’s eye her grandmother straightened up and turned to look at her. She was folding a cloth in her gnarled hands. She put her head on one side like a small, brown, distracted bird.

“Oh, dear,” said Gramma, “have I not told you that before? One of Madeo’s. I sung it to you, surely.” And she disappeared.

“It’s in a song by Madeo,” Yaret said aloud.

“Is it? I heard nothing from the Farwth,” said Maeneb, sounding deflated.

“Neither did I. But I remembered – I’m sure it’s somewhere in a song. I just have to work out which one.”

“So what is a skeln?” asked Tiburé. “A person or an object?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Tiburé stood up, brushing down her breeches. “Well, you need to think about it,” she said sternly. “Work it out as quickly as you can. I’m going to see the Wardens about loading our provisions.”

Parthenal glanced at Yaret as if he wanted to laugh. “You’d better start singing,” he advised.

“Singing?” she said, and looked at Rothir, whose opinion mattered more to her than Parthenal’s despite the other’s graceful height and beauty. Of course, she had known Rothir longer. A full seven days longer. But such days.

“If that’s what it takes,” said Rothir. “The Farwth’s word is not to be ignored. If you can discover what a skeln is, we need to know.”

So once the others had departed to sort out their gear, Yaret began to run through songs inside her head. In her present state she found it hard. Therefore she began to sing aloud – though quietly – beginning with the songs she remembered from the earliest days of childhood. She was not always sure which were by Madeo and which were not, but she sang through them anyway, though some were little more than nursery rhymes. There was no skeln in those.

Eled listened and at times smiled and nodded along. That the songs were all in Bandiran did not seem to bother him. The more rhythmic the song, the more he enjoyed it. She encouraged him to clap his hands in time: he could do that, and was pleased.

Rothir came back in and sat down on the floor opposite them with his pack. He took out a small pot and a piece of rag and began to grease his boots.

“Music while I work,” he said.

“I don’t sing well,” said Yaret apologetically. “I can hold a tune, that’s all.”

“You sing well enough. Any sign of the skeln yet?”

Shaking her head, she went on with her song. This one was about a mountain: for many of Madeo’s songs were on the theme of travelling. But several of the words escaped her. It was so long since she had heard some of these songs that trying to recall them was like dredging them out of a deep, muddy pond.

She remembered the stagnant pools before they had reached the Gyr: the darkburn struggling in the water: and stopped singing in a wave of pity and revulsion. It took her a few seconds to pick up the thread of the song again.

“Not that one,” she said. She started another one, *Long Walk*, but ran down after the first few lines as they blurred together in her memory. She shook her head in disappointment. “No, it’s gone. It would be easier to remember if I had a lutine.”

“A what?” said Eled tentatively, as if he felt he ought to know.

“It’s a musical instrument,” she explained, “a kind of five-string lute that we play back home. I’m used to having the accompaniment.”

“They play a six-string one in Kelvha,” Rothir said.

“And in Caervonn?”

“Also six strings. They used to, at any rate. Is one string any use?” he asked.

“One string?”

He reached into his pack and tossed something over to her. She looked at it in bemused wonderment.

“Oh,” she said, “my gourd! But I left it in the Gyr cave.”

“And I picked it up. It’s not heavy, after all. I had an idea that you might want to keep it. It may help to occupy you here while you recover.”

“Well,” said Yaret. “Thank you.” She opened it and tested the mournful plink of the string. It was like an old friend that she thought she’d left behind, to be seen no more. Welcome, friend, she thought; although it was more than the gourd itself that warmed her heart.

She began to sing *Long Walk* again, accompanying herself on the gourd, and this time the words came back to her with ease. Eled laughed at the slow doleful pecking of the string. But half a dozen songs later, no skeln had yet emerged.

“Those are pleasant tunes,” said Rothir. “Even though I don’t understand the words, most of them seem to me to hold a sense of yearning.”

“You’re right, they do... I suppose that’s because Madeo lived a life of exile.”

Rothir put down his boot and rag. “Madeo was in exile?”

“Yes; along with all the rest of our people after they were forced to leave their home up north. Even once the Bandiran had settled in their new home, Madeo kept on wandering.”

“And those songs that you’ve been singing, they were all written by your ancestor?”

Yaret’s fingers stilled on the gourd-string. She looked up at him in puzzlement. “What do you mean – my ancestor?”

“That’s what the Farwth said: that Madeo was your ancestor. It had certainly heard of Madeo. I think that was the main reason it allowed you to stay here.”

Yaret was almost dumbfounded. “What? The Farwth said that? When?”

“Yesterday, while you were still unconscious.”

“But it’s impossible. Madeo had no children,” she protested, staring back at him in disbelief. “None that are recorded, anyway.”

Rothir shrugged. “Well, perhaps he had one that he didn’t know about.”

“Oh, I think she would have known,” said Yaret. She gazed across the hollow tree into the mysterious distance of the past, pondering the matter. “It’s true that there are many gaps in our knowledge of her life. She roamed around so much. What we know is mostly through her songs, and old traditions. But we do know that Madeo came here.”

“To Farwithiel?”

“Yes. She didn’t call it that. She called it by a different name.”

“Which is Ulthared.”

“Naturally. She is supposed to have stayed here quite a while.”

Rothir sat up. “So when the Farwth told you to look for the skeln, was it because the Farwth itself had heard it in one of Madeo’s songs?”

“I suppose that’s possible. The skeln must be there in my memory somewhere.” She rubbed at her forehead in frustration. “I just can’t find it.”

“I can’t either,” said Eled, who had been listening, but, it seemed, not entirely understanding. “I keep forgetting.”

“It will come,” Rothir said to both of them.

“But probably too late. I expect I’ll remember it once you’ve gone,” said Yaret with a sigh. “And how can I get a message to you then, from here?”

“The Farwth should be able to communicate with Maeneb, if it wishes, for a considerable distance. Although it does depend on where we are.”

“We are here,” said Eled.

“But we will not all be here tomorrow.” Rothir turned to the younger man. “You need to stay here with Yaret, Eled, and wait for your leg to heal. After we go, we hope to gain news of you from the Farwth, so that we can come back for you when you feel well enough.”

“I’m sorry I’m not well enough just yet,” said Eled, glancing at his splinted leg. “But it’s healing. And when it heals I’ll be better too.”

“I have no doubt of that,” said Rothir.

But Eled’s pleasure at the music had departed, to be replaced by guilt. He sighed and looked so unhappy that Yaret swiftly changed the subject.

“Why can’t the Farwth just tell us what a skeln is?” she said. “It would make things so much easier.”

“*Ulthared*,” said Rothir. “Maybe there are things that even the Farwth does not know, or is not at liberty to tell.”

“Rothir, how did the Vonn get to know the Farwth? How is it that the Riders are allowed here?”

“History,” said Rothir. “Also *Ulthared*, I’m afraid.”

Yaret sat back again, strumming at the gourd. “Ah, well. I expect the answer is that you people of the Vonn had your own *Madeo*, or someone like her, who found the Farwth on their travels.”

“I expect so,” said Rothir, and Eled nodded wisely.

“Somebody who loved trees,” she went on, “somebody with a large mind, and far-sightedness, and influence. Lots of influence. So that you are allowed back.”

“Somebody like that.”

She thought for a while, absently tapping the gourd.

“Could that person be anything to do with the skeln?”

Rothir looked slightly startled. “They would certainly be a good person to ask,” he said, “if we only knew where they were.”

“Oh! So they are still alive, then? Meaning that it’s not someone from four hundred years ago like *Madeo*.” When Rothir was silent she said, a little contritely, “I did not mean to trick you into giving away anything that is *Ulthared*.”

“You didn’t trick me. I was unwary.”

“You didn’t trick him,” confirmed Eled. “Nobody tricks Rothir.” He grinned at his friend, who reached forward to tweak his good leg.

“I’m glad you have such faith in me, Eled.”

“I do,” said Eled. He lay back and closed his eyes. They both watched him for a moment before exchanging a glance. In Rothir’s face she read sorrow and concern; and resignation.

“Well,” she said, “the skeln. Could it be a place? Madeo travelled widely.”

“So have I,” said Rothir, “yet I have never heard of a place called Skeln, or anything remotely like it.”

She put the gourd down on her lap. “Where was your favourite place, Rothir? Or is that a secret too?”

“Not really.” He gazed into space, reflecting, and then spoke quietly. “The city where I grew up is very dear to me – or rather the image of it, as it was back then. The memory of Caervonn is both a comfort and a hope, but the place itself is much changed by now, I dare say. I’ve not been back these last twelve years.”

“Caervonn... It sounds like the wind high in the clouds; a sailing ship, swift and easy. It is a lovely name.”

He smiled. “It’s a lovely place. I’m not sure about the sailing ship; Caervonn is twenty miles from the sea – although I suppose you could say that the city sails like a ship above the plain, but looking down on wheatfields and orchards instead of on the waves. There is rich land around it.”

“And all that once belonged to you? I mean to the Vonn?”

“You might say rather that we belonged to it. But yes.”

“What about all the other places you have travelled to? Are any of those as dear to you as Caervonn?”

“There are a number that I like,” he answered. “I have never ranked them in terms of how much they mean to me. There seems little point.”

“Why not?”

“Because I never stay at any of them for long.”

“But you must now have a home, somewhere, surely?”

He smiled at her again, ruefully. “I do. It moves around.”

“So did Madeo’s,” Yaret said, and she began to sing the *Long Walk* again, this time in the Standard translation. With the gourd’s help it came to her readily.

“The light on the hills is beckoning me

“As I set my foot on the track,

“And its beauty calls me forwards

“And bids me not look back.

“When I reach the summit the light is gone,

“But a further mountain beckons me on–

“And on and on and on...”

“And on,” said Rothir. Then he fell silent, listening while Yaret continued singing.

But in all the songs she sang there was no skeln.

Chapter 28

There was more singing in the evening, although not by Yaret. Parthenal took the lead: he had a fine tenor voice, and Rothir sometimes accompanied him in a bass rumble. Tiburé and Eled added choruses, a little less tunefully; but the overall sound for Yaret was both strange and lovely. They sang three ballads in Vonnish, in a slightly melancholy six-note mode that she had not come across before. When she tried to catch at the words, the meaning slipped past the edges of her mind. She was now feeling extremely tired.

“Maeneb is the best singer of us,” said Parthenal, “but I doubt if we can induce her to join in.” Maeneb was the only one of them not present in the hollow tree, although there was plenty of room there for her. Tiburé said that she had stayed outside to commune with the Farwth.

“And with the insects,” added Rothir. “There are wonderful multitudes of them here, but the biters come out in the evening.” Indeed, Yaret could hear their faint hum and whine from where she sat; along with the calls of unknown birds, which coloured the night air with plangent hollow flutings.

They had already eaten, a Warden having brought them bowls of some small fish and plain vegetables. After the songs they fell into quiet conversation, mainly in Vonnish; it seemed to Yaret that they were trying to engage Eled in their talk and to reassure him. She wondered how much he understood of his own situation – whether tomorrow he would feel lost once they had gone.

“I will look after Eled,” she said into a pause. “We will learn to walk again together. I am sure the Wardens will give us exercises to do; will they not, Eled? We can practise those and devise our own. And by the next time you meet your friends I’ll have taught how you to dance the Rannikan. You remember the Rannikan?”

Eled laughed, but with an anxious look in his brown eyes.

“It will not be for long, Eled,” Tiburé told him briskly.

“You’ll be well-cared for here,” said Rothir.

“We’ll explore the forest,” Yaret told him, “and learn the names of all those birds and trees. And play games. And perhaps you can teach me to speak Vonnish.”

“Good luck with that,” said Parthenal in an undertone. But he said aloud to Eled, “We will leave you my scroll, Eled. And we’ll write on it what is happening, as a reminder, so that you will always know that we are thinking of you.”

He produced a leather tube from which he unrolled a short parchment scroll and flattened it out. Yaret, seeing a map and words and numbers, looked quickly away.

“It doesn’t matter now,” said Parthenal. “It’s no secret any more.” He took up a small quill-tank pen and wrote a line or two beneath the map in a fluent script; then passed the scroll to Tiburé, who did the same before passing it to Rothir.

“We’ll get Maeneb to sign it also, later,” said Rothir as he finished writing.

“I will guard the scroll,” said Eled earnestly.

“We know it. You are also charged with taking care of Yaret, as far as you can with your leg still in a splint.”

Eled glanced around the tree as if looking for some immediate danger, a lurking lion perhaps. He put a hand on the hilt of the sword that lay beside him.

“I pledge to do so,” he said soberly.

“Good,” said Rothir. “We know that we can trust you in that.”

But a little later, once Eled had drifted off to sleep, Rothir turned to Yaret and said softly,

“I doubt if you will need much looking after. I told Eled to do it because he needs a task.”

“We all do,” said Yaret, “and mine shall be to take care of him, as far as I can with one foot.”

He nodded. She did not ask what the task of the Riders would be now, and where they would go, since they had chosen not to tell her.

Nor did they say any more about their destination the following morning.

It was a dawn of pale green-lemon light. Seemingly a whole choir of birds jostled on a branch outside the hollow tree, all intent on out-piping each other. The riders arose with the same organised quiet bustle that there had been in the Gyr cave; and then all too soon the horses were stamping outside, laden and ready to leave.

Yaret sat next to Eled on a root just outside the entrance of the hollow tree to watch them, her bandaged leg dangling. The effect of the Wardens’ drugs had worn off overnight so that now she felt bleakly slow. Her leg was throbbing and tingling, as if the absent foot were being stabbed by a thousand tiny needles. But not tiny enough.

“Farewell,” said Tiburé. “Maeneb will send word through the wardens.”

“And I will hear word of you from the Farwth,” said Maeneb.

Tiburé rested her hand briefly on Eled's head and nodded to Yaret, who propped herself on a crutch and stood up to bow. She had barely tried to use the crutches yet, and felt clumsy and unsafe. She bowed also to Maeneb, who made a vague gesture that might have been a wave.

Parthenal clapped Eled on the shoulder.

"Bear up, get well," he said.

"I am," Eled assured him.

He turned to Yaret. "You too, donkey."

"Parthenal?" She put out her right hand to clasp his shoulder, before clenching it and touching it to her chest. "I hold you in my heart," she said, "*galeth*."

When Rothir came up to her she made the same gesture. "I hold you in my heart," she said. "Always."

"I too." He laid his hand briefly on her arm. Then he turned to Eled and took his hand.

"You are a brave man, my friend," he said, "and you bear your injury with fortitude. It will heal. Don't be afraid. Keep up your courage."

"I will," said Eled.

A minute later, they were gone. Yaret stayed on her feet, leaning on the crutches to watch the horses disappear amidst the trees. Very quickly they were so completely swallowed by the forest that even the thud of hooves was no longer audible. Yet the shuffling rank of birds above her sang on blithely as if nothing had just changed.

She sat down again next to Eled.

"Well," she said, "I have a plan for today."

Eled looked round at her, his face unhappy. "What is it?"

"First we eat. Then when the Wardens come, we ask them to take us for a walk. If we are to stay in this forest, I would like to learn it a little. Then, while we are resting, I will sing and help you learn the songs that you enjoy. But you have to teach me something in return."

"What?"

"You have to teach me Vonnish."

Eled smiled. "I know Vonnish!"

"Good. So that is my plan, but if you think of more things to do along the way, we can add them in. Now, let me sort out breakfast."

There was another thing she wanted to ask Eled to teach her; but that would have to wait. As she fetched the basket of fruit and grainy bread that had been left outside the tree, she reflected that it would be a while before either of them could engage in swordplay.

The previous morning, while half-asleep, she had seen Parthenal outside the entrance to the tree, going through his drill. It had been impressive enough to wake her up. Now it made her think that she ought to learn to wield a sword. Although she did not particularly relish the idea, she had a feeling that it might be useful, in case by some mischance she ever came across a stoneman.

For she had gathered from the Riders' talk that the stonemen were marching north, in considerable numbers. It was unlikely that they would ever come close to Obandiro, since there was no reason for them to aim for such a sparsely populated area; but all the same...

Enough of that, she told herself. Stop fighting shadows. Swordplay might be interesting, that's all.

However, the perils that the Riders of the Vonn could meet with soon were all too real to her. She tried to shut out those thoughts too. The Riders would not be in any danger yet; not until they left the safety of Farwithiel.

So it was better for her to focus on the here and now. Establishing a routine was important, both for her sake and for Eled's. She was not short of ideas for things to do – if anything, she had too many. But she needed to learn what activities Eled could cope with, and what would benefit his recovery and mood the most.

The walk in the forest was too much for him, she realised almost as soon as they set out. The problem was not physical. After the Wardens had arrived and given them a dose of belvane, the pair of them took up the wooden crutches which had been provided. They were able to practise hobbling around the tree without too much discomfort, laughing at each other's efforts.

But when they set out to hobble through the forest – with a Warden in attendance alongside each – Eled quickly became at first alarmed and then overwhelmed. She had thought the exercise must surely be good for him. Perhaps it was. But the vast strangeness of the forest was not, even though he was aware that he was in Farwithiel.

“He's only been here once before, for a few days,” murmured Goren the mind-doctor, who now was Eled's chief attendant. “He's had no time to get to know it. Farwithiel has laid no roots in him.”

“Does it usually? Lay down roots, I mean.”

Goren smiled. He was a neat, affable old man with thinning white hair and a bland manner. Behind it Yaret suspected he was scrutinising everything.

“I don’t mean literally,” he said. “But anyone who stays for any length of time will find themselves changed. Farwithiel will grow into their dreams. Its strength and wildness will have their effect.”

She thought that he was over-dramatising. But certainly Farwithiel had its effect on Eled. Seeing his bewilderment at his surroundings – which seemed almost a kind of grief – Yaret soon pleaded tiredness so that they could both retreat into the hollow tree.

Even back in that more manageable sanctuary Eled looked around as if it were all new to him, and saw with relief his pack and sword and scroll.

“I have to look after that,” he said.

“Read it now, Eled,” she suggested.

“Am I allowed?”

“You are. Look for the messages on the bottom. Your friends want you to read this every day.”

Eled unfurled the scroll and read the messages, his lips moving. “Yes,” he said, “yes.”

That seemed to settle him again. And once the Wardens had departed, their medical duties over, the singing was more successful than walking about had been. Yaret taught him half a children’s song about a greedy bird, translated into Standard. While he was slow to learn, that did not seem to bother him. So it did not matter.

She gave him the gourd to play with and watched him inspecting the hinge and experimenting with the tension of the string. His innate intelligence was evident. Perhaps she could make another instrument? Surely in all this forest there must be gourds somewhere that were suitable. She could ask the Farwth, if she knew how. Though it seemed far too trivial a thing to bother the Farwth with. Maybe she could ask the Wardens.

In fact, there were many things she wanted to ask the Wardens, but neither Goren nor Walen were particularly forthcoming. Certainly they showed no curiosity equal to her own. She felt that they were too wrapped up in the concerns of Farwithiel to have much interest in people from outside.

And it was true that there was much here to enrapture. Once Eled was asleep again, Yaret took up her crutches and hobbled back out of the giant tree.

The birds were quieter now, but more visible; bright moving sparks of red and vivid green high up in the branches. She could not identify any of them. One type in particular caught her fancy. They had small, round, orange-brown bodies, and long tails that wagged whenever they perched – which

was never for long. They flew in changeable tweeting flocks, settling for a moment restlessly before all taking off again.

She limped away from the close-stemmed mass of trunks and foliage that Maeneb had called the Farwth, under the more widely spread trees. Even so, some grew so close to each other – their trunks touching and branches intertwining – that she was hard put to say which tree was which. Others stood alone, reaching up to join a lofty canopy that was hidden from her sight in mist.

Yaret could not name many of the trees. Even those she thought she recognised, like Eastern Ash, were so hugely increased in size that she was doubtful if they were actually the same species. In places light fell in and splashed across the leafy, pool-dotted floor. Occasional fruits fell, too, with faint thunks, gold and pitted or furred and pink. Not knowing what they were, she left them where they lay. No doubt the Farwth had a purpose in their falling.

Always in her consciousness was the massive presence of the Farwth behind her. Or was it around her? Did she walk through it now? Which part of the forest was the Farwth?

And how had a tree – or a forest – learned to communicate with humans? Something else to ask the Wardens. Though she did not expect to get an answer from them.

Ask me.

The voice made her stop in her tracks. Again she thought of her grandmother, busy in the kitchen, tying on her apron. Nothing asked, nothing given, Gramma Thuli used to say.

“If I ask, will you give me an answer?” she said aloud.

No answer.

Yaret smiled. Then she asked, speaking to the air, “Farwth. How did you learn to communicate with humans?”

I was taught, said the Farwth. She wondered if the birds heard it as well. Probably not, because the nearest flock continued its alternate twittering and flitting.

“By whom were you taught?”

Silence.

Yaret reflected, and then, to be polite, turned on her crutches to face the immense close-knit mass of greenery. Not just greenery: brownery. Goldery. So many shades.

“What is the best thing for me to do with Eled?” she asked.

He is not a tree. If he were a tree then I would know.

“What would you do if he were a damaged tree?”

Keep him watered, sheltered, and free of pests. If he were too damaged, then withdraw.

“Withdraw what?”

Myself, said the Farwth.

Yaret reflected again, more on the nature of the Farwth than on Eled. She would have to work out Eled for herself.

“Where in the forest may I go?” she asked.

Wherever you wish. I will stop you if you go too far.

“That is very kind,” said Yaret, and she bowed.

It is not kind. It is necessary. Now you may tell me about Madeo. I should like to know her history.

“I will try,” said Yaret. “Although you probably know more than me, if you know Madeo was my ancestor. How did you learn that?”

From your blood and bone. As I can tell which tree a sapling is descended from.

“It must be through my grandfather’s line: he’s the one that’s from Obandiro. But he never mentioned anything like that,” she mused. Most likely he hadn’t known. Or maybe it had been another secret kept from her... Yaret waited, but the Farwth made no comment on the matter.

“Well, ancestor or not,” she said, “I don’t know much about Madeo apart from her songs. Was it Madeo who taught you to speak?”

I could speak before she came.

Yaret sat down carefully on the dry grass beneath a tree that was strange to her: its huge leaves were like many-fingered, feathery hands. She laid her crutches down beside her. Both her legs were aching, not just the shortened one; her arms and shoulders too. But the bruises from her fall were starting to turn from blue to yellow now.

She thought about Madeo, putting in order what she knew of the bard’s life four hundred years ago. After the long journey south, it was not really much. Madeo had spent little time in Obandiro, except for the last years of her long life. The sequence and full extent of her travels had been much guessed at from her lyrics but could not be defined for certain.

Madeo had made perhaps three trips to Farwithiel; however, they were wrapped in mystery and obscurity. Mentally Yaret ran through those songs that referred to the ancient forests which the bard had found within the cloud-banks. But much of what Madeo had said about Farwithiel was Ulthared. It could not be spoken of except in certain circumstances.

So Yaret thought it instead. The Ulthared spoke of the wisdom of the earth grown straight and tall: a sea of roots with a multitude of changing waves of green above it; yet a single entity. Perhaps the Farwth then was not as huge as it had since become. But in the Ulthared its grace and power were clear, if not much else was.

That is of interest.

It seemed that she did not need to speak her thoughts aloud; for whatever she wished the Farwth to know, it knew.

She wondered if it also knew her other thoughts. That would be disconcerting. Especially as it was a one-way street: the Farwth's thoughts were closed to her.

You would not understand them, said the Farwth.

Very likely not, thought Yaret. It occurred to her – she did not know why – that the Farwth might be lonely, if it was indeed a single entity. No matter how old and huge and wise it was, it was only one.

And many.

“I stand corrected,” Yaret said.

And many, and yet one.

Chapter 29

They rode hard and fast across the bleak plains west of the Thore. When they had crossed the outer woodlands of Farwithiel, with the trees ever diminishing in size and splendour, they had felt as if they were emerging from a languorous sleep. A sense of urgency rose in them and hurried them over the river and past the dour Coban Hills hunched to their north. They galloped across long miles of increasingly withered scrub until they found themselves high on the Iarad plateau, the cold wind slapping in their faces to wake them up still further.

Maeneb, at least, was very aware of the difference. She was not sure if it affected the others in the same way. But she herself seemed to be riding away from an unlikely dream whose true nature slipped into forgetfulness minute by minute. Yet who was to say which was more real: the great living halls of the Farwth, or this mad galloping over a vast empty land in pursuit of an unseen enemy?

After the enclosing lushness of Farwithiel the grey moorland of the barren Iarad was bleak and hostile. Maeneb had heard that it had once been forested, many centuries ago, before blight and drought reduced it to a semi-desert. Although it rained enough here now, the land had not recovered; there were areas of muddy ground where nothing grew. In other stretches, stunted gorse and heather seemed to battle for survival.

The biting wind scoured the drab earth and dragged wave after wave of black, heavy clouds across the sky. As they pulled up by a stream to let the horses drink, and to drink themselves, Rothir looked at her.

“Well? Any clues, Maeneb? Which way do we go next?”

She stared upstream, listening for the stonemen. It was not like listening to the Farwth, for that would speak to her whether she were prepared for it or not. And its voice those last two days had put her into a kind of trance of gladness. Almost of belonging – that was the only way to describe it. The sense of belonging had no connection with her father: she hadn’t even seen him this time, although he must have been told that she was there. No, it was due purely to the Farwth, when it had given her the unexpected news about the stonemen.

More than that. It had discussed the threat as if her opinion actually mattered. She felt that it had finally accepted her, or had chosen to let her know that it accepted her. Yet now that it was gone she struggled to remember exactly how it sounded.

Now she strained to listen to what she thought of as the lesser voices of the land, although what she heard came neither through the ground nor through the air. It was a sense for which she had no name. What had been developed in the Wardens to speak to the Farwth seemed in her to apply to any human – indeed, she could sense any living thing, if in a weaker way. So she put forth all her strength to hear.

And she did not like what she heard.

“There are so many of them,” she said in some dismay. “Perhaps more than a thousand. Certainly many hundreds.”

“All stonemen?” queried Tiburé.

Maeneb nodded. “They all have the same colour of thought. They all think of war, and fury, and the triumph and honour of killing. It is a concentration of minds all turned in the same direction – but distorted, too, like a picture seen through a twisted glass.”

“The drugs,” said Parthenal.

“The stones,” said Rothir.

“No darkburns there with them?” asked Tiburé.

“There may well be darkburns. I do not hear them as I hear living things. I can barely feel them at all, and only when they are very close. By that time everybody else can feel them coming too.”

“How far away are these stonemen now?” asked Rothir. Although she had detected in his mind some sadness at leaving Eled and Farwithiel, now he seemed equally determined to get away as fast as possible. All his mind was keenly focused on the road ahead.

“They are distant,” she replied. “Perhaps as much as thirty miles away. They’re travelling quite fast, but not towards us: they are marching north. I think they may have recently split into two groups; there is a divergence, but the groups are not yet very far apart.”

“Then we’ll ride on,” said Tiburé, “because however fast they march, we can ride faster. We’ll try to get close enough to judge their numbers and their destination.”

“We may judge their numbers to some degree by the trail they’ll have left behind them,” Rothir pointed out. “If we’re marching north we’ll cross their path. It can’t be far away.”

So they rode on; and within a few miles found the expected trail, a wide trampling of the withered shrubs. In one muddy place the marks were clear, so they dismounted to examine them. Maeneb immediately recognised the prints left by the stonemen’s rope-soled boots.

“Six or maybe eight abreast,” reported Parthenal. “And another six abreast just over there. Two columns... but who knows how long each column might have been?”

Rothir was frowning at the trampled earth.

“There are wheel marks here,” he said, “as if there were carts. But no sign of any hooves. So were there no horses pulling them?”

“Handcarts,” said Tiburé. “They must need them for provisions for such a long march.”

“Well, maybe,” said Rothir, although he seemed unconvinced as he raised his head to scan the area. Then he pointed. “Look, there’s a cart that’s been abandoned over there. Let’s go and see if it can tell us anything.”

Maeneb noted the tracks of many over-lapping wheels as they rode to the fallen cart, which was lying on its side several hundred yards away. It was a crude green-wood handcart with metal shafts, small enough to be pulled by two men. It had lost a wheel: the axle had evidently broken as it was hauled over the rocky ground. But it was the cart itself that gripped Rothir’s attention.

“It’s burnt,” he said. “Look. Burnt half way through the base.”

“It’s been carrying darkburns,” Maeneb said. The thought filled her with a sudden grim anxiety and fear – an irrational dread, she told herself, a mere memory of fear; for there was neither the smell nor feel of any darkburn here. They were too long gone.

“You couldn’t use a wooden cart to carry darkburns,” Parthenal objected. “The wood would turn to charcoal within minutes. And even with the metal handles, the men pulling the cart would suffer burns.”

“Those holes drilled through the handles could take ropes or chains, and lengthen the distance between cart and man. Also, the wood is sodden,” Rothir pointed out. “I expect they sluiced it down at intervals. And, look here: something has been torn up from the cart’s base – see the nail marks?”

“A cart lined with metal sheeting might not burn away too fast,” said Tiburé, “particularly if it were regularly soaked with water.”

“You could use tin, perhaps,” said Parthenal doubtfully.

“A darkburn would melt tin. Iron more likely,” said Rothir, “but you’d need a lot of it if all the carts were lined that way.”

“And they’d be heavy. So you’d need more than two men for each cart,” said Parthenal.

“The ropes would allow for that. We must have crossed the tracks of at least a dozen carts – maybe twenty.”

“Twenty darkburns?” queried Tiburé. “In iron carts?”

“Caged,” said Maeneb suddenly. “I saw strange rows of bars in the stonemen’s thoughts. Stripes of darkness. And heat within them.”

They looked at each other.

“Why?” asked Parthenal. Maeneb shook her head.

“Twenty darkburns would be hard to keep control of,” Tiburé observed. “With those numbers, and for these distances, it would be difficult to herd them. The stonemen might well have to cage them just to keep themselves safe.”

“I don’t like it,” Rothir muttered.

“I like none of this,” replied Tiburé, somewhat sharply. “Is there anything else to be learned here? If not, let’s move on and keep following the trail.”

They did so. But they had ridden only a few miles further when Maeneb’s sensation of anxiety grew much stronger.

Something here was in terrible distress. Something she recognised. Not a human – but some familiar being none the less. She pulled up to a sudden halt, putting both hands to her head.

“What is it?” asked Tiburé.

“Something dreadful happened here,” she answered hoarsely. “There’s an animal nearby, I think, in appalling pain. It’s struggling. We need to find it.”

She pointed to the direction of the feeling. Within minutes they had found its source, deep in a ditch. It was a horse, with all its legs broken. Its saddle had been cut from its body with a violence that left deep bloody slashes along its flank. It was trying to stand up.

It was Arguril’s.

“That’s Vela,” said Maeneb in new anguish.

“So where is Arguril?”

“I don’t know. I can’t hear him anywhere.”

Tiburé gripped her sword hilt, her face stern. “We’ll look around,” she said, “in case. Parthenal?” She nodded at the horse. Then she and Rothir rode away to scour the area for any sign of Arguril, leaving Parthenal to do what needed to be done.

Parthenal climbed down into the ditch to reach Vela, the stricken mare. He spoke soothingly to her and stroked the bloodied neck and mane until the eyes stopped wildly rolling. As she grew calm, he told her what a good horse she had been, what a fine and faithful servant: how she was loved. Then he drew his knife and gently cut her throat.

Chapter 30

Soon after that, following a terse discussion, the group split up. By common consent, Tiburé set off south-west back to Thield to report what news they had to Huldarion. Most of the news was bad, and Rothir did not envy her that task.

Meanwhile he himself, with Parthenal and Maeneb, rode north into the cold wind, following the stonemen's trail and hunting for any further sign of Arguril.

There was no trace of the young man to be seen. The trail of rope-soled prints and wheel-ruts continued for many miles with no indication of the stonemen making any stop to camp. Riding in the army's wake, they passed a hut, a traveller's shelter, that had been burnt out: when Rothir investigated he found what might once have been a man's body lying inside. However, from the little that remained – chiefly buckles, and hobnails in the remnants of its boots – it did not seem to be Arguril's.

They left it and rode on until they reached the point at which the stoneman army had, at last, evidently halted for a night. The ground was littered with scraps of food and human waste. There they debated whether they should halt themselves.

"There's still an hour of daylight," argued Rothir, who was desperate to move on.

"Twilight rather. As the light drops we may miss something," Maeneb countered.

"We can at least continue till the light drops too far. Another half hour."

Rothir knew he was not being entirely reasonable. The daylight was already dimming fast beneath the sullen clouds. A damp, sour smell was sharpening the air: although there was little summer or autumn on the barren Iarad, the seasons were fast turning, and evening would now swing its curtain down upon them earlier each day. Rothir knew they needed both to eat and rest. The horses also needed rest. But he felt he could not rest while he could still see to hunt.

First Eled, then Yaret, now Arguril... This latest care clenched tight within his chest. He did not think that he had any tendency to succumb to unnecessary fear. Yet disaster on disaster was falling on the youngest members of the group, the ones he should be able to protect, and it hurt him. The self-reproach was a pain that would not leave, like a stone being driven hard into his head; a pain he had no remedy for, apart from action.

Never mind that it was Tiburé who had allowed Arguril to ride off alone. Never mind that Arguril himself had been so keen; he was inexperienced, and Rothir should have spoken out against it. He should have safeguarded Arguril.

Parthenal glanced at him from time to time as they rode on.

“You can’t be responsible for everyone,” he said.

“Only those I am responsible for,” Rothir retorted. His friend cocked an eyebrow and said nothing. On Parthenal responsibility never seemed to weigh as heavily as it did upon himself. Yet he knew that Parthenal was just as apprehensive as he was. They did not speak of what the stonemen might do to Arguril. It did not bear speaking of.

First Eled, then Yaret... Rothir told himself firmly that those two, at any rate, were safe. He thought of Yaret’s bandaged stump with a pang of loss – oddly deep, he was not certain why, because at least she was alive, he had managed to achieve that much – and then he put the thought firmly in a box and shut it away. Task done. Forget it. Now the next thing.

Box after box. There was little enough time to look back at them, all lined up along his past, let alone to open them and let memory back in. Why bother? Better to think of a future idealised Caervonn. Memory was often painful.

And he did not need more painful memories. So he needed to find Arguril.

The mere fact that Arguril’s corpse had not yet appeared along the trail meant there was still hope; although not much. If the stonemen found the scroll they would not spare him. The news within the scroll was old news now. But the very fact that Arguril carried it would mark him as a Rider of the Vonn, as the stonemen’s sworn enemy, and that would mean his death.

Amongst other things, the scroll mentioned the ignoble one, whose name Rothir preferred not to speak aloud if it could be helped; although that did not stop him from saying it in his closed mouth now with disgust and loathing. He would spit it if he could. *Adon*. All this was bound to be his work.

“Over there,” said Maeneb sharply, swerving to the left. He saw another overturned cart: another broken axle. The carts were not well made, but had been crudely nailed together.

“I missed it,” Rothir said shamefacedly. “I wasn’t paying enough attention.” Like the first cart, this one bore the signs of burning. And there were scorch marks on the thin grass for some distance; so he followed them.

At the end of the scorched path lay the remains of a man, his limbs distorted in agony, his clothes and face burnt badly but still decipherable: not Arguril. Neither was it a stoneman. Although the corpse was cold, it smelt of smoke and rank roast meat. Rothir turned away, trying not to retch.

“So who is he? There are no houses around here. Was he some slave who was pulling the cart? And when it overturned, perhaps the darkburn broke out and attacked him,” muttered Parthenal.

“Something like that. I hope the stonemen managed to round up the darkburn,” Maeneb said. “I wouldn’t want to find it lurking anywhere near here.”

“How do you round up a darkburn?”

“They must have a way.”

“There’s an end to the burnt trail here,” said Rothir, inspecting the ground, “so they evidently managed it somehow.”

“In that case, so long as there’s no darkburn on the loose, I vote we stop here for the night,” suggested Maeneb. “We are all too tired to be effective. We don’t want to miss anything else.” She looked pointedly at Rothir.

He gave in. Moving away from the stonemen’s trail, they rubbed down the horses in the dusk. Then he ate and slept, because that was his job, and shook Parthenal awake early in the morning. Maeneb was already up. His mind turned to Yaret for some reason; doing her daily ritual, murmuring those words. Back into the box. His thoughts should be on Arguril and his plight.

Parthenal groaned as he heaved himself on to his horse. Normally Rothir would have made some joking remark about him not being the early riser that he usually was; but he did not do so now. There was nothing for them to joke about. Sensing his horse’s weariness, he hoped that Narba would continue to bear up under this enforced effort. It was probably still a full day’s ride before they could hope to catch up with the stonemen.

But then what? If Arguril were captive they could not rescue him from an entire stoneman army. The best they could do was to assess the situation.

“They’re on the move again,” said Maeneb, head cocked to the breeze, “definitely in two groups now. They’re diverging quite widely; one group is going further east.”

“Which group is the larger?”

She concentrated. “The other one, I think, that’s heading west.”

“The large group is marching towards Outer Kelvha, then. Can you sense Arguril?”

Maeneb shook her head. "I've been trying at intervals, all night." He realised that there were shadowed circles underneath her eyes. "There's nothing detectable. That might mean that he's... unconscious. Or too far away. Or he simply might be drowned out by the large numbers of stonemen. I'm not good enough to distinguish one voice amidst so many." Rothir knew she blamed herself, but he did not have the energy to spare to reassure her.

It was Parthenal who said, "Don't feel bad about it, Maeneb. You're doing a useful job. Without you we'd have no clue at all which way to go." He was not normally so sympathetic.

However, if Parthenal was sympathetic to anyone, it was to Maeneb, thought Rothir as they rode off. His friend showed a gentleness to Maeneb which he demonstrated to few others. To some people he could be ruthless; even cruel. Rothir was often glad that Parthenal was on his side.

"If they have hurt Arguril," said Parthenal now, deliberately, "I will cut their limbs off, one by one, and feed them to their darkburns."

"And I will help you," said Rothir. They both knew that such revenge was not remotely possible.

He urged Narba to a gallop on the moorland, which was not so barren now as the Iarad behind them. All the time he rode, he checked the landscape for a body. None was to be seen. But if the stonemen had killed Arguril, they would have left his body by the roadside, surely? They certainly would not bother burying him. If they had not killed him, what were they keeping him alive for?

Information, thought Rothir. But Arguril knew little information that was not also in the scroll. Even the location of Thield would have changed by now. The stonemen already knew the rest.

Sport. They might keep such a captive purely for their pleasure. Yet Rothir doubted this, because in his experience the stonemen's pleasure lay in outright killing, not in torture. He had an idea they would regard it as a waste of time. Deaths were what counted.

Something to bargain with, then... He hoped that was the reason, because in that case the stonemen would have to keep Arguril not only alive but also relatively unhurt. However, the willingness to bargain was also something which he had not come across in stonemen previously.

There was, of course, one other possibility.

"They might be using him as bait," he said aloud as he slowed his horse.

"In which case we are riding straight into their trap," said Parthenal.

“Not really. The trap is still a long way off,” said Maeneb. “And we’ll hardly be taken by surprise.”

But Rothir now began to think, and to study not just the trail but the countryside around them as he rode, looking for clues as to what objective might drive on the stonemen in their swift march through this place. The empty lands appeared more welcoming than before, with increasing signs of cultivation if no actual people. The Iarad wilderness lay behind them: ahead, the gentle hills and wooded vales of the Iartir began a slow rise and fall, as if the Riders were poised on the verge of some wide green frozen sea.

They passed an area of farmland, full of yellow stubble, and then a homestead. It was burnt. When they rode up to it, the blackened stones still felt warm – hot, even, to Rothir’s cautious touch. This had happened within the last twenty-four hours. No survivors: three corpses lay outside the building, also burnt. Two, he thought, were female.

He bent down to check the third. “Not Arguril,” he said. Nobody else said anything, because there was nothing to say. Before he rose, Rothir bowed his head in a silent vow that the dead would be avenged. He would try, at least.

“Do you hear anything new, Maeneb?” asked Parthenal.

She shook her head.

“Keep listening.”

They continued riding fast, but with increased wariness now that they were drawing closer to the enemy. After a few more miles they came to a hill a little taller than the rest. Smoke rose thickly from beyond it. Mounting its summit to look out, they saw no stonemen. Instead, a second burnt-out farmstead lay below them: a black, steaming shell surrounded by a half-charred orchard. A few goats browsed the slopes as calmly as if nothing untoward had happened.

As they descended Rothir already knew what they would find. This time there were six corpses. One held a knife: a pitiable defence against a darkburn and its following army. Not far away a sack of flour lay on the ground, unburnt and split, a splash of white amidst the black.

“They take the food and kill the farmers,” muttered Parthenal. Rothir nodded.

The army had moved quickly on, for it could not be seen. But in the distance, beyond the swelling waves of the westlands, a long white plume of smoke was drifting to the sky as if pulled upwards by the clouds.

“That’s the western branch of the stoneman army, the ones that we are currently following,” said Maeneb. “The other smaller group is three or four miles east by now – maybe further.”

Rothir squinted east, to where high moorland again encroached on the cultivated Iartir. A distant pall of smoke seemed to lie over wide areas of the land.

“You still think the western group is larger?” he asked Maeneb.

“I believe so. Their voices are certainly stronger.”

“There are many more villages lying to the north-west than to the east,” observed Parthenal. “Moreva and Brul, and beyond them, Outer Kelvha. There’s nowhere so populous to our right. So the stonemen have split up accordingly.”

“And you think they’re going to attack those places?” Rothir demanded. “It would be a brave army that encroached on Kelvha.”

“But it would be a wise one that tested the defences of Outer Kelvha first.”

“We need to tell Huldarion,” said Maeneb.

“We need to find out more. And above all, we need to find Arguril,” said Rothir. They spurred their horses away from the ravaged farmstead and up the far side of the hill, through the swirling wind and scattering leaves, dispersing the goats who swirled and scattered in the same way.

Over the green hill they rode and down to the next vale, through lush water-meadows where lay the half-butchered corpses of a dozen cattle with only their heads left intact. At the bottom of the vale, a row of gracefully draping willows lined a wide stream. It was not too deep to ford, however, and they had splashed across it and were halfway to the next rise in the ground when Maeneb’s mare suddenly reared up, lurching sideways so that she almost unseated her rider.

At the same instant Alda stopped dead, throwing Parthenal forward in the saddle. Narba threw up his head and neighed.

Then Rothir felt it, and he knew that Parthenal did too from his sharp intake of breath. Strength drained from his limbs. Beneath him the horse was tense and trembling. He threw himself off Narba and drew his sword to meet what he knew was coming, although with the whirling wind behind him the warning stench came late.

But by that time he had already seen it hurtling down the rise towards him. Darkburn.

Chapter 31

This one had wings. Or had had, once. Now it had only tattered shreds of blackness that sent flakes of soot into the sky.

It reminded Rothir strangely of an eagle, although this darkburn was five times an eagle's size. Yet its head might have been shaped something like a dog's had it not been burnt into bluntness. It did not bewilder the sight like most smaller darkburns: Rothir could clearly see the charcoaled feet, as big as a lion's, but more fiercely clawed.

He had two seconds to take all this in, before the darkburn launched itself at them.

It leapt into the air in a wave of heat and made as if it would have dived at them from above. But whatever the wings could once have done, they could not now, in their burnt and shredded state. The darkburn collapsed in a floundering heap on the ground before them, next to a bush which burst instantly into flame.

Welding his sword in a swift arc, Rothir cleaved its neck. It was tough: the head did not fly off but remained half-attached and dangling. There was no blood, merely a shower of soot. The darkburn flailed its rudimentary wings as if struggling to get up.

Both men struck again at the same time, their swords clashing, and now the head did detach itself and toppled quietly on the grass. But the body continued to thrash and writhe and tried to clap its wings, more fire and smoke arising round it constantly.

The two men had to hurriedly withdraw some yards from the heat. Rothir feared for his hair as sparks flew round him. After a few seconds' respite they looked at each other, nodded, and sprang forward again to finish the thing off. Parthenal slashed at the frantically beating wings, while Rothir hacked at the body, chopping the long tail which writhed independently before falling still.

But the body was still moving, twitching; while around it half the shrubby hillside now seemed to be on fire. They retreated from its heat again to watch it in revulsion. There seemed little harm that the darkburn could do now. The horror which had accompanied it began to slowly fade. Rothir felt that he should put it out of its last misery.

Misery? What misery could it feel? It was already burning of its own volition, creating mindless terror in any human or animal nearby. It was itself already death. How could it suffer?

With these thoughts in his mind, he readied himself to charge into the fire again. But Parthenal beat him to it. He leapt at the fallen darkburn, and swinging his sword furiously he slashed at the twitching body again and again until it was no longer a body but a heap of blackened parts.

“If I had an axe,” he said, panting, “I would use that too.”

They retreated, coughing, to where Maeneb was leaning on her sword. Her face was twisted in shame and sickness.

“I couldn’t attack it,” she said. “It weakened me too much. I couldn’t even lift my sword. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry,” answered Parthenal. “This one was worse than some. And I think you feel them more intensely than we do.”

“You’ve not met as many darkburns as we have,” added Rothir, wiping the sooty sweat from his brow with his wrist. “We seem to be becoming accustomed to them.”

“Unfortunately,” said Parthenal. He frowned at the blackened, smoking heap. “I’ve seen something like that before.”

“Surely not,” said Maeneb in dismay.

“Not in real life. In a picture. Probably a storybook or some such, years ago. The wings of an eagle, the feet of a lion, the head of a dog. I can’t remember what it was called. But I think it was some exotic beast from far in the west.”

“No such thing exists,” said Rothir.

“Well, this thing definitely does.”

“Proof that it’s a manufacture,” Rothir grunted.

“Do you think this is like the darkburn that attacked Eled?” asked Maeneb.

“No; that one crawled, by Eled’s account,” said Rothir. “It kept close to the ground. Yaret told me the same.”

Maeneb said in a low voice, “I heard Yaret mutter words over the dead stonemen back at the Gyr cave. I feel as if something should be said over this creature too.”

“Words? What words? Curses?” asked Parthenal with disdain.

“There was some ritual that she performed,” said Rothir. He remembered the darkburn graveyard in the swamp; and before that, a tumbling rabbit, Yaret murmuring unheard words. He had his own prayer for the dead, but had never used it on a rabbit.

Maeneb said, “I think they might have been words of appeasement. Apology. Farewell. I don’t know.”

Parthenal snorted. “Apology? Wasted on stonemen – or on darkburns.”

But Rothir, studying Maeneb, asked her, “Why do you feel that something should be said over this one? What is it about this darkburn that makes it different to the others?”

She was silent for a moment. “It’s grief,” she said at last. “I felt such grief, as well as horror.”

He opened his mouth to say that Yaret had felt something of the same. Then he closed it again, because all such feelings were subjective. They proved nothing.

“That’s just an emotion that the darkburns generate,” said Parthenal, “to disarm and dismay. This one happens to be particularly strong.”

“Yes, I know.”

“A more immediate question,” Rothir said, “is what is it doing here? Was it sent here to attack us?”

“I don’t see how. There are no stonemen anywhere nearby,” said Maeneb.

“This must be one of the darkburns whose cart overturned,” suggested Parthenal. “If they couldn’t control it and it got away, it will have been roaming around here for the last day or two, hunting. And found us.”

That seemed to Rothir to be the most likely answer. Perhaps the thing had happened on them by pure chance. Perhaps it smelt them, just as they smelt it. Perhaps it felt their presence...

And what had he felt? Horror, certainly. Grief? He wasn’t sure. But almost a sense of shame. That made no sense, unless it was his own shame at his weakness. He gazed at the smoking remains, and remembered the tears that had stood in Yaret’s eyes back in the swamp.

Needless, pointless. Put it in a box. The thing was destroyed now, that was all that mattered.

“Come on,” he said curtly. “We can’t hang around.”

They left the smouldering remains and continued their trek north. After another mile they came to a point where the stonemen’s trail veered more directly west.

“The eastward group is still only a few miles away,” said Maeneb, “but soon the distances between the two halves of the army will grow wider. We need to decide which group to follow.”

“You still think the eastward group is smaller?”

She nodded. “A few hundred, I think. The other is at least twice the size. But in both directions I feel that impression of stripes and heat within them.”

“The darkburn cages. I wish we knew which of the two armies held Arguril,” growled Parthenal.

Rothir thought, *If either of them do*, but he said nothing. Never to give up hope even when all reasonable hope seemed dead: the events of the Thore ought to have taught him that.

Maeneb shook her head.

“I have no way of knowing where Arguril is,” she said dolefully. “I still can’t hear him amidst all the other voices. There are too many of them.”

“Statistically,” said Rothir, “he’s more likely to be with the larger group that’s heading west. But we can’t take the risk of pursuing the wrong group and missing him. We need to split up.”

“Then Maeneb and I will ride west,” said Parthenal, “and you go east. We should be able to overtake each group within a day and see if there is any sign of Arguril.”

“We can’t fight an army,” Maeneb objected.

“No. We’ll stay secret. But we need to know where he is and where they’re headed. Maybe together we can do something. Tomorrow evening, or as soon as possible the day after, we will return and rendezvous. Where?”

Rothir looked around, and nodded at a craggy hillock crowned with one lone stunted tree.

“Foot of that greythorn,” he said. Wheeling his horse round, he gave them a brief wave of salute before cantering away. Apprehension spurred him on. There was no time to waste.

He followed a farm-track to the eastern upland. When he turned to check his orientation and to fix the rendezvous landmark in his mind, the other two were already a fair distance west, moving rapidly away from him. Nothing else stirred in the landscape below except the drifts of dirty smoke from the places they had left. A deserted country; like so many. He turned back to the east.

Although it felt strange to be so abruptly solitary again, it was in some ways a relief. It was good to ride at his own speed without halts and distractions. The farm track soon disappeared, but he headed for the pall of smoke that veiled the horizon, and after a few miles he came across the signs of many trampling feet and cart-wheels.

Now with the trail clear before him he could gallop as fast as Narba was prepared to. Although treeless, this was not as bleak and hostile a stretch of moorland as the Iarad had been: the going was firm, and the trampled trail impossible to lose. In fact, he could see it stretching for a full two miles ahead between the clumps of heather, its purple blooms now turned to rust.

There was little but the undulation of the land and a few wandering sheep to obscure his view or hinder his swift progress. He had to tell himself to

slow down from time to time, to check for anything that he might miss: broken carts, abandoned bodies.

He saw neither, although this apparently blank land was, once he looked, full of the small signs of life. Narba's hooves flushed little brown larklets from the heather, along with hares and the occasional squirming fangol; and every time he slowed, he heard over the harsh breathing of his horse the chuckling alarm call of a brindlecock. Not always the same one presumably. Now and then he would inadvertently send one running, its neck stretched out, its stubby wings trying to haul it off the ground. Brindlecocks were so well camouflaged that they were invisible until they moved. A cloak that colour would be useful, he thought; could a weaver reproduce that random pattern of grey and rust? He would have to ask Yaret.

But then he remembered that he would not see Yaret again. The recollection was like a bucketful of water in the face – cold and sobering. It was stupid to keep thinking of her: and quite unnecessary. She was safe. A temporary friend, no more. He set his mind back on the trail.

Soon afterwards he came upon something which sobered him still further. A day or two ago it had been a tranquil hamlet of low-roofed cottages on the far edge of the upland. Now it was a set of smoking ruins.

He approached them warily – an irreverent larklet singing overhead – in case any of the perpetrators were still here. Heat radiated strongly from the buildings. The only inhabitants were the scattered corpses lying in between the houses, barely recognisable as having once been human. Not Arguril. They had worn earrings.

Rothir straightened up and looked away and said his prayer. He had said it briefly in his head for the first corpse they had found along the road; but after that he had thought chiefly of vengeance. The memory of Yaret's murmurings brought a sense of remorse that he had not said it for the others.

So this time, although there was nobody to hear, he spoke the words aloud. An acknowledgement of what had happened in this desolate place. An apology that he could not prevent it. He commended the dead to the power of the stars, while overhead the larklet still kept singing, no longer irreverent but offering its tremulous note of hope – if hope could exist for the dead. Rothir remounted and rode on with cold determination.

An hour later he caught his first sight of the stonemen. By now he had left the stretch of higher land behind and had descended to a more fertile region scattered with gnarled fruit trees and small cottages. Despite their thick stone walls, all of the latter were burnt out, roofless, full of ash and

rubble whose heat was like an open oven. An egg thrown on the stones would have fried and shrivelled up in seconds. There were many corpses, all charred so badly that if Arguril had been one of them Rothir would not have been able to tell. He had to trust that he was not.

No bustling brindlecocks ran here: no larklets sang. Only the crows circled, and even they saw nothing in the ruins worth flying down for. But as he glanced up at the crows he became aware of movement through the smoke; a change in the middle distance, perhaps four miles away.

So Rothir spoke his prayer again and then rode on, more cautiously this time, shutting away his anger and anxiety so that they would not distract him. Behind his back, the sun was going down. It illumined his path with a swelling glow of golden fire, as if to show him what had lately happened here. Despite his resolution he could not help imagining the sudden blaze becoming an inferno as the darkburns rushed through the hamlet: the fleeing villagers thrust back into the flames by surrounding stonemen.

His shadow lengthened, a black ghost in a golden land that was fading gradually to grey. It was just after sunset when he found the stonemen's camp. The army had stopped, not at another hamlet, but at a much more sizeable village – almost a small town – that was surrounded by hedged fields.

Rothir halted Narba in a stand of trees some distance from the nearest buildings. Dismounting and unstrapping his pack, he instructed his horse to stay there in the trees. Yaret's donkeys came unbidden to his mind... Narba too would get the gist. He did not tether the horse; if he himself were caught, Narba should have the chance to get away. He had the sense and instinct to go and look for the other Riders.

So Rothir left him, to creep up a concealing rise and slink behind the hedges. He skulked past fields of sweetroot leaves and barley stalks to a patch of thorny undergrowth that was close enough to the camp for him to look down at it through the thorns and assess the stonemen's numbers.

Perhaps a hundred people were in sight, although not all appeared to wear red tunics. No doubt there were many others that he could not see. The carts were clearly visible, however: about a dozen of them, drawn up to the side of a group of low stone barns at the town's edge.

For all the buildings of this place were still intact. If I were a stoneman deciding to pitch camp, he thought, I'd raid the village first. Kill the inhabitants, eat their animals, steal their food and use their shelter. Fire the buildings when I leave.

He felt revulsion at this putting himself inside a stoneman's head. But it was necessary. Now he checked the wind and studied his surroundings while the light was still sufficient. In some of the narrow hedge-lined fields, cattle stamped or ran, turning in small, panicky stampedes, upset by the nearness of the darkburns. The carts were drawn up in a circle and were faintly smoking. Or perhaps it was the wet ground under them that steamed.

It was still too light for him to try to get any closer. So he watched and waited in his patch of undergrowth. Not until the dusk was growing deep did he finally move. Then he made his careful way down the border of a field he had noted, where he could creep close to the village in the shelter of a high double hedge. The stink and aura of the darkburns became noticeable, and then unpleasant.

At its end nearest to the village, the hedge was tall and thick, a tight double row of beech: he burrowed into it. The leaves crackled against him horribly for a second but once he was in the centre there was enough space for him to crouch and spy through to the other side.

He was at a junction, where an earthen track met the cobbled road that ran into the town, with more paths leading off it. In the twilight he saw small but sturdy houses, built of wood and stone and undefended by any encircling walls. It was an ordinary little country townlet, which had probably never thought it needed any defending walls until today.

Groups of stonemen patrolled the streets which were empty of living inhabitants but littered with the dead; in one spot he could see corpses piled in a careless heap. The stonemen were still plundering houses for food, kicking open doors and charging in, to emerge minutes later with armfuls of bread or bulging sacks.

One stoneman entered a house opposite him: immediately there came a yell. A man – a grey-haired villager – dived out of the open door into the street, followed by the shouting stoneman. The villager turned and stabbed his pursuer with a short knife before two more stonemen dragged him off and disarmed him. The fight was over very quickly.

But the stonemen did not kill the hapless villager. They shoved him down the road a little way past the junction where Rothir was hiding, and there tied him to a tree. There was some consultation between them.

Meanwhile another stoneman went up to his bleeding comrade and turned him over roughly; the man was evidently dead. Somewhat to Rothir's surprised disgust, the stoneman did not make any gesture of regret or pity towards his fellow-soldier. He did not even bother to move the corpse aside.

Instead he took from his belt what looked like a pair of pliers, and applied them to the blood-spattered victim's head, prising out the stones set in the skull. It seemed to take considerable effort. He dropped the stones inside a metal box: Rothir could hear the series of small clunks. As the stoneman pulled at the last stone, it flew from the pliers' grip and bounced across the road, landing on the grassy verge not far from the hedge where Rothir was concealed.

With a muttered curse, the stoneman crossed the road to look for it, poking around in the weeds and grass some distance from where the stone had actually fallen. He was a mere three yards from Rothir, who kept entirely still. If the stoneman had looked up and paid attention he could have seen him even in the dusk. But he did not. After a moment or two he gave up the search and went back, grumbling, to his companions.

And then there was a stir among the carts drawn up on the north side of the village, to Rothir's left. Movement, stonemen's voices, and a heavy clang: one of the cages had been opened.

A minute later, apprehension gripped him. Down the road there came a darkburn rushing towards him in a whirl of heat and shadow.

Rothir froze. Three following stonemen waved the darkburn on, driving it before them. Although they held long whips they did not use them.

Why were they doing this? Had they freed the darkburn to hunt down any intruders? Fear wrapped itself round Rothir. Part of it was the rapidly growing horror of the darkburn's aura; but part was far more rational. If the darkburn were to sense his presence it would fling itself towards the hedge, setting both it and him burning. He swiftly planned his escape route were that to happen – at the same time knowing that escape would be unlikely. If he ran he would be seen at once. If he did not run he would be burnt alive.

So don't move until it's absolutely necessary, he told himself. The darkburn hurtled on towards him. Still motionless, he felt the wave of sudden heat ahead of it, as if an oven had been opened. But he held his ground.

Just before the heat became too fierce, the darkburn swerved aside. It veered away from him, moving in a wide arc around his section of the hedge. It struck Rothir that it might be avoiding, not him, but the place where the lost stone had fallen.

And then, as it whirled on down the track, the darkburn sensed another prey. It gained speed. In a blurring haze of darkness it flung itself at the tree and the man tied to it. There was a hideous sound and a searing blaze of

heat. Rothir turned his head, but he was unable to shut out the crackle and roar of flames. He hoped it would be quick.

That it had been extremely quick was evident when he raised his head again some minutes later: both tree and man were burnt to white-hot embers. Smoke billowed up and was lost in the darkening sky. The darkburn was being herded back towards the carts: he watched carefully to see how the stonemen did it.

Again, they did not use their whips. Although one bore a spear it was not needed either. As they moved towards the darkburn, it veered away from them.

And now for the first time Rothir thought he understood their power over the darkburns. It lay in the stones around their heads. He did not know how that might work, but it surely must be so.

The darkburn was driven back into its cage: although he could no longer see it, he heard the clash of an iron door being slammed. Next there came a bellow, as an ox was herded past him by another pair of stonemen, to disappear up the street into the village. From the subsequent noises he suspected it was killed and butchered on the spot. The glow and sparks of a fire showed where it was being cooked – probably in the village square.

The stonemen in his sight-line hurried off towards the fire. Gradually the smell of roasting ox and mutton mingled with the darkburn stench, not doing a great deal to improve it.

By now the blue twilight was as thick as water. The sparking fires – for two others had sprung up within the town – were bright by contrast, making the darkness elsewhere even darker. Rothir could see no stonemen now. They had set no sentries, evidently feeling themselves safe from attack.

Well, they had a point, he thought grimly. While there was still a modicum of light, he eased himself out of the hedge.

First he looked for the lost stone. He had noted carefully where it fell and even in the dusk it did not take too long for his fingers to alight upon it. It was unmistakable: a long, worked flint, or similar rock, rounded at one end and sharpened to a fierce point at the other. Shreds of flesh still clung to it. He wiped it on the grass and put it in his pocket.

Then he moved silently towards the carts, using the abandoned houses as cover. When he could see the whole group of carts, he counted them: twelve, of which eight seemed to hold cages. Although they were black against the indigo dusk of their surroundings, the bars of the central ones glowed darkly red. These carts were drawn up in a rough circle, while those without cages stood a little further back; he thought that they most likely

held supplies. He crawled towards them through the grass until the heat became uncomfortable. Much closer, and it would be unbearable.

Yet someone had to bear it. Men – not stonemen – sat slumped and either tied or shackled by the legs, in three long rows. These were men enslaved to pull the carts: that much seemed clear. Probably they had been collected at various villages along the way, the stonemen capturing any young men before they killed the rest.

Again he counted. Just over fifty men: so four men for each cart, plus a few to spare. Two red-clad stonemen sat nearby, beside a pair of spluttering torches, eating greedily and flicking idle whips at the captive men from time to time.

Rothir scanned the rows of huddled prisoners carefully in the almost non-existent light, trying to see if any of them looked like Arguril. It was too dark. He could not tell.

He contemplated creeping up to kill the guards – he could dispatch at least one before they would even know that he was there; but they were too far apart for him to kill both swiftly, and the second might sound the alarm before he fell. Then he would still have to hunt for Arguril, unshackle him – if he was amongst the captives – and whether he was there or not, fight off the hundred or more enemies that would soon come running.

Even as he dismissed the idea, one of the captive men began to wail. It was some poor villager calling out the names of his lost family, who were most likely lying slaughtered in the street. Rothir found his fist was clenched.

“Shut the noise!” yelled one of the guards. “You want to end up like the one just down the road? Shut up or we’ll feed you to the burners!”

The man kept wailing. The guard stood up, picked up a torch and strode towards the line of shackled men to give one of them a vicious lash with the long whip.

There was a sudden clatter and a heavy thump from the nearest cage. Rothir saw a thing of darkness hurl itself against the glowing bars – away from the stoneman, who had evidently got too close to it. The stoneman stopped and moved away from the cage before he lashed the prisoner again.

Rothir measured that distance, between stoneman and cage, with his eye. About six yards. As the stoneman strolled back towards his seat, he tripped over something and swore. There was the rattle of a metal chain; that must be what was shackling the rows of captive men together.

The stoneman swung his torch round briefly, to allow him to release his foot. The torchlight shone upon the nearest prisoner, lighting up a brow, a

nose, a face – and Rothir knew that he saw Arguril.

Chapter 32

Retreating silently, Rothir followed the line of hedges away from the village in what was now almost complete darkness. He found his way back to the clump of trees where Narba waited. The horse stamped and snorted, seeming impatient for action.

“Rest now,” Rothir told him. “You’ll be driven hard enough tomorrow.” Narba nuzzled at his hand for food although he had nothing to give him. He had little enough for himself, but he sat underneath a tree and ate a third of what he had. Then he drew up his knees and rested his arms on them, planning.

His plans were all conditional. If this, if that. He could be sure of nothing. Perhaps he could be fairly sure of two things: one which was hopeful, and one not. The clank of metal chains holding the captive men was not a hopeful sign. His sword could cut through rope but would not bite through metal. Unless some axe were conveniently lying by, he would not be able to free Arguril swiftly without the shackles’ key. While the guards must hold the keys, he could not get at them without raising the alarm.

On the other hand, the prisoners could hardly pull the carts while they were shackled. If the stonemen were to move off the next morning, the prisoners’ bonds would have to be removed. That might be his best chance of rescuing Arguril – if he could keep the stonemen at bay for long enough.

He sat and made his plans, going through different scenarios, and then dozed for a while, waking at frequent intervals. When he woke a final time before the dawn, he dared to sleep no longer. At the first glimmer in the eastern sky he saddled Narba, feeling for the straps, and then led him across the fields towards the road.

Crossing the cobbled road was the most dangerous part of this short journey. He lifted Narba’s feet, one by one, and tied around his hooves the cloths that he kept in his pack for this purpose. Narba was used to the procedure and did not kick.

Then they crossed the road almost silently. Rothir led the horse over to the group of low barns near which the carts stood. Between two of the barns, as he had hoped, there was sufficient space for them to wait. There they were shielded on three sides: and although he felt horribly exposed from the fourth side, that nearest the road, there were no stonemen at this end of the village to see him. The stonemen were all within the centre, where the fires had been lit and the ox had been roasted. He could hear no

feet or voices and hoped that no-one would decide to walk down here just yet.

From his stirrups he could easily climb onto the sloping roof of one of the barns and peer over it at the shadowy camp where the carts stood. When he did so he saw nothing stirring, so he slid down the roof onto Narba's back again and waited. He felt for the stone in his pocket: checked his sword; rehearsed various possibilities in his mind.

It was another quarter-hour or so before he heard any movement. He climbed up to peer over the roof again. Although the sun had not yet risen, the sky was now pale enough for him to see the carts and lines of shackled men quite distinctly. He could pick out Arguril, sitting with his head bowed. Stonemen began to stroll out from the upper end of the village, walking towards the lines of prisoners, who lay on the ground or sat slumped and dejected.

“Up! Up! Wake up! No food until you've done the first five miles!”

Whips were wielded, and kicks given. A stoneman bent down to the captive at the end of one row: his legs were unshackled, and along with the next man he was pushed over towards a cart. Rothir could now see chains dangling from the carts' handles: the man was shackled to one of these by the wrist.

He realised that he would have to be quick. Another two prisoners were already having their metal bonds unlocked. They stood up stiffly, shaking their limbs before they were shoved over to the carts at swordpoint.

Arguril would be one of the next pair. Rothir watched tensely from his roof. He had to get this timing right.

The stoneman bent down. As soon as the shackle began to fall away from Arguril's leg Rothir threw himself onto the horse and galloped out of hiding.

Narba needed no urging: he rode straight at the stonemen. He was used to battle, and even seemed to relish it. But Rothir steered him away from the men, towards the ring of carts with their cargoes of searing darkness. He felt the growing sense of dread objectively this time, as if it were nothing to do with him.

He heard shouts and saw stonemen running towards him. By now the heat of the darkburns was beginning to bite. He steered Narba in an arc; and as the horse swung round to face the stonemen, he raised his arm and flung the stone into the middle of the ring of carts.

At once the nearest carts began to move and sway. There was the thump and crash of darkburns hitting iron bars. Several of the carts rocked to and

fro with increasing violence: one, more top-heavy than the rest, leaned so far over that it began to slowly topple.

Stonemen were running around the field, yelling and waving axes, faces distorted underneath the grey lines of paint: but they were not organised. Some ran to the carts, making matters worse by getting too close. The swaying and thumps increased, followed by a thunderous crash as the most unstable cart fell right over on its side. Other stonemen were charging at Rothir with their axes raised.

Ignoring them, he galloped straight at Arguril, who had had the wit to step away from the line of prisoners unobserved amidst the alarm, and who was ready.

As he galloped past Arguril Narba barely had to slow. Rothir reached down and summoning his strength hoisted Arguril up by his belt; he felt the young man grab and slither his way onto the horse's back behind him. Then Narba was away, scarcely breaking the rhythm of his hooves. Rothir blessed his horse fervently as he rode. Had he ever had a better?

"Hold on," he said over his shoulder. This was a risk, but he felt he had to take it. With Arguril clinging round his waist, he wheeled Narba round again and back, between two of the lines of shackled men – all on their feet now, staring – and straight towards the guard who still held his bunch of keys in one hand. With the other he brandished his sword, shouting incoherent threats.

Rothir swung his own sword as he rode and swiped the weapon from the stoneman's hand. With a second stroke, the hand holding the keys was parted from the guard's arm to sail over the heads of the shackled men. He saw one of the prisoners catch the keys as they fell.

That was the best that he could do for them. He rode on through a group of stonemen, slashing his sword from side to side without compunction. One man who tried to grab the reins fell under Narba's thudding hooves. Arguril grabbed Rothir's knife from his belt to stab at another until he too let go.

And then they were through and galloping across the road and up the hill. Most of the stonemen were still near the carts, shouting furiously.

As Rothir glanced back he saw why. A darkburn had escaped from the fallen cage: the stonemen were trying to herd it back behind the bars. Instead it rushed away from them in a smoky blur and threw itself towards the nearest line of prisoners.

His sense of heady triumph was immediately dispelled. Grimly he continued to gallop away from the screams and chaos while Arguril clung

on behind him. He hated himself now, hated what he had just done despite the fact that he could not have rescued all the other men. To attempt it would be suicidal. Reason told him that. Yet he felt that somehow he should have found a way. Neither he nor Arguril spoke.

Narba laboured valiantly uphill and then down towards the trees, heading south and west with Rothir hardly needing to direct him. Although a few stonemen had started running in pursuit, without horses of their own they had no chance of catching Narba and were soon left far behind.

Once the camp was out of sight, Rothir was able to pull on the reins, and as his horse slowed, finally to turn and speak.

“Arguril. All right?”

“Rothir. Good to see you.”

For a moment they gripped each other’s arms. He thought that Arguril did not look too bad considering what he must have been through. “Any damage?”

“Not much. They didn’t beat me; they needed me and the other men to be fit enough to pull those carts. Dreadful work.”

“So I imagine.”

“Exhausting, hot, and soul-destroying. One man went mad, I think. They fed him to a darkburn. But I’m all right. I’m hungry.”

Normally Rothir would have made a joke of this, for Arguril was always hungry. Now he just said soberly, “Look in the saddlebag. Have anything that’s there.”

They rode on, Arguril tearing at bread and chewing behind him. Eventually he swallowed and said, “Rothir. That was horrible, I know. But you couldn’t have done anything about the darkburn that escaped.”

“Maybe not; but I caused it.”

“Did you? How?”

“I caused the carts to overturn, by using one of the enemy’s stones.” Tersely Rothir explained what he had surmised about the stones and how he had put his guess to use. “It was the only way I could think of to get you out,” he finished. “I just didn’t foresee the consequences.”

“Those men would have been fed to the darkburns anyway,” said Arguril, “once they wore out. Me too. That was what they did every time a man collapsed. They’d just replace us at the next farm or village.”

“That village where I found you... What exactly happened there?”

“The stoneman army arrived there yesterday, about mid-day. We were already almost worn out from pulling the carts: I don’t know if the

stoneman commander had decided beforehand to stop there, or just saw it as convenient. There was no attempt at stealth.”

Arguril took another bite of bread, possibly to delay the moment when he would have to speak again.

“The men-folk all came running out,” he said, “armed and ready to accost the stonemen, but they had encircled the town. They set a darkburn loose to race through the streets. It only started one or two small fires, but it caused panic. When people tried to run out of the town the stonemen killed them. They took a number of the younger men as prisoners, to pull the carts: picked off all the others as they fled. Women and children too. Marched through the town to find any that were hiding. It was not good.”

Rothir shook his head. A prayer flowed through his mind, tied to a curse. Neither seemed adequate.

“You said exhausted prisoners were fed to the darkburns,” he remarked after a moment. “Is that why the darkburns chase humans, then, do you think? For food? We’re just fuel?”

“I expect so. What else could it be? Either that or a pure instinct to kill. When you’ve seen them burn a body up...”

“I have,” said Rothir, and both the men again fell silent. Eventually he added, “Parthenal and Maeneb will await us on the far side of the highland. They’ll be glad to see you.”

“And I to see them,” said Arguril. “You must have ridden a long way, Rothir. I’ll get down now and walk, to give Narba a rest. I believe... that they killed Vela some miles from the Thore.”

“Yes, they did.” Rothir did not elaborate. But there was one thing more he needed to ask. “Arguril, what happened to the scroll?”

“It’s stuffed down a rabbit-hole, near to where they caught me. I’d just woken up when I heard them coming. I didn’t even have time to get to Vela – I only just had time to hide the scroll. It’ll still be there if nothing’s eaten it.”

“So they didn’t know who you were. Well done. Get back on the horse, Arguril; I’ll walk.”

In the end they both walked, and took occasional turns to ride, past the burnt out farm at the edge of the moor and up onto the higher ground. As they walked Rothir related all that had happened in the days since Arguril had left the other Riders, before they reached the Thore, and had galloped off on his lone errand. Some of it he found inexplicably difficult to say.

But he said it, and as they trudged over the empty uplands, disturbing occasional brindlecocks, the peaceful everyday landscape seemed to calm

some of the tumult in his mind. He made Arguril mount the horse again, although he himself was bone-tired now, and thought the lone tree of the rendezvous would never come into sight. Finally it did, however, and he dragged himself towards it.

At first he thought there was nobody there. But as they drew closer the long figure of Parthenal unwound itself from a rock where he had made himself invisible, and greeted him.

“You found him, then.”

Parthenal’s tone was terse, but he was grinning. He embraced first Arguril and then Rothir, who dropped to the ground beneath the twisted tree and lay there unwilling to move until he had to.

“Where’s Maeneb?” asked Arguril.

“Not far away. She’s taken the horses to water.”

“Ah, water,” said Arguril longingly, and Parthenal threw him a waterskin.

Before long Maeneb appeared; and then Rothir and Arguril each had to tell his tale in full.

“So the stones around their heads are a deterrent to the darkburns,” said Parthenal.

“It appears so,” answered Rothir. “Though how that works, I couldn’t tell you.”

“It’s a shame you couldn’t keep one.”

“Yes. But next time we pass a dead stoneman, feel free to prise one from his head.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” said Parthenal grimly. “Dead or alive.”

“What did you two discover when you went after the larger group of stonemen?” Rothir asked. “Anything of interest?”

“Much the same as you,” said Maeneb. “We found three burnt out hamlets. And we saw the stonemen’s camp. We hid nearby overnight and watched as they moved out this morning. They’re moving fast. Roaming the country with their darkburns, looking for villages to terrify and sack – almost at random, it would seem.”

“A campaign of terror.”

“Perhaps. Although they are working their way gradually towards Outer Kelvha.”

“And then into Kelvha itself?” asked Arguril.

Maeneb blew out her cheeks. “I can’t imagine that. Take on Kelvha? They’d have to be mad.”

“They *are* mad,” said Parthenal. “They’re pumped full of ethlon and whatever else, and they don’t much care if they live or die, so long as they

die fighting.”

Rothir looked into the distance, frowning. “That group I followed puzzled me,” he said. “I’m not familiar with all the furthest parts of those northern reaches, but surely there’s little there for them to sack and burn? Working round to an attack on Kelvha is one thing. But why are they heading for the empty lands up north and east? They’re still two hundred miles even from the fur-trading outposts. It’s just a waste of effort.”

“They may not know that,” Maeneb pointed out. “When they find nothing, they may turn west again and head for Kelvha.”

“True,” admitted Rothir. “I did think of riding off somewhere to warn people that the stonemen were coming – but I didn’t know where to ride or who to warn.”

“I felt the same,” said Maeneb in a low voice. “If we’d kept going, perhaps we could have overtaken our half of the stoneman army and reached the next town in time to raise the alarm.”

“And perhaps we couldn’t,” countered Parthenal. “Our horses are close to exhaustion as it is.”

“And now we’re one horse down,” said Arguril.

“Ideas?”

“Sleep,” said Rothir.

“Find the nearest inn,” said Maeneb, “buy a horse, go after the western group of darkburns and try to get ahead of them to spread the warning. No point in chasing after the ones going north to nowhere.”

“The nearest inn will be the Wyedown. That’s two days’ ride,” objected Rothir. Although the Wyedown was the obvious place for them to go, he wasn’t sure quite how he felt about visiting the inn just now. Normally he’d welcome it. But then he reflected that Gwenna might no longer be there anyway.

“Find the nearest inn,” said Parthenal, “buy a horse – if we can afford one that has four legs – tell them to send warning to Outer Kelvha by the fastest messenger they have, and then go home to Thield. The message is the important thing. We don’t have to carry it ourselves. And we do need to report to Huldarion, as soon as we can.”

“All right. I vote for that.”

They all voted for that in the end. And after a chilly and uncomfortable night beneath the twisted tree – during which Rothir’s sleep was continually broken by the memory of screams – the Wyedown Inn was where they went.

Chapter 33

On the long ride to the inn they passed an increasing number of farmsteads and small villages, but thankfully all appeared unharmed by darkburns. The stonemen had not marched through this land, and when the Riders stopped to speak to farmers working in the fields, their questions about a red-clad army were met with incredulity. On Maeneb's trying to explain the nature of the army, the incredulity grew greater.

"If the stonemen do come here, these people will be totally unprepared," she told the others in dismay.

"We'll just have to hope the stonemen won't decide to come this way."

"But whichever way they go, the people will be unprepared!"

"Then the best thing we can do is send a messenger," said Rothir, "to prepare them. Even if one of us were to go on alone, our horses are too tired now." The three horses had taken it in turns to carry Arguril; when it was Maeneb's turn, she simply swapped horses with Parthenal and let him and Arguril go up on Shoda. So all the steeds were weary, no less than their riders.

They coaxed them on, alternately cantering and plodding through a rolling countryside that was tamer than any they had passed through for a while. This was the eastern edge of Outer Kelvha and, it might be said by some – not Rothir – the start of civilisation.

It was not simply that he preferred the wilderness or the semi-populated landscapes further east. He did not particularly care for Kelvha, although the demands of the last twelve years had often called him there.

But Rothir had always liked the rambling, friendly Wyedown Inn on the border. It was well over a year – more like two – since he had last been there, and he feared the Wyedown might be full. It was a popular place, because it lay so close to the great road that led west to Inner Kelvha, and usually held an ever-changing crowd of travellers and traders. He thought that if it turned out to be full he would sleep in a barn if necessary; just so long as he could sleep. Both mind and body ached for rest.

As they drew closer to the inn, however, it was clear that although they had arrived quite late in the day there would be no need to seek a barn. On crossing the wide Kelvha Road they saw no other travellers in either direction. Only a couple of farmers' carts stood in the Wyedown's yard; and when they went round to the stables, their horses more than doubled the

number of inmates there. The sprawling inn itself, which had always been a cheerful, bustling place, looked more run-down than Rothir remembered.

While they were in the privacy of the stables, Maeneb retrieved her money from an inner pocket. They all carried coins secreted in various pockets in their gear and clothing, but Maeneb had been handed most of Tiburé's share before they parted. This she now gave to Parthenal.

"Go and find us a horse. You'll be the best at picking one out," she said.

Parthenal gave a resigned sigh. "All right. Order me some food, and a decent ale," he told them as he took the coins. "I shouldn't be too long."

In the end he took well over an hour. He walked into the taproom when Rothir was already halfway through a somewhat disappointing mutton stew, and on his second mug of an ale that was just about half-decent. There were less than a dozen people in the place all told, and the landlord was not his usual chatty self. The Riders' voices seemed to echo amidst the empty shadows cast by the lamplight.

"It used to be better than this here," said Rothir, as he signalled for food and another tankard to be brought to Parthenal. "Did you manage to find a horse with four legs?"

"Eventually. I had quite a search. All the good horses have recently been sold to Kelvha."

"But that's where they will have come from in the first place, surely?"

"And now Kelvha's buying them back. But not at full price. They're driving some hard bargains, and the local people are having to accept because they need the money. Things have been tough here, apparently. Failed crops, and traders not appearing as they should."

"That's what old Bell the landlord told me too, when I asked him to find me a messenger," said Rothir. "He said there'd be no shortage of candidates if the money was right. So what did you pay for your horse?"

"Sixteen. The best one I could find – she's a bit long in the tooth, but she looks like a tough old nag. She'll carry Arguril home all right."

"She sounds enticing. Maybe you should ride her home yourself, and I'll have Alda," offered Arguril, who was on his third mug of ale and was now relaxing nicely, Rothir was glad to see. Maeneb had declined to eat with them but had taken her meal away with her to her room. As he spoke, Parthenal's meal was carried over to their table.

"Rothir!" exclaimed the serving-woman as she put it down. "How are you? It's been a long time since we've seen you in the Wyedown."

"Nearly two years," said Rothir, pulling himself to his feet. "Hallo, Gwenna. I hoped I'd find you here." In fact he had half-hoped. He knew he

ought to hope. But he was so tired. “Gwenna is the landlady’s sister,” he explained to the other two. He introduced them and then watched her exchanging pleasantries. He could see Parthenal already charming her, as he could so ably do when in the mood.

And although Gwenna too looked tired, to his eyes, she was as lively as ever, with the easy friendliness that had first attracted him to her. Or had it been she who had approached him? It seemed to him that that had been the case, on looking back to his first visit six or seven years ago. His visits since had been infrequent; but Gwenna had always greeted him with the same openness and pleasure. It made things very easy.

This evening was no exception. Soon she was telling the Riders all about the cancelled autumn fair, the strange travellers on the road, the troop of twenty Kelvhans in full war-gear who had treated the serving staff like dirt and left mud all over the floor.

“But that’s Kelvhans for you,” she said. “And that old wizard that you used to know, Rothir – he came in here last week and hardly spent a shilling. I thought a wizard would be rolling in it. Though how old is he, really? I can’t tell.”

“Wizard? You mean Leor?” Parthenal said sharply. “What was he doing here?”

“I thought he was called Liol. I didn’t talk to him myself. He told Bell he was heading north and east: goodness knows why. That’s a long trip to nowhere.”

“But we’ve just–” Arguril began to say, until Rothir quelled him with a look.

“He wouldn’t even do any magic for the crowd,” Gwenna went on, “though it wouldn’t have cost him anything. Not that there really was a crowd – there never is, these days. A magic trick or two might have helped to pull a few more people in.”

Then her voice softened as she turned to Rothir and asked him for his news. Which of course he could not tell her, since she had no idea who he really was. As far as she was concerned he was an itinerant farrier – a job he had actually done for a year or two in Kelvha, back in the days when the Vonn were still trying to find a way of living after their exile. The Vonn had become somewhat more established since that time, but that was simply the more reason not to tell her the truth.

So he murmured banalities about family business before he carefully ventured on the subject of the stonemen. Gwenna looked bewildered.

“Men with stones around their heads? You mean like on a crown? I’ve not seen anyone like that.”

“Nor heard of them?”

“No.”

“You will,” said Arguril, draining his tankard. Rothir frowned at him again. But the words reminded him that the landlord had still not let him know whether a messenger had been found to leave first thing next morning. He’d been assured that no-one would be prepared to travel overnight.

So now he got up – his muscles all complaining – and walked over to the bar to discuss it with old Bell, the message ready in his pocket.

“Well, I’ve got you an errand boy,” said the landlord, a shrewd, stout man. “He’s got a good fast horse. Where do you want him to go?”

That was not so easy to work out. Bell chalked a map on his bar and eventually they agreed a destination – Moreva in Outer Kelvha – and a price: a thin young man was summoned from the back room to do the riding. Rothir looked him over, questioned him, and nodded.

“All right. He’ll do. Make sure he leaves at first light tomorrow. Half the money now, half when he returns.” The price was high but he knew that Bell would take his cut.

And then once the young man had departed he asked Bell about the wizard Leor, as casually as he could: had Leor said anything about his purpose? The landlord looked at him stonily and shook his head. Bell must, he thought, be a friend of Leor’s. Or perhaps the wizard had left a little spell of silence over him. Would Leor have done that? Rothir had heard a report that the wizard had vowed to abandon all his magic, but that seemed such an unlikely prospect that he was doubtful of its truth.

Leor was also a friend of the Vonn – supposedly. Yet Rothir, who had met him on several occasions through the years, would still call him an acquaintance rather than a friend. Well-meaning, he judged, if you could judge a wizard in the same way as ordinary mortals; polite enough, but mysterious. Nobody ever seemed to know what Leor was about.

So now Leor is heading north and east, thought Rothir – only a few days ahead of the stoneman army which had captured Arguril. Why? What had Leor known? What was he up to, going in that direction, towards the cold wastes of the northlands? While they were not empty of life or interest, humans were certainly thin on the ground up there.

Although Rothir racked his brains, he couldn’t imagine any reason for Leor’s journey. But he couldn’t think straight now. Too tired. And nothing

to be done about it anyway.

Nothing to be done about any of it. He stared into the shadows flickering around the fire. Somewhere out there in the dark, the stoneman army rested and the darkburns smouldered: some poor unsuspecting village slept before the storm of fire and blood broke on them, and he hated his inability to act, his failure to ride out and save them.

Try to forget it for a few hours. Time to rest.

As he was gathering the energy to leave the bar Gwenna slipped over to him and took his hand.

“You remember where my room is, Rothir?”

“Do I?”

“Up the stairs, third on the right. I’m nearly finished here.” She smiled, leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “That’s if you want to?”

“How could I refuse?” he said gallantly. As he walked towards the stairs he told himself he ought to be more glad to take this chance. It was what he had half-hoped for, after all. Almost two years since he had been with a woman – and it had been Gwenna that time too. It might be two more years before the chance came round again.

Oh, the romantic life of a Rider of the Vonn, he thought as he entered her little room and sat down wearily on the bed. It was a life that didn’t leave much space for love. There were women riders of the Vonn, certainly, but he was related in some way to many of them and in any case they were his comrades in arms. Love was the last thing he wished to think about when he was on a mission; he needed all his focus for his task.

In any case love in real life was difficult. Rothir thought fleetingly of his mother and how she had left his father, so abruptly, when he was seventeen. Olbeth fourteen. Things must have been going on that he had never known about. Still didn’t know. Forget her. She forgot us, after all.

He removed his thoughts from her and let them rest more gently on the woman of his dreams: the one as dark and lovely as a rose, smiling as she leaned down to him from that imagined balcony in a reclaimed Caervonn. Silken hair the colour of a blackbird. A voice as sweet as any blackbird’s too. Skin soft as a peach. But that ivied balcony was a long, long way from here... As he gazed around the snug, untidy room he acknowledged just how far those dreams were from reality.

Not that reality lacked comfort. The patchwork quilt upon the bed looked so inviting that he felt inclined to lie down on it and go straight to sleep. If I really were a farrier, he thought, working in this everyday little place, with no other responsibilities, I might well have sought to marry Gwenna. Nice

girl, practical. And kind. That's important. I could have done much worse. She might even have married me. But she wouldn't marry a homeless Rider of the Vonn.

Oh but I would like some tenderness, he thought. To lie wrapped in someone's arms, to feel her gently stroke me, even just to talk in murmured voices, to rest next to her warm body. That would be so good.

Gwenna came in now. In the lamplight she looked older than he remembered; the happy smile lines around her eyes had acquired a careworn aspect. But he probably looked aged and careworn too; and she greeted him cheerfully.

It seemed that she didn't want to talk too much. What she did want was soon obvious. She was as innocently brisk as last time about stripping off her clothes.

Rothir, by contrast, felt himself creaking. All his over-worked muscles complained at the effort as he pulled off his shirt and breeches. He really wanted to lie down and sleep with his arms around her. Wake to her body. But he was a gentleman.

"Do I need to take precautions?"

"No. We can still get Callaret. But thanks for asking."

He was a little disturbed that she took the herb: so who else was she sleeping with? Sternly he reminded himself that lots of women took it to control their periods, and that anyway it was none of his business. He had no rights over Gwenna, and should not expect her to keep herself for him. He lay down on the quilt and kissed her, although she didn't seem to want preliminaries. She seemed quite happy to get down to it, so he tried to tell himself that he was happy too.

But when they did get down to it, he was too tired to enjoy it. His legs and back were aching relentlessly. He wanted it to be over, but that wasn't fair on Gwenna and in any case there was no sign that it would be over soon. Gwenna must have sensed this, for after a while she said,

"Is this not working for you?"

"It's fine," Rothir assured her. "I just want to make sure that it's good for you." Shifting his position, he caressed her in the way he knew she liked, touching her with the tenderness that he himself desired although he could not think how his hard roughened fingers could give her any pleasure.

Evidently they did, however, which was something, because once he reapplied himself to his task he found that he was still getting exactly nowhere. It felt like more a labour of duty than of love, and all that would

come into his head were screaming men and smoking carts which were of no help in the slightest.

Think of something else. Some success. It's not all failure. He conjured up Arguril, successfully rescued and galloping away with him on Narba across the fields, miraculously unhurt. Eled, saved, and up on Narba: poor old Narba, allowed no rest, so weary, and so slow...

"Are you still all right?"

"I'm just enjoying it," he said, and thought of Yaret, found and brought back from the swirling river of death, sat before him on the horse, head lolling as she leaned against him, only held there by his arm around her...

Good grief. Stop thinking about these things. Put it in a box.

Something must have done the trick, however, because now he was back on course, he had got into his rhythm, the end was thankfully in sight, and he was there at last, even if he did feel like a tired old racehorse galloping to the finish and then collapsing on the line, exhausted.

He fell on top of Gwenna on the bed. "Sorry."

"It's all right. It was for me, anyway." She snuggled herself against him. That was pleasant. He wondered if he could stay here and sleep instead of going back to the cramped, expensive room he had to share with Parthenal and Arguril. It would be so much easier than moving now. And there might be another chance for him in the morning, before they began the long trudge home to Thield.

But now Gwenna wanted to talk. With her hand laid on his chest, she began in a low voice to tell him how things were.

It seemed that they were even worse than she had said before. Trade was so poor. Bell was so worried. Everyone was worried, because if things didn't pick up, the inn might have to close and she would have to go back to her mother in Selba, and she didn't know how she would manage, she didn't even have the money to get there, everything cost so much these days...

Listening and murmuring occasional tired sympathy, Rothir understood the nature of the act they had just undertaken. It hadn't been like this before. He felt saddened, both for her and for himself.

At last he kissed her tenderly, for old times' sake, got up and dressed himself. Reaching inside his boot he found a silver coin secreted in a pocket there, and placed it on the corner of the table. Then he left her room and made his way back down the narrow stairs and through the inn's dank rambling passages.

“Good time, dwarf?” That was Parthenal, who was folding up his clothes. Arguril was already in the bunk above him, alert and interested and even admiring. Much he knew.

“Fine,” said Rothir somewhat grumpily. “And you? No luck? No willing waiter or gracious groom?”

“Sadly not on this occasion.”

“That’s not like you.” He was conscious that he sounded sour. Parthenal raised an eyebrow.

“You were quick off the mark yourself tonight.”

“I’ve known Gwenna for a long time,” Rothir said. But he knew that that would be his last time in her bed.

Chapter 34

The wind was high. Literally: when she suddenly awoke from another dream of falling, Yaret could feel the wind's force running down the tree – the tremors as the tree-top swayed and leaned, and then rebounded. Yet when she crawled out of the shelter of the hollow there was scarcely a breeze down on the forest floor. A fine small rain was falling as it did through every night and often into early morning. At the moment it was just enough to dampen her clothes but it was never cold.

She sat up and tried to shake off the dream. It was always the same one – the cliff hurtling past her, the fall far more terrifying than it had actually been when it had happened. She woke before she landed, feeling dizzy and appalled.

“But I'm here,” she said. “I'm safe.” And she performed her Haedath, touching earth, heart, lips, forehead, thinking of the riders who had saved her. She missed them. She missed that vividness, that sense of urgency – even the danger, because with it came the sense that her decisions mattered; and she missed the companionship. Although she had never felt lonely in her life before, she found that she did now.

In the days since they had left, it had at times occurred to her that if she stayed here in Farwithiel with Eled, perhaps when the Riders came back for him she could rejoin their fellowship. Then she could ride out of Farwithiel alongside them, to embark on some extraordinary, unknown life....

Except that they would not know what to do with her. And she would not know what to do in that existence. And her grandparents needed her back at the farm.

So enough, she told herself again. That's past. Think of the future: think of home, of Gramma. Washing day today; her grandmother would be bending over the tub, her sleeves rolled up, the mangle ready. Good morning, Gramma. The old lady waved a soapy hand but did not look up nor pause in her diligent scrubbing. Good morning, grandfather. She did not bother to imagine him.

Breakfast was waiting for her: in fact, the whole day's food was waiting, in covered dishes just outside the entrance to the tree. She lifted a lid. The usual coarse damp bread, and the orange and yellow fruit, the same as yesterday. She did not know the name for it. She wondered if it was safe to pick and eat any of the small bright red fruits she had seen hanging in the trees around.

If it is not safe, I will stop you.

“Thank you,” said Yaret aloud. However, most of the fruit was too high in the branches for her to reach until she was able to climb. One day.

Meanwhile, another day. She crawled back into the hollow tree and marked it on the corner of the scroll: that made twelve marks. Eled was still fast asleep. He would sleep for another hour and the Wardens would not arrive until mid-day.

Yaret sighed, and read the scroll again. She could understand those Vonnish words of encouragement now. She felt that she had learnt a fair amount of Vonnish in the last twelve days, even though Eled could teach her only a little at a time.

The scroll held exhortations to Eled to get well, to stay cheerful, to remember that he was not forgotten. It told him that the Riders had to return to Thield (how far away was Thield? she wondered, not for the first time) but he would join them soon, when he was well. They would hear word from Farwithiel and send for him. He was beloved.

Eled would read the scroll several times a day. At first it had sometimes seemed new to him but now he nodded as if it was familiar. Progress. Perhaps.

She seized her crutches and hobbled out of the tree again, this time to go and wash and walk before she ate. She did her standard circuit of the pools, swinging on the crutches, and looking up into the trees to see the birds' indignant jostling.

These great grey trees were growing familiar now; she was learning them too, from their deeply scored trunks to their most delicate stems and leaves, which were starting to turn gold around their scalloped edges although none had yet fallen. She wondered when they would – or if they would: did winter come here? The more she studied them the more she realised that every tree's life was a vast mystery to her. Each one was a world unto itself, on which the birds and insects – and darting lizards, and small fleet-footed furry things – built their own mysterious worlds which she could not hope to fully comprehend. No reason not to try, apart from time. She had plenty of that.

So she stood awhile and gazed at trees without understanding anything more, until her left leg began to hurt from taking all her weight. Then she hobbled on around the small, clear pools. They changed shape and moved from day to day, but she walked around them just the same. Her routine was fairly set now. It was important both for her and Eled. She had an idea that if you stayed here for long, your sense of time could easily unravel.

Time works differently for the Farwth.

Why sometimes *I*, and sometimes *the Farwth*? she mused.

It is the same.

That was something else it was important to get used to. Otherwise you might think you were paranoid, or mad. Inspired by spirits, or by heavenly voices. Although the Farwth never told her what to do: it only told her how things were.

“How are things today,” she said, “with you?”

That amused it. *Which parts?*

“Roots,” said Yaret.

They feed. They drink. They reach. They touch. They exchange. They send. They do that every day. And your roots?

She looked down. “Getting better, I think.” Her stump was still tingling but not so badly as before. It could no longer be called pain. Walen had stopped giving her the drugs some days ago, and it had not mattered too much. When the bandage had been changed yesterday the skin had no longer looked so red and ugly. The wound seemed to be turning in on itself somehow, its curved seams slowly neatening.

But her arms were sore from the crutches, and her left leg was aching from doing all the work: tired from carrying double the normal weight. She thought of Narba, that strong stoical horse, labouring steadfastly under its load, not so different from its rider. Then she steered her thoughts away.

As for her right leg, that posed a different problem quite apart from the healing stump. She feared its muscles must be weakening. Walen had suggested exercises, and Yaret had added her own to try and keep the muscles strong, but none of them was as good as walking would be. She wondered if she would have to live her life on crutches.

It is a strange thing to do in any case. To be uprooted always.

“I like it,” said Yaret, “to go where I will, to not be tied down to the earth.”

If you are not tied to the earth how can you feel it? How can you know it?

She considered this. “By observation. And by digging.”

But you cannot dig deep.

“True enough.” If she could not comprehend a single tree, how could she understand the whole earth?

Even I cannot do that entirely.

“Can anyone?”

They may try. But they may find that it is dangerous to dig too deep.

“I am sure,” said Yaret, feeling that this was altogether too deep for her before breakfast. She swung and hobbled her way back to the hollow tree where Eled was just sitting up, stretching and yawning and rubbing his eyes like a bewildered child. Perhaps not quite so bewildered as he had been a week ago.

“Good morning, Eled. We’re in Farwithiel,” she began, “inside one of the trees—”

“Oh yes, I remember.”

Eled sat up and touched the sword that lay sheathed beside him, and then reached for the scroll, unfurling it.

“I remember this,” he said. He read it, nodding. “Yes,” he said. “Yes. How long ago did they leave?”

“Twelve days. Come, Eled, breakfast is outside.”

He shuffled out behind her. He used his crutches too, although he did not find them easy – his sense of balance seemed to be awry. Yaret made a mental note to try some more balancing exercises on him later, after she had led him out on his own morning walk.

Just round one pool was enough for him. The trees no longer overwhelmed him as they had – in fact, he hardly seemed to notice them – but any sustained activity was difficult. So after circling the largest pool he would bathe in its margin, careful of his splinted leg.

Yaret had told him several times that she was female, but because he frequently forgot, he was unembarrassed that she stayed near him to ensure his safety. She would watch his beautiful lean brown body and think of Parthenal. Wondering if Parthenal ever... But no; even if Eled were sideways, probably not. Eled would be too close. She had an idea – whence it came she did not know – that Parthenal would prefer his lovers more detached.

This is something else I do not understand.

“Not just now,” she said.

As she helped Eled climb out of the pool she wondered when – or whether – to tell him again that she was a woman. It distressed her a little that he did not remember, and she was not sure why. She knew that she did not have the feminine beauty of, say, Maeneb; and she had never hankered after it. Her looks were serviceable enough. The two lovers in her life had not complained. But perhaps her lack of beauty had been the chief attraction there: maybe they had assumed that she’d be grateful for their interest. It was a dampening thought.

However, Eled's assumption of her maleness was useful now. Once she had helped him dress, it would be time for some exercises on his crutches. Then Eled would be tired for a while; so she would lead him back to the tree where she would sing to him – one old song to relax and cheer him, one new one that she was slowly teaching him. Very slowly.

Then she would practise her Vonnish. Eled enjoyed that: words were something he had not forgotten and he was an encouraging and patient teacher. She had learnt to spot the patterns of how Vonnish differed from Standard – how *p* slid to *v*, for instance, and *a* to *e*. Many of the words were familiar once you knew which way to turn them. The grammar too seemed like a peculiarly archaic version of that she was familiar with. The Wardens spoke an old-fashioned variety of Standard but Vonnish went still deeper into some mysterious and attractive past.

“You are quick to learn,” Eled had recently remarked. She was pleased that he was able to pay that much attention.

“I grew up speaking three languages,” she had explained; “well, two and half anyway, because my grandmother speaks Ioben, which is not so different to Bandiran, and we learnt Standard in school. And I've picked up some Kelvhan on my travels. But I prefer Vonnish.”

“So do I,” said Eled.

However, half an hour of Vonnish was plenty, possibly too much for Eled, so after that he took a nap. After the nap, there was another walk, this time along the Farwth. They would skirt its edge, looking into the dense tangle of stems and leaves and multitude of shades of green and brown – so many shades that her vocabulary in any tongue was totally inadequate. She asked Eled for words for one section but all that he could suggest was chestnut. She thought of russet, hazel, auburn, copper, earth and dun... And still a hundred more were needed.

“What colour do you call yourself?” she asked the Farwth – silently, so as not to confuse Eled.

I do not know colour. I know new growth and old: the tender and the tough. I know bud, leaf, blossom, twig, branch, root, stem.

She could not disentangle all those she saw before her. It seemed a tapestry woven out of trees: somewhere in the middle she guessed at some vast single entity, some huge heart of wood. However, she did not know this for sure and the Farwth did not enlighten her.

They had never yet got even half way round the Farwth before Eled became tired. His physical strength was improving rapidly but his stamina – or maybe simply his ability to stay awake – was slower to recover. By the

time they returned the sun would be streaming down through the distant tree-tops and it would be time for lunch. And after lunch the Wardens would arrive.

And then another walk, some exercises, talk, doze: wake and watch the birds that gathered during the long late afternoon, and try to think of names for them: eat, play memory games that she devised, sing, talk quietly until dusk fell.

It was then that Eled would talk about his home – or rather the lack of it. He spoke about the places he had ridden through, in small disjointed snippets. She glimpsed wide plains full of roaming herds, a mountain pass, a long strand by a pounding sea. He mentioned once or twice the place called Thield. She thought he did not realise that the word had passed his lips, so she did not draw attention to it. In any case he gave no clue as to where or what it was.

His home, it gradually became clear to her, lay in his people: both his own family and the extended family of the Vonn. He had two sisters who were also Riders, as was his father, although his father was perhaps a farmer too. It was not clear. He spoke of his riding partner Arguril, Rothir whom he evidently regarded as a mentor or perhaps an honorary older brother, and other names were mentioned besides the ones she knew: Sashel, Gordal, Alburé, Aretor.

And once Huldarion. As soon as he had said that name he looked suddenly afraid. It was something he thought he ought not to have said. So she pretended not to have heard it and turned the conversation to his horse, Poda, who was suffering from a sore fetlock. The last thing he would do before he slept was read the scroll again.

Every day a pattern of orderly variety. Every day the same.

But today was not quite the same. The Wardens arrived – all three of them this time. Golen, as always, came to talk to Eled, to check his eyes and speech, and memory and reactions. But Baird and Walen took Yaret aside, a little way round the huge home tree as if for privacy. There they sat her down on the root that seemed to have grown there for the purpose, and carefully unwrapped her dressings.

“How is Poda?” she asked. The horse was being kept near the Wardens’ residences, too far away for Yaret to walk there and see her.

“She is continuing to heal well,” said Baird. “As is your own leg.” He gently felt her stump, and Yaret tried not to mind. “Is it still tender?”

“Hardly at all,” she said, for it was not sensitivity that made the touch unwelcome, but simply the reminder that such a major part of her was

missing.

“We have something for you,” Walen said with a faint smile: and she produced a foot.

An approximate foot, at least. It had no toes. It was slightly smaller than Yaret’s remaining foot and was bent at a walking angle. It was made of a strangely grained, pale wood. Above the ankle and lower shin was a mass of what looked like some fine clay.

“This is only a prototype,” said Baird, “a first fitting, if you like,” and he offered it up to Yaret’s stump and strapped it in place with wide leather straps. It felt cool and heavy although it was probably lighter than her original foot would have been.

“What sort of wood is that?” she asked.

“It is a piece of rootwood: very strong, slightly flexible, and almost unbreakable – certainly less breakable than bone. The clay is merely to take an impression. From that a more accurate fitting can be cut, with a leather pad and cup placed where the clay is now. No, don’t get up. You need to keep still for a while. The clay will take a good half-hour to set. The leg’s too long in any case; we’ve allowed for it to be whittled down into shape.”

Then Baird went to check on Eled’s splint, leaving Walen sitting near her with the leg stretched out between them like an unexpected guest.

“How soon can you adjust the foot to fit?” she asked the female Warden.

“By tomorrow,” Walen said. “But don’t expect to run around on it straight away. Or even to walk more than a few steps. It’ll take a while for you to adapt to it; and you have some healing still to do.”

“Yes. I know all that. But it’s wonderful news. Thank you.” She couldn’t stop smiling at the leg. “May I ask one other thing, Walen, while you’re here? My monthly bleed has started – the first for a while because I normally take Callaret. But I lost my supplies two weeks ago. Can you help?”

“With cloths or Callaret?”

“Both, if possible.”

Walen considered. “Well, I’ll see what I can do. Callaret’s not something we grow much, because we have so little need of it ourselves. Almost all the Wardens are too old to require it.”

“But you must have younger Wardens here as well?”

Walen shook her head. “Hardly any.”

“How will you renew your numbers, then?” asked Yaret curiously.

“Surely you’ll need younger people to take over the wardenship in time?”

“Eventually, yes. But we are a very long-lived people.” Walen paused. “I myself am a hundred and sixty-nine years old.”

“*What?*” Yaret sat bolt upright. Some craven instinct was telling her to shuffle away – as if Walen would transform into a shrunken crone before her eyes. The other woman looked only seventy at the most. Luckily her leg prevented her from doing such an insulting thing.

“Oh, I’m by no means the oldest of us,” said Walen. She sounded matter-of-fact but seemed a little sad. “The few youngsters that we have are half-wardens like Maeneb – but they are very few indeed. The oldest warden is well over two hundred.”

“How can that be? Is it an effect of living in this place?” Yaret looked around at her surroundings in sudden new alarm. Living twice a normal lifespan held no charms for her.

I do not think two hundred years is a particularly long lifespan.

Walen evidently heard that too, for she dipped her head in acknowledgement.

“Not for a tree. It is for humans, however,” she said.

I am aware of that. But it is only custom that makes humanity think a century is long.

“It’s not custom, it’s experience. We live at a faster rate than trees do,” argued Yaret. Walen looked faintly alarmed at her casual contradiction of the Farwth. But was she supposed to simply agree with everything it said?

That is not necessary. Not for you.

“Ah... only for the Wardens, then?” said Yaret.

The Farwth does not ask that. But it happens.

“So perhaps compliance is a result of living here,” she said drily.

Walen looked put out. “Compliance? We make our own choices. Farwithiel is kind to us.”

Kindness is not a concept that I understand.

“It is hospitality,” said Yaret. “For instance, it was kind of you to take us in and send the Wardens here to care for us.”

It suited the Farwth to do so. That was not kindness.

Yaret considered this. “Kindness may have its basis in selfish motives as well as in compassion,” she observed. “We humans, for example, may be kind because we wish to think better of ourselves. Or because we want others to admire us. The result is kindness none the less.”

I have no need to think better of myself.

“I would like to know what you do think of yourself.”

“Yaret!” Walen addressed her with mild but definite reproof. Her remarks were obviously unsuitable.

“I beg your pardon,” she said to the Warden. “I asked you about your lifespan, but I did not allow you to answer.”

Walen looked down at her hands upon her lap. They were slightly gnarled and wrinkled. “It is true that long life is partly a result of living here,” she said. “But only for the Wardens, not for you. And it only works while we stay here. If we leave Farwithiel we will begin to age again at the normal rate.”

“So you can’t leave.” Yaret tried to imagine a century and a half spent enclosed amongst such huge, mysterious trees, in this enchanted world.

“We can’t leave if we want to live long, no. But why would we wish to leave in any case?” Walen gestured at the vine-clad trunk above her, massive and serene. “We have peace and a purpose. Farwithiel needs its wardens. To protect the Farwth is a vital and enriching task. And we in turn have everything we need.”

Compliance, thought Yaret, and heard the Farwth answer.

I do not ask them for such service.

This time she thought that Walen did not hear. The Farwth’s voice was for her alone. So she answered it silently, inside her head.

Then why are the Wardens here?

They arrived at a time of plague and pestilence. I gave them shelter and they in turn tended my trees and guarded my borders. It was not kindness. It was an exchange.

But the Wardens call it service. I’d say they worship you.

The Farwth does not ask for worship. That is another concept that is alien to me.

Possibly because you can imagine nothing greater than yourself, Yaret reflected.

On the contrary. The earth is greater than the Farwth. So is the sun.

She dipped her head. I beg your pardon. I spoke carelessly.

But I do not worship the earth or the sun.

Oh, I expect you do, in your own way, she thought. But it is human nature to worship age and power. Particularly power.

Madeo did not worship me. She argued with me. Politely. As do you. The Farwth seemed amused.

“I wish I’d met Madeo,” said Yaret aloud, before realising both that it was a singularly foolish statement and that Walen was looking at her with bewilderment.

“Madeo?” queried Walen. No doubt it seemed to her that Yaret had just been sitting and staring rudely into space.

Yaret pulled her attention back to the Warden. “I beg your pardon, once again. My thoughts were roaming. May I ask if your long life is given you by the Farwth?”

Not I.

And Walen shook her head. “The Farwth has many powers, but that sort of spell-making is not one of them. No, it was the result of wizardry.”

Yaret frowned. “So you mean that two hundred years ago, some sorcerer or wizard—”

“Oh, it was much longer ago than that,” said Walen with an odd wistfulness. “I am the third generation and the last for whom the enchantment works. The spell was created four centuries ago to give long life to the original Wardens, and their children, and their children’s children. No further.”

“So you don’t have any children yourself?”

“I did,” said Walen. Her voice was almost steady. “Two. They are dead now. They died of old age.”

Yaret caught her breath; and this time she did instinctively draw back, not in horror at Walen but at what had been inflicted on her. To lose your children to old age, while you yourself stayed young... What parent could want that? Surely no human would cast that sort of spell. No human with any sense of foresight.

“Who devised this magic?” she asked, her voice hushed with pity. “If not the Farwth, then who was it?”

Walen looked away and up into the trees as if she did not want to say. But Yaret heard the answer resonating through her mind.

The Farwth said, *It was the Wizard Liol.*

Chapter 35

“Leor,” said Huldarion, his voice cool and even. “Leor is what I do not understand. What was he doing up there, crossing the wildland from Outer Kelvha?”

“We could have roamed around for another three weeks and not discovered that,” said Rothir.

“You could roam for a lifetime,” added Tiburé, “and if Leor did not want you to know what he was up to, you would never find out.”

Huldarion looked across at Maeneb, who shook her head. “He has always been obscure to me,” she said.

He looked down again, and laid his hands upon the map spread out across the table. The lower part of it was dominated by the strong blue ribbon of the Darkburn River, which was surrounded by the dark green of the forest and looped around in two great curves before it reached the sea.

There, near to the coast, was the city of Caervonn; Parthenal’s eyes were drawn to it. Not all that far away in miles but still unreachable. The rivers Thore and Borelet were lesser strings of blue, the first running almost straight from north to south, the other winding to the east. To the west, the Pridore gathered up its tributaries as it flowed through Kelvha, accumulating might: just as the Inner Kingdom of Kelvha seemed to gather tributary states around it.

Parthenal watched the scarred hand point to the area north of Outer Kelvha, a scattering of nondescript small towns. The hand was more interesting to him than anything it was pointing at.

“Some of these places are prosperous enough but none are of any military account,” said Huldarion in his unemotional, meditative way. “Why would a stoneman army go up there?”

“Because they could,” suggested Solon, casual as always. As one of Huldarion’s chief councillors he assumed an informality that others seldom did. When the council had gathered in the tent, he had greeted his wife Tiburé with the merest nod.

Thoronal’s nod to Parthenal had been hardly any warmer. Thoronal, who was Huldarion’s cousin and another chief councillor, was also Parthenal’s cousin on his father’s side and nominal head of his family. Parthenal knew well that Thoronal, ten years his senior, did not approve of him, although nothing had ever been said to him outright. He had schooled himself not to

care, because Thoronal was an experienced and valuable Rider. That should be all that mattered. Somehow it wasn't.

Vaneb, as marshal of resources, was also present. Arguril, being a mere junior patrolman, was not. The eight of them standing round the table filled the tent. A sharp autumn wind blew a few dead leaves around their feet.

"As I told you earlier," Tiburé said sharply, "we don't know where the stonemen went. We had to guess. We didn't have the manpower to investigate." She was the only one of them who would dare to speak so tersely to Huldarion.

Though I would dare, reflected Parthenal, if it were necessary. It is not a question of requiring daring. It is simply that Huldarion is so seldom wrong.

Huldarion looked up at him now, expressionless as always. Even Parthenal, who had known him all his life, found it difficult to read his face, its left side drawn taut with the old scars of his burns. The fire had spared his eye but not much else. Huldarion was the older by three years but also by a dozen years of silently borne pain.

"Parthenal," he said. "You're very quiet. What is your opinion?"

Parthenal studied the map and gathered his thoughts. "It was such an unpredictable expedition all round," he said, "that I find it hard to know what to make of it. Possibly my wits have been slightly addled by the Farwth..."

"It does that," said Solon, while Maeneb stirred but did not speak.

"...but it seems to me that the stonemen could have had no short-term military objective in heading north. They might have been pursuing Leor, but so many of them?"

"It would need many," said Rothir.

"But why divide the way they did?"

"To broaden their search," said Solon. "More chance to cut him off."

Parthenal shook his head. "If they wanted to cut him off they should have spread out wide and thin. And they were hardly in a hurry; those carts slowed them down. I admit that the smaller group which Rothir followed northeast had no obvious destination, unless they were indeed pursuing Leor: so that is a possibility."

"But what would Leor be doing up there in the wilderness?" demanded Tiburé.

"Who knows? Who ever understands Leor's business?"

"The stonemen do," said Huldarion drily, "according to your theory."

"Knowing which direction he is taking is a different thing to knowing why."

Huldarion nodded slightly. “Very well. The other group: the stonemen that you and Maeneb followed. I know you sent out your message warning the towns that lay ahead of them. On Tiburé’s return, we issued dispatches to Kelvha and they ordered some of their own troops up there. Only two companies; they don’t regard that area as of tactical importance.”

“Do they even have jurisdiction that far north?” asked Rothir.

“No. But that wouldn’t stop them interfering if they wished. Anyway, reports from those two Kelvhan companies came back to me this morning.” Huldarion picked up a scroll from the table. “As much as they choose to tell us, at any rate. They count this as a minor incident. They report three villages and a town – Moreva – burnt. An estimate of between fifty and seventy dead.”

“And that’s a minor incident?”

“To Kelvha it is. They didn’t bother to count the bodies. It could have been far worse, but for your warning message. They spoke to a few of the survivors: thanks to you, most of the population got out before the stonemen came. Only the men who stayed to defend the place were killed.”

Rothir sighed. “That’s something, I suppose.”

“It is much,” said Huldarion. “The Kelvhan companies saw no stonemen. One company followed the stoneman army’s trail west to the Outlands; when it was clear it was continuing to head away from Kelvha, they turned round and came home again.”

“The Outlands? But there’s nothing there.”

“Except stonemen, now.”

There was a pause.

“We should go back there ourselves,” said Rothir. “Find out what’s happening.”

“We know what’s happening,” said Huldarion, “we just don’t know why.”

Here Vaneb spoke for the first time, her voice quiet and clear after the stern bass of the two men. “If we went back ourselves, Rothir, it would require a great part of our resources. Two Kelvhan companies is equivalent to a quarter of our Riders. We could empty Thield and leave it unprotected, of course...”

Meaning of course we couldn’t, thought Parthenal. Huldarion was looking at him again.

“You still have something left to say,” Huldarion observed. “You told us that the stonemen could have no short-term military objective. But what about long-term?”

“Long-term is a different matter,” replied Parthenal. “It’s just possible they could overwinter in the Outlands, and in the spring make an attack on Kelvha from the north.”

There was a silence. Huldarion studied him, one finger tapping thoughtfully on the table. Those considering eyes on him made Parthenal’s skin tingle. He hoped he did not show it.

“That would be a long winter,” Huldarion said. “Provisions?”

“The villages that were burnt out – it’s my guess that they ransacked the granaries and store barns first.”

Huldarion nodded slowly. “And harvest fully in,” he said. “But where would the stoneman army stay?”

“The Outland Forts,” said Parthenal.

Rothir threw back his head as if in sudden memory. “The Outland Forts. Why didn’t I think of them? And I was there only a couple of years ago – less than that. They’re still habitable if you’re not fastidious.”

“Stonemen are not fastidious,” said Tiburé. “What were you doing all the way up there?”

“Chasing a rumour that there had been signs of life within the Forts. Fires had been seen from a distance. Parthenal didn’t come with me; it wasn’t deemed all that important, only the word of a wandering shepherd. So I took a few days out to check.”

“And you told me you found nothing,” said Parthenal.

Rothir nodded. “That’s right. I didn’t check all the forts: they go on for miles, in various states of dilapidation.” He brushed a hand across the map. “All the way west to the far mountains. There must be dozens of them, but I only visited the ones closest to the eastern road. No life was visible apart from birds and a few mangy sheep. The earth was trodden down around the forts but the only prints I could see clearly were those of wolves and bears.”

“Bears do not light fires,” said Huldarion.

“No. It’s true I did see signs of fire-making in two places. I put them down to another wandering shepherd.”

“How habitable are the forts?”

“Considering their age – what are they, five, six hundred years old? – they’re surprisingly well-built. The ones I checked had their walls almost entirely intact. Doors and roofs had gone, of course, but you could see the stone brackets for each set of floor beams – at least three levels – and the stone staircases were complete most of the way up.”

“You told me you wouldn’t mind moving in yourself,” Parthenal reminded him. “Put a ceiling in and it would be more comfortable than

Thield, you said.”

“I expect I did.”

Huldarion asked, “Are there trees nearby?”

“Yes. Numerous large stands of pine. Not exactly forests, but certainly enough to refurbish a few forts. I saw no signs of attempted refurbishment.”

Huldarion looked at Rothir in a way that Parthenal recognised. He had been on the receiving end of that look too, from time to time. When it happened, it made him feel afraid – not because of any ill-will on his leader’s part, but because Huldarion always understood more than he was told, and then he judged. That they had been friends since boyhood made no difference. Huldarion’s was the only opinion that Parthenal ranked above his own: and his the only judgement that he feared.

“So you put in your report saying there was no cause of concern,” Huldarion said to Rothir.

“Yes.”

“But you thought privately that re-use was possible.”

“I... yes. The forts seem made for it – if there were any point. They’re on the edge of nowhere. It’s not a defensive location.”

“It was once.”

“Evidently. But hasn’t been for centuries.”

Huldarion looked at Parthenal. “And you think the forts may be re-used this winter.”

“There’s nothing else up there,” he said. “No other place the stonemen could hide out. So, yes, I think the Outland Forts may be re-used: not for defence, but for attack.”

He watched the scarred hand place two red tokens on the map, in the area where a number of small squares denoted the Outland Forts.

“So,” said Huldarion. “Thoronal? Your turn.”

Thoronal stepped forward. “Crade and I rode south,” he said, somewhat importantly. “We crossed the Pridore and skirted southern Kelvha, then rode up its western edge.”

“What for?” asked Parthenal.

Thoronal gave him a flicker of a glance. “Stonemen. What else?”

“We’d had reports,” Solon explained, “of troops of stonemen heading out that way. Small numbers but at frequent intervals, driving a few darkburns. They go west and they don’t come back. Kelvha have been too busy with the encroachments on their south-east borders to take much notice.”

“So what are these stonemen doing?”

“They’ve been setting up camps at the upper end of the Pridore, around the caves there,” said Thoronal. “We didn’t retreat until we tracked them down.” Parthenal sensed that this was a pointed comment on his own failure to track the enemy to its destination.

“Again, they have sought a deserted area to camp,” commented Huldarion. He reached forward to place more red tokens on the map. “Now Kelvha has stonemen on its south-west and its north-west flanks. If the group that Rothir followed were to stay in the northeast – and especially if their numbers were added to – Kelvha would then have enemies on three sides: none of them directions from which it would normally expect attack.”

“It would expect it from the south-east,” said Tiburé, “from the Darkburn forest, as usual.”

“Exactly. Kelvha has already been tackling a number of minor incursions – nothing serious as yet; but they seem to expect more heavy attacks from that direction. So if we are right, they will be surrounded on all four sides.”

“And with the snows up north,” said Parthenal, “and the frozen swamplands to the west, it would be almost impossible to prise the enemy out of their strongholds over winter. In fact, it would be extremely dangerous to try.”

Thoronal moved restlessly.

“This is leaping to conclusions, Parthenal. It’s all very well,” he argued, “this talk of wintering here and wintering there as if it were nothing for an army. Food might not be a problem if they’ve been sacking places as they go: and I suppose they can hunt if they run out of supplies. But the cold in the north would be dreadful. Spending weeks in freezing temperatures and darkness? The stonemen would be fatally weakened before they even started their campaign.”

“Cold is not a problem,” answered Parthenal, “if you have darkburns.”

For a moment everyone was silent.

“Kelvha needs to know this,” said Huldarion at last.

“They probably won’t want to listen,” Solon warned.

“They also need to know about the stones,” put in Rothir, “that they repel the darkburns. If that power applies to all the stones the stonemen wear around their heads–”

“Kelvha won’t want to know that either,” said Tiburé acidly, “unless they think it’s their own discovery.”

“All the same,” said Rothir. He seemed about to say more, but fell silent at a movement of the scarred hand upon the map.

“I think we need more proof of that power,” said Huldarion, “before we present it to the Kelvhans as a definite fact. And we also need more definite facts about the stonemen’s current hideouts. I shall travel up to the Outlands with a company. A small one. It will not require a quarter of our strength to merely scout them out.”

Vaneb bowed her head in acquiescence.

“I should like to be the captain of that company,” offered Thoronal. Of course you would, thought Parthenal, so sure you are of your own claim. Who else would put himself forward in that presumptuous way?

“That will be decided shortly.” But Huldarion looked across at Tiburé. “I would have considered you for captain, Tiburé, were it not that I have another task for you to undertake. And if Kelvha is to be involved we cannot be seen to have a woman in authority.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Is Kelvha to be involved?”

“I hope so. That is where your task will be – in Kelvha City. We need to make sure that Kelvha takes an interest,” said Huldarion, “both for their sake and our own. Kelvha’s forces outnumber ours considerably. At present we are not important to them.”

“But we could be, if we bring intelligence of a forthcoming attack,” said Tiburé thoughtfully. “Especially if we then help them to repel it.”

“Kelvha’s problems are not ours,” objected Solon, possibly just for the sake of disagreeing with Tiburé. “Why should we risk our lives to protect their borders?”

Huldarion gazed down at the map.

“Two reasons,” he said. “Firstly, it is not just Kelvha who will suffer. At present it is not Kelvha at all. It is those outer settlements which have no defence against the stonemen; and I do not wish to stand by while they are ransacked and their people slaughtered.” Parthenal thought that at that moment Huldarion did, unusually for him, betray emotion.

“I agree,” Rothir murmured. “It is what we are for.”

“And the second reason?” asked Parthenal.

Huldarion raised his damaged, now totally impassive face.

“The second reason is Caervonn.”

Chapter 36

Yaret missed the hollow tree. The cottage that she shared with Walen and another elderly female Warden was certainly more comfortable than the tree had been. It had walls strangely woven out of yellow-green stems that grew up from the ground – perhaps a variety of willow – and which seemed still to be alive. Inside were low beds with rustling, sweet-scented mattresses, and reed mats underfoot in every room. It had proper wooden chairs.

But she missed waking to the rain and birdsong and the sense of green: she missed the solitude of her mornings walking round the shifting pools... Although it had never been quite solitude, with the inescapable presence of the Farwth.

However, the Wardens' cottages were undoubtedly a better environment for Eled now that his leg was healing and his alertness had improved. Yesterday she'd tried a memory game on him and he had laughed.

"We played this one last week!" He was right. He did not need her company so much now that he took frequent walks with Habend and the other Wardens. She still had her daily language lesson with him; but they did not talk so much, nor sing.

Yaret missed that too. The Wardens sang occasionally, and she had sung one or two of Madeo's songs to them, but she felt too embarrassed to accompany herself on her little one-string gourd. In any case she sensed that the Wardens weren't really interested in Madeo's songs or in Madeo herself the way the Farwth was.

The Farwth had given her glimpses of Madeo's life here. There had been four visits, not three as Yaret had thought; two of them long, the last one with a baby girl. Madeo had leaned against the massive trees and sung to them and to her child. She had been quick and restless, always moving, said the Farwth, although Yaret suspected that anyone other than the Wardens would seem restless to it.

Madeo's hair was as brown and curled as a fallen leaf, reported the Farwth; her body as lean and sturdy as an oak sapling. She liked to muse upon her travels, picking out tunes at the same time as words.

And it seemed the Farwth liked to muse upon them too. Hence it asked Yaret several times for details of Madeo's journeys.

"She was your friend," said Yaret on one of these occasions, in sudden realisation. She spoke aloud, since the Wardens were not by.

That seemed to give the Farwth pause for thought.

We gave each other information. And nourishment. Does that make us friends?

“If you cared about each other, yes.”

It made no difference if I cared or not. She is long dead.

“But you still think about her.” And even though Madeo was long dead and buried, could the Farwth not commune with her bones as they decayed deep in the earth?

This was not a thought intended for the Farwth. None the less it answered.

She is still there, but changed. We do not talk.

“Can anyone talk with the dead?” asked Yaret.

I talk with her in memory, the Farwth said. Tell me more of that second journey to the north she made.

As Yaret cast her own memory back to those ballads of the north, it occurred to her that the Farwth had side-stepped the question. It was unanswerable, after all.

But to her the Farwth’s affection for the long-dead Madeo seemed clear. The Farwth was especially interested in her stories of the forests of the north – vast tracts of pine and fir and selver and other trees that Madeo had described but did not name. Yaret saw them growing in her own mind as she related the old words. Those great forests had not died as Madeo had; many of the trees that the bard had spoken of would still be alive.

Yet Madeo, commented the Farwth, hardly spoke about the homeland whence she had fled with all her people; which was what Yaret would have most liked to hear. And the Farwth itself could – or would – tell her nothing of the lands left by the Bandiran.

Despite such gaps and silences the Farwth was better company than the Wardens. They spoke mainly about their everyday concerns, showing little curiosity about the world outside Farwithiel. The exception was Habend, a tall, softly-spoken man who seemed to know Tiburé and asked Yaret wistfully for details of her life. Questions which Yaret could not answer. Everything was very gentle, very quiet, very much the same from day to day.

This morning was no different. She had just limped over to see Poda; the mare was kept in a wooded enclosure with half a dozen other horses, and was recovering her fitness more quickly than Eled. As Yaret stroked her and spoke to her in clumsy Vonnish she thought about her donkeys. More things that she missed.

Then, since Eled was occupied with Habend, she walked the two miles to the Farwth. She took a stick but barely used it. Although she limped, it was not as markedly as before.

Yaret did this walk daily now: at first it had been hard on her leg – on both legs – but now they seemed to be toughening up as she adapted to the wooden limb, and her muscles had almost returned to their former strength. She just needed to be careful not to overdo it.

Later on she would practise her swordplay, or at least the basic moves Eled had shown her; and privately, a few more complex moves that she had seen Parthenal employ that morning when she'd watched his sword drill. They had been difficult and she probably did them wrong. Eled's sword was too long and heavy for her, and would have been dangerous; so instead she used a length of wood.

Her exercises would be of little practical use in an actual fight, she thought, but she could feel her muscles growing stronger. She enjoyed the stretching that was involved, and sensed that the swordplay was good for her balance. Her leg didn't seem to mind it either. She was on her second wooden leg now: the first had ceased to fit after a while. But this one felt right.

You are faster today, the Farwth said.

"I am faster every day." She could have talked to the Farwth from Walen's little hut, but it seemed unmannerly with other people around her who could not hear it when she did. She assumed that at times it spoke to Walen or another Warden, for she would see their eyes glaze and their lips half-move. It felt strange and intrusive to be watching that.

So she sought solitude amidst the great trunks near the Farwth. Today she first walked over to see what shape the pools assumed; they were scattered with leaves, and she looked up at the reddening boughs and speckled golden fruits hanging high above her.

She thought she could climb a number of the trees now if she tried. But when she attempted to plan the footholds on those branches, she immediately imagined herself falling, plummeting endlessly as she had so often in her dreams. Then she had to look down at the pools again until the dizziness receded. I was found, she told herself. I was found. I am still here.

After visiting the pools she walked over to the great hollow tree for old time's sake. It was almost three weeks since she had slept here – Eled's scroll now held forty marks, and she had been amongst the Wardens for the last eighteen of those. It felt like longer.

How far could you walk now?

“A few miles more, I think,” said Yaret.

And ride?

“I haven’t tried that yet.”

Try it. You may need to ride before too long. When you leave here.

She was startled. “Really? How soon do you think I can leave? The Wardens haven’t said anything about me going home yet.”

The Farwth did not answer immediately.

Not too soon. Not too long. I have not heard you singing for a while.

“I’ll sing now if you like,” said Yaret, and she went to sit on the grass facing the green mass of the Farwth.

A song by Madeo, it said.

“Most of them are.” Although she had been writing her own songs recently, they were not what the Farwth wished to hear. She thought she had probably emptied her mental store of Madeo’s songs by now, and was singing repeats. She had not forgotten that she had previously been searching through them for the mysterious skeln. However, if the skeln had ever been in any of Madeo’s songs, it still refused to surface in her memory.

Today she found herself singing the *Long Walk* that she had sung the day before the Riders had departed.

“The light on the hills is beckoning me

“As I set my foot on the track

“And its beauty calls me forwards

“And bids me not look back.

“When I reach the summit the light is gone,

“But a further mountain beckons me on...”

Where were the Riders being beckoned to now? From Eled she had gained a sense that they were carried along by history, by events, and had no fixed destination nor proper home. None that he could describe to her, at least. Although she knew they were in exile from Caervonn, Eled could tell her little of that place, having been a child when he left. He was unable to add anything to what she had heard of it from Rothir.

In any case she did not think the Riders could return there. In her imagination they galloped across endless plains, always seeking out or escaping from their foe. Galloping away from her into a separate future.

Well, she would be glad enough to be crossing the endless plain herself soon. And it would not be endless at all, not for her. Once she could see the Coban hills it was not much more than a two week journey on foot to reach Obandiro; with a horse it would be less. She would not have to backtrack as far as the Darkburn Loft, which was a relief, although she also felt for that

wild region something almost like nostalgia. It seemed more untouched than any other place that she had visited. Or touched by something different. After she had sung the last refrain she asked,

“Do you have lin here, Farwth?”

No answer. She tried to elaborate. “A sort of tree spirit, or earth spirit maybe, which just pops up when—”

I know what lin are. Rather, I know what you mean by them. I do not know them. I have not seen nor sensed them here.

“I’d expect you to see them if anyone could. And you’d think Farwithiel would be just the place for lin,” said Yaret a little wistfully, “or woodwones, certainly, if they existed. Do you think they don’t actually exist, then?”

Again there was no answer for a while.

She began to explain, “My grandmother swears that the lin are real, although—”

They may be real. They are not as the Farwth is. It is tree and earth and air and water, but not spirit.

“But surely everything alive has a spirit?”

I do not know what you mean.

“Well, everything that is conscious—”

You spoke of your grandmother. You need to go back home.

At once she was alert and anxious.

“Why? Farwth, have you learnt something? My gramma – is she ill?”

Again that pause, during which Yaret wondered how much she ought to worry, and a formless fear grew like a sickness in her throat.

I have no cause to think that she is ill. That is not something I would be able to detect.

“Then have you learnt something else about her? Or Grandda?”

I know nothing about them except that it is time for you to leave. You need to prepare.

Maybe she had just outstayed her welcome. Outside Farwithiel the autumn was passing; winter would be swift in coming, to Obandiro if not to here. Provided she was fit enough she ought to leave here soon in any case.

She stood up somewhat clumsily, picked up her one-string gourd and bowed.

“I thank you for your hospitality,” she said, “and for your many kindnesses, whether you call them that or not. I am extremely grateful, on my own behalf and on behalf of Madeo and her Bandiran descendants.”

The Farwth did not answer. So she set off walking towards the Wardens’ houses. She was several steps away before she heard it speak again.

It was your grandmother, and not your grandfather, who was descended from Madeo.

Yaret came to a halt and turned to stare back at the twined and impenetrable green. “But I assumed... My grandmother isn’t even from Obandiro! She’s from Ioben.”

It was to Ioben that Madeo went to have her child. She brought it here to Farwithiel so that I would know it; and then she said that she intended to return to Ioben and there leave the child with friends.

“With its father?”

She did not say.

“Who was its father?”

She did not say.

“Well,” said Yaret. “Can I tell my grandma? Or does she already know?”
Again a long, long silence. The trees dripped.

She knows everything that she needs to know. And you need to prepare.

Chapter 37

“If you can’t tell us their numbers,” said Thoronal, “then what are you here for? What exactly is the point?”

Maeneb did not answer immediately. She stared out across the dull browns and sickly greens of the Outlands with her lips tightly compressed. Inwardly she was assessing stoneman numbers by the weight and shape of distant minds. She was also beating down the wave of anger that seethed through her.

“It’s not an easy task,” she said. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“I certainly do not understand,” said Thoronal with heavy disdain, “why you thought it worth our while for you to come all the way out here to tell us what we can already guess perfectly well using our own eyes.”

“A little over three thousand,” said Maeneb coldly. “Say three thousand and three hundred, distributed over about the first ten forts. I can’t tell the numbers of darkburns.” She wondered what Thoronal would do if she whipped out her long knife and held it to his throat, here, now, on top of the Outland wall. Laugh, probably. Except that Thoronal hardly ever laughed. He took everything in earnest.

Holding a knife to his throat would achieve nothing. And it would mean getting too close to him in any case. She tried to swallow down her anger: this was all just part and parcel of being who she was.

“Unfortunately the number of darkburns is equally important,” said Thoronal, and he walked away along the top of the ruined wall to watch the distant Riders who were returning from the forts across the muddy plain. The nearest forts were small grey blocks, surprisingly regular in shape considering their age. Beyond them rose stern mountains already topped with white, in warning of the winter. It would come early and without mercy to these northern Outlands.

Parthenal climbed up the steps to join her on the Outland wall. He also stood watching the Riders, at a distance from her that she found acceptable. Thoronal had stood too close.

“Don’t let him get to you,” said Parthenal quietly. “He does that to everybody. It’s not personal.”

Maeneb nodded. However, in her case it probably was personal. Thoronal thought she was a freak, a misfit, an undesirable aberration from the norm. The norm, of course, being him.

“He doesn’t approve of me either,” said Parthenal. “Can you tell if there are any stonemen in the furthest forts, beyond those first ten?”

“I’m sure there are. But I can’t tell the numbers. It gets too confusing at that distance.”

The group of four riders galloped over to the wall and pulled their horses up below it. Maeneb and Parthenal saluted – not to Huldarion, who did not expect such formalities, but to the General who rode alongside him. The General was a small, blunt man, very upright in the saddle: he was not of Kelvha, as was evident from his lack of ornament, but was from West Vale on its borders. Kelvha had delegated this remote and chilly task to his command. Behind Maeneb a few soldiers were still milling around after the morning’s muster.

The muster had been interesting. Maeneb had kept her distance, being female, while Huldarion inspected the General’s troops. She had read a lot of curiosity in the soldiers’ minds – centring on those scars of Huldarion’s, of course. The troops from West Vale regarded his disfigured face with respect. That, and something in his manner, seemed to mark Huldarion to them as an able military man. Which he was. She just hadn’t expected the soldiers to recognise it so quickly. Esteem gave their massed thoughts a certain colour.

But the colours of men’s minds were often contradictory. Take Parthenal’s mind, now, looking half ahead and half behind him: a mixture of thoughts that seemed shocking even to her, who knew him well, and ought to be used to it by now.

“It’s a pity we can’t go and explore any closer to the Forts,” she said to him as they watched Huldarion and his companions dismount.

“Yes. But by this time of year it’s all bog and swamp out there. If we picked the wrong path the horses would sink up to their shoulders very quickly. Men too. It would not be pretty.”

“But once it freezes...”

“No better, really,” Parthenal remarked. “You never know if the ice will be thick enough to bear the horses’ weight. Where it is, they skid. Where it’s not, they drown. Not pretty, again. I’m glad we don’t have to stay up here all winter.”

“Unlike the stonemen.”

“I hope they all freeze and starve,” said Parthenal. “Unfortunately they’re not likely to do either.” His gaze followed Huldarion, who was consulting with the General and his aides. His mind veered back and forth and settled somewhere behind them. She knew why but would certainly not discuss it.

“Where will you go when we’re finished here?” she asked.

“Thield, I expect.” Thield would move its tents to a more sheltered spot for the coldest weeks. But it would be diminished in size, and not the most comfortable of winter quarters. “Then I plan to join Rothir at his sister’s farm for a week or two, just to get warm.”

“I’ve been invited there for winterfest,” said Maeneb glumly. “Though it’s not really the sort of thing I enjoy.”

“Ah, but Olbeth won’t force you to make merry. And she does a fine feast. I hope Rothir is finding it congenial working in the forge there: more than enough heat for him, I should think. Good practice for darkburns.”

“Indeed.” Maeneb gazed past him at the Outlands, whose cold prospect was to her almost more inviting than the idea of farmhouse warmth and feasting. At least the Outlands were solitary.

She studied the Outland Forts, which receded in a long line across the weary landscape. From here, none looked inhabited: the nearest three had been evidently occupied quite recently and then abandoned as the stonemen had moved further west. The stands of pine trees had nearly all gone, presumably to re-roof the forts for the stonemen. So not a solitary landscape after all.

“Where would the stonemen keep the darkburns, do you think?” she asked.

“Cellars or dungeons, I expect,” said Parthenal. “As long as there’s a stone floor above them that they can’t burn through. One darkburn could probably heat the whole fort. But each fort might hold several darkburns.”

“I expect so.” Maeneb felt across the Outlands for them yet again. Nothing. Thoronal was right: there was no point in her being here. Her despondency and sense of uselessness returned, and again she had to fight against the fall into gloom. It was such a struggle, sometimes. Exhausting; this continual self-measurement she had to undergo, the repeated consciousness of failure.

“You’re doing a useful job,” said Parthenal, and she was grateful. She thought that, like her, he must sometimes feel alone.

Not today, though. She was well aware that Parthenal was not just standing on the rampart to look out and keep her company. Somewhere behind her was that familiar colour of longing and desire which sprang up rather frequently around him, in both men and women. She suspected he had already noticed someone’s interest amidst the soldiers from West Vale and was now, as it were, on display. Later on, she would have to avoid looking in the direction of his thoughts for a while.

Parthenal walked along the wall towards the steps to greet Huldarion and the General. After they had exchanged a few words the men dispersed. Huldarion and the others descended from the wall, but the General lingered. He came over to her, hands clasped behind his back.

She couldn't remember his name. He was a stocky man the same height as her; he looked steadily in her face, before turning his gaze towards the Outlands and taking one courteous step away from her. So somebody had warned him, then. Probably not Thoronal. The General's thoughts were very focused.

"I'm glad you could come," he said. "We need all the information we can get, from whatever source."

"The help that I can give is limited."

"It is certainly unusual. You see men's minds, I understand?"

"I detect their presence. I see their colour and shape – their leanings perhaps – rather than their detailed thoughts."

"How very odd that must be," said the General, although he did not seem taken aback.

Maeneb shrugged. "I've never known things any other way."

"Could you see my men's thoughts now?"

"As I say, only the colour of them. Your men seem to be steadfast enough if that is what you're asking. They study the Outlands. Their minds are on their future task. I cannot be more specific than that." Nor would she mention the two or three minds fixed on Parthenal.

"And are the men's thoughts different to their leaders'?"

Now she turned to look at him. "Not in their quality, no. Why would they be?"

"Ah," said the General. His gaze was fixed on the distant Forts but his mind was set the other way. It looked south and backwards, and seemed to hold a tinge of anger.

However, there was no anger in his voice when he continued. "The Kelvhans would say that there is all the difference in the world between a commander and his troops, or a lord and his servants. Also between the men of Kelvha and those from outside. Do you know Kelvha?"

"Outer only. I have never been to Inner Kelvha and do not wish to go – although a friend of mine is there at the moment." Tiburé was not quite a friend; Maeneb was not sure what friendship entailed. But it was the easiest term for now.

"Indeed? A good moment to visit, with the Prince about to be invested. Will your friend see the ceremony?"

“I imagine so,” said Maeneb. “She’s staying with one of the ladies-in-waiting at the castle, who is married to a High Lord.”

He whistled. “With the big-wigs, eh?”

“She herself was a maid-in-waiting to the past queen there, many years ago.” Maeneb found it hard to visualise Tiburé as a maid-in-waiting, even in her youth. She couldn’t imagine her compliant and curtsying – and in a dress, of all things. “She was on a visit from Caervonn.”

“Caervonn,” repeated the General. “Now, there was a city indeed.”

“There still is.”

“One hopes so.” He stood ramrod straight, gazing out at the Forts. “Your commander, Huldarion. He aims to take back Caervonn eventually?”

“You would have to ask him that.”

“I will. He seems to be a man that I can deal with. He speaks with sense. Where did he get those scars? I hardly like to ask him that.”

Maeneb was silent for a moment. It was not her tale to tell, but on the other hand it was no secret. If she did not tell him, somebody else would.

“A darkburn,” she replied. “At Caervonn, twelve years ago, in the feud between Huldarion’s house and that of his cousin–”

“Olvirion. Who claimed the throne through primogeniture, although being descended of the female line, yes?”

“Yes. The throne should have gone to Huldarion through the male line, as was the law.” She paused and added, “I am sure that Huldarion would tell you that it was a law that he did not actually agree with; but it was not for him to change it. That had to be done by the council.”

“And was not.”

“It was done by half the council: not enough. But Olvirion claimed he had won the right to rule. It caused a great deal of unrest.” She remembered the fights in the streets, the antagonism that had sprung up between families. Old feuds had been reignited and new ones brooded over. It had been a horrible time.

“Which became war,” said the General. “I study my military history, you see.”

“Which became war only because of the actions of one other person,” she said sharply. “Huldarion was ready to negotiate–”

“Wouldn’t have worked. You can only have one king.”

“It could have worked. It wasn’t given a chance. This – person – offered Olvirion a weapon that could destroy any opposition; that could demolish Huldarion and all his allies. Olvirion took it. It was a darkburn. The first of its kind that anyone had seen.”

The General fell silent.

“They set it in his house,” she said. She had not witnessed this but they had lived in the same quarter. She remembered well her mother’s grief and horror, and the scenes that had followed were vivid to her mind. “It ran through the place seeking people to kill – well, you know what darkburns do. But nobody knew then what it was. Huldarion’s mother and sister were dead before he could even get to them. He tried to shield his brother and fought against the darkburn while the house went up in flames. He managed to cut it to pieces eventually but not before they were both badly burnt. Meanwhile fire had spread through the quarter and killed a dozen others. Huldarion’s brother died a few days later. As for Huldarion himself...”

“I see,” the General said sombrely. “Yet nowadays it prospers, does it not? Caervonn?”

“In some ways,” Maeneb answered. “Olvirion was not a tyrant. For the first few years, when harvests were good, it seems that he was well-accepted. But fear of the darkburns may have had something to do with that. Caervonn has become an inward-looking place. Little information comes out.”

“I believe some information has come out lately that is not so good.”

“You mean the stonemen.”

“How can Caervonn form an alliance with such savages?” the General expostulated.

“The stonemen never caused a problem until recently,” Maeneb pointed out. “They were an isolated people and kept to themselves. I suppose Olvirion saw no reason not to trust them.”

“I see every reason. I don’t believe the stonemen are even capable of forming an alliance. And to what ends?”

“To their own ends,” said Maeneb. “But if you mean someone else has formed the alliance, you are probably right. We believe the stonemen are driven by the will of the one who is said to rule Caervonn from outside its walls. The one who introduced the darkburn.” The Riders of the Vonn usually referred to him as The Ignoble One. If they spoke his name it was with hatred and disgust; and with disgust she said it now. “Adon.”

The General studied her.

“Come with me a little way,” he said, and he led her briskly along the uneven wall.

He did not speak until they had walked for some distance. At one point they had to descend where the wall had collapsed, and re-ascend it twenty yards further on as it regained its integrity. Here, the wall curved round to

face the west so that they were no longer looking straight at the Outland Forts, but at the featureless swamplands, and beyond them at a blur of far-flung forest and pale hills.

The General gestured at the empty landscape. High overhead some kite or vulture circled; apart from that, no sign of life was visible.

“Can you hear anyone out there?”

Maeneb listened. “If there is anyone, I can’t detect them.”

He nodded. “Many hundred years ago,” he said, “that land you see stretching to the horizon was a rich and fertile plain. It produced great quantities of wheat and barley and held many thousands of cattle on the meadows around a number of small towns. That land was called Elthe, and my people are descended from those who lived there once.”

“What happened to it?”

“A combination of things. The weather changed; the watercourses altered; the land may have been over-farmed and too many trees cut down. But all those changes were put down to one ruler. Adon.”

He stared out at the land as if seeing those ancient scenes. “Adon was not just a king; he was a god, or so he claimed. He also claimed that the floods and famine were the fault of the people – they were a punishment.”

“A punishment for what?”

The General smiled at her sadly. “For not believing in him enough, I think. It’s not clear. It was a very long time ago and the records are few. Of course he wasn’t a god at all. He was just an incompetent ruler. There was a battle and he was driven out – but Elthe collapsed anyway. It could no longer sustain people: the land that had been fertile was now barren. The surviving inhabitants moved south to settle in West Dale. Adon himself moved north with a number of his soldiers. If this ruler of Caervonn has now taken on his name and mantle—”

“It is the same Adon,” said Maeneb.

“That’s impossible. Adon was no god.”

“True. But neither is he quite a human. What happened to your Adon after he moved north?”

“Oh, he subjected some other poor tribe to his rule. The Outland forts are said to have been built to keep him and his new army out. And they succeeded. He went further east eventually, I believe, and disappeared. Presumably he died.”

“He didn’t disappear, nor die,” said Maeneb. “It’s said he crossed the northern lands and laid them waste: some of them at least, with fire and flood and earthquakes.”

“Earthquakes?” The General took a step away from her as if doubtful of her sanity.

“It’s not known how he could have engineered them,” Maeneb said calmly, “but he certainly boasted of doing so. Four hundred years ago he was on his way east and south again. Do you know the Iarad, the land west of the Thore?”

“I do not.”

“The Iarad once was fertile, and now is blighted since Adon passed through it, though perhaps not as badly as Elthe. It seems he then crossed the ocean to the southlands and tried to set up some sort of empire there. Within two centuries the southlands were largely lost to desert. Wherever he went, he despoiled and exploited, trying to extract as much wealth as he could in minerals and gems and food, and ruining the land in the process.”

“This cannot all be the same man,” said the General stiffly. “I daresay it could be a series of Adons, a dynasty passing the name down the line.”

“It is all the same man – or rather, the same not-quite-a-human,” countered Maeneb. “When the Southlands failed to meet Adon’s needs he crossed the seas again. It was on the coast some distance from Caervonn that he found the stonemen and placed them under his dominion. For a long time he was quiet; but he was laying his plans. He set up his stronghold in the elbow of the Darkburn river. And somewhere there – somehow – the darkburns were created.”

She thought the General was going to scoff, but he was silent.

“Adon,” he said, as if testing the word. “Adon. It cannot be the same.”

“It is. We know that for sure.”

He turned to look at her.

“We know who Adon is,” she said, “because we know his brother Leor, who is a wizard. Adon was a wizard too, before he called himself a god. I have never seen Adon, but I have met Leor on several occasions.” She saw him in her mind’s eye, tall and thin and energetic with a tremendously long stride.

Always in a hurry, she thought, always busy on some errand that he would not divulge. Huldarion trusted Leor, so she had to; but she could not see the wizard’s mind. Although she could feel its quicksilver presence, its shades of feeling were cloaked and shielded from her.

The General’s face grew dark. “I have heard of Leor, if that is the same wizard as Lioril. Is he in league with his brother?”

“No. I am almost certain he is not.”

“But he doesn’t do much to stop him, does he? Where is this Leor now?”

Maeneb gazed out across the plain. Although it was still early, night was already falling, thickening across the Outlands to hide the grey Forts in its gloomy shroud.

“Nobody knows,” she said.

Chapter 38

Tiburé looked in the mirror in some disgust. It wasn't that she objected to dresses in principle; it was the Kelvhan style that she didn't like. This dress combined maximum display with minimum practicality. She didn't care that the tight embroidered sleeves were not flattering to her muscled arms. She did care that she couldn't raise her arms above her head. Not without hearing some stitching rip, at any rate; and this dress didn't belong to her.

"You look quite lovely, my dear," said Shildha with audible doubt.

Tiburé laughed as she turned round from the mirror to speak to her hostess.

"I've never looked lovely, Shildha! But at least I look presentable by your exacting Kelvhan standards. I'm certainly quite believable as your clod-hopping cousin from the country."

"Not clod-hopping," Shildha protested weakly. Tiburé patted her old friend on the shoulder.

"I'm fine with that description," she assured her. "It explains my mutilation of the Kelvhan language too."

Shildha sighed. Then she said, more hopefully, "I could lend you some pearls."

"Lend them to Alburé instead. They'll suit her better." Tiburé pictured her daughter Alburé, currently downstairs with Shildha's daughter, in her silver-threaded dress. Pearls would be appropriate on her. She would look very fine. Alburé had both style and stature, though perhaps a little too much swagger to look convincing as a Kelvhan lady. Tiburé had advised her daughter to tone down the self-confidence and to keep her mouth shut.

"I wish I could have persuaded you both to lighten your hair," said Shildha with a mild, regretful pout.

Tiburé smiled. "That would not have made me into a swan, Shildha! I'll always be a crow, even when I'm grey."

"But Alburé..."

"Is so clearly not from Inner Kelvha that I doubt if it really matters."

Shildha gave a small sigh of resignation. To achieve the Kelvhan ideal of female beauty was for her the pinnacle of ambition. She did not need to lighten her own fair hair, as did so many of the Kelvhan ladies with their dry, bleached golden locks. Men too. Tiburé didn't care for the stiffly orange-haired look and was glad Alburé had rejected it outright.

This was her sixth visit to Inner Kelvha since that first winter she had spent as maid-in-waiting at the castle, thirty years ago. She had been one of three young women accompanying an envoy from Caervonn in the name of amity. Tiburé had volunteered for the adventure and had not regretted it. Shildha, the pretty, conciliatory girl she had befriended then, had remained her friend ever since. When Shildha married her nobleman, Tiburé had been one of her entourage of honour, and had continued to visit her at intervals.

Huldarion had encouraged her visits. Not that Tiburé attempted to be any sort of ambassador from Thield – that was impossible, with her being a woman – but her very femaleness made her visits useful in a different way. Nobody in Kelvha remembered who she was, or took her seriously. Her curiosity about the place they put down to naivety and ignorance.

Shildha's husband, the High Lord Melegan, was a benign and indolent man who did very little actual work in his position as the Keeper of the Keys. Nevertheless he knew everything that was going on inside Kelvha Castle, and with a little naïve and ignorant questioning Tiburé was able to extract a good deal of information from him.

She had no qualms about this. Indeed, she was hoping to train Alburé to fulfil a similar function with Shildha's daughter, who would doubtless also marry well, and probably soon – the girl was eighteen already. But Tiburé was also fond of Shildha for her own sake, so that she able to say now with real sincerity,

“You quite outshine me in beauty, my dear Shildha, and that is as it should be.”

By good fortune Melegan came in at that moment and overheard. He beamed with satisfaction.

“I married a fine-looking woman, did I not?”

Tiburé dropped him a curtsey before answering. “The finest, my lord. And your own magnificence is simply... breath-taking.”

Breath-taking it certainly was. Long plumes were involved as well as large bronze shoulder-buckles, an enamelled ornamental breastplate, and the usual acres of embroidery in red and silver thread.

Melegan beamed some more. “Shall we go? I need to take my place in good time before the Prince arrives.”

It would not do to be late for such an important event as the Prince's crowning. Yet rather than walk the three hundred yards to the castle, they had to travel in the coach, with all the tedious business of handing in and arranging gowns. They joined a procession of similar coaches which

crawled from the enclave of large villas to the massive outer gates of Kelvha Castle.

Within the gates, the courtyard had been cleared of its usual rabble of hurrying grooms and servants, and was instead lined with ranks of immobile and impassive soldiers. Tiburé counted the rows: three hundred men: and noted their standard. Fifth Company.

“Who is that impressive looking man at their head?” she whispered.

“Commander Jeveran. Not high-born but capable enough,” replied her host, somewhat condescendingly. Tiburé had heard him speak of Jeveran before. Now she filed the face alongside the information in her memory.

The coach came to a halt beside the inner gates. The four ladies were helped down by a phalanx of footmen, and escorted through the inner courtyard with its high towers into the vast and complex space of the castle proper. Kelvha Castle was not one single building but a gathering of many, of various ages and sizes, but all strongly built and loftily turreted, and held together by two miles of outer wall.

It was to the greatest of these buildings that they proceeded, past more soldiers— Eighth Company, noted Tiburé, perfectly disciplined as always — and mounted the massive steps, the ladies attending carefully to their long gowns, anxious not to catch their feet in the low hems. In the Hall of Light — despite its name, windowless but illuminated by a hundred oil lamps — they paused to be announced. Then when their turn came they processed, gowns rustling, into the Coronation Hall.

After the yellow lamplight the high windows dazzled. Where there were no windows the long tapestries hanging down the walls were bright and richly patterned. Tiburé knew without looking what they depicted: coats of arms and noble genealogies. In the centre of the far wall hung the longest, most ornate tapestry, that of the royal line.

Melegan led them past the towering stone columns to their seats and then walked on alone with slow, ceremonial steps to take his place in the row of gilded chairs on one side of the royal throne. He almost strutted in his self-conscious pride. The ladies of his household were seated at the front of the audience, as befitted Melegan’s high rank: the lesser nobles and their families were relegated to a greater distance, near the door.

No commoners attended the investiture of the High Prince — not as audience, at least. Two rows of heralds flanked the furthest columns while a line of servants in gold-embroidered tunics stood rigidly against each wall. Woe betide any of them who smeared or snagged their uniform, thought Tiburé.

“It’s all so very grand,” she whispered. As they waited for the Prince and Regent to make their entrance, the great hall echoed with whispers which seemed to fly around it like trapped birds. “Who is that man in the elegant red gown?”

“That’s Arch-Lord Helb, the Keeper of the Scrolls and Archives.” Shildha whispered back. “Next to him is High Lord Brolgun, the Keeper of the Swords.”

“Is he head of the army, then?” asked Tiburé, although she knew that he was not.

“Oh, no. That’s Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun, with the little beard, on the left.”

Tiburé studied him intently. Another face to fit to a name she knew. Shargun was elderly, aloof, his pinched narrow face a closed book to her. He did not look especially soldierly in his ceremonial robes, but appearances could deceive – especially here in Kelvha.

And so it went on, Shildha happily describing every Lord in the two rows of gilded chairs while Tiburé memorised their relative positions. The closer to the throne, the higher their current standing. Despite his indolence Melegan evidently stood a little higher than she had thought.

The heralds raised their trumpets for a long, strident fanfare during which everybody stood and waited, trying not to cough. There was a long pause, which Tiburé appreciated, as a sign that those about to enter outranked the audience so greatly that they could keep them waiting all they liked.

At last, while the trumpeters again raised their instruments and redoubled their efforts, in strode the Regent, without any hurry: a robust and heavily-built man between fifty and sixty. He was followed by the young Prince Faldron, and then the Princess Idria with a troop of courtiers who arranged her in a lesser throne next to the Prince’s before melting away. The old Vizier came creeping in the rear, to be guided to the gilded chair on the Prince’s other side.

The Regent, Nerogun, had no chair. He remained on his feet throughout. Tiburé was interested to see that he took charge of the ceremony even though the whole point of it was that he would lose much of his existing power. For eleven years, since the death of the old King, Nerogun had ruled as Regent while waiting for the Prince to come of age.

And now Faldron was twenty. Today he would be invested as High Prince. For the next twelve months, Nerogun, as Post-Regent, would continue to advise him; effectively, they would rule together. A year from

now the High Prince would be crowned High King and become sole sovereign of Kelvha.

Tiburé personally did not think that Faldron looked old enough to be either. He appeared almost unchanged since she had glimpsed him on her last visit five years previously: a bland, unformed young man, with a faintly startled look that she suspected might be permanent.

“How very handsome the Prince is!” she whispered to Shildha as the rustling crowd resumed their seats.

“And he is said to be very adept at swordplay, and a matchless rider,” Shildha whispered back.

That was something, Tiburé supposed. But not much for a man to rule with. A speech was mumbled, almost inaudibly, by the aged Vizier. Tiburé heard nothing in it worth reporting. Then a crown and sceptre were carried reverently in. Again Nerogun seemed to be in charge; it was he who handed the sceptre to the Vizier, for the old man to place somewhat shakily in the Prince’s hands. Faldron smiled and nodded. He looked remarkably at ease for one who was the centrepiece of such a ceremony.

“How old does he have to be to marry?” Alburé whispered on Shildha’s other side.

“Twenty-four. But his sister can marry now, and probably will soon.”

Tiburé pitied the princess. She looked frail and timid, young even for seventeen. The Prince was smiling up at some unheard remark made by the Regent.

“He looks all right,” said Alburé. “Young and fit. And he looks biddable enough.” Her voice was smiling. Had that actually been biddable she said, or beddable? Tiburé bent forward to give her a warning shush.

When she looked back, the Regent was frowning at their section of the audience. Tiburé let her mouth fall slightly open, like an over-awed country cousin.

The Regent turned and nodded to the heralds. Another long fanfare rang out; the crown was carried forward on a crimson cushion. Tiburé noted the sleek young man who bore it, but when she nudged Shildha to ask his name, the only answer was a shrug.

“Some equerry of Nerogun’s. Jaul, I think.”

“A fine crown indeed.”

“That’s only the High Crown,” murmured Shildha. “The Sovereign Crown the Prince will wear next year is much more impressive.”

Even the High Crown looked ridiculously cumbersome to Tiburé’s eyes, its golden spires aglitter with green jewels. The Regent took the crown in

both his hands and held it up. Standing behind the throne, a solid and imposing figure, he addressed the hall. His forceful voice rang out to fill the space.

“By the powers invested in me as Regent to the throne of this our mighty Realm of Kelvha, I hereby crown the most august and royal Prince Faldron as High Prince of the Realm. I hope before long to have the exalted task of placing a still greater and more extraordinary crown upon his head.”

There was yet another fanfare. The prince smiled good-humouredly as the jewelled crown descended over his blond locks. He put up a hand to steady it. The audience rose and cheered in unison.

Tiburé copied them, miming the cheers. But she felt a strange and sudden frisson of anxiety. Something in the Regent’s voice, and in his face, as he looked down upon the placid prince, disturbed her.

And yet she could not work out what exactly caused that unexpected prickle of alarm, or why.

Chapter 39

Poda stepped elegantly along the faded track that led north from the Coban hills towards Obandiro. Yaret, perched on her back, held on to the makeshift saddlebags; she would have to do something about those before they fell off completely. The Wardens were not particularly handy at that sort of craft. She thought of Kelvha – of the ornamental saddlebags she'd seen at various markets with their embossed leather flaps and straps, the gilding and long tassels and decorative buckles. The Wardens hardly knew what a buckle was.

But it had been kind of them to escort her safely through Farwithiel and across the swirling waters of the Thore. She had forded the river on Poda with a shudder of memory which she tried hard to repress.

Once the Wardens had departed, she had stopped and said a farewell to the Farwth.

“I thank you once again,” she had said aloud, gazing back across the river to the shrouded trees. She already missed those great edifices of Farwithiel, supreme and massive harbours. “I will not forget you or your kindness.” This seemed, indeed, a superfluous thing to say: how could anyone forget the Farwth?

While she felt sure that the Farwth would hear her words, she did not expect to be able to detect any returning answer. So it was a pleasant surprise when the answer came, almost as strongly as before.

I shall remember you too, and your songs.

Yaret smiled. “Perhaps I may even see you again some time?” This was presumptuous, she realised as soon as she said it: for she had gathered from the Riders that the Farwth did not allow every traveller to proceed past its borders. Indeed, it permitted very few.

I do not know that. Winter comes, and spring should follow: but who can foresee what will happen in the world of humans?

“Well, I hope spring comes with bounty to Farwithiel.”

I do not understand hope. Things thrive, or they do not. Wishing has no effect.

Yaret thought about this, and then countered, “Wishing has an effect if it makes you act for the better.”

In that case it is not a wish but a deed.

She thought some more. “I suppose the point of hope is that it makes action possible,” she said; “or at least it impels you to action when

otherwise you might do nothing.”

That would make hope also a deed and not a thought.

“Yes. Yes, it would.”

No answer. After a while, she bowed, and then turned on her way. The river was already out of sight and hearing before the reply came.

That is the first time that you have chosen to agree with me.

She felt no anger in the Farwth’s voice: perhaps even some amusement. So she said,

“I don’t think I always disagreed with you.” Who was she, after all, to challenge the Farwth? She was of no more account in that marvellous forest than a slightly annoying insect – yet one that it had cared for and discharged into safety.

You disagreed with me most courteously. As did Madeo.

Yaret had smiled again, and waved, and then continued riding.

After that there had been no word from the Farwth. That was a cause for sadness but also some relief. By now, a few days further on, she supposed she was too far beyond the Farwth’s boundaries to hear its voice, and was truly solitary once more.

Her farewell to Eled had been harder – for her, at least. Eled had not minded her leaving. It was obvious that he no longer needed her presence to keep him steady, and was content with the tranquil company of the Wardens. So that was good.

All the same it saddened her. Not only was she very fond of Eled for his own sake, but he was the last human link to that other world she had found herself entering so unexpectedly: the world of the Riders of the Vonn. She was left with Poda, a smattering of Vonnish, and vivid, sometimes painful memories. She suspected that life back home would seem flat and tame at first after the strangeness of the last few weeks.

Still, it would be good to be back with her grandmother – with both her grandparents. She was conscious that they needed her; and that was a need she could fulfil. Bringing Poda to a halt, she readjusted the slipping saddlebags yet again, before gazing up at her onward path.

She had not ridden as far west as the lonely wastes of the Iarad, and the scene, though somewhat stark, was not without attractions. The landscape had been painted in new colours during her long weeks in Farwithiel. Autumn seemed hardly to have arrived in that forest, yet here the trees were already almost bare; between their austere black outlines all the hues were of rust and mud and ochre. It was very beautiful in its way. And also cold.

She spurred Poda on until she crested the hill, and the first villages of North Coba came into sight.

Yaret surveyed the smoking chimneys and grazing cattle with a faint sense of relief. All was as it should be. Of course there was no reason why it might be any different.

She decided that she might spend a couple of the coins given her by Walen on a comfortable night at an inn: but no, on second thoughts she'd save them, while the weather remained dry. It was the only money she had. Her own had been left along with much else by the banks of the roaring, tumbling Thore.

Once again that night came unbidden to her mind. The stars so powerful in the sky, so close. Lying alone and on the shores of death with the pain and wonder and knowledge of oncoming oblivion.

She found herself catching her breath and made herself recall that she was safe. She had been found, by Rothir. Who had departed. That too was as it should be. So forget about it now. She put the thought away.

Normally on this last leg of her annual journey she would have stopped at various villages to take orders for cloth. Now she avoided the usual stopping-points; she had no samples and no time. She dared not gallop in case Poda went lame again, and did not want to waste precious hours in social chit-chat with past customers. Indeed they would not want to waste time either if she had nothing to sell.

So instead, following meandering earthen roads that were occasionally blocked by sheep, she determinedly set her mind on the life ahead and the winter to come. She was still several days away from home; her lateness would have started to worry Gramma even though Gramma was not given to worrying. Yaret felt bad about that. Her grandfather's feelings she did not bother to consider just now.

Plenty of jobs would be waiting for her. Once she was back at the farm she would need to work hard to lift the autumn roots and cellar them before the snow set in. Buy in flour and oats and oil from Obandiro. Make the yard ready for the nanny-goats. The sheep would look after themselves. And the donkeys...

Oh, my donkeys, she thought, my donkeys; and suddenly weary, she pulled Poda up and steered her off the road behind a sheltering hazel copse, deciding she might as well stop here for the night. It would grow dark within an hour anyway.

Well before the darkness fell, the fire was built and the pan was simmering. Yaret left the camp to search the copse for cobnuts. She had

noticed that there were still quite a few around which the squirrels and mice had failed to find.

She spent a pleasant quarter-hour amidst the bushes in the company of complaining finches: her pockets were full and lumpy when she emerged from the far side of the hazel copse and saw an old man sitting by the road. Behind him a bony horse was grazing.

“Good evening, great-uncle. How are you?” she said, using the standard greeting to the aged in these parts. There was no need to adopt male mode for one so old, but she kept it on anyway, since it matched her clothing. The Wardens had kindly equipped her with a pair of old-fashioned breeches and two dun shirts; cast-offs, but she was grateful for them.

“Good evening to you,” he said, looking up.

Her first thought was, *Oh, I'll have offended him, he's not that old at all.* For his eyes were young and as blue as the evening sky. But when he smiled his face crinkled with a hundred lines as if he were as old as the hill. His hair was red – made redder by the twilight glow, most probably – but with two great streaks of white across his head from front to back. Like an elderly fox, she thought, intrigued.

“Have you come from Melmet, or Ioben?” she asked him. It was the first thing his red hair made her think of. For only in that distant western region had she ever seen people of that colouring – the same bright red as her grandmother’s hair, before it had turned grey. Although Yaret’s own hair was brown she had been told it held a reddish tinge in certain lights.

“From neither place,” he said, looking startled.

“I beg your pardon. It was the hair.” She gestured vaguely.

“No, no. I’m... just wandering,” he said.

“A fine evening for it.”

“Yes.” He hadn’t bothered to stand up to greet her. Of course to him she was only a youthful journeyman, and a scruffy one at that.

But she thought that he looked tired. His dark grey cloak was mud-spattered and badly needed mending: the hem had come unstitched. The pack beside him seemed inadequate for anyone wandering far. Yet the scrawny horse carried no other baggage.

“Are you hungry?” she asked on impulse. “I have some spare food, and a fire.”

The searching blue eyes looked up at her again. “Thank you, young man, but no. I need to move on soon.”

“You’ll travel further on a full stomach than an empty one. My camp’s not far away.”

“Well... perhaps, then.”

He stood up stiffly and followed her back around the hazel copse to the little campfire. His long stride kept up easily with her slightly halting step. It was not quite a limp, but it still slowed her up by the end of every day.

She could hear Poda pulling up the grass beyond the bushes. It occurred to her that it was as well that her fine horse should remain unseen. An old man could be as unscrupulous as a young one. But she had offered this old man hospitality; so she threw another chunk of wood on to the fire and added a handful of oats to the simmering pot to bulk out its contents.

“Rabbit and roots, is that all right?” As she spoke she seemed to be back on the Darkburn Loft, that first evening with Rothir. Her head swam for a moment. But that was probably just weariness. She knew that she was still not fully fit.

“It’s ample. How did you hurt your leg?”

“Oh... I had a fall, a little while ago,” she said. “I’ve been laid up with friends while I recovered. I’m a weaver and a pedlar of woven goods, on my way back home.” It was polite to tell a passing companion like this something of the nature of your journey. You didn’t have to tell him everything.

But her present companion did not seem inclined to tell her anything at all. He sat staring at the gently crackling fire with creased brows. After a while he gave his head a shake, as if to dismiss unwelcome thoughts, and asked her:

“Why did you think I was from Ioben?”

“The red hair, like I said. You usually only see it in those parts.”

“You’ve been to Ioben, then.”

“Yes, on my travels.”

“Lately?”

“The last time was two years ago. But I was in Melmet just three months ago,” she answered.

“Ah.” He relapsed into silence, again staring at the fire, until she handed him a bowl of rabbit stew. Then he ate hungrily.

Once the bowl was half empty, he spoke again. “And today you’ve come from...?”

“From the south. From Coba,” said Yaret. She wasn’t going to mention Farwithiel or the Riders.

“Ah. And how are things... south?”

She shrugged. “Quiet. Not much business.”

“What sort of woven goods?”

“Woollen cloth and garments, chiefly cloaks. I sell a few on the road and take orders to be fulfilled next year.”

“Ah.” He ate. She didn’t know whether to be offended by his failure to offer any corresponding information. It wasn’t good etiquette. But again he seemed deep in his own thoughts.

“I notice that your cloak is badly torn,” she said after a while. “I could mend it if you like, while you finish eating.”

His eyes narrowed in puzzlement. “Mend it? Why? I can’t pay you.”

“Why would I want payment?” she retorted. “It’s ten minutes work. I can do it now, while there’s extra light from the fire.”

He took off the cloak and passed it over. Yaret found the needle and thread in her pack: that had been another small gift from the Wardens. They must have put some thought into her leaving gifts, for they’d included ample provisions, as well as the clothing and the pan and bowls that sat beside the fire. And the best gift of all, the wooden leg. She felt a wave of gratitude and hoped she’d expressed it adequately at the time, because in the end, she had left in somewhat of a rush.

The cloak was a heavy wool serge. Old-fashioned in its style, and too heavy, she thought, to be comfortable for such an old man; although when she glanced up from her work he looked strangely young again, the blue eyes dancing in the firelight as he watched her.

“Thank you, young man. You are nimble with a needle.”

There seemed to be some extra meaning in his words. She had probably stepped outside her male mode by offering to sew. But it did not really matter with such an old man, who must surely have come across a number of such women through the years. And at least it meant he was showing her something more like proper courtesy.

“It’s the only thing I am nimble with, these days,” she said, a little ruefully. “How did this get burnt?” For the cloak, along its tattered hem, was but not just mud-spattered but charred black.

“I was too close to the fire.”

She had the feeling that she was not the only one who was not telling all she might. “It could really do with patching.”

“That will have to wait,” he said.

“How far do you have still to go?”

He paused. “Some way.”

“I’ll stop asking questions,” she said with a smile, handing the cloak back over. “Except for one – would you like any more to eat?”

He shook his head and hauled himself to his feet, donning the cloak once more. His height was striking. Taller than Parthenal, she thought, but not nearly as graceful. For an old man, though, he was agile, so that again she found herself becoming doubtful of his age.

“I must be on my way,” he said, his deep voice a little friendlier than before. “But thank you for the hospitality. I wish you a safe journey, young person, wherever you are going.”

“I’m going home to Obandiro,” she said. “What? Do you know it?” For he appeared to have frozen as she said the name.

The old man slowly shook his head. “Ah... No. Yes. I knew it once.” He seemed to be staring at her in some perplexity. Anxiety, perhaps. Or more like fear.

“Well, I wish you safe travelling also,” said Yaret, since the man seemed rooted to the ground.

“Thank you.” He was subdued. Then he finally turned and strode swiftly away. He must have been in an immense hurry, for within seconds she heard him calling to his horse. Bryddesda. An outlandish name; not Ioben, certainly. Yaret listened for the hoofbeats, and heard them briskly disappearing down the road.

That was strange, she thought, the way he looked at me just then. *Young person*. Maybe he wasn’t sure if I was male or female. She turned it over in her mind and then forgot about it.

For several days of uneventful travelling, she did not think about the old man with his strangely striped red hair. Her mind was set on home. Gently wheedling Poda to all possible speed, she headed north from Coba, riding across wide cattle pastures to reach the shallow Reedlakes.

There were small settlements here, perched precariously on stilts above the water, but she did not visit them. Even if she had her normal wares to sell, the Reeders never bought much; and what they did buy, tried to pay for in dried salt fish or basketware. She did not care for the former and did not need the latter. So she skirted round the clustered lakes, watching distant fishing boats glide smoothly out upon the dark still waters. Nobody waved. They did not see her. She rode on north.

To save time she missed out her usual last diversion to the little town of Byant, and instead crossed the windy wildlands, the peaty ridges where even greythorn struggled to grow tall. But the weary up-and-down of this final stretch eventually relented, and brought her to the shelter of the Bander Woods. As she entered their familiar shade – so different to the

gloomy tangle of the Darkburn, or the giant spaces of Farwithiel – she felt she was already home.

The last brown leaves clung to the oaks. The air was full of the smell of woodsmoke and damp earth. The dead leaves blanketing the ground, soft and sodden beneath Poda's hooves, sent up their own decaying sweetness. Amidst them a jay was busily collecting acorns; a host of mushrooms had sprung up in clumps like small white villages. She thought of collecting some for Gramma, but decided not to delay. She was only two or three miles from her house now, and just wanted to be there at last.

Emerging from the edge of the Bander Woods she stared out across the land. And then she thought of the tall red-haired man staring at her, frozen in perplexity, anxiety; or fear.

For the smoke that she had smelt had not come from any bonfire in the woods. Over where Obandiro should be, its pall lay wide and grey. And underneath the pall was only blackness.

Chapter 40

Yaret looked for what felt like a long time – a lifetime in shocked disbelief, although it was probably only minutes in reality. She searched the landscape for signs of human life: and she saw none. Beneath the hanging cloud of smoke the blackened area stretched in a wide radius all around the town. Nothing stirred. She realised that the smell was more than woodsmoke. Other things had burnt there too.

She hardly dared look over to her right. There, a couple of miles east of Obandiro, the familiar stand of trees appeared to be untouched – as far as she could tell from this distance. In a clearing amongst those trees was her grandparents' farm.

At last she nudged Poda into a sedate walk towards it. She did not rush. In one way she wished never to arrive there. She could still – just – imagine her grandmother in the yard, looking up at her approach to say, *Well, here you are at last!* She kept scanning her surroundings and checking Poda for any sign of panic that might signify a darkburn; but Poda remained calm.

Some trees were indeed untouched. But as she drew closer to the farm more and more of them were burnt and broken. The track here had been trampled. The hedge was turned to a dark skeleton. She put out a hand to it as she passed and the burnt leaves crumbled in her fingers.

Beyond the hedge, the vegetable patch had been destroyed. Charred carcasses of goats lay in the ash-strewn paddock by the ruined remnants of the fences. The farmhouse – what was left of it – was a tumbled heap of black and grey. She dismounted from the horse and walked into the yard.

Something lay in the yard amidst the grey ash. Two burnt somethings. She could not tell which was which except by their relative sizes. She knelt down beside them.

“I’m so sorry,” she said into the smoky silence. “Oh, gramma, I’m so sorry. I should have been here.” She said Oveyn, twice, although it was wholly inadequate. Then she left the bodies of what were no longer her grandparents, burnt objects that were now meaningless, and walked slowly over to the house as if they might be there after all in some other guise.

But no memory of her grandparents or anything else remained in the ruins. The wooden walls had been demolished by fire. The two looms had fallen through the kitchen ceiling and lay amidst the ashes. There was nothing left to rescue. There was nothing to pick up and hug. She stood in the kitchen trying to take it in, trying to believe it, because her brain kept

denying it and telling her those things outside were just... what? Trees? Goats? And that any moment Gramma would walk in, and purse her lips, and say,

“Well! What a mess. Just as well that we were out...”

But Gramma would not appear even in her imagination. There was nothing but a blackened stump where Gramma had once been.

Yaret stumbled out into the yard and threw up, violently, over the ashes of the wash-house. Then she sat down on the stone sink, weak and shaking. When she had fallen off the cliff she had felt no dread or shock or emptiness equal in any way to this. Her brain felt wiped of all sensation except the attempt to grasp the silent horror. It loomed in and out in great tides of nausea. This was real. This could not be real. This was real. While she sat, Poda ambled round the yard in mild bewilderment, looking for something to eat.

At last she got up on her feet again. She walked back into the house. This time she made herself touch the singed stones of the hearth and the charcoaled wood of the dead looms. All completely cold. A fire this size would have taken a long time to cool down. This had happened many days ago: a week at least. She stood still again, her mind a total blank until she forced it into thought.

She picked her way around the room. The cupboards were all burnt, any food they had contained now transformed to lumps and grains of black. One corner held shards of pottery. She picked up a smoke-stained bowl and watched it fall to pieces in her hand. A pile of spoons lay fused together on the floor.

Yaret looked up. There was nothing where the ceiling and the looms had been, except the open sky, grey like the ash around her, but a cleaner grey. She wished she was up there somewhere. Anywhere far away so that she did not have to experience this.

But it was her grandparents who had experienced it, not her. Of all the things they'd built their home from, sixty years ago, was nothing to remain? If anything was left, she had to find it.

The cellar. It was accessible only by a wooden trapdoor set into the stone flags of the floor. The trapdoor was half hidden now, between the fallen looms. Although it too was burnt to black its wood remained intact enough to cover the cellar's entrance.

As soon as she tried to lift it by its iron ring, the trapdoor broke and crumbled. Beneath it the ladder was scorched but was still propped in its

place; and when she began to descend cautiously it did not give way beneath her.

She stepped down to the bottom and in the dim light saw the sacks of oats and a smaller sack of flour, the boxes of apples, the shelf laden with cheeses. The roots that she had planned to dig up this week were piled in a corner. Gramma had been busy. Everything smelt of smoke but the food appeared to be unharmed. Well done, Gramma. Thank you. She lay down amongst the sacks for a while and thought of nothing but the smell of roots and earth and apples that seemed to go deeper than the smoke. She wanted to sleep. And not wake again.

Then she got up and climbed the stair back to the kitchen and went out to Poda. After leaning against the horse's shoulder for a moment, she began to walk her first around the farmyard and then in a widening spiral round the farm.

There was no clue as to how it had begun. The cloth-house reeked of burnt wool, but not so much as a strand remained in there. The stable which once held her donkeys now held silence. In the orchard the blackened bones of trees stood to attention. Slowly she realised that the Farwth must have known of this burning. She touched a tree and wondered if some record of her touch would reach the Farwth through it. But no, this one was well and truly dead.

So were all the goats, not just in the paddock but the orchard. She started to count their bodies and then gave up, because there seemed to be no point. The sheep out in the fields might have survived but she had no inclination to go and look for them.

It took a while for her to find a patch of grass where Poda could be left to graze. Then she returned to the farmhouse. The objects that had once been her grandparents seemed to greet her as if they had already grown familiar. They looked not totally unlike darkburns. But they thankfully lay still.

Because she did not know what else to do she descended once more to the cellar and ate an apple and some cheese. Then she lay down again, and wept, and then slept, probably, because darkness came and went and left this next thing that must be another day. Somehow it had to be got through. But how? For what?

Slowly a plan formed. Not a plan, really, just a task. Something to do. Yaret climbed out of the cellar and trudged through the remnants of the house. Outside she found the small spring behind the cloth-house that was still bubbling into a pool of sodden ashes. There she washed and filled the waterskins, and forced herself to eat some biscuit. Remembered filling a

waterskin beside a river: the smell of the approaching darkburn. A creeping shadow in a shroud of fear. The anger, grief, and desolation. The heat. The end of everything.

Darkburn. The thought came to her again when she fetched Poda and found the mare skittish and nervous. But that was probably just the smell and strangeness of the place, because once Yaret was mounted, Poda quickly settled down again. She trotted blithely along the narrow wooded track that led from the farmhouse to Obandiro and came out of the trees just above the mill.

Burnt, of course. But this was as good a place to start as any. So Yaret dismounted and led the horse down the track and to the mill, which was built of stone, not wood. Yet it was as thorough ruined as the farm, although unlike her own house the ruins were still warm. The fires had burnt for longer here.

She walked on to the miller's house at the edge of town. Burnt, empty but for ashen relics. When she whispered her Oveys her voice had almost vanished. The huge silence of the streets here overwhelmed it. In several places low loose drifts of smoke unwound and wound themselves in the caressing breeze: they were the only things that moved.

Street by street, leading Poda by her bridle, she carefully patrolled the town. As she walked she spoke aloud but quietly the names of those she knew. All gone, that was too evident. Menlo, Coret, Dalko, where are you now?

There was no one to reply. Nothing left except their names echoing into silence. In places the town was unrecognisable; yet elsewhere some stone buildings appeared almost intact until the blackened hollows of the windows gave away the nature of what lay inside.

Along her path lay numbers of charred corpses, like burnt effigies – so many of them that she almost gave up saying Oveyn. Some of them might have been trying to defend themselves: she saw amidst the ashes the grey glint of a knife. Intruders had been here then, either before or during the burning. Someone for them to fight.

In a corner of the village square she found the first dead stoneman. He was burnt too and identifiable only by the halo of stones set into his skull. She walked in a long circle round the town: more of the same, corpses, ashes, silence. A warmth still lingered in the ruined walls. The ash that filled the streets was damp with rain and roughly trodden down by many feet with strangely patterned soles – stonemen's, presumably. At the northeast edge

of town a second dead stoneman lay outside the forge next to what might once have been Shay the blacksmith.

She stepped across the bodies that were not even bodies, into the forge which was cold and still. Three swords were hanging on the scorched stone wall, their steel blackened. She stared at them for a long moment before nodding and stepping out again. They would be there later if she needed them.

Walking back into the Cross-street, for the first time she heard a noise.

At once she stopped and put a hand on Poda's neck. Should have taken down one of those swords after all. Too late to go back now. But handier with a knife in any case. She drew it from her belt.

And then she thought more clearly. It had been a stealthy, scuffling, furtive noise. She did not think a stoneman had just made that sound. As she understood it, a stoneman would simply yell and charge, not hide.

So she put her knife back in her belt and said loudly, in Bandiran, "Hallo? Is anybody there? I've been away for weeks. I've only just got back. What's happened here?"

She waited. Nothing.

"I'm Yaretkoro, Ilo the weaver's grand-daughter from the farm on the east road. Ilo is dead. I need to know what's happened."

Still silence. But a different sort of silence. And then there was a rustle: and a boy emerged from behind a wall and stood before her in the street, his clothes streaked grey with dirt and ash. He was, she judged, about fourteen. His eyes were wide and wary.

"Is there anybody else?" he said.

"I'm here alone," said Yaret. "What's your name?"

"Charo." He stared at her as if she was not real.

"When did this happen, Charo?" she said gently.

"Two weeks ago. Where have you been?" His voice was urgent, almost accusing.

"Peddling cloth," she said. "I got held up." And now for the first time since arriving home she felt terribly afraid, in case those two weeks had been spent in desperate loneliness. "Charo," she said, "are you the only one? Are you alone?"

"No."

She felt a huge relief flood through her at the answer.

"But I'm the oldest. There are four of us." He looked at her with a strange twist of his mouth. It might have been an attempt at something like a smile.

"Five, now," he said.

*

*

End of Book 1

The tale will continue in Darkburn Book 2: Winter

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Table of Contents

Book 1

Book 1

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40