



TAYIN MACHRIE

DARKBURN

BOOK 2 WINTER

Darkburn

Book 2

Winter

Tayin Machrie

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Chapter 1

“There are five of us now,” said Charo. He tried to smile at the woman because he was terribly afraid that she would climb on her horse and ride away. There was nothing here for her to stay for. Everything was in ashes: his house, his family, his friends, his whole world.

Sometimes, at night, it seemed as though the town and its inhabitants were still burning. But when he awoke, shivering on the hard unsympathetic ground, Obandiro was stark and silent. The ashes had been slowly cooling for a week now; although the fires, he thought, must still seethe unseen in a few smoking buildings, where sudden small collapses now and then occurred like mocking forgeries of life.

Charo had nothing left to stay for either. But he had nowhere else to go. And then there were the others: the responsibility for them weighed heavy on him. Now he suddenly hoped this woman wouldn't turn out to be a useless deadweight, another burden on his shoulders. If that were the case then maybe it would be better after all if she just rode away.

She was looking up and down the street again, taking everything in. Her face was familiar so he must have seen her in the market before the... Before. But he had never spoken to her.

When she looked back at him her gaze was no longer stunned. It was intense and focused.

“Where do you sleep?”

“We found a cellar,” Charo said. “I'll show you.” Now he didn't know what he wanted. She would make up her own mind anyway.

So he led her down the Cross-street, the elegant horse following them, to the ruins of the inn. The yard was blocked by the remains of a burnt-out cart. Charo stepped over it and past the grey approximations that might once have been the innkeeper and an ostler or a guest. If he had cared to search what was left of the bodies he supposed he might find some identifying badge or buckle. But he had not cared to search the bodies. Whoever they were, it could make no difference now.

The inn had neither door nor roof. Within its walls of sooty flaking stone, the counter and the furnishings were turned to shapeless stumps of charcoal. Two pewter tankards lay amidst the ashes on the flagstoned floor, melted and distorted.

As the woman entered after him, Charo picked up the branch of fir which he had walked half a mile to find and brushed away their footprints in the courtyard. In the street it didn't matter, because the ash was so well-trodden anyway by the feet of the men who had done this. But it was important to leave no new trail of footprints leading into here.

He had told the others to stay down in the cellar while he went out in a vain search for some vessel to hold water. All they had was one warped tankard. So many things they needed, and he didn't know how to find any of them.

The trapdoor to the cellar was behind what once had been the bar: the rusted hoops of barrels lay across it. The barrels, spilling out their beer, had probably saved the trapdoor from being completely burnt away. Its wood was blackened but intact.

Charo lifted the concealing hoops aside. Beneath them the trapdoor was already propped slightly ajar, to allow air in.

"It's me," he said into the opening, and saw the small yellow pool of a lamp being unshielded. He let himself down the ladder into the cellar and the woman followed, a little clumsily.

Only two of the other three were there. They were already on their feet and staring at the descending woman in something close to fear: certainly not delight.

"That's Elket," he said, pointing at the older of the pair. "She's fifteen, the same as me. That's her brother Dil. He's nine. And this is..." He paused. He had forgotten the woman's name. The other two were like statues in the lamplight.

"I'm Yaret Thuleikand," said the woman. "I'm the grand-daughter of the old weaver Ilo, from the farmhouse on the forest road. I've just returned from travelling. My farm is burnt out, no survivors, everything the same as here. I am very glad to find you." Her voice was low but matter-of-fact. Charo was glad she wasn't crying, because they had done enough of that and it really didn't help.

The others seemed stricken dumb.

"Where is your fourth?" asked the woman, and finally Elket answered.

"She's gone out."

"She's not supposed to," said Charo, exasperated.

"I couldn't stop her," said Elket. "How could I stop her? You know what she's like. She said she was going to look for eggs."

"Eggs? Where does she think she's going to find eggs?"

"She said near the chicken huts," said Dil. "She said some of them might have escaped and be roosting nearby."

"She's mad," said Charo. "I wish she wouldn't do this."

The woman sat down on the nearest barrel and glanced around. There were plenty of beer barrels inside the spacious cellar, although not much else. It was high enough for them to stand up in. The roof beams had been protected from the fire by the flagstones laid above.

There had been three hams hanging from the beams, but they had eaten all except the second half of one. There were still two big rounds of cheese – they had finished off the other two – and a sack of red roots in the corner. None of them liked red roots, which were pungent and stained everything they touched, but Charo supposed they would have to start eating them soon. They had been a popular fried snack in the inn, before.

Before. Everything was before. There was a huge burning line dividing then and now. It separated him from everything that he had known, everything normal. The days passed mostly blank and numb and the burning line with his family on the far side of it didn't seem to get any further away. The separation just got deeper. More uncrossable. More permanent.

He tried not to think about it. He had quickly learned that it was better to concentrate only on the present, not the past or future. He didn't often succeed.

But the cellar had been safe till now. It had been a giver of gifts. As well as the food, there were several large jars of lamp-oil, and three lamps. There was beer in some of the barrels, but he had no intention of letting anybody drink it. Luckily none of them showed any wish to.

"What's the name of your fourth?" asked Yaret.

"Shuli," answered Elket.

"How old is she?"

"Twelve."

"She's not," put in Dil. "She's says she's twelve but she's really only eleven and ten and a half months."

"How long has she been out?"

"About an hour," said Elket.

Yaret nodded. "I walked all through the town and saw nobody," she said. "She's good at keeping hidden. I expect she's safe enough. Has anybody else been through Obandiro since this happened?"

Charo answered reluctantly. "The men who did this." He did not know what to call them, but gestured at his hair. "Men with... things on their head. They've been back twice since the, since the first time. The last time they came through was five days ago."

"Stonemen," she said. "I know them. How many were there, do you think?"

"When it, when it, when it happened, there might have been about two hundred, I suppose. Maybe more. I don't really know."

"What about when they came back?"

"We were all in the cellar so we only heard them," Elket said. "I think they came into the inn but they didn't find the trapdoor. They tramped around outside a lot."

"The second time they came back while I was out," said Charo, "looking for food. I heard them coming. They weren't quiet. There were only about ten of them and they walked up and down the streets and then they went away."

"Searching for survivors," said Yaret. "Or people who might have escaped and returned later. You have had none of those yet, I suppose?"

"They're still waiting till it's safe," said Dil. Charo winced. He knew that Dil had hopes and didn't want to squash them. But he had to be realistic.

"No one else has come back yet," he said. He thought the four of them were the town's only survivors, but he had never said it aloud. Although his voice had broken last year the words made it crack as if it were breaking all over again.

"Well, I have come back now," said Yaret. "One more question, and then you may start asking me your questions instead. When they returned, did the stonemen bring with them any darkburns? They are the hot, burnt creatures that—"

"We know what they are," he said, before she could start describing what they did. "No. We didn't see any. Not since that first, that first time."

"Good. Now: your turn."

Charo didn't have as many questions as he had expected. He knew she was a travelling pedlar, but it didn't really make much difference where she had been and for how long, and he didn't really care. He asked who had lived with her – and had died – at her farmhouse. The only other thing he could think of to ask was,

"Is that your horse outside?" It didn't look like a weaver's horse.

"You've got a horse?" asked Dil eagerly.

"It was given to me," said Yaret.

"Who by?"

"Friends, far away. It's a long story."

"Can you ride it?" Dil demanded.

"I can."

"Good," said Dil, and he then asked a much more useful question than any that Charo had thought of. "Is there food at your farmhouse?"

At that, Yaret smiled.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "Quite a lot of food. There is a cellar nearly as big as this one, with oats and flour and roots and apples and cheese, all safe and unburnt."

"They're not red roots, are they?" said Dil.

"No. They're yellow ones and sweetroots."

"Hurrray!" Dil cheered. And then the trapdoor lifted and Shuli's surprised face looked down at them.

"There's a horse outside," she said.

"And there's a strange person inside," said Yaret. "What if we all go out, and find somewhere to sit where we can see each other properly, and talk for a while?"

So they all climbed out of the cellar. Yaret again seemed slightly clumsy – of course, she was an adult, so not nimble – but when she walked over to her horse he noticed that she had a limp.

"I saw you near the Dondel bridge," said Shuli.

"And I did not see you." Yaret introduced herself to Shuli, and asked, "Did you find any eggs?"

Shuli uncurled her hand. There was a small brown egg inside it.

"They're roosting on the other side of the orchard," she said. "Some of them, anyway."

"Well discovered," Yaret said.

"I think so," said Shuli, and she put the egg down carefully just inside the ruined gateway to the inn.

"We'll go to the burial ground," said Charo, because he felt he ought to be in charge, and wanted to get a suggestion in before Shuli did. "We can sit down there and talk, away from the, away from the town." He meant away from the bodies.

"Can I take the horse?" asked Dil, and Yaret let him hold the bridle. Elket said nothing as she led the way. Shuli walked at the back, probably so that she could watch the woman. She was nosy about everything. Charo did not know where she found the energy.

The new woman was nosy too, or at least, she was looking hard at the bodies in the streets. She need not have bothered because none of them were recognisable. He suspected that there were many more that were not even recognisable as bodies, but had been devoured entirely by the fire. He said nothing about them, and neither did she. Dil was the only one who talked, pointing out buildings as if they were still there and Yaret was a casual visitor to town. The joiner's yard, the fletcher's shop. There was nothing left of them. Yaret merely nodded.

But the burial ground, outside the southern edge of town, was relatively untouched by fire. The memorial stones and the paved paths between them were blackened, and some of the stones had fallen – or had been pushed over – but that was all. They could sit on the curved stone bench in the middle, in the remembrance circle, and look at each other. They had seen each other so little in daylight for the last few days that Charo was shocked at how grubby and tired and thin the others looked.

"A good choice of place," said Yaret, and unstrapping one of her saddlebags she began to hand food and a waterskin around. The biscuit was slightly gritty and the cheese stronger than he was used to, while the dried fruit was of a kind unknown to him; but it was all very welcome.

"Have you come across much food apart from what is in your cellar?" Yaret asked.

He shook his head. It was a worry although personally he really didn't mind much if he starved to death. Except that it might not be a pleasant way to die. And it wouldn't be fair on the others.

"And the cellar is also where you sleep?"

He nodded.

"A hard bed," she commented.

Charo shrugged. It was another thing that didn't really matter, given what had happened to Obandiro. He hoped she wouldn't start asking them about that dreadful night. She was bound to want to know.

Thankfully she did not ask, but merely looked around her as she ate her biscuit, until she said,

"Is this where you hold evening council?" Although she addressed nobody in particular Charo answered.

"No, we have it in the cellar."

"We did," said Shuli, "to start with, but then we stopped."

"That was your fault," said Dil.

"It was boring," Shuli said.

"We stopped," said Charo, "because there seemed to be not much to say."

Yaret nodded, her eyes moving thoughtfully from one to another of them in turn. Then she wrapped up the uneaten end of her biscuit.

"Although it is not quite evening," she said, "I wonder if you would consent to hold the evening council here, now. I for one feel badly in need of it."

"I suppose so," said Charo. He glanced at Shuli. She was the person most likely to make trouble.

"I pray you all to attend this one time," said Yaret, "because it is important to me."

"All right," said Shuli. "I don't mind."

"Very well. We will start with Oveyn, for all those who lie around us."

She began the incantation and the others joined in. Charo felt it was meaningless. He had stopped saying Oveyn because it was not adequate for what had happened. Nothing was. None the less he now felt a certain relief in hearing Yaret speak the familiar words.

Then he realised that she was saying a longer version than he knew, and it gave him a shock. It did not only offer thanks and honour to the dead but spoke of them as standing by the shoulders of the living. It spoke of them becoming one with earth or trees or skies, as was ordained by powers beyond thought. He knew that this was Ulthared and it made his scalp tingle.

Yaret finished, touching her hand to her forehead, and studied their faces. Even Shuli was looking faintly stunned.

"I have said the last part which is Ulthared," said Yaret quietly, "although you younger ones in particular would not normally be made acquainted with it for some years to come. But there is no-one now to tell you the Ulthared lore except myself. So I think I have to impart some of it early. Not all. And of course I do not know it all myself."

They were silent for a moment. Then Dil said in an awed voice,

"Can you say it again?"

"Tomorrow evening," answered Yaret. "Now it is time for news, if you are willing. But for my part I feel that anyone unwilling does not need to speak. Do you agree?"

Since she was asking rather than commanding them to agree, Charo said, "Just for this evening, maybe. But I think it's important that everyone joins in or there's no point."

"Elket never says anything," said Shuli.

"I have heard Elket speak," said Yaret mildly, "so perhaps *seldom* would be more accurate."

"I'll go first," said Dil. "It's always youngest first." Yaret turned on him a long, thoughtful look and said nothing. To Charo's astonishment Dil began to squirm.

"Please may I go first," he said.

"Please do," said Yaret.

"My news is that somebody arrived today, and we don't know yet what she is like, but she did bring some food and she has more in her own cellar and we hope that she is good."

"Shuli next," said Charo.

"The hens are roosting behind the orchard. I think they've settled there. I found an egg."

"Elket."

"Somebody arrived," said Elket, and left it at that.

"Now you," said Dil to him.

"I think you summed it up, Dil," he said. "Somebody arrived. Thank you for the food. We hope you will not go just yet."

"I will not go just yet," she said.

"Your turn," said Dil.

Yaret did not speak immediately. Then she said quietly, "You know my news. It was your news two weeks ago. It is that everything has changed. And everything will keep on changing; and not always for the worse."

"That wasn't news," objected Shuli.

"Forgive me."

"Now best thing," said Dil. "Can I do best thing first?" Charo realised that Dil had been missing evening council. Perhaps he had been wrong to let it drop.

"Go on," he said. "Best thing today." It was really meant to be Thanks-saying, but they were following the simplified children's version of evening council for Dil's sake.

Dil beamed. "We've got a horse! I mean, it's nice to have you here too, but we've got a horse!"

"He likes horses," explained Elket.

"She's called Poda," said Yaret, "and really she should be rubbed down properly before nightfall. She's worked hard these last few days."

"Can I rub her down?"

"Anyone who wishes can," said Yaret. "She'll enjoy that. I have a brush in my pack."

"Then that'll be my best thing ever today," announced Dil. He sounded even younger than usual. To Charo it seemed that Dil did not fully grasp the catastrophe that had come upon them. Sometimes he appeared to just ignore it; although at nine he should have better sense. But Elket protected him, perhaps too much.

"Shuli's turn for best thing," he said.

"I found an egg," said Shuli. "Elket's turn."

"We have the promise of more food," said Elket, "in the cellar at your weaving place."

Now Yaret looked at him. He knew what the obvious thing to say was. Of course her arrival ought to be the best thing of the day. But everything was so confusing. He did not

know what she would want to do with them or what might happen. In one way she had upset everything.

"Your coming here," he said, because he had to.

"I hope it will be," Yaret answered gravely, "but you cannot know that yet."

He nodded and bit his lip.

"My turn," said Yaret.

"It's finding us," said Dil.

"Yes, it is. I don't know how you four come to be here, and you don't need to tell me now. Tell me later if you wish. But I am very glad to find you."

She looked at Charo, so he said, "Now. Plans for tomorrow. Dil?"

"I want to ride the horse," said Dil. "Please."

"Find more eggs," said Shuli.

"Find more food," said Elket. "Not just eggs. Anything."

Charo took a deep breath. "Work out what we're going to do," he said, because it now seemed slightly more possible than it had been before.

"Those are all good aims," said Yaret, "and since my brain seems to be rather slow at present I think I should just fall in with all of them. So tomorrow morning, if you are willing, I will take Dil and Elket and the horse back to my farm, and load up with provisions there and bring them back. If Shuli wishes for help in hunting eggs I will do that on our return."

"I don't need any help," said Shuli.

Yaret bowed her head in acknowledgement. "And then," she went on, "at tomorrow's evening council, we can start to work out what we're going to do."

Chapter 2

Dil was in ecstasy.

He had never been atop a horse so fine, so grand, so high-stepping. He had hardly been on any horse at all apart from the miller's old dray horse; and Poda was completely different. Charo had said that Poda looked like a nobleman's horse and Dil was ready to agree.

Last night he had rubbed her down diligently and today her coat gleamed like a ripe conker. He bobbed in the saddle and was not entirely comfortable, but he was very happy.

Elket and the new person walked alongside. Dil knew she was a woman in male mode but sometimes he forgot. He forgot her name too. Yaret. That was it. She was most important to him as the owner of the horse.

He didn't understand how a weaver could own such a good horse, however. That was something to be explained later on that evening, after the council, when Yaret had promised to tell them the story of her travels. She was going to explain her leg as well. He had nearly collapsed in amazement last night, in the cellar before bedtime, when she had said,

"Ah, just to warn you. This one's wooden," and had pulled her own foot off. Pulled it right off! And then passed it over for him to look at! He rehearsed the story to tell his friend Armendo and then remembered that Armendo was not there. At that, the panic began to grip him and it made him grip the horse in turn until she grew restless.

"What is it, Dil?" said Yaret, who was walking beside him.

"Elket," he said. "Do you think Armendo is still hiding in the woods?"

"It's possible," said Elket. "You never know. He might be."

"How long would he have to hide before it's safe to come out?"

"A bit longer, perhaps," said Elket. "Until those men, you know, have really gone away."

"The stonemen," said Dil soberly, his joy at the horse all dissipated. He shouldn't have thought about Armendo. But how could he just forget him? He missed Armendo and it made him ache in the middle of his chest.

And he missed Ma and Da almost as much, Ma anyway, although they seemed to be already further away somehow – Ma especially. He had cried lots those first few days, hoping Ma would reappear and comfort him; but really he knew that she wouldn't. He thought he had already got used to her not really being there, because she had been so busy with the baby for so long. And the baby had been so ill. It might have died anyway, even if. Even if. If. Not.

Go away, he said silently, go away, go away, and although he was not quite sure who he meant they did go away after a few minutes and left him sitting on the proudly-stepping horse and with a farmhouse just coming into sight. It was burnt, of course, all the houses were, but as they entered through the non-existent gate he found the ashen shapes on the ground quite easy to ignore. He and Charo agreed that they weren't people any longer.

"Are they still people?" he challenged Yaret, ready to put her right if she said yes.

"Not like us," said Yaret. "I think not. No."

"I keep thinking that we ought to bury them," said Elket.

"Again," said Yaret, "I think not. Not just yet, at any rate. It would be a huge and difficult job and it isn't really necessary as far as hygiene goes. Also the disturbance to the ground would be quite obvious."

“To those stonemen,” said Dil. “If they come back again.”

“Yes. At the moment, undisturbed as they are, those – those effigies that were once bodies – they protect us. They make the town seem uninhabited, untouched. We might regard them as our guardians.”

Dil looked at the blackened shape nearest the house and at once his perception of it changed. It was now a guardian, a burnt and almost magical thing. It seemed to have acquired a different sense of life.

“Guardians,” he said. “That’s what they are.”

“At present guarding our food,” said Yaret. She helped him climb down off Poda, which he found he was quite glad to do after all.

“Ouch,” he said.

“It’ll take you a while to get used to riding so far. You’ll have to walk back home anyway, because Poda will be carrying a lot of weight.”

That sounded encouraging. And when they entered the burnt farmhouse and descended the ladder to the cellar he saw that there was plenty of food here. Elket stood next to him and just sighed, a great sigh of relief. It was the same way Ma used to sigh after Da had gone out for the day. But that was before...

No. No. Go away.

It went away quite easily this time, because there was so much to look at and discuss and do. What to take first? A bit of everything, they decided, so long as they could carry it. Oats, flour, apples. Dil found a bag of dried peas but Yaret told him to leave those where they were.

“We might need them in the spring,” she said. Dil didn’t understand why peas would be important in the spring and not now, but before he could ask Yaret, she picked up a sack of oats and gave a cry of pleasure at what lay underneath.

“Ah! Excellent,” she said. “These will be useful.”

Dil ran over to see what she’d found. It seemed to be only a pile of old empty sacks and some folded cloth. Yaret unfolded it. It was a long woollen piece, rather blotchy and mildewed. She sniffed it.

“Hmm,” she said. “But we can wash it and use it as a blanket. The winter weather will come soon. Do you get cold at night?”

“No,” said Dil.

“A bit,” said Elket, and he remembered that Elket had given him her cloak. It made him feel slightly guilty but not much because she didn’t have to.

“We can stuff some of the sacks with heather or dry grass,” said Yaret, “or even bedstraw, if we can find any, to make ourselves more comfortable at night.” Dil had been quite comfortable at night. But then Elket had told him he could fall asleep anywhere. She said he could fall asleep on the blade of a knife.

There were no knives or anything so useful down in the cellar. There were some candles and soap, however, which Yaret took. They loaded apples into one of the sacks and carried the cloth and everything else back up the ladder to the horse. Yaret filled the saddle-bags until they bulged and threw a sack of oats over the saddle. When Poda tried to reach round for it with her nose, Yaret smiled and then looked sad.

“My donkeys used to like oats,” she said.

Dil did not want to ask about the donkeys because he assumed they were now black sticks inside one of the burnt sheds. But she went on,

"I had two donkeys. One of them went lame by the river Thore and I had to leave them both behind. So they're probably very happy running free up there, with the wild donkeys for company."

He breathed more easily again. "What are they called?"

"Dolm and Nuolo."

Elket said, "By the river Thore? Isn't that an awfully long way away?"

"It is."

"Will the donkeys be in your story tonight?" asked Dil.

"Oh, yes. They play quite an important part. And so does Poda, and another horse called Narba." Yaret was staring at the sheds but he had the feeling she was looking at something much more distant. Charo did that too sometimes.

He was suddenly quite glad that Yaret was here. Charo was all right but he wasn't yet a man. Yaret wasn't a man either but she was half-way; and she was nearly twice Charo's age, she said. It meant that she seemed to know a lot of things. And she was very calm.

"Before we go," she said, "let's look around for anything else that we can salvage. I'm thinking about anything metal and tools in particular."

So they divided up the farm buildings between them and had a rummage in the ash. Dil knew that he was getting very dirty, and he had no other clothing to change into, but neither had anybody else so it didn't matter.

He found a spade without a handle, and a garden fork with one prong melted like a worm but the others still proudly straight.

"Good," said Yaret. "Those could be very useful. We'll leave them in the kitchen here for now."

Elket had found in one outhouse a jug – not metal but pottery, with only one thin crack – a metal carding comb, and a whole bunch of iron spikes lying by a wall.

"They were for fencing posts," said Yaret. "Again, let's leave most of the spikes here. They're heavy. We'll just take a couple with us."

She washed the jug at the little spring and they all drank from it. The water tasted good. There was a spring behind the inn but the water from it tasted smoky and bitter. Charo said it would improve.

"And I found more cloth," said Yaret. She seemed to think that cloth was important. It was probably because she was a weaver. "It was in the dye-baths. They must have almost boiled dry; but the cloth seems to be all right, just a bit shrunken. I've rinsed it and put it in the cloth-shed to dry out. We'll take it back next time."

He liked the sound of that. "Next time, can I ride the horse again?"

"It might be someone else's turn. Like Shuli's. Does she ride?"

"I don't know," said Dil. "I didn't really know her much before."

"She lived with an aunt and uncle just outside the north edge of town," said Elket. "She said she woke up when the moonlight fell on her face through the window and then she heard people marching past and smelt a smell and had a strange feeling, so she climbed out of the window and went to see what was happening. And when she saw what was happening she ran away."

Dil knew that this account was not entirely true, because there had been no moon that night. He thought Shuli had probably been up to no good, but there was no point saying that, and in any case it seemed like telling tales.

Yaret paused. "So they came at night?" she asked.

"Before dawn," said Elket. "It was still dark. My mother woke us up – she was awake every night with the baby – and she pulled us out of bed and told us to run. I only had time to grab some clothes and then she pushed me out of the door and just said 'Look after Dil.' We're on the west-side so we ran straight out across the field towards the woods. There was fire to our left. We could smell – the smell – and we felt – so – so weird and shaky that after a bit we couldn't move and we had to sort of sit down. Nobody saw us in the field. We were invisible. But we could see fires starting up all over the place and they spread so fast and burnt so high, so high you wouldn't believe, and then there was a lot of shouting and everything was just burning, burning everywhere. And then as soon as we could move again we ran into the woods."

Dil listened. This was the most that he had heard his sister speak since it had happened. He knew that she was missing a lot out. They had seen more than that – people on fire – those men running after them with swords, black against the roaring orange dazzle of the flames – the one that – the ones – Go away, go away, go away, go away. It wouldn't go. He ran over to the horse and began to stroke her frantically, making sure she wasn't scared. He didn't want her to be scared.

"It's all gone now," he said to her. "It's all gone." And eventually it was. The horse was warm and quiet and solid and didn't seem to be so scared any more.

Yaret and Elket were still talking, in low voices, but he didn't want to listen to them. So he stayed to stroke the horse until Yaret came over with an apple and some biscuit and they ate that before they set out home. He gave the horse half of his apple because she was such a good horse.

As they left Yaret turned to look back at the farmyard, and nodded. She had already brushed the ash across the kitchen floor with a piece of bushy shrub she'd found somewhere, so that no footprints were visible. Now she did the same in the farmyard.

"We do that at the inn," said Dil. "It was Elket's idea."

"And I am copying it, because it's a sensible idea," said Yaret. She smiled at Elket, who said nothing now, as if she'd done all her talking in one go.

He didn't mind the walk back home. Some of the woods were still nice and not burnt at all although they smelt of smoke. Dead leaves crackled underfoot the way they were supposed to. There was a squirrel and a jay.

"Nuts!" he said eagerly. "Cobnuts! Look, look!" There was only one hazel-tree with nuts and the squirrels had already had a share, but he could still fill both his pockets until they were knobbly. The others filled the jug.

Closer to the town they passed many of the no-longer-human shapes, but now that Dil knew who they were he didn't mind them. They were the Guardians. He felt that they approved of the day's work. It was very pleasant to arrive back at the inn and show the food and everything else to Shuli and Charo. He felt triumphant, as though he had saved everyone. A bit, anyway.

"I found a few cobnuts too," said Charo, "but not as many as you, Dil." He looked at Yaret. "And I did what you suggested." He held open the small bag which she had given him that

morning. "You were right; there were still quite a lot of beans beyond the south-side in someone's garden."

She peered into the bag. "Good. These we will keep in a cool, dark corner of the cellar, for sowing in the spring."

Now Dil thought he understood about the peas. They were for sowing too. But that worried him. It meant that they would still be here to sow the peas in spring. It meant that they would still be here to pick the plants in summer. It meant that there would be nobody else to do it for them, and maybe no other food. He felt himself start to go tight as the aching gripped his chest again.

Yaret looked at him. "Just in case," she said. "Because I think there will be many other stores of food to find, and other people to join up with. But it is always good to be prepared for everything you can."

"All right."

After that it got better again. Shuli arrived not with eggs but amazingly with a whole chicken.

"A fox had just got it," she said. "I chased it away. Can we cook it?"

Charo pulled a doubtful face. "I don't know. I'm worried about smoke. We haven't tried making a fire yet," he told Yaret.

"I can understand that. And it has not been too cold. But now is perhaps a good time to try a fire, while the weather is dry and the whole town is still smoking slightly. At least it appeared to be from a distance. There are probably embers still smouldering in places, so any smoke you make will be disguised."

"We'll need dry wood," said Shuli. "Cutting down trees won't work. They'll smoke like mad."

"Perhaps around the edges of the town," suggested Yaret, "would be the best place to look, where wood stores may be partly burnt but not entirely."

She looked at Charo, who said decisively, "In that case, we'll all go out again now, to look for dry wood, so that we can cook the chicken. Bring back all that you can carry."

"We can store it in the outhouse," Shuli said. "It still has nearly all the tiles on the roof. I climbed up to check." Dil wished he had done that.

But he was allowed to go with Yaret and the horse, although he did not ride it. Shuli went with them this time. Shuli said they ought to try the forge because it used so much wood for fuel. Dil thought it would all have been burnt, but she said there was a wood store by the stream, and sure enough there was. Fire had caught its edges but it had not burnt entirely.

They filled the sacks they'd brought. Now he understood why the sacks were important. Sacks and peas. Yaret loaded up the horse. He noticed that she was watching Shuli. Yet she asked no questions, until she said, "Anywhere else?"

Shuli thought. "Holvet's farm," she said. "He must have had a wood store. He was a pig-farmer and kept a smokehouse."

"We should check that for hams," said Yaret.

"I already did. There aren't any. The smokehouse is gone now."

"Pity. Still, we've done well here. We'll save Holvet's farm for next time."

"I'll take a proper look tomorrow," Shuli said.

Dil led the horse home. She obeyed him every step and stopped when he stopped. He thought he might already love the horse. Yaret didn't seem to mind; she was still watching Shuli, who was looking around at everything. But they didn't talk much.

Back near the inn Charo had found a place to build a fire. It was actually a real fireplace in the house two down from the inn. You couldn't see it until you were right inside the ruined house, but Charo had cleared the cavity and the ashpit. There was still a bit of chimney over it although it went nowhere.

So they built a fire and put the chicken over it, spitted on one of the fence spikes they'd brought back from the weaver's. They shoved some of Yaret's roots into the embers and she added some of the red roots from the inn although they all protested.

"I like them," said Yaret, laughing.

"Then you can eat them all," said Shuli, "and leave the proper ones for us."

When they went outside to check, there was hardly any smoke, not enough to matter. They ate the chicken with their fingers. It was tough but very tasty.

"Tomorrow I will look for wintergreens," said Yaret. Dil opened his mouth to protest that he didn't care for wintergreens, before closing it again. He hadn't believed Elket when she told him wintergreens were important, but if Yaret said it then it might be true.

After the chicken they left the roots to continue cooking in the embers and walked down to the burial ground for council. He had so many things ready to say that they were almost bursting from his mouth. But he had to wait.

Yaret said Oveyen, as before, the Ulthared version which made them all listen almost without breathing. Dil thought it might take him another few goes to remember because it was quite long, and strange, but he decided that it sounded comforting even though he didn't understand it. Then Yaret sat back while they had the council. Charo led it although he was not the oldest any more.

All the news and best things tonight were obvious, of course: food, horse, wood, chicken. Dil surprised himself by adding the Guardians, and then Elket had to explain. Yaret said almost nothing which was strange because she was the oldest. But this time she was quieter than Elket until the plans for tomorrow were discussed.

"We haven't decided yet what we're going to do," objected Shuli. "I mean are we going to stay here or not?" Not staying here had not even occurred to Dil. It alarmed him.

"Where would we go?" he said.

"That is too big a decision to make all at once," said Yaret. "There are several possibilities." She waited but when nobody else spoke she went on. "We can stay here in the town, obviously. I think there will be more food and tools to be foraged from cellars and storerooms. It's just that they are all buried in ash, but we can dig them out. There will be outlying gardens and fields still left untouched. There will be sheep out on the hills if we can catch them. I saw deer spoor in the woods so if they return there will be hunting." Dil hadn't seen the spoor and felt put out.

"What with?" demanded Shuli.

"My bow. We can make more bows. How many of you can shoot?"

"I can," said Charo and Elket together.

"Sort of," added Elket.

"I want to learn," said Shuli.

“You’ll need a smaller bow than mine,” said Yaret, “but if we can make one I can teach you.”

“Me too,” said Dil, although he wasn’t sure.

“Not until you’re ten,” said Yaret gravely. That was a long way off; further than he could see at the moment. He was only just nine now. At first he hadn’t been sure that any future would happen. Everything seemed to have stopped. But Yaret was now talking about the future as something assured.

“As long as the stonemen don’t come back I think we could successfully winter in Obandiro,” she said. “Alternatively we could all move to my grandparents’ house; the cellar is big enough, but it is more isolated, and higher up, so it gets more snow. Or we could travel to another town – Byant is the closest – before the winter sets in, and see what the situation is there.”

There was a silence. “Do you think it will be the same as here?” asked Elket.

“We have no way of knowing until we go to see,” said Yaret. “I didn’t come through Byant. On my way from Coba the villages were untouched. But Coba is more than a week away, and things may have changed there too by now.”

“I don’t want to leave,” said Dil. “What if Armendo comes back and there’s nobody here? What will he do?”

Shuli seemed about to say something. Then she stopped. Then she started again, and said,

“You know, he has a point. There might just be more people out there. Travellers, like you.”

Yaret nodded. “I think, for another week at least, we establish ourselves here,” she said. “If the stonemen don’t return then I will ride out to Byant and see how things stand there. The days are shortening fast but if I go within the next fortnight I could be there and back before nightfall.”

“Don’t go yet,” said Dil, suddenly afraid of losing her, and the horse.

“No, I won’t go yet. Tomorrow’s plans?”

They all made suggestions. It was decided that they should look for more firewood, and for more places to store it. Yaret suggested that Shuli should scout for wood and she would go to collect it on the horse.

The others would explore houses, starting on the Cross-street, methodically looking for cellars and storerooms or anything useful hidden underneath the ash. Yaret said that anything metal would be good. Knives, pots, needles, hammers, spoons. And if they found a cellar, they should check not just for food, but for pottery, candles, clothing, anything that they could use.

Charo said he would search the forge and after a moment’s hesitation, she nodded. Any building they went inside, she said, they needed to carefully remove any fresh-looking footprints afterwards.

“At present our tracks are not obvious on the streets,” she said, “but we need to keep an eye on that too. And just in case we see anyone approach the town, stonemen or anybody else, we should agree a plan of action and a signal.”

The plan of action they agreed was basically to hide; and later to meet up at one of four places on the perimeter of the town – the inn, the mill, the Northgate or the Dondel Bridge, whichever was furthest from the danger.

The signal was more difficult to decide. Yaret suggested that they all try bird calls, so they sat there hooting and whistling and squawking until Dil was in a fit of giggles. They fixed on owl because they could all do a shrill “week, week” quite convincingly. It wasn’t very loud but it was better than nothing. He pointed out that owls sometimes called during the day, so an owl call wouldn’t sound too strange, but not very often, so there shouldn’t be many false alarms. And everyone agreed.

Dil felt quite happy by the end of council. There were plenty of interesting things to do and many of them used the horse. Charo had thought of lots of things before, but now that Yaret had arrived it was clear that there were things he hadn’t thought of. Dil hoped that Charo didn’t mind.

So on the walk back to the cellar he told Charo,

“I think you and Yaret both make really good leaders.”

“Thank you,” said Charo, sounding surprised. “But you know the whole point of the council is that we don’t have leaders.”

“I know. But all the same.” Dil felt quite glad that he was only nine and didn’t have to be responsible for anyone else. But he could still be leader of the horse.

Back at the inn he was allowed to brush the horse down and then Elket made him wash himself, and had a moan about his dirty clothes. Since it was starting to get dark and the roots were cooked, they took them down to eat by lamplight in the cellar. Yaret picked some large stones out of the fire and wrapped them in sacks and took them down into the cellar too. When she unwrapped them and piled them up on the earth floor it was almost like having a little fire to sit near. But not a dangerous one. They ate the roots and listened as she began to tell her story.

It was going to be a long story, she said, and would take many nights to tell. It started with her grandparents and the two donkeys. Dolm was the male, the stubborn bold tough noisy one, and Nuolo was quiet and clever but also stubborn.

The donkeys and Yaret marched quickly through various towns and markets on their way to the first important bit. Which was a burnt-out farmhouse, and he seemed to stand inside it with her and feel the wind blow through. But it was all right because she had already made it clear that everybody got away in the carts, and took the horses with them, although she didn’t know where they had gone. But they were safe and it was also very far away and felt safer for that reason too.

He liked the story being so far away. It made it more of a story and less real. Next she was somewhere that she called the loft, where there might be lions, and then all of a sudden there was a horse galloping out of the forest, with no rider.

“My horse!” he cried, and Yaret looked at him and smiled.

“Our horse,” she said. “And I’ll stop there, and go on with the story tomorrow evening.”

Dil didn’t want to wait till tomorrow but then they had some singing and Yaret led them in a round. He was good at singing and didn’t lose his place once. When they began to get ready for bed he realised he was very tired. It had been a much busier day than usual. The roots filled his stomach and the story filled his head quite nicely. He gathered it was going to be a rather scary story but so far he hadn’t had to tell any of it to go away.

Chapter 3

Huldarion walked forward to the edge of the escarpment. When he looked back, Thoronal stood on the skyline holding both the horses. Huldarion shook his head in faint irritation. Why be so conspicuous when you didn't need to be? But Thoronal thought he was invincible. As well as always being right.

However, it didn't really matter, since there was nobody to see them here. These uplands by the Darkburn head were as free of man as any place could be. A strange region; almost otherworldly. What had Rothir said that northern woman called the place? The Loft. It suited it. Remote, aloof.

Not so remote just now. Thield was camped only fifteen miles distant: the town of tents had moved for the winter, not to Bruilde's meadows as it sometimes did but to a hidden wooded valley not too far away. Today he'd ridden here from Bruilde's burnt-out homestead at Deloran, which he had visited to see if the northerner's report had been correct.

When he got there the place was indeed in ruins, although he found unexpected signs of life. Two of Bruilde's farmhands had returned and were dispiritedly sifting through the blackened debris; but of the whereabouts of Bruilde herself, they could tell him nothing. It had been a darkburn that was responsible, of course – in fact two darkburns, so they said, with a dozen stonemen following: they'd been spotted from the look-out in the cedar tree and Bruilde had organised a swift evacuation in the carts.

But once her household was a safe three miles from the fire, Bruilde herself had saddled up her horse and thrown some things into the saddlebags, and left. She couldn't say where she was going, she had told her people, because she didn't know herself.

Huldarion allowed himself a wry inward smile as he thought about Bruilde. At over seventy you might have expected her to settle down to quiet retirement. She was a determined woman, though, and once she took something into her head she carried it through. Wherever she had gone, he had to trust that she could look after herself – despite a crawling doubt that warned him that she had not been seen for several weeks now; and that she was old, and that every person's body failed at some point.

"Be safe, Bruilde," he said aloud, although it might already be too late for that. From this long cliff-edge he looked down upon the mysterious vastness of the Darkburn forest disappearing under distant layers of cloud. It seemed almost to steam. Possibly it created its own weather system. Down there, only a mile or so away, was the spot where the crawling darkburn must have pursued Eled before heading back into the forest.

Poor Eled. An admirable young man, lots of potential there if only he recovered. Huldarion hoped Farwithiel was kind to him. At least Eled was safe. The Riders of the Vonn were all safe, for now: most of the patrols had returned from their far-flung journeys, and were back in Thield or dotted around various farms and villages south and east of Kelvha.

His own trip up to the northern Outlands had been annoyingly inconclusive. General Istard had been a positive. Being from West Vale, not Kelvha, he had the resourcefulness and toughness of those people. A keen and capable soldier, in Huldarion's judgement; they had agreed that a watch should be kept on the Outland Forts over winter, and the country readied for attack early in the spring. In saying *readied for attack* the General clearly hoped to be the one doing the attacking.

But whether Kelvha would back him up was another question. The General would put in his reports, and Huldarion would make his deputations – wording still to be decided – and at some point he hoped to go himself to Inner Kelvha. Somehow he needed to win himself an invitation. He hadn't been there for six years; and last time it had been in disguise. But Kelvha's friendship was critical to him.

Meanwhile he was living in the chilly tents of Thield. He didn't mind; the cold seemed to ease the pain of his burnt side to some degree. Although Tiburé had brought some painkiller called belvane back from Farwithiel, he was reluctant to use it unless it became absolutely necessary. Not as addictive as ethlon, she had assured him, but still.

Thield held the additional comfort of company: that of those Riders with nowhere else to spend the winter. However, two of his closest friends – or counsellors, rather, for they were no longer the carefree comrades of his youth – would not be at Thield. Parthenal and Rothir had gone to stay with Rothir's sister, a calm and practical farmer's wife whom Huldarion admitted freely to himself that he wouldn't have minded marrying if he could. He liked her very much. But he couldn't marry her, of course, it had never even been a possibility: had never even been suggested by him. He had not shown by word or look or touch that he had any preference. Olbeth had chosen her farmer, and seemed content.

As for himself... He sighed. Marriage might be forced upon him soon, and dear stars, how he had sometimes wanted a woman in the last few years, but he wished it could be one of his own choosing. That looked increasingly unlikely.

He walked restlessly a little way along the ridge. It was easy for Parthenal. He knew that Parthenal had been hunting, up at the Outland forts. His friend had probably thought that nobody would notice; and maybe he wouldn't have noticed, had he not been so attuned to Parthenal's moods. *Hunting* ... No, that was unfair. His human prey were unlikely to complain at being caught. They might complain about being dropped again so quickly afterwards.

Parthenal appeared unchanged by his last trip. Not so Rothir; he'd come back more set, more silent than before, if that were possible. Seeing the woman go over the cliff seemed to have affected him despite the surprisingly good outcome. Yaret. She sounded like a useful person; although Rothir had said little about her. He'd learnt more from Parthenal. He had gained the impression of something turning in the depths of Rothir's mind, rising to the surface after long submersion. Perhaps it was the result of the stonemen's unforeseen movements – the same sense of approaching conflict and resolution that he himself felt. The awareness that the long years of waiting might be coming to a head.

On this spot Rothir too had stood. A sound man. He did not spare himself.

Huldarion gazed down at the forest and a solitary goat on its edge gazed back. Unlike Rothir he had come here looking not for swords or saddle-packs, but for space to think.

So think. Stop rambling, he told himself: and he expected himself to be obeyed. Stand still and consider. What was the right thing to do?

He stood still and considered. He knew what he wanted to do: to forge an alliance with Kelvha, march on Caervonn and claim it back as lawful king. To claim Caervonn had been his wish for the past twelve years. That did not make it necessarily the right thing for him to do.

What would be best for Caervonn? If he loved his homeland as he hoped he did, he should choose what would be to its greatest benefit, not to his own. But he had so little information to go on.

Not much news had come out of Caervonn since his exile. Traders said it was prosperous enough: its terraces still alive with lights and music in the evenings, its craftsmen dextrous, its huntsmen successful, its satellite demesnes awash with grain.

But that was news from traders, not from Caervonn itself. There was no diplomatic route in. Caervonn had cut him off and shut him out. Its only ambassadors were murderous stonemen sent out to pursue him; if not by Olvirion's command, then with his connivance. From the people of the city itself, all he had were rumours.

It was the latest disturbing rumours that made him seek for answers now. Stonemen were marching through the fields, not marching on Caervonn but around it in a threatening flow. And with them were the darkburns that had made the city so obedient to its ruler.

As for the self-styled king, Olvirion himself – was he even still alive? He was little seen and only from a distance. Some of the rumours spoke of doubles. And where Adon stood in all this was unknown, although he was bound to be somewhere, and dangerously so.

No, all was not well in Caervonn. But if Huldarion tried to take back his city uninvited he would be fought bitterly; and even if he were successful – which would need Kelvha's help – he would be resented and opposed. And in debt to Kelvha. Better to be invited back, although how that could be done he did not know. But he would certainly be more persuasive with Kelvha's weight behind him.

Before any of this became possible he needed to put Kelvha into debt to him. So he had offered the forces of the Vonn to defend the Outland Forts and anywhere else that they might be required. It would not be the first time that the Vonn had fought for Kelvha, although most of those previous occasions had been mere border disputes. Still, that history meant that although Kelvha might sneer at his Riders in terms of numbers, they would not sneer at the Vonn's ability in battle. That had proved itself.

So. That was what he wanted to do. But what ought he to do?

Moving his gaze upward from the vapours of the Darkburn forest and its hidden river, he sought for some message in the long unattainable coastlands of the sky. Give me an answer, he thought, although he knew that any voice he heard could only be his own.

Nevertheless. Advise me now. Help me to find some answer. He looked along those territories made of cloud and light and felt his heart empty upon some strangely glowing shore. Such a light. Such inhuman glory. We make of it what we will. But it is just itself.

Protect the land. Protect the people.

He stared out at the layers of light, thinking, well, that was my own voice. And an inane one at that. What it said was obvious enough. Protect the land. Protect the people.

Which people? My people? Caervonn's people? All people? *The people.*

So not my people only. What I choose to do will affect far more than the Vonn. I have to take that into account. Protect the people.

Protect the land. Which land? It is all land. Why does the land come first?

The land always comes first. Without the land there are no people to protect. The land is sacred.

That was something he had never thought before. Momentarily bewildered, he cast his eyes down from the island kingdoms of the sky to the green clouds of the forest, a multitude

of trees, each its own realm and of its own importance. Who was he to decide that his small kingdom should take precedence?

Protect the land. Then protect the people. Very well. That was something to think about, at least.

He turned to go, when a movement close by caught the corner of his sight. A small person had just stood there, surely? But when he looked there was only a lump of rock.

“So which are you?” he said aloud. “Are you land or people?”

Then he saluted the rock and smiled at his own folly; and set off walking back to Thoronal, still waiting on the skyline.

Chapter 4

Shuli was inside a chimney when she saw the returning stonemen.

It was the chimney of the bakery near the Northgate and only half of it still stood. But in the half that remained, the pigeons liked to sit. In the absence of any net or snare, Shuli had decided that the best way to catch a sitting pigeon was from below. So she was waiting for a pigeon and was peering through a gap between the stones when she saw the movement on the north road.

Only four of them. Red tunics. But this time they were riding horses. There was no small concentrated thing of darkness. She climbed down swiftly from the chimney and stood on a wall behind it to give the signal. *Week, week*, four times, as loudly as she could. An answering *week, week* came from the east side; that was a small reassurance that she had been heard. She just hoped the stonemen hadn't been paying attention.

But the stonemen were making plenty of noises of their own as they rode up to the Northgate. They weren't trying to be stealthy; so they must be confident that nobody was here.

If they were sure that nobody was here, then what had they come back for? A day out, Shuli thought. A holiday from killing.

She crept round the back of the bakery and padded as silently as a cat – she was good at being a cat – through the blackened rubble to the market hall. Its small bell-tower made an excellent lookout in three directions. The bell had fallen but she scrambled over it and climbed up the inside of the tower to where it had once hung. There she was hidden as long as nobody looked too hard. She trusted that the horsemen would not be interested in the bell-tower.

By now they had split up. Two were riding south through the middle of the town, still making plenty of noise, and looking up and down the silent ruins of the streets they passed.

The other pair rode into the market place below her and dismounted. They went up to one of the Guardians and kicked at her and laughed. Shuli was coldly angry. She always thought of that Guardian as female and did not like to see her kicked. They kicked a couple of others too, before stooping to examine them. They seemed to be looking for something that they did not find, until they came to the corner where the dead stoneman lay.

One of the horsemen exclaimed on seeing the body; and the other one came over pulling what appeared to be some pliers from his pocket. Shuli couldn't see what he did as he bent over the corpse, but after a couple of minutes they both moved off, talking to each other. They seemed to talk a form of Standard but with a strange abruptness. She thought one of them said,

"There were only two left here, weren't there?" Two what, she wondered? They mounted their horses and rode off casually down the west street. In her opinion they were not very good riders: they kicked and slapped their horses more than should be necessary. The horses were not as large or grand as Poda but looked agile and tough.

Shuli stayed where she was while the stonemen moved around the town. She trusted that the others all had the sense to stay where they were too. She hoped the last person out of the cellar had swept the entrance to the inn. Yaret had been strict about that. It was one of the few things she was strict about.

The other things were performing Haedath every morning, and holding evening council. They had not missed a single council in the last two weeks, since Yaret had arrived. Shuli put up with evening council, although she didn't care for it because everyone just stated the obvious. Or what was obvious to her, at any rate.

The stories and songs that followed in the evenings were better. They sang Madeo's songs: Yaret was teaching them unfamiliar ones and encouraging them to write their own. That was fun although Shuli couldn't sing. She was better at dancing and practised the Rannikan diligently in private. That was something Yaret couldn't do, with her wooden leg.

However, she had found that she respected Yaret, and day by day had seen no reason for her respect to be withdrawn. She was glad that Yaret had ridden out to the town of Byant three days ago and not today, or she might have met the stonemen on the road. Yaret had come back looking grave and said that Byant was the same as here, only worse because there appeared to be nobody left at all. There might have been some survivors in the outlying hamlets – just a feeling she had, she said, although they were burnt out too and the streets appeared empty. But she had run out of time to look more thoroughly.

"I expect there are people who got away, and then came back like us, but they were hiding," Dil had said, and everyone agreed – even Shuli – because keeping Dil happy seemed to be important for all of them. That was because he was the youngest. Although Shuli was the second youngest she sometimes felt like the oldest. She knew she was cleverer and less afraid than either Elket or Charo. She had done more exploring than either of them and had learnt the Ulthared Oveyn on the second time of its saying. She would have memorised it on the first if she hadn't been so surprised.

By now she could not see any of the stonemen although she could still hear faint voices and hoof-treads in the deep silence of the town. They sounded unexcited: so the Guardians were doing their work. Thank you, Guardians. That was something Yaret said.

Yaret had brought bad news from Byant, but also good. On her way back she had found a survivor – a shepherd on the hills – although he had refused to leave his lonely hut five miles away, or his flock, saying he had to stay to look after them. The stonemen had taken many of the sheep but he had been gathering up any strays. A strange gaunt man, said Yaret, whose words were halting as if he seldom spoke to anyone. But as Yaret pointed out, he now knew where to find other people; and they in turn knew where the sheep were to be found.

Better even than that, Yaret had brought home more chickens. Live ones, from a Byant garden. The hen coop was burnt out but the chickens had been clucking nearby.

"It was Shuli that made me think of it," she said, as she carefully unwrapped one from the sack she'd carried it home in. It was quiet while held fast in the sacking but began to fluff and squawk indignantly as soon as it was released. They had to catch it again and take the sacks over to the east side where Shuli's chickens often roosted.

Shuli knew there were no foxes to harass them. She presumed the foxes had all left the area when the fires took hold. She had lied about the dead chicken she had found: it had not been taken by a fox at all, but had been running round in frantic circles with its eyes pecked out. So that would have been crows. She'd wrung its neck.

When they had released the chickens from the sacks, to her delight she saw one was a cockerel. Yaret unwrapped it very carefully.

"It took some catching, believe me," she said, and showed the peck marks on her arms. "And we might be fed up with it soon if starts doodle-doing all the time."

However, the cockerel had kept its crowing for the dawn. It was at present lurking with the chickens somewhere on the east side. The stonemen had not gone that way, so they were safe, and Shuli hoped that everyone would keep still and hidden just a little longer because now she could see the stonemen emerging on the west-road, riding slowly.

They were leaving town. After a moment one of them kicked his horse quite viciously into a gallop and instantly the others did the same. They were racing each other. Another five minutes and they were out of sight.

All the same she waited; and when she did descend from her look-out post, it was very cautiously. She went straight to the inn.

Everyone else was there already. They looked relieved to see her although they should have known that she would be all right. Only Yaret and Elket had noticed her owl signal; but Charo and Dil had heard the noise of the approaching stonemen with just enough time to hide in the cellar. Dil looked quite shaken.

"I thought they'd given up searching for people here," said Elket with an unnecessarily long face.

"They weren't looking for us," Shuli told her confidently.

"What makes you say so?" Yaret asked.

So Shuli explained what she had seen in the market place and what she deduced from the stonemen's careless behaviour.

"Let's go and hunt for what they found so interesting," Yaret said. All five of them walked up to the market place and stepped courteously over the Guardians to look at the dead stoneman's body.

There was a line of holes where the stones had been around the blackened head. It was satisfyingly gruesome. Shuli hoped the stones they drilled into their skulls hurt them. She did not care in the slightest what happened to any of the stonemen after what they'd done. She wished she had a bow or sword to fight them with, although she knew that jumping down from her tower today to attack them would have ended in her death. But all the same.

When she had gone to the forge last week to look for the old swords that used to hang on the walls she found that Charo had got there first. She wished she had remembered the swords earlier, because she knew Charo had taken them although he wouldn't say. He didn't trust her to be sensible with a sword. She wondered if Yaret knew about swordplay as well as archery.

"You'd think they would have taken the dead stoneman away," said Charo now in some disgust, "to bury him."

"That doesn't seem important to them. But the stones in their heads evidently are," Yaret replied. "Yet they're not gemstones. The ones I've seen were more like flint."

"Perhaps they're rare," said Charo. "Rare round here, I mean. So if the stonemen need more stones maybe they have to re-use the old ones."

"Why would they need more? Why do they need them at all?" asked Yaret.

"The stones must have some special meaning," suggested Elket. "They might give them..."

"Status," said Charo.

"Yes."

"Power," said Shuli.

Yaret looked at her thoughtfully in that way she had. "What sort of power?"

"Power over the other stonemen."

“Mmm. What puzzles me,” said Yaret, “is why they’ve waited so long to come back for the stones, if they’re that important. These bodies have been lying here for a month now.”

“Perhaps they didn’t have the right tools before,” said Shuli. “It looked quite difficult to get them out even with pliers.”

“Perhaps they were busy,” put in Dil, “and couldn’t come back until they had horses. You can do a lot more with horses.”

“And you can travel further,” Yaret said with a sudden smile. “You may be right about that, Dil. They may be travelling a long distance to reach us. Which makes it all the stranger about the stones. If we could find one of the stones we could check if there’s anything unusual about them.”

“What about the other dead stoneman, the one outside the forge?” asked Charo.

“They went there too,” said Shuli dampeningly.

“Let’s go and check.”

But sure enough, when they trooped over to the forge to look, the burnt corpse lay discarded without its coronet of stones. They had all been removed.

“That’s a shame,” said Charo.

“And there were only the two dead ones,” Elket added.

“That’s what the stonemen thought as well. I heard them say so. But they were wrong. There is a third dead stoneman,” Shuli said. “It’s underneath the Dondel bridge.” They all turned to stare at her. She shrugged. “It wasn’t important before.”

“It might be now,” said Yaret.

And off they trooped again, back across the ashen town to the north-west edge where the stoneman lay sprawled beneath the bridge, hidden in the reeds. He was not burnt like the others had been and had evidently drowned in the shallows of the Dondel brook. There was not much of him left and what remained was not very much like a human any more.

Yaret told them all to wait on the bank while she waded to the body and turned it over. Shuli saw Yaret take a knife from the man’s belt and was annoyed with herself for not searching him when she first saw him.

Then Yaret used the stoneman’s knife to poke and prise at his head. It took quite a while. Eventually something fell with a small splash into the water. Yaret retrieved it and washed it before bringing it back to shore. When she held it out for them to inspect, it looked a little like a thin arrowhead, sharp at one end, but shaped into a rough dome at the other.

“It doesn’t look anything special,” said Charo.

“I think it’s horrible,” said Elket vehemently. “It’s been inside a man’s head. And it’s so sharp! How could they?”

“They take painkilling drugs for it, apparently,” said Yaret absently, to Shuli’s chagrin. She thought about the stonemen in Yaret’s long ongoing tale, which was continuing nightly. Currently several stonemen had just been killed at the entrance to a cave by the man Rothir, of whom Shuli approved. She approved of Tiburé as well. She had decided that she might quite like to be a Rider of the Vonn if such an option became open to her.

Meanwhile there was plenty to do here. It was decided to leave the stoneman hidden underneath the bridge in case they wanted any more of his stones. He didn’t smell much: the water seemed to have washed the smell away.

Then the others went back towards the inn to make the evening fire before it got dark. Shuli told them she would be working on a cellar she was hopeful of, on the north-side. In

fact she had already dug out most of the entrance. It looked as if this cellar was going to be a good one. She could see at least one barrel inside.

But she did not return there now. Instead, once the others had departed, she hung around the Dondel bridge, poking about in the water for anything else that might have fallen in. It had occurred to her that the other two dead stonemen had had no weapons by their bodies, yet in the first attack when she looked back from her hiding-place across the fields she had seen all the stonemen carrying slightly curved swords.

She paused with that picture static in her mind for a few seconds: the upraised sword, the running woman silhouetted by the flames. It had happened. She would not forget. Meanwhile she did not let the image run on in her head but concentrated instead on the contents of the stream. Not to think about it unless you wanted to: that was the trick. She found it easy. She didn't even think much about her aunt and uncle. They were gone. She thought about the present and the future and looked at the past only when it was necessary, for information.

The stonemen must have taken their dead companions' swords. But they might well have missed this one. Downstream was the place to look. The banks were obscured by overhanging weeds, so she took off her shoes to wade in. The slow waters of the Dondel were not much more than knee deep. When she turned round to check how far she was from the bridge, she saw the lin.

As soon as she looked, it disappeared, of course, and became a stray bedraggled branch poking through the water. She bowed and said the rhyme:

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

She wondered if this was the same lin as she had seen last time. Or was it a lin at all? The Dondel lin was usually to be found on or underneath the bridge, not all this way downstream. It might even be a hob whose home had burnt and had to seek refuge here. There had been a hob in the school; all the children knew that, although they never mentioned it to Anneke the teacher. It had often lurked around the stove, and turned itself into a lump of wood whenever it was looked at. Perhaps this was the school hob. Shuli knew that some people were sceptical about the existence of hobs and lins, but she knew what she had seen and she trusted her own judgement.

When she looked back at the water she saw the sword. Her heart seemed to skip out of time for a second. Were the two connected? The sword and the lin? It was obviously the stoneman's sword caught in the weeds against the bank, for it was long and slightly curved and starting to grow rust. It would need cleaning and oiling but then it could be very useful.

She pulled it out and tried to wield it. Too heavy. But she herself would grow – was growing fast at present. She wondered if Yaret could wield this sword, and if so, whether she would give Shuli lessons.

But no, she wouldn't tell Yaret about the sword just yet.

"Thank you, lin," she said, in case the sword was somehow the lin's doing – although she didn't see how it could be. This was probably not the school hob after all, but just the lin that had always lingered around the Dondel bridge.

It was strange that she had seen it so often recently, however. Even before the stonemen first arrived. It might have been several weeks before. She had been seeing the lin – or different lins or hobs – all over the place. After the fire happened, she had vaguely assumed

it must be something to do with that; but now that she considered, she realised that such vague assumptions were a mistake. She needed to be precise. As sharp as this sword.

Climbing back onto the bridge with the sword, she felt quite proud but also unusually anxious. There were a number of things going on now that she didn't understand, and she liked to understand things. The stones; the lins; and as she stared out down the east road, a new thing. Three of them.

"Week, week!"

She did the owl screech for the second time that day, knowing it might well terrify the others. But it might just be necessary.

As she watched, though, she soon realised it was not. The three people approaching were not stonemen after all. They were on foot and the middle one was supported by the other two. The tall one on the left carried a long, hooked stick: a shepherd's crook. The two others wore long dresses, like Elket's before she had cut it and stitched it into breeches, although on Elket it did not seem like proper male mode. She was the wrong shape. Male mode was sensible, in Shuli's opinion. At least her aunt had never objected to that.

Two females in dresses, she thought in some disgust. We don't need more girls unless they're me, and they never are. We need more male mode, or more men.

Nevertheless she stowed the sword carefully beneath the bridge, intending to hide it later on in her new cellar; and then she ran across the fields to meet them.

Chapter 5

“Haven’t you done here yet? The twins have just arrived.”

Rothir looked up from the anvil. He knew how he must appear to his sister: over-busy, over-heated, aloof and stupidly obstinate in his desire to keep working till the last possible minute and beyond.

“I’m just finishing these arrowheads while the fire is still hot,” he told her.

Olbeth stepped inside the forge, shielding her face. “You said you were only going to do the sickles and shears. So why all the arrowheads?”

“We’re going to need them.”

“Not yet, Rothir. You’re acting like a man obsessed. Leave it all here and come into the house.”

Rothir sighed and counted arrow-heads. Twenty five. That would last a single archer about four minutes.

He was out of practice at blacksmithing. But he was getting back into practice now, and getting fit into the bargain; and staying warm. That last was an increasing bonus as the winter winds swirled in. Olbeth’s farm tucked in amongst the hills had drier pastures than those lower down, but also harsher weather.

Most importantly of all, here in the farmhouse forge he was staying solitary. He wasn’t normally unsociable, and winterfest at Wiln and Olbeth’s had always been enjoyable in the past. He just wasn’t enjoying it now. Too many things weighed on him. Empty farms, burnt-out buildings. Rows of captives, trapped and shackled, at the mercy of the stonemen while he galloped away free with Arguril – abandoning at least some of them to death by darkburn.

That and other things beat at his mind. The steady thump of hammer on anvil and the fierce heat of the fire seemed to match his mood. They were a reminder of all that he had failed to do; and all that was yet to come. Hence the arrowheads.

“Come on,” said Olbeth. She wasn’t going away. So he sighed again, put down the tongs and hammer and shovelled out some of the spent charcoal from the hearth before he took off the heavy leather apron.

“Wash,” commanded Olbeth, so he washed his hands and face in the basin by the door. “Now meet and talk.”

“You’re very severe for a younger sister, do you know that?”

“I know that. It’s the only way to be, with you. You’ve got soot in your hair. Goodness knows what your wife will do with you when you get one.”

“Don’t,” said Rothir, running his hands through his hair.

“Why not? You will get one. Forget poor Gwenna. You never really knew her anyway.”

“Evidently not,” said Rothir. He had told Olbeth about the change in Gwenna. Not all the details, obviously, although he probably could have told her even those and she would still have listened patiently with only the smallest grimace. She was an attentive listener.

“You look better since you had that haircut,” she said as she led the way back across the twilight farmyard through flickers of blue snow. “Try and persuade Parthenal to let me cut his too.”

“I won’t be able to.”

“Tell him he’d look just as beautiful with short hair.”

“Oddly enough, I don’t think he cares what he looks like,” Rothir said.

“No, he takes his looks for granted. But he’d care soon enough if he lost them. Boots off.”

He obeyed, again, stopping in the porch to prise off his boots and caress the two great dogs that raised their heads to him as they lay there. They preferred the porch to the noisy warmth inside the house, a preference that Rothir sympathised with. He envied them their quiet undemanding companionship; even with the wind blowing they were reluctant to come inside. Stubborn as donkeys sometimes. No, not donkeys. Stroking their shaggy ears he tried to make himself as placid as the dogs, content simply to be here. Yet he felt strangely hollow.

Through the door he pulled on the fur slippers that were waiting and stepped into the fire-hall which seemed already far too full of people. Half a dozen of them were sitting at the table while four men were gathered round the fire which crackled loudly in the old stone fireplace.

Despite the lamps in every corner, the hall was a constant shift of shadows, as restless as the wind. In the darkest corner was the cradle where baby Doval slept. The greater the noise the better he seemed to sleep. Olbeth hurried over to peep at him and give the cradle a gentle rock.

Rothir went up to the fire and nodded to Parthenal and Wiln, Olbeth’s husband. Then he greeted the newcomers.

“Sashel. Gordal. Good to see you both. How goes it?” He liked the twins, who were big, young, tough, uncomplicated men. If they had any complications they kept them to themselves – or kept them between themselves, for they shared a half-hidden communication system of looks and grimaces. They were keen on horsemanship, weaponry, hawking and eating, and excelled at all of them.

“So Olbeth managed to drag you away from the forge,” said Sashel with a grin. “Where’s the fine sword that you’ve been making?”

“I’m starting small,” said Rothir. “Arrowheads. I’ll work up to pocket-knives soon.” He found he was able to talk to them readily about bladesmithing, about the right edge for a sword and the best quenching methods to achieve it. Such a conversation suited him. It was interesting and useful, yet it touched on no emotions.

When they moved on to falconry and Parthenal joined in, with his decided views on the trainability of merlins, Rothir felt himself ease inwardly a little. Maybe he could get through this winterfest, if only all the talk would stay so practical. But despite the recent heat of the forge and the current heat of the fire he was still aware of a chilly emptiness inside him.

He looked over at the women seated round the table with Olbeth. They were shaping salops – the small fruit-dotted doughy cakes that would be griddled on the fire after dinner. A stodgy winter speciality. Olbeth and her youthful friend Durba were dextrous from long practice; Maeneb and Alburé, not so much. Maeneb looked faintly horrified as she tried to pull away the sticky dough that clung to her fingers. Alburé made ambiguous animal shapes and talked loudly and laughed a lot, with an occasional glance towards the fireplace. She seemed to have her eye on one of the twins, or possibly both.

But it was good to see Maeneb there and joining in. Olbeth had been her friend from childhood; she had adopted Maeneb, Rothir sometimes thought, when Maeneb had no other companion. And Durba seemed a little like Maeneb in character, although almost ten

years younger; she was equally reserved. Olbeth was currently doing her best to make them smile.

Looking down on their doughy efforts were the two farmhands, Naileb and Calenir. They were also Riders of the Vonn, although when Naileb said gaily that she preferred a milkmaid's life, he suspected that she wasn't joking. Calenir was an awkward youth but good-natured enough.

It was Olbeth, he thought, who held everyone together. Her compact, capable figure was at the centre of the gathering, as briskly warming as the fire. Now she stood up and announced,

"All hands to the table! Parthenal, bring those large plates from the dresser, please. Sashel, could you carry the pot over from the stove? Wiln, you're carving, I'm afraid." She grinned at her husband, the lanky and taciturn farmer who was only person in the room not of the Vonn. Every time Rothir met him he felt for him an increased liking and respect, as a man who knew his business but never forced it upon others.

"I hope everybody likes their venison chunky," Wiln said to the room at large, "as that's the only way I carve."

"He practises on tree trunks," explained Olbeth, "with a hatchet."

"Get Rothir on to it with one of his new swords," suggested Parthenal.

"He's not even on to knives yet," Gordal pointed out.

"I can bring a nice sharp ploughshare over from the forge, though, if you like," said Rothir. "Or a horseshoe."

"Oh, that'll do the job."

"You should have seen the meals in Inner Kelvha," declared Alburé. "A lark inside a partridge inside a hen inside a goose inside a swan! All decorated with feathers and carried to the table by two men in gilded gauntlets."

"How did they carve that one?" asked Sashel.

"The servants carved it – very carefully. I got the impression that if they broke a slice they might just have been dragged out of the dining hall and whipped."

"Now, how would you stuff venison?" mused Naileb. "Shrew, mouse, rabbit, badger, sheep, then deer?"

Rothir joined in the laughter. But he was reminded painfully of some moment – where was it? Eled back in Farwithiel, smiling as he tried unsuccessfully to repeat a sequence of animals he'd been told. Poor Eled. The hollowness inside him seemed to grow.

It appeared that Parthenal and Maeneb did not remember, or did not make that connection. For Parthenal sat sleek and smiling, while even Maeneb, a little separate from the others at one end of the table, did not look as uncomfortable as Rothir might have expected amidst the joviality. It made him feel increasingly alone.

When they began to eat there was plenty of talk about Kelvha, and gales of laughter from the twins, as Alburé, recently returned from Kelvha City with her mother Tiburé, described the customs there. She made fun of the bleached hair and heavy gowns and ornaments her host had been so proud of. She mocked the etiquette that had to be adhered to, and the stern looks if anyone tried to follow the procession in to dinner in the wrong part of the line.

Rothir joined in when he could. When he couldn't, he pretended to. He didn't take in many of the jokes he laughed at. What was wrong with him? Here he was at a well-laid board with family and good friends, a warm fire and the knowledge that no work needed to

be done during the coming winterfest. Olbeth would drag him away from his anvil for the full four days of festival. Nothing to do but eat and drink and talk. He shrank from the prospect.

And after the meal, which seemed endless, people forever saying, "Oh, I'll just have one more shred of meat, I'll just have another spoon of gravy," his face aching with the effort of smiling, there was more talking and smiling to be done around the fireplace while the doughy salops cooked. He hoped it would soon be done and they could have music: he could stop talking and smiling then.

Olbeth came over to him and offered him a griddled salop.

"What's the matter?" she said quietly.

"Nothing's the matter. It's all very good, as always." He made himself smile at her again. She didn't look convinced.

But he could have given her no better answer. He'd tried to put the stonemen and the darkburns in a box. Set them aside, don't think about them for the present. So he wasn't thinking about them now; yet he still felt hollow and had no idea why. In previous winters he'd been appreciative of his stays here, had enjoyed the sense of shelter from the harrying winds with their load of blistering sleet. He'd thought of the sheep huddled on the hills and had been relieved and grateful.

In those days he'd been happy. But then so much of happiness was relief. He remembered thinking that not so long ago, with Eled...

Safe now, Eled. Warm in Farwithiel. No need to think about him either.

So why couldn't he be happy now? Gordal was shouting in laughter at some joke, something to do with an animal shape that Alburé had made, impolite no doubt, and she was running to find spare dough to make another. The salops were browning on the griddle and the fire crackled heartily and yet he seemed to feel the chill sleet-laden wind run wild through the hall. The hearty fire held no heat and its noise was muted and winter filled the space around him with its roaring silence. Such an empty space. So cold. Voices were lost within it. What was wrong with him?

Then of a sudden the door banged open and winter entered in reality. With a snarl and a bad-tempered whine of the wind, a small tempest of snow was thrown across the hall. The cold air charged in and attacked him.

Everybody turned towards the open door. In the sudden silence the baby gave a wail.

But Olbeth did not move towards the cradle. She was staring at the doorway: and she was first to speak.

"Bruilde! Where have you been?"

Chapter 6

He hadn't recognised Bruilde, wrapped up as she was in a snowy cloak and hood and shawl. Moving stiffly, she began to shed them, layer after layer. Olbeth plucked the wailing baby from the cradle and handed him to Rothir, who held him against his shoulder, a warm writhing bundle. Then she began to fuss around Bruilde, helping her to pull off her wet boots and standing her before the fire. Bruilde did not say anything at first.

"Give me a few more minutes," she muttered after a while. "I got quite cold out there. Wiln: could you see to Hama? She needs food and stabling."

Wiln nodded and went out. Olbeth tried to get Bruilde to sit down by the fire, but she snorted and declared,

"Coddled in a blanket? I'm not an old lady yet. Well, I am, but not that sort of old lady. Is there any of that food left, or is it just bones on the board?"

"There's plenty of food," Olbeth assured her.

So they all ended up sitting at the long table again, but this time there was no joking or laughter. Baby Doval squirmed and whiffled on Rothir's shoulder. Meanwhile Bruilde did the only talking, while she ate.

On that disastrous day so many weeks ago, at her homestead of Deloran, she said between mouthfuls, she had received half an hour's warning of the approaching stonemen from the lookout in the cedar tree. After swiftly summoning the household and leading them to what she hoped would be a place of safety, she had gone straight back to see how much of her home remained.

"It was all on fire," she told them matter-of-factly. "Nothing to be done about it. The stonemen had already moved on, so I rode along their trail to see where they were going next. They hadn't got far, even allowing for them being on foot. After three miles or so I saw them hurrying back down the road towards me. There were about ten of them, following two darkburns – one big, one small. I got out of the way and watched them from a distance, in the cover of the trees. I don't know what had gone wrong; but somehow they'd lost control of the darkburns. They kept trying to get round in front of them and failing. It just seemed to have the effect of pushing the darkburns faster and further the wrong way."

She paused to tear off a hunk of bread and dip it in the gravy. Parthenal began to say something about the stones, when Rothir stilled him with a hand on his arm. He didn't want to break Bruilde's flow.

"Well, they kept this up all day," she said, "chasing their runaway darkburns, and I kept following at a distance on Hama. They weren't looking behind them. I could have ridden right up and hit them on their stony heads before they noticed me. By evening they were arguing. Couldn't seem to agree if the chase was worth the trouble. The two darkburns were about a hundred yards apart by this time, but running in the same direction, parallel to each other. And they didn't stop for nightfall. It was only the rough terrain that slowed them enough for the stonemen to keep them within sight.

"As the light failed half the stonemen gave up and sat down. The other half kept following the bigger of the darkburns. So I followed the smaller darkburn, alone."

"You followed a darkburn?" asked Calenir, wide-eyed.

“Why not?” said Bruilde. “It was easy enough to see the trails of sparks that the darkburns left behind them, to say nothing of the flares of burning grass. Lucky it was damp. I could hear the shouts of stonemen chasing the larger darkburn to my right but they never realised I was there. The shouts got further and further away as they lagged behind: before midnight I had ceased to hear them. In the morning I found myself far south of the moorlands, at the Darkburn head.”

“Near the long escarpment?” asked Rothir, now deeply interested. With the steady sound of voices baby Doval had gone back to sleep. His breath was warm and damp on Rothir’s shoulder, his small body curled on a supporting hand.

“Beyond the escarpment, close to the forest. The darkburns ran along its southern edge, heading east. I was worried that they’d plunge right into the trees; I didn’t fancy following them in there.”

“Wouldn’t they set the trees on fire?” asked Durba.

“Only if they stood still. It’s all too wet. Anyway, the darkburns didn’t go into the trees, and neither did they stand still for an instant. They went at a speed between a stroll and a gallop and stopped for nothing. I could walk Hama some of the time and still keep up, but by mid-morning she was struggling, and so was I.” Bruilde paused to drink. No-one spoke.

She set the mug down. “So I stopped and rested for a few hours, and later in the day picked up their trail again. And followed it all through the next night by the glowing embers. In the morning I galloped for three hours until I saw the darkburns ahead, still only a few hundred yards apart, still going. Then I began to see small groups of stonemen, at a distance, and had to stay amongst the trees and out of sight. Some of the stonemen tried to catch the runaway darkburns but they got away and kept heading east. I knew I couldn’t keep up with them for much longer, but I decided to head east too in any case, since I had come this far.”

“That was dangerous,” said Parthenal severely.

“Thank you, Parthenal. I never would have guessed. I spent the next week lurking, riding, hiding, nearly drowned in a ditch a couple of times. The place was criss-crossed with stoneman roads although the numbers of actual stonemen seemed quite small.

“I soon discovered why. When at last I reached the Fyleway that leads to Caervonn, marching along it was a huge company of stonemen, with tents and carts, some holding caged darkburns. I estimated six thousand men: and as they marched away west, I saw more starting to march in from the east to replace them.”

Again Parthenal began to say something. This time he stopped himself as Bruilde resumed.

“I watched them pass, and I kept heading east, against the flow, just inside the forest edge. By this time I was out of food and hungry. Tired, too. I saw a farmstead up ahead and watched it for a while. It wasn’t a stoneman place; it belonged to some of the old forest people, the farmers whose ancestors were there before the stonemen came. I saw an old man going in and out, his two sons and their wives.

“I walked up and offered them silver. Told them who I was. I was ready to run if they kicked up a fuss, but they didn’t. No love there for the stonemen, I gather; they take heavy tithes of the farmers and give them nothing in return except the threats of burning. I stayed there for two weeks, regathering my strength, and learnt a lot. Those farming people could be of use to us if their numbers were greater. But there are only a few hundred of them, scattered.”

“There are only about twelve hundred active Riders of the Vonn,” Olbeth pointed out.

“And farmers are generally tough people,” added Wiln. “Don’t discount them.”

“I don’t. But these ones were disheartened and ill-fed,” said Bruilde, “and jealous of Caervonn, which seemed to them a land of plenty. An insular, closed land. They poured out their grievances against Caervonn but I don’t think they would get involved in a fight on either side. They tolerated the stonemen, unwillingly, because they had no choice. Feared the darkburns.

“And then one night the old man spoke up. He usually sat quiet in a corner. The others seemed to think he was – not exactly an old fool – but confused by age. Someone to be humoured, but not believed. Yet I think he could be worth believing.” She stared into space.

“Why? What did he say?” asked Rothir.

“He spoke of darkburns as being something ancient, something that was part and parcel of the land, a phenomenon that had previously been extremely rare and had been contained entirely within the Darkburn forest. He said the darkburns had emerged and multiplied only in the last twenty years.”

“Twenty years? Not twelve?”

“He was vague, I’ll admit,” Bruilde said. “I asked them where in the forest the darkburns had come from. He said, from the elbow of the river: meaning the area enclosed by the bend of the Darkburn north of Caervonn. In the most secret and inaccessible part, he said, were the smoking shafts from which the darkburns crawled.”

“I haven’t heard of those,” said Parthenal.

“I think I have,” said Bruilde. “I’ve heard stories – legends, maybe – about hills of ash that rise amidst the forest, and deep chasms between them, with an intermittent pouring of smoke into the sky. I think those are the smoking shafts he was referring to. He said that when they are most active the forest is obscured in cloud.”

“That’s possible,” put in Sashel. “I’ve heard of something similar far up north, beyond the Outlands, of places where the earth’s heat rushes to the surface in fountains of boiling water. Never been there, though.”

“There’s been no reason to,” said Rothir. “But on our last journey we did try to explore the area near the elbow of the Darkburn river from the north. It wasn’t a success. Two of our company were ambushed, with results that could have been fatal.”

Bruilde looked at him. “Anyone hurt?”

“Eled.”

She sighed and shook her head.

“Later,” said Olbeth. “What else did you hear, Bruilde?”

“Many scraps of news about Caervonn. All rumour, naturally, but they are for Huldarion to hear first. I saw Caervonn itself, from a distance. It looked the same as ever.” Her face was wistful and Rothir felt an answering pang of longing.

“You went that far?”

“Further. Listen. When I left the farmers I continued east, beyond Caervonn: but I could not linger close to it because of all the enemy encampments. They reached a long way through the hinterfields to where the hunting forests used to be. They are being chopped down now.” At that, Parthenal drew his breath in sharply. “And then quite suddenly the land was clear of stonemen; I could ride far and fast and not see a soul. The only fort that I got close to appeared almost unmanned.

“This was three days past Caervonn. There was smoke over the trees, and the quantity of it made me wonder. And then I found a road, where no road used to be, cutting from the plain straight through the Darkburn forest.”

They were all still now, listening, and watching Bruilde’s gnarled finger draw a rough map on the table.

“Caervonn. The river’s crook: its elbow. And about here, I’d guess, the road. Crudely made – trees just hacked down and thrown aside as if some massive animal had plunged into the forest – but wide enough for carts to travel two abreast. I followed the road through the trees but to one side: I kept fifty yards away, even though I saw no travellers on it other than a couple of small groups of stonemen. When the undergrowth grew thick I had to leave Hama and walk on alone. I didn’t reach the river. Too far. But my guess is, that where there is a road that wide leading to a river, there must be a bridge at its far end. Otherwise why build it? Certainly the road leads to somewhere important – and protected.”

“Protected how?”

Bruilde licked her lips and then took a drink from her mug. For the first time she seemed reluctant to speak.

“By two things,” she said. “Two types of thing, rather. The first I saw after I left Hama. As I drew closer to the road, a darkburn crossed the track from left to right in front of me. It was a darkburn of a kind I have not seen before. Long, lizard-like, with low crawling legs, perhaps some rudimentary wings or stumps of what once had been wings before they became charcoal. It was not entirely black. It had fire within. A glow.”

She paused, thinking, and in the silence the baby hiccupped on Rothir’s shoulder. It was getting ready to cry.

“It’s all right,” he murmured to it, “we’re still here.”

Bruilde took a long breath and went on.

“The darkburn saw me. Detected me, I should say, for of course it had no eyes. But it raised what might have passed for a head and turned round to crawl along the road towards me. It moved so fast that I was startled. I began to back away and was becoming aware that I would have to run, and although I’m a strong walker I’m no longer good at running.

“But before I could turn tail, the darkburn... rebounded. That’s the only way I can describe it. It appeared to hit a barrier which I could not see. It was thrown back. It tried again; the same result. Then it opened its head – I can’t even say its mouth, for there was no mouth until it opened it and fire came out.”

“Fire,” said Parthenal.

“A long flame. Very long. The flame bounced off the unseen barrier too, and rebounded back upon the darkburn. At that it turned and crawled away from me down the road. Once it was out of sight I walked forward along the road’s edge, hand outstretched, until I found the barrier before me. There was nothing there to feel – yet it was a point beyond which I could not go no matter how I tried. It wasn’t age or tiredness that held me back: it was something else. That’s all that I can say.”

“So... wizardry?” asked Rothir. He did not care for wizardry as an explanation for anything, but sometimes it was the only answer that would fit. The baby snuggled into his shoulder, mewling faintly.

Brulde nodded. "I assume so. Wizardry guarding the road and whatever bridge might lie beyond it and whatever might lie beyond the bridge. As for the darkburn – I can only say that it occurred to me that it might have been a firedrake."

There was a silence, until Olbeth said quietly, "Another thing of legend."

"Yes. The firedrakes of legend are lizardlike, or snakelike: creatures of flesh and blood with teeth and scales and spreading wings. The thing I saw had only rudiments of those. But it did have those rudiments. There was the fire glowing at its heart and flaming from its mouth. So, yes, I think it might have been a firedrake. Or was something related to it."

"So the legends got it wrong," said Gordal.

"How should I know?" snapped Brulde. She looked very tired.

"Please go on," said Olbeth. "And then?"

"And then I admit I'd had enough. Call it cowardice. I turned around and retraced my steps out of the forest and back past Caervonn for many weary days, all the way to my friendly farmhouse. They were pleased enough to see me once I showed them the rest of my silver. I stayed there again for a little while. Well, quite a long while. I admit it, I was weary. Couldn't face the long ride back to Deloran to pick over the ruins. So I stayed with the farmers, and gathered as much information as I could about business in Caervonn, and tried to milk the old man for anything he knew; which wasn't much. They were kind enough. Once I was fully recovered they gave me provisions to get back home. To a home that wasn't there."

Her tone was prosaic. Olbeth said gently,

"Your home is always here, Brulde, and of course at Thield too."

"Oh, Thield. I had a good farm of my own." She looked around the warm, firelit hall with its dancing shadows. "I hope those stonemen never come near this place."

"They've all gone north and west," said Wiln, "by all accounts; those companies you saw, with the caged darkburns."

"And when spring comes we'll be going after them," said Parthenal with relish.

"Meanwhile you can rest here, Brulde. Regather your strength, and enjoy the winterfest."

Brulde nodded. She looked suddenly older now than she had while she was speaking. When the younger ones began to talk amongst themselves, Olbeth took her arm and led her to the fire.

"No blanket, I promise," she said. "But you have to eat salops." Brulde half-laughed.

Rothir sat down near her with his snuffling burden and thought about firedrakes. When he was a young man on an early tour he had almost convinced himself that he had seen a firedrake. It had been above the Gyr tarn; spiralling high, the wrong shape for an eagle – the wrong shape for any bird. He had watched it until it disappeared into the clouds. But it must have been a firedrake of the imagination only, if the reality was a charcoal monster with burnt stumps for wings.

Olbeth came over to him and held out her hands for Doval. Rothir felt almost reluctant to give him back: he was so easy to protect and soothe. If only all his tasks were that simple and satisfying. As she hefted the baby onto her own shoulder, Olbeth gave him a look that he could not interpret. But she said nothing.

The hush that had fallen during the sobering story had already given way to merry-making. Back at the table, the twins and Calenir were beginning to engage in a noisy pickle-

eating competition, egged on by Alburé and Naileb. Beside the fire Bruilde nibbled at a hot salop and closed her eyes.

Parthenal was watching her with a smile curving his lips. Rothir knew his friend was up to mischief even before he spoke.

"We learnt something about you, Bruilde," said Parthenal, "while you were on your travels."

"Don't, Parthenal," muttered Maeneb. "Not now. That's not fair."

Bruilde's eyes reopened, sharp and interested. "So what did you learn?"

"About you and a weaver from some outlandish town up north. Your long, close friendship – is that the right word for it? – with an old man called Ilo. We met his granddaughter."

The elderly woman sat up straight. "Yaret? You saw her? Where did you meet her? What did she tell you?"

"She told us nothing about that particular matter," Rothir said reluctantly. "It was in a letter that she carried." He knew he would have to relate the story now, to stop Parthenal making too much of it.

So he outlined, as briefly as he could, the sequence of events from the finding of Eled to the reading of Ilo's letter in the Gyr cave. He did not quote its reference to that old love affair between Bruilde and the weaver, but it was obvious that Bruilde understood. He was aware that Olbeth as well as Bruilde was watching him intently while he spoke.

"Well," said Bruilde. "I hesitate to call Ilo a sentimental old man – but really. That was all long in the past, before Yaret was even thought of. You know our family always had the farm. We used to visit every summer from Caervonn... And so did Ilo, peddling his cloth. Good cloth." She looked thoughtfully into the distance. "Ilo could be very charming. Still can, I imagine. It's a few years since I saw him, and I don't expect to see him any more. But Yaret is thriving, I hope?"

At that, all three Riders who had been there hesitated. It was Maeneb who said,

"Well, she's alive, although we thought she wasn't for a while."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Then Parthenal told the tale of the stonemen's ambush and Yaret's fall over the cliffs of the Thore, leaving her foot behind – trapped beneath the prostrate horse until a stoneman hacked it off. Rothir could not bring himself to speak even when Parthenal described their discovery of her down by the roaring river. It had seemed miraculous at the time – a reprieve sent by the stars – and yet it felt extraordinarily painful to recall it now. Olbeth was still watching him although he couldn't think why. It wasn't as if it was the first time she had heard this tale.

But it was Olbeth who asked, "Once she's able, where will she go to from Farwithiel?"

"Home," said Parthenal. "We promised her a horse; Eled's Poda. The Wardens will see her out of Farwithiel safely."

"She's probably already home in Obandiro by now," said Maeneb. "With a wooden leg. She was asking the wardens how soon she could use one." Rothir felt himself turned to stone.

"Well," said Bruilde, "I must say I am not surprised. A resourceful person, young Yaret."

"Her grandfather's letter said she had led a sheltered life," remembered Maeneb.

“Sheltered?” Bruilde laughed and then shook her head. “That was Ilo for you. Couldn’t see further than his own nose in some respects. It was clear who was really keeping their business afloat the last few years; and it wasn’t him. But he wouldn’t want to admit that... Sheltered?” She shook her head again. “The tales she told me of her travels. Even in disguise – what did she call it? Male mode.”

“What sort of tales?” said Maeneb. “No, it’s all right. I can guess.”

“Wiser than her grandfather,” said Bruilde.

“She called me a polecat,” said Parthenal, to Rothir’s amazement.

Bruilde studied him and nodded. “Apt.”

Feeling he had better speak before his silence became conspicuous, Rothir said, “You didn’t like her, did you, Parthenal?”

“I didn’t trust her at first,” admitted Parthenal. “That assessing way she’d look at you, weighing you up, working you out. She saw too much. But I liked her well enough by the end.”

The end. Yes. But then Bruilde said,

“Well, I shall look forward to welcoming Yaret and her wooden leg next year, and hearing her account of everything.”

“Next year? You think she will still travel?” asked Rothir, amazed again.

“Of course she will. She’s not the woman to let a little thing like a missing foot stop her from doing what she wants.”

“I hope she comes peddling her wares here,” said Olbeth, her smile dancing. “I’d like to meet her.”

“At least she should be snug and safe back in Obandiro for winterfest,” said Bruilde, stretching her arms, “just as snug as we are now. My goodness, how I’m stiffening up. Did you say something about a hot drink, Olbeth?”

“Spiced wine all round,” said Olbeth, and she hurried away to fetch it. Parthenal picked up the lutine and began to strum a well-known melody. Rothir pulled up his stool to listen. In the background was the familiar buzz of his friends chatting, laughing, humming, yawning: the noise that half an hour ago had left him in a pit of loneliness had suddenly become a comfort. Whatever the reason, winter seemed to have retreated from the place for now.

Something had begun to thaw inside him. He couldn’t define what had just changed. Perhaps it was the baby’s warmth upon his shoulder. But maybe, he thought, winterfest at Olbeth’s wouldn’t be so chilly after all.

Chapter 7

Elket looked back doubtfully at the line of footprints they had left behind on the forest road. Although the snow was thin, not even half-covering the ground, she thought the trail might be too conspicuous.

“Don’t worry,” said Yaret, seeing her look. “It’ll snow again before the day’s end and hide all our footsteps. Meanwhile we’d better get a move on if we want to be back before dark.”

Elket tried to nudge the horse into a faster walk. It complied for a few yards before slowing down so that she had to nudge it again. It didn’t recognise her authority; maybe because she didn’t recognise it herself.

This was her second trip to the weaver’s farm, although the fourth for the horse and Yaret. Charo had accompanied Yaret on one visit and Dil and Shuli on a third, when they had come back with a whole sackful of cobnuts from the trees behind the farm. But this time it was Yaret and Elket on their own. It would be the last trip before winterfest – possibly the last for a few weeks, said Yaret, if the snow set in as it usually did; so they would be wise to stock up well.

“We need a cart,” she said to Yaret now, as the horse slowed again.

“Perhaps. I don’t know how to make a cart. I expect Shuli could tell me. In fact, she’d probably show me where to find a set of wheels. But I suspect Poda has never pulled a cart in her life and might not be inclined to learn. What we really need is another horse, one that’s used to haulage. A cow would be nice too.” Yaret gazed out thoughtfully at the snowy landscape. “Two or three cows. The stonemen can’t have taken them all. Once the days start to lengthen again, after winterfest, I might go out and look.”

“Do you want another turn on Poda now?” Elket was aware that Yaret was limping. The stiffness in her step was hardly obvious at most times, but by the end of the day she became more halting. Now that Elket knew what had happened to her foot (and that part of Yaret’s story, a few nights ago, really had shocked even Shuli) she was more concerned about it than she had been before. She felt almost protective of the weaver even though it was Yaret who had now become their adviser and protector.

“No, I’m fine. We’re nearly there now.” The weavers’ farm came into sight, its blackened walls blurred and softened by the snow. Yaret walked into the yard past the – no, Elket could not think of them as Guardians. They were bodies. Bodies everywhere.

At least there were only the two here. But as she glanced down at them, Elket gasped.

“Stop!”

Yaret stopped at once. “What is it?” she said quietly.

“Someone’s been here. On horseback.” Elket hardly dared to speak in case she was overheard. She pointed to the double line of hoofprints in the snow.

Yaret looked down; and up again, her mouth open. Elket had never seen her look so at a loss before. Fear thudded in her chest.

But after those few seconds’ hesitation Yaret strode swiftly forward into the yard. She gave a long, rising whistle – and round the corner trotted a donkey, head nodding, long ears flecked with snow.

“Nuolo! Oh, Nuolo!” And then Yaret was down on her knees and hugging the donkey as if she never wanted to let go. A second, slightly bigger and darker donkey followed the first, purposefully nosing at her back. Yaret raised her head.

“Dolm,” she said. There were tears in her eyes. “Dolm. Oh, you wonderful, wonderful donkeys.”

Elket realised that the hoofprints were smaller than the horse’s. Her fear had been so immediate that it had stopped her noticing. She needed to stop worrying about everything, she knew: but what else was there to do but worry?

She got down from Poda and gave the donkeys a tentative pat. Their hair was rough and matted and their legs muddy but they seemed healthy enough. Yaret ran her hand up and down their legs and along their bodies, before looking up with a smile.

“We could try and build a donkey cart some time,” she said.

Elket smiled back, because she could see how pleased Yaret was; and the others would be glad about the donkeys too, especially Dil. But she was anxious. The horse already ate a significant amount of the oats in the cellar; they put it out to graze in the outlying meadows but that didn’t always seem to be enough. It wouldn’t even eat the red roots. How much extra fodder would these donkeys need?

As if guessing her concern, Yaret said, “They’ve survived well in the wild, from the look of it, so they should be happy in the fields around Obandiro. I like to give Poda a little extra food because we work her hard. But if you’re worried about it, we’ll start to dig up some of the beets in that field south of town. We should do that anyway before the ground freezes.”

That made Elket feel a little better – for a moment. But as soon as she descended the ladder into the weavers’ cellar and perceived how fast the stocks of food down there had shrunk, she felt worse again.

“There’s enough to get us through the winter,” Yaret said, although Elket did not see how she could know until winter was over.

“But now that there are three more of us–”

“We’ll have to be careful, it’s true, but think of all that we’ve discovered in the houses just on the Cross-street and the Market-street.”

“But the Market-street cellars had all fallen in.” The houses had been floored with wood, unlike the buildings on the Cross-street, and any cellars were full of a jumble of burnt beams and broken planks.

“It’s true the things in there are harder to retrieve, but it’s still worth trying. There was that pea-flour and old clothing only yesterday, and there’ll be plenty more waiting to be found. Ondro has been very useful in helping dig the cellars out.”

Ondro was the shepherd whom Yaret had met near his lonely hut, which he had refused to leave until he brought the two girls to the Dondel Bridge. It was true that he had been useful; for although he looked thin and wiry he seemed to be remarkably strong, and would dig all day without complaining. Indeed, he hardly said a word at all, even at council, but just gazed around with a slightly vacant face. Yaret had said that he wasn’t vacant at all, just not used to expressing his thoughts to other people. Elket wasn’t convinced that there were many thoughts in there to be expressed. Certainly nothing like the busy complexity of her own.

Stop thinking and start doing. That had been one of her father’s complaints to her. At least Ondro said nothing like that. *By the stars, I wish you’d been a boy.* Though Dil had

never seemed to content him either. *Lazy little lump. Get off your backside.* And Dil would get a wallop. Sometimes she would deliberately aggravate her father so that the wallops landed on her instead. Their mother had been too tired and sad to interfere.

It had been a shock to find her father gone. She hadn't exactly hated him, but she had wished so fiercely and helplessly that he was different that it was alarming to know he had been turned into a pile of ash. She knew it wasn't her fault. His death was nothing to do with her longing for him to be changed. She hadn't wished him dead. But she felt he blamed her for what had happened, because blaming her was what he did. He was definitely not a Guardian.

While she packed roots into a sack from the diminishing pile in the cellar she wondered if Lo and Renna's father had been like that as well. Although Lo hadn't said anything about him, she felt it might explain Renna's continuing silence. Nearly two weeks and Renna still hadn't spoken. Both girls – women really – were thin, thinner than Ondro, lighter and frailer than Elket, with hollow eyes and sunken cheeks. They were from a neighbouring farm and Lo, the elder by two years, was nineteen but looked much older. Worn-out. Yaret said quietly to her that the farm had obviously not prospered.

It was Ondro who had explained how, soon after the coming of the darkburns, he'd found the two girls cowering in their burnt-out shed. He was hunting for lost sheep at the time, and had led them back to his shepherd's hut. He seemed to regard them as oversized lambs.

When Yaret had met him on her expedition to Byant he'd thought it wiser not to mention the concealed girls: but two days later, when he saw the returning stonemen in the distance, he decided that he had to get them out. He was just in time. From their hiding place behind a hedge he watched the stonemen ride up to his hut, kick down his door and set fire to the interior. No darkburns required.

So then he'd brought the two girls to Obandiro. Ondro didn't seem to mind his change of circumstance. He just accepted it and got on with whatever needed doing, although he made it clear that he would still be going back at intervals to check his sheep.

The girls were different. They slept, and lay around, and did almost nothing. It made Elket angry. Their laziness added fuel to the smoulder of resentment that lay deep inside her. She knew the resentment was there and didn't see why she shouldn't let it stay. It was a change from worrying, and felt more powerful. She had enough to be angry about, after all. Why not start with the girls?

When she carried the sack full of roots up to the horse, she found Yaret bundling matted lumps of speckled wool into a saddle-bag.

"Raw wool," she explained, "from the bottom of the washing-tub. I doubt if my grandparents even knew it was there." Elket nodded. Any extra bedding would be welcome.

They had split into two cellars now that there were eight of them. It wasn't an even split: Shuli and the new girls shared the cellar they'd cleared two doors down, while Ondro and the others remained underneath the inn. Elket didn't mind Ondro. He was old, about forty maybe, but she'd rather share with him than with the idle girls.

Yaret went back down the ladder and came up with the remains of the dried fruit and a sack of oats – the last sackful, although there were still some left back home.

Home... That was what the dingy cellar underneath the inn felt like now, as much home as Elket's drab old house had been. Since the baby, her mother seemed to have been hardly there in spirit. She was somewhere else, somewhere the sick baby was. Elket thought the

baby would have died soon anyway and that would have broken her mother's heart. So. It was to have been called Jeret but they never called it that; it was just a gasping shivering little animal with blue lips and no strength in its hands. Poor thing. She allowed herself to think that now. Poor little thing. Poor Jeret.

She found the tears pricking at her eyes again and turned to the donkeys to disguise it, breathing in their warm wet-grass-and-muck smell. She wasn't even crying for the baby, poor little Jeret though he was, but for her family, given no chance to be different, no chance for anything to change although her father would never have changed anyway. So stop crying. No point. It was time to go.

On the long walk home Elket led the laden horse and Yaret led Nuolo by an improvised woollen halter. Nuolo could easily have broken it but she didn't try, and Dolm followed her doggedly. Every time Elket turned round to look, Yaret was smiling. The donkeys would be the obvious choice for Best Thing at evening council.

But she was soon surprised by something better than the donkeys. As they came out of the woods above Obandiro the thin snow along the ground was shaded blue by the fading light. The whole landscape was a wondrous wash of patterned indigos and twilight blues and slatey greys that blurred into the distance until they met the darkening sky. A single streak of pale, cool gold lay on the horizon in defiance of the dusk.

She stopped and looked. Poor baby Jeret and her angry father fell away, lost in the blue waves of the fields and trees, their skeletal starkness transformed by snow. This was winter.

My heart feels hot and heavy, Elket thought, but this is beautiful. So cold and beautiful. I shall have to tell... who do I tell?

They were all gone, all her friends, all her aunts and nan and neighbours, all the people that she might have told. They were not Guardians. Just bodies. Just dead.

Beside her Yaret was gazing out as well, with one hand on Nuolo's back.

"It's hard to realise," she said, and stopped.

"I don't find it hard," said Elket. She knew her voice was thin and bitter.

Yaret took a deep breath and began again.

"I have sometimes found myself thinking," she said, "that anger is like a darkburn blazing in the heart. We want it to run out and leap on other people and burn them as well. In that way one person's anger could set a whole town burning. It is a destructive thing. We all have good reason to be angry now. But if you keep your anger nurtured, and feed its fire in your heart, it can never be safe there, it will burn through. It will escape and damage others somehow."

"So what do you do with it?" muttered Elket.

"I think... if you can't quench it, you have to make of it a furnace where something can be forged. A sword, a spade, a ploughshare; something useful. What I mean is, anger has enormous force. So you have to use that energy in the most productive way you can. Whether that is digging or building or hunting or making war or making something else. But you have to shape it and not let it shape you."

Elket thought about this as she gazed down at the sweeping wonder of the landscape.

"My father was always angry," she said. "Usually. Nothing was ever right for him. Everything was my fault."

"To say that was unfair of him," said Yaret quietly, "would be to state the obvious. Do you know why he was that way?"

"What do you mean?"

"What was his own father like?"

"I don't know. I never met him. If you mean that maybe Da was hit and shoved around and sworn at and had things thrown at him as a child and that's why he did the same to us, I don't see that it follows. It just makes it worse, because he knew what it was like."

"But people get trapped in ways of thinking," Yaret said.

"Then they should climb out of the trap."

"If they can see how to. Was he the same with Dil?"

"Not as bad. But Dil was a boy. There were three other boys but they were all born early and they all died. There might actually have been more than three... I don't know. They didn't tell me."

"Your parents bore a lot of grief," said Yaret.

"I suppose."

"You were the eldest?"

"Yes."

"Were you his?"

This shocked Elket so much that she did not answer. She took a step back and stared at Yaret, who merely shrugged.

"Maybe I am becoming trapped in my own way of thinking," she said, "because I have my own small darkburn here to deal with," and she tapped her chest. "But if you weren't his child it might explain some of his behaviour."

"I... Whether I was his or not, he was still my father," Elket burst out. "He took me on. He was supposed to look after me. That was his job."

"He knows that. The dead stand in the shadows of the room and bow their heads, for on the shining walls are written all their errors and omissions."

Elket felt a shiver run up her spine. "That's Ulthared, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Poor old dead."

"Yes. They are brought to know what they have done. We all are."

"I hope it's not all sorrow and repentance for those..." She gestured at the blue, dead town beneath them.

"Without sorrow there's no joy," said Yaret. "Or less intense joy."

"Is that Ulthared?"

"No. That's me. There is joy too in the Ulthared but I won't say it now."

"Why not?"

"Wrong time."

Elket sighed. "I still feel angry with him."

"Then make of it a furnace," Yaret said, "and think of something useful you can forge."

Elket kicked at the snow under her feet. "Well. We'd best move on or we'll be late for council."

She pulled on Poda's halter until the horse began to walk. Then she stroked Poda's strong arched neck in case her feelings had transmitted to the horse, which would not be fair. Poda was a magnificent horse, who made her dream about her owner: Eled, the young stricken Rider who in Yaret's nightly tale was now lying in a hollow tree in Farwithiel. In last night's account, the other Riders of the Vonn had just departed and Elket sensed something in

Yaret's telling that was more than plain regret. Maybe she was angry at being left alone to look after Eled, and that was her small darkburn. Elket didn't know.

At any rate, the whole account of Farwithiel was like stepping inside a marvellous land of Ulthared. Yaret had described the Farwth to an awed silence in the cellar, although Elket had the feeling that she did not say all that she knew. Everyone had listened intently, even the two new girls.

"Those girls," she said to Yaret now. "Lo and Renna. I know they've had a hard time, but it's more than two weeks now since they got here and they've still done nothing."

They walked on a few more paces before Yaret answered.

"It will take a little longer yet. I think they've been starving."

"We've all been hungry."

"No, we haven't. Not really. If you were hungry you'd eat the red roots. If you were starving you'd eat grass and leaves and leather, and I think that's what Lo and Renna have been doing for the last few months."

"But nobody starves!" cried Elket. "In Obandiro? *Starving?*"

"They were outside Obandiro and nobody knew. Ondro saw them occasionally, and he says he did worry about them. Half their flock died of bloat and they had to sell the rest. He gave the family a couple of sheep but he had nothing else to give them. He says he told an alderman about them when he was in town for market, a few days before the stonemen came. Nothing was done. Well, there was no time, I suppose."

"But they hardly eat anything," protested Elket.

"They eat more than they did at first. I think they were so unused to eating, or their stomachs had shrunk so much that... Anyway," said Yaret, "they're eating better now. I just wish we had some better food to give them."

"Is that what's happened to all Shuli's eggs?"

"Yes. It was her own idea."

Elket felt ashamed. "We could grind up cobnuts," she suggested after a moment, "with oats or flour, and make them into little cakes."

"I hadn't thought of that. It would be a good thing to try."

They were almost at the town now and Elket could see the ruins of her old house beyond the truncated market-tower. There was an inconspicuous trickle of smoke coming from the fire-place on the Cross-street: they still used the same cooking fire, although now they had cleaned out the inn's own hearth and had begun to keep a second, smaller fire in there to gather round in the evenings. The fires would be essential once winter hit the town in earnest. One of the cleared cellars had produced two metal buckets, so they set one over the new fire for warm water in the morning. It was a wonderful luxury. They had even washed and dried some clothes.

The cellar was increasingly cold at night – it didn't help that Yaret insisted on leaving the hatch open by day, so that it wouldn't get damp. They had to leave it propped slightly open at night, too, for ventilation. For warmth they made do with the hot stones. But the earthen floor was always cold.

Her mother had put a hot brick in her bed, wrapped in a cloth. Her father had thrust a bowl of warm milk at her, scowling.

"Well, get on with it! Drink it down! Some children would be grateful."

She had not been particularly grateful. Yet they had never starved. She had hardly ever been hungry. Her father had worked hard – as a waller, fencer, builder – and he had always let them know exactly how much hard work the food had cost. But the food had been on the table.

And maybe she hadn't been Da's child after all. She knew nothing of the history of her parents' marriage. Her babyhood had never been discussed. So; maybe.

Oddly enough, it made her feel something almost like sympathy. Lumbered with a touchy stranger who snapped back at him. Sometimes he raised his hand but did not strike.

Now he stood in the shadows with head bowed. Well, he should have done far better. But he could have done far worse.

Chapter 8

At evening council, best thing all round was Donkeys. Yaret was quite touched. Dil obviously meant it – he'd already had a go at grooming them, which Dolm had not appreciated – but the others, she suspected, named the donkeys as best thing of the day only because they knew that Dolm and Nuolo meant so much to her. Even Lo said "The donkeys," in her thin, hardly-there voice, while Renna gave the merest nod. And the donkeys couldn't mean anything to Lo.

The two new girls had managed the walk to evening council in the burial ground for four days now. They looked as if they didn't really understand proceedings, although evening council should have been a mainstay of any family in Obandiro. Even Ondro sat alertly through it with his bland appreciative smile.

Yaret had already had a quick word with Ondro, so when it came to talking about the next day's activities she was prepared for the plan that he put forward. He got it in first, before Dil could say anything about his own plans for the donkeys, or the others suggest their ideas for the coming winterfest, which they had decided should begin on the next day. It would not be a luxurious winterfest but Yaret hoped it would not be a miserable one either. The return of the donkeys was a cheerful start.

"Tomorrow," Ondro said to the small semicircle of people in the burial ground, amidst the scattering of snow, "I plan to leave early – before dawn – go back to my hut, and search for my dogs because I still haven't seen them since they ran off from the darkburns. And I'm hoping to find a sheep or two. Well, I'll find lots of sheep, but I'll be looking for a weak one."

"What for?" said Dil.

"For food," said Ondro. "There are always one or two weak ones. Kinder to slaughter them before the snow does."

"Will you need the donkeys?"

"I'll take the horse," said Ondro, "and I'll take someone to ride it as I'm not a great rider. Myself, I'd sooner walk. I thought of taking Charo but I think we shouldn't have both men leave town at the same time. One of us should stay here." This phrasing had been Yaret's suggestion, so she was pleased to see that Charo sat up a little straighter. "I'll take Shuli," Ondro said.

"But I – oh well, all right," said Shuli. That also was pleasing. And when Charo announced that he was going to the south beet field to dig up any beets he could find, and the others all said they'd help, her pleasure was complete. It was what she would have suggested herself but it was better for the idea to come from Charo.

They only had the one spade and one fork – now fitted with new handles – but they had the metal spikes to dig with too. Dil said he could fill up sacks and put them on the donkeys. Lo said that she and Renna could help. Although Yaret could not imagine the new girls picking even one heavy beet, she nodded. At least it would get them out and into the fresh air. Once the snows arrived fully the sisters would be confined to the cellars until they were stronger. But the northern sky, though bulbous with grey clouds, did not yet have the lowering blankness that presaged heavy snow.

“Well, as for me,” she said, “tomorrow I’ll be hunting. From the woods today I saw deer on the south-side. If the deer are returning at last, I think I should try and get us at least one before they disappear again.”

“Where do you think they all went?” asked Dil.

“Somewhere less smoky. But I think wildlife in general is returning. I’ve noticed the odd rabbit too.”

“Is the deer for winterfest?”

“For afterwards. Venison is best hung. That will take a week, or longer, probably, in this cold weather.”

So the first day of winterfest was planned. Although nobody was sure of the exact date, they had all checked the winterstones beyond the burial ground and had agreed that the shadows showed the sun was practically at its lowest. The second and third days of winterfest, on either side of the longest night of the year, would be the actual feasting days when not much work would get done. There wasn’t a great deal to feast on, so they would have to fill the hours of darkness with songs and games and stories.

Yaret felt a weary relief at the general good mood, and made sure to keep her own face bright. It was not so difficult now; she needed only to remember the donkeys and the smile would come. There was a lot to think about, and much of it was hopeful.

After their dinner of beans and roots there was singing that night in the cellar: she had taught them Madeo’s Snow Song, with Dil and Elket adding their own harmonies. They were a musical pair and the sound was sweet. Yaret played her gourd and Ondro nodded along and tapped on a barrel, while Lo and Renna listened intently but did not sing.

When they had arrived Renna had moved like an old woman. She seemed younger now, younger even than her seventeen years, although still silent. Lo had offered to make spice cakes tomorrow evening, although the only spices they had found in the cellars were of dubious age and smelt of dust. But nobody would complain about that.

Yes, there was much to be cheerful about. Yet that night, when Yaret lay down on her heather-filled sacking, feeling the inadequate warmth radiate from the hot stones, hearing the others breathing themselves into sleep, all that she could see were her omissions and mistakes lined up to reproach her.

I don’t need any shining walls, she thought: I can’t forget them. The things I should have said to Elket today and didn’t. The Ulthared I shouldn’t have said and did. I ought to have been paying more attention to Charo. Thank goodness for Ondro, although I burden him with too much work as well. I should have started digging beets three days ago. And I think I’ve been feeding the new girls the wrong things.

I promised Shuli a bow, yet I still haven’t managed to make a decent one. Ash or hazel? Neither that I’ve made so far is good enough. I can’t get the tension right, one’s too stiff and the other’s too slack. And they’re both too basic, because there’s nothing to shape them with apart from my knife and Ondro’s little hatchet. Have to adjust one somehow, give her Shuli for winterfest. And then start on a longer one for Charo.

And we need arrows. Have to try and knap some arrowheads, if I can remember how. Still haven’t sorted out the other gifts. Dil’s easy, he’s got the donkeys. Charo and Elket can have the new cloaks from the woollen cloth out of the dye-pit, if I can get them finished. Have to do that the second day. Try and get the spindles for the girls rubbed down tomorrow. Haven’t even thought about Ondro. I’m so tired. Need to sleep.

But all my errors and omissions. No end to them, standing in the corners to accuse me. Will I have to face them all over again, once I'm dead? I hope not. It's bad enough now. Not worth dying just yet. Have to make things better first. The Ulthared doesn't help there: I never learnt it all. No time.

All the Ulthared that Gramma Thuli or her friends ought to have told me when I reached thirty, I'll never know it now. Such a huge gap... such a lonely, empty space. Sometimes they seem to all stand at my shoulder but at other times, too often, there is no-one there, just the vastness of eternal silence. No Ulthared. No words. But I must not forget. My worst omission would be to forget them.

She listened to the dark, the sleepers' breath against the endless night. At least they were alive, she told herself. They held her to life because otherwise there would be nothing here to live for.

Next day arrived, as it always did; and Yaret was grateful. While the sky was still grey she performed Haedath with the others, and hoped Shuli was performing it in the second cellar with the new girls as she'd been asked to do.

Shuli was already at the trapdoor minutes later, ready to leave and waiting impatiently for Ondro to pull on his boots. Yaret gave them each a slice of porridge and some biscuit and apples for their day. Shuli was about to grab the food and go, when she hesitated.

"I meant to tell you," she said, "I found another cellar on the north-side."

"Well done. Any good?"

"Could be," said Shuli, grinning. "I thought I'd give it everyone for winterfest." Then Ondro was ready and they left to fetch the horse and set out on their trip.

The others put on all the clothes they had and went out to the south-side field. Although the beet tops were whitened with frost and thin snow, ice had not yet bitten very far into the ground. Below the crust the earth was hard but not frozen solid as it would be deeper into winter. Charo and Elket attacked it with the spade and fork; thankfully the new handles seemed to hold. The others used metal fencing spikes to loosen the ground around the beets. Even Renna tried to dig although her spike barely made a mark on the unyielding soil.

Yaret left them to it and walked further south, over a small rise. When she paused at the top and looked back at the beet-diggers, they were all bent towards the ground, pointing, wielding their tools, Lo with skirts hitched up. They looked almost picturesque against the snow.

Yaret studied them for a long moment, fixing the image in her mind. She had a sense that everything was just about to change but could not imagine how.

She glanced up at the sky – ice-blue – and then headed on towards the copse where she had seen the deer. It had not been touched by fire, and was still thick with dead leaves and twined with bramble stems, their withered berries small and black. There would probably be cobnuts in there if she could only reach them. She could hear movement; an irregular rustle from within, so she stepped back again to stand behind a lone tree a short distance away. The beet-diggers were just out of sight downwind. She nocked an arrow to her bow and waited.

Time passed. She thought about the coming cold, the need to gather in more wood before it snowed again. Make warmer bedding. Find more heather. Ask Ondro about fleeces.

There was another sudden rustle and a crackle of twigs. Yaret drew her bow. A thrush called in strident, sharp alarm – and out from the copse bounded a deer, a young stag,

coming fast towards her. She stepped out from behind her tree, aimed, shot. In the side of the neck. The stag stumbled for a few paces but stayed on its feet. As it veered away, still running, she nocked another arrow and began to run after it.

And she stopped again, after only half a dozen steps, because something else was happening in the copse. The trees were swaying, and there was a crash. That was no deer, she thought, in alarm and puzzlement, but something much more massive and less shy.

Then, with the sound of rending branches, a huge, bulky figure emerged to shamble towards her on all fours. It was a bear. A big one. Grey.

Her mind began to bounce around, thinking, What's it doing here and not up north? Luckily her body had had the instinctive sense to freeze instantly. She stood still with bow half-drawn; the bear paused, standing squarely on all fours, its huge feet turned in, and frowned at her.

Shoot it, she thought. Big target. Can't miss.

But she knew one arrow would not kill a bear unless she could get it in the eye. Probably not even then. It would just become enraged and charge.

And if she simply ran away it would charge after her. She knew she ought to shout and make a noise – bang something – but she had nothing to bang and she was not big enough to impress a bear.

There was one noise she had to make. Without moving, she gave the *Week, week* signal twice, and hoped the beet-pickers would hear it over the rise.

She needed to stop the bear from going that way. It was still studying her, deciding if she was a threat. If she kept still it might turn round and leave. If it decided to attack her she would have to shoot at it, then run.

The bear shook its head as if annoyed by invisible flies. Then it began to walk unevenly towards her. Its body rolled in a huge swagger.

Don't run yet, she told herself. When there's no choice, run to the right – away from the beet-pickers. But the foot will slow me down. Can't outrun an angry bear in any case. Likely to get mauled. Better me than them.

Was it, though? They needed her. How could they do without her?

Then don't get mauled.

But such a reprieve did not seem likely. There could be no good outcome: for the bear was still advancing, its nose pointing at her, its gait heavy and intent. It began to pick up speed. She could smell it now, a rank, meaty, pungent smell.

So this is it, she thought, the change that had to come. She raised her bow.

The bear lifted its head. But now it was looking not at her, but at something to the side, behind her. It shook itself: slowed its pace; and then stopped altogether.

A second later there was a clamour from the rise behind her – raucous shouts, thumps, clangs and bangs. When she risked a glance over her shoulder she saw all five of them in a row, at arm's length from each other, yelling and clattering together spikes and tools and stones. Their arms were high in the air as they advanced, stamping the ground.

The bear looked at them and considered. They kept coming. The bear kept considering. Its head flicked aside once; twice.

Then it slowly turned round with a lot of grunting and – in no hurry – ambled with its heavy rolling tread back to the copse. There was more tearing and crunching of wood as it gradually disappeared into the thicket.

Meanwhile the beet-diggers kept noisily moving forwards. They held their line until they were level with her. Dil was in the middle, wide-eyed but shouting bravely. One of the new girls was on either side of him. She had never seen them look so animated. Charo was nearest her, and Elket at the far end, looking furious.

Charo lowered a hand and they all stopped.

"Now we all walk backwards," he said, "slowly. If it comes out again we shout and bang until it goes away."

They all obeyed him. Yaret joined the end of the line, her bow fully drawn and aimed towards the copse. They walked steadily backwards up to the top of the rise without needing to shout again – and then, as they descended on the other side, the line broke up. They retreated to the safety of the beet-field in more haste.

"Why didn't you just shoot it?" Charo asked Yaret. His face was flushed and angry, although not, she thought, with her. Angry at his own fear, maybe.

"One arrow won't kill a bear," she answered. "And it won't give you time for two."

"We saw the deer run past, and then I heard your alarm call, so I ran up the hill to see what it was for." The wounded deer was lying on the ground beyond the beet-field, vainly floundering in its endeavours to get up.

Yaret hesitated. She ought to tell Charo sternly that he shouldn't have come to look. They should have all found somewhere safe to hide.

Instead she said, "Thank you. You probably just saved my life."

"It was Lo who told us what to do."

"We had a bear once that got in with our sheep," said Lo. She looked almost feverishly excited.

Yaret nodded. "Thank you, Lo. Thank you all." She bowed to each of them.

Then she walked over to the struggling deer and put an end to its struggles. Her heart was thumping as she said Oveyn. The others could so easily have been saying it now for her. Yet everything was the same. Nothing after all had changed, except for a bear still lurking in the thicket.

But although her heart would not stop pounding, her hands were steady as she gutted the deer on the spot. She kept the liver and heart to eat that evening. The rest of the offal she buried deep in the holes dug free of beets, fearing that it might attract the bear again – or even wolves. If a grey bear had travelled all this way south, who was to say that others wouldn't follow? Or that wolves wouldn't come prowling from the wastes?

She did not tell this thought to the others, however, merely advising that they should all dig and gather as many of the beets and greentops today as they possibly could.

"Why? Will the bear come back?" asked Elket.

"It'll probably roam around for a while. We'll have to be careful, and on no account should we leave any food out in the open – either here or back in town. We don't want to encourage it."

So they set Dil on the rise as look-out while they dug and packed the sacks with beets, and urgently ferried them on the donkeys back and forth to town.

By the time the light was beginning to fall, the bear had not been seen again, and the smaller cellar was stacked high with beets all along one wall. It made the place smell strongly of earth, and Yaret feared that Lo and Renna would complain. But Lo said she did not mind, and Renna of course said nothing.

It was Shuli who grumbled when she and Ondro returned shortly afterwards.

"It'll be like sleeping underground! I'll go and spend the night in my new cellar."

"Not on your own," said Yaret. "If it's on the north-side it's too far away."

"All right – I'll stay here tonight. But tomorrow I want to show my new cellar to everyone. You can see what you think then," said Shuli.

"Very well. You seem to have had a successful day."

For Shuli and Ondro had returned with two sheep – one dead, for eating ("It was nearly dead anyway," said Ondro philosophically) and one that was heavy with a lamb that would be born too early and would die if it were left up on the hill.

So they cooked and ate that evening with a heavily pregnant sheep for company. It huddled in the corner of the fireplace house, while they roasted the deer's heart and liver and broiled a pan of wintergreens.

Ondro chopped up some roots for the sheep and gave it an armful of grass, having brought a sackful home on the horse. He had failed to find his dogs, but otherwise seemed happy. It was useful to have somebody always so good-humoured. Even at the news of the bear Ondro merely raised his eyebrows and nodded. So perhaps it was not the momentous event that she had thought it was.

Since the night was fine but cold they held the evening council where they were, by the glowing fire with the sheep mooching disconsolately in the background. The others seemed to expect Yaret to lead the council. Although her mind was busy reliving the bear over and over again, she kept her words brief and simple.

She suggested a shorter version of the council for tonight: no news was necessary, just best thing and giving thanks, which was traditional before winterfest. There were no plans for tomorrow, again because it was winterfest; and they all knew what winterfest should be.

And so much of it, thought Yaret, would be missing.

Chapter 9

There was only porridge for breakfast, but nobody minded because there was the promise of roasted sheep to come. All eight of them crowded into the cellar under the inn to do the last Haedath and exchange the final greetings of the old year. Then they held the silence in contemplation of the twelve months just gone. Tomorrow's silence would be in contemplation of the year to come.

Yaret was not sure which of the two was worse. She had considered suggesting that they skip the contemplation of the last year; but no-one else had brought the matter up and in any case the past would not just go away. So now she stared dutifully at the floor until she realised that Dil, also staring at the floor, was weeping.

"What is it?" said Elket, her arm around him.

"You need to ask?" said Shuli, though not loudly.

"Armendo," said Dil through his tears. "I miss Armendo."

"Armendo's friendship was a great gift," Yaret told him. "So try to remember the happy times you had with him." She knew that this advice was trite and next to useless.

"I am," Dil answered mournfully. "That's the trouble."

"Then think about something else," said Shuli, not unkindly. Dil took a great gulp and then was silent.

No, she should definitely have suggested that they skip this bit, thought Yaret. She herself had no wish to reflect on the last few weeks; so instead she began to make a mental list of things to do today. Finish the cloaks and spindles, check the donkeys, look for any further signs of bear; prepare the food and supervise the roasting of the sheep.

Her mind strayed further forward, worrying about keeping everybody warm and fed all through the winter, until she checked it. Future plans were tomorrow's task. And everyone else was looking solemnly thoughtful. So stick to the rules.

With a reluctant sigh she let her mind stray back through random images of the year just gone: the long spring days spent weaving, tending crops and chickens, spinning and talking through the evenings, waiting for the summer dawn when she would set out on her journey. Gramma giving her the last of the old wrinkled apples, her grandfather handing her the letter. Well. That was all done with now.

But the joy of travelling alone! The donkeys were sufficient company. The hills rose and fell along her path and the sun pulled her west and south. She wouldn't be doing that any more. No more journeying. No need.

But a quiet voice inside her head spoke. Maybe there will be a need. She stopped and listened to it.

There's no more cloth to sell. But there are other needs more urgent now. Those Riders of the Vonn: their garb so drab, their lives so vivid, their quest so clear although they never told her what it was.

She knew it all the same, from Eled's murmured words and from the scroll. In the long term, they hoped to end their exile from their homeland; but their immediate task was to fight the stonemen and the darkburns.

That was enough, for it was surely her desire too. Although she had never seen a battle she felt at that moment that it was both her wish and duty to avenge her dead. They stood

now at her shoulders in the shadows of the room – perhaps in her imagination only; but that was irrelevant. They had no words yet they did not condemn her.

All the same she could not see how that duty might be fulfilled. It shouldn't be left to the Vonn alone: but what could she do from here, so far away? And she was needed here by the children. She could not abandon them.

She thought back through the events of the last autumn. Her evening story was all told, yet there was so much that she hadn't touched on. So many things that the Vonn had said and done, leading her to see the world with altered eyes. Wherever she had travelled to before, her thoughts had always centred on Obandiro. But now Obandiro was gone; and her thoughts were drawn towards Farwithiel and the bleak Gyr hills and past the strangely watchful Darkburn Loft to the boundaries of Kelvha. And somewhere indistinct, called Thield; and somewhere yet more hazy called Caervonn.

The world was huge and beautiful and dangerous and beckoning. But she could not go anywhere. Her place was here.

She raised her head and looked around at all the faces in the thin, wan morning light from the open hatchway. The faces looked equally thin and wan. Some had eyes closed; only Shuli met her glance. Shuli's former scowl had gone. She looked full of glee and Yaret smiled. After another minute she said,

"Time for gifts now."

At that, everyone woke up with a buzz of anticipation which she hoped would not be disappointed. But it seemed they were determined to be happy.

Charo and Elket already knew they were getting the woollen cloaks as their gifts for winterfest, and had assured her that they did not mind waiting another day for her to finish hemming them. There was only one precious needle – Yaret was trying to make more from bone, but without much success – so she set to the task of sewing straight away, while the other gifts were distributed.

Dil was appointed official donkey-keeper, and was presented with a halter, along with a warning of his heavy responsibilities. He couldn't stop grinning. Charo had cut the halter from an old belt found in a cellar. He had greased it with lamp oil and sliced and knotted it together cleverly.

Shuli was given the hazelwood bow which Yaret had made, but with a warning.

"The string is cordweed so it may not last. And I think the bow still has too much draw-weight. I need to adjust it, or it might just take your ear off," Yaret told her. "So be careful. Maybe we can use some of the sheepskin for a cheek-guard."

Despite the warning Shuli was grinning as widely as Dil. That was important. Keep the two youngest happy, and it was easier for the rest.

It was with some doubt that she handed the carding comb and the bundle of raw wool from the bottom of her grandmother's washing tub to Lo and Renna. This might not be seen as a gift at all, but just as work.

"I've nearly finished these," she said, and produced two wooden spindles, still a little rough around the weights. "Can you spin? If not, I can teach you."

"We can spin," said Lo eagerly. "And card as well. What do you want us to make?"

"Just make the yarn for now," said Yaret, "and meanwhile you can decide what you want it knitted into." Although her looms were useless, knitting could be done with a pair of sticks.

"I can knit," said Lo. She sounded glad, and Yaret realised that she had been needing a way to be productive. She should have guessed that. Renna said nothing but picked up one of the unfinished spindles and caressed it.

"We'll rub them down to make them smooth," said Yaret, and she nodded.

Then there was Ondro. For him she had only a shoulder-bag with a drawstring and strap, sewn out of a torn sack. It wasn't pretty but she hoped it would be useful. He seemed happy to receive any gift at all.

"My gift to everybody is the sheep," he said. "And the lamb that will be born soon – if it survives. You can share looking after that."

Then, unexpectedly, every head turned round to look at Charo. He cleared his throat and stood up, his head almost touching the cellar ceiling. She realised that he had grown in the weeks since she had met him.

"We've got a present for you," he said, addressing Yaret. "I found it in the forge." Reaching underneath his bedding, he produced a long thin object wrapped in a sack.

Yaret knew before she unwrapped it what it would be: one of the swords that had hung on the forge's wall. She had noted some time ago that the swords had disappeared and had suspected Shuli. But then they had been pushed out of her head by more immediate concerns.

What was totally unexpected was the scabbard that the sword was in. It was made of old, discoloured leather, but perfectly sound.

"Where on earth did you find the sheath?" she asked.

Charo looked a bit embarrassed. It was Shuli who replied.

"I found it, in Holvet's pig-sty. I think he used it to wedge open the door. But don't worry, we've cleaned it."

Yaret sniffed at the leather. "Ah, yes," she said with amusement. Then she drew the sword. It emerged with a faint hissing whisper. It had been scrubbed and oiled; the children stared at it with a kind of fascination which Yaret had to admit she shared.

"I wonder whose sword it was," she mused. Swords had been so rare in Obandiro that this was probably antique; or perhaps was one that Shay the blacksmith had made himself, to test his skills. Thank you, Shay.

"You'd better go outside to try it," advised Charo. So they all climbed up the ladder into the cold air which had the metallic tang of ice. In the frosty yard Yaret practised sweeping the sword through the air, using the moves Eled had shown her and which she had practised in Farwithiel with a stick.

Then she tried some of the more complex lunges and blocks she had watched Parthenal perform on that morning outside the hollow tree. They made more sense with the sword than with a stick, even though she could not wield it with anything like the right speed and accuracy, and her muscles were soon aching. It had been very evident that Parthenal knew how to handle a sword. And Rothir, too, fighting those stonemen at the Gyr... She had tried not to think about that much. But now she needed to remember.

"That's good," said Shuli, evidently impressed. Yaret realised that they were all staring at her new sword slightly open-mouthed. "Will you teach me those moves?"

"When you're old enough."

"Twelve is old enough."

Yaret didn't refute this, because that argument could wait. She held the sword upright. It was a good size for her, unlike Eled's, which she remembered thinking a monstrous, dangerous object the first time she had picked it up. This sword was also hugely dangerous, yet it did not fill her with the same revulsion. Instead she was aware of a certain apprehensive pleasure.

"That is a... that is a wonderful gift," she said, for the sword was certainly a thing of craft and beauty. Whether she would ever be able to wield it properly was another matter altogether. But she would practise, just in case.

"There were two others in the forge as well," said Charo. "Not as good; they looked like old ones that had been repaired. I thought that they could be for me and Elket, because, you know, if we've got them we ought to learn to use them safely." Shuli, to Yaret's surprise, made no protest. "Or Ondro could have one if he wants." He glanced at Ondro, who shook his head.

"Not for me," he said. "I'd only cut my own leg off."

Yaret laughed, and bowed to everyone in general.

"Thank you all," she said, her surprise and wary pleasure at the gift still growing like a fast-blooming flower. So they didn't see her just as a big sister, but as a warrior of some sort. She was aware of something shifting: perhaps it was her own view of herself.

"And now you all have to come and look at my new cellar!" burst out Shuli.

"We will," promised Yaret, "as soon as we've set the food to cook."

So once the mutton had been prepared and spitted over the fire, and the roots within it, they all tramped, chattering, up to the north-side of the town. Shuli insisted on stopping at the nearest junction to dance the Rannikan. Everyone joined in – even Renna, for a few seconds; and Ondro, who was slow and kept forgetting the sequence. But he performed it with a wide, earnest smile on his face, sending Dil into fits of helpless giggles.

Yaret's attempt was almost as brief as Renna's. She stumbled on her false leg, which refused to move as fast as she would like. So she bowed out and watched the others, laughing and clapping along, and trying not to think about the last time she had danced it. And the fact that she would never dance it properly again. The contest was declared a draw between Shuli and Charo.

"But I'll win next year," said Dil.

Breathless now, they continued north along the Dondel brook. Its banks were decorated with small icicles, although the ice had not yet laid its sheen across the water. As they passed the bridge, Yaret noticed that Shuli kept glancing at it.

"What are you looking for?"

Shuli hesitated. Then she muttered, "What happened to the stoneman? It wasn't there when I last looked."

"I moved the body," Yaret murmured back. "Not much of it left. I got the other stones out of the head first, just in case."

"Where are they?"

"Safe," said Yaret.

Dil piped up, "There was a lin on the bridge just now, wasn't there?"

"Better say the rhyme, then," said Elket indulgently, although she had been looking the other way and could not have seen the lin herself. As Dil stopped to recite the lin's grace, she

said to Yaret, "He's always seeing lins these days. He used to see a hob quite regularly at school."

"The hob? Is that still there?" But even as Yaret spoke she realised that of course it would not be, not any more.

Elket looked surprised and then amused. "I never saw it," she said.

Meanwhile Shuli had dived along a narrow bridleway near the bridge, towards a row of stone-built cottages. She marched down to the furthest house in the row and stopped in the ruined doorway, arms akimbo.

"Come on!" she urged.

Inside the roofless cottage was a snow-spattered sludge of ash and charcoal, the same as now lay in all the houses. Rain and snow had cleaned the streets to some extent but was taking longer to deal with more sheltered spots. The walls and flag-stoned floor remained intact, though black with greasy soot. Shuli led them to where the staircase to the upper floor must once have been; underneath it, a flight of stone steps descended through the flag-stones to the darkness of a cellar.

"It took me ages to dig the steps out," Shuli told them as she climbed down. "But it was worth it." Carefully she lit a flint-lamp sitting on a small barrel at the bottom. Once its wick was glowing, she set it down and spread her arms. "My kingdom!"

"My word. It's extraordinary," breathed Yaret.

This cellar was big. Bigger than the cottage above it, surely: it must have reached right under next door too. The beams above her head were so massive that it made her think the cellar must be older than the houses.

And it held much more than one small barrel. It had furniture. At least, it had two chairs, a broken table, a cupboard with its door hanging off, and an old bedstead propped up on its end against one wall. The wall opposite the bed was lined with shelves: and they were laden. There were dusty jars and pots and boxes, piles of cloth and paper, strange useless ornaments; all sorts of unidentifiable objects sat in the shadows under a cloudy layer of fine ash.

"I've cleaned it all once already but the ash gets in again," said Shuli. "Everybody can choose one thing each for their winterfest gift. Anything you like. Only I've already chosen *that*." She pointed to the wall, where a curved sword was propped up on two nails.

"You didn't find that in here, surely?" Yaret asked.

"No. I found it in the Dondel – it was the stoneman's. It's a bit big for me now but I'll grow into it."

Dil had already run over to start inspecting the contents of the shelves and hold them up towards the light.

"Another lantern!" he exclaimed. "That's not my gift, I'm just saying it because it's a useful thing."

"It'd be more useful if we had more lamp-oil," Elket commented.

"We'll grow that in the summer," Yaret said. "There's a flax field on the east-side. With any luck it'll have self-seeded. Or even gold-cabbage seeds would do." She was picking up pots and jars to examine them. None of them contained food but many could be put to use for storage or for cooking.

Turning to the piles of cloth, she unfolded them. There were four long robes of mildewed linen and three short tunics of frayed, moth-eaten wool. She recognised one of her

grandfather's woven patterns – it was one of her own favourites – and felt her heart turn over. She stood quite still, holding the worn-out garment to her heart.

None of the others seemed to notice. They were too busy examining the jumbled objects on the wall of shelves. Dil gave a cry as he picked up something from the bottom shelf. Blowing a small flurry of ash off it, he handed it to Elket.

"For you," he said. It was a lutine. When Elket plucked the strings they made a dull, tuneless sound; after tightening them, she tried again, and then smiled with pleasure.

"Shuli? Can this lutine be mine?"

Shuli assented with a lordly gesture. Yaret was relieved, for a lutine would make the long evenings of winter dark more bearable. At present she felt the weight of keeping everybody occupied with discussion, story, song: now they could try to learn to play the lutine too.

"I'd like this, please," said Lo, holding up a double candlestick of earthenware, glazed in a blue as bright as a clear winter sky. Renna held out a small carved wooden box, opening it to show that it was empty.

"You're welcome," Shuli said.

Dil was hovering over the shelves, unable to decide.

"I like this," he said, picking up a pottery horse that pulled a tiny wooden cart. "But I like that too." It was a child's puzzle, a wooden castle with interlocking pieces. "I'll have.... I'll have... the castle." Reluctantly, he put down the horse and cart.

Charo picked them up. "May I choose this?" When Shuli nodded, he handed the horse and cart ceremonially to Dil.

"Happy winterfest, Dil," he said.

"Oh," said Dil and Elket together, Elket in something like dismay, and Dil in delight.

"But then you'll have nothing," said Dil. He looked appealingly at Shuli, who just shrugged.

"His choice," she said.

"And can this be my choice?" Yaret said, still grasping the tunic to her chest.

"I don't think clothes should count," said Elket.

"This one is special."

"It counts, then," Shuli said. "Things that are just useful and boring don't count. Like the lantern, and that pile of plates. That's for everybody."

Yaret picked up a pair of dusty boots and turned them over. "Badly stained. Sound enough otherwise. Are these useful and boring enough not to count, Shuli?"

"Yes. And too big for you. They're really wide. I already tried them on."

Yaret nodded. "They're not for me; they're for Charo. His are splitting down the seams." She handed the boots over to Charo, who immediately began to prise his battered old boots off to try them.

"All right," said Shuli. "I suppose. Now there's only Ondro left without a gift. What would you like, Ondro?"

"This'll do me," said Ondro, holding up a metal tankard. "What's in the barrel?"

"It's wine, I think," said Shuli. "I tried a little bit. It's fruity and quite strong."

"Let's try a little bit more then, shall we?" Ondro said. He looked at Yaret and after a moment's hesitation she nodded. She had visions of Ondro rolling drunk and carolling down the streets; but he had spent weeks in the cellar alongside several barrels of beer without asking to broach them.

Now he uncorked the spigot and caught half a tankardful of dark liquid before sealing it up again.

"I'd best just test it," he said. He took a sip and raised his eyebrows. "Well." He handed the tankard to Yaret.

"Whew," she said after one taste. It took her breath away. "Three sips each. We could use that as antiseptic. What on earth is it made from?"

"Plums, I think," said Shuli. "There used to be a plum tree in their garden."

"You know who lived here?"

"An old lady and her husband. I didn't *know* them."

"Well... We give our thanks to them."

They took turns to sip the wine and say variations on *Whew*. Yaret pictured that old man and lady, picking plums. Telling each other where they'd missed some. Don't overfill that bucket; mind your sleeve. Busy and careful. Turned to ashes.

As we all shall be, eventually. Enjoy the wine for now.

"That's enough for you, Dil," she said, and as she spoke she heard a noise right overhead.

She froze. So did everyone else. It had been a thump, not loud, but quite distinct: a sound like someone stepping into the room above them. And they had been making a fair amount of noise down here. Too much noise.

"The bear," mouthed Dil, tankard clutched in both hands, his eyes wide.

The bear. It was entirely possible. Or stonemen...

Either way, she had no bow and arrow. Incredibly stupid of her to forget. Danger hadn't heard of winterfest.

She stepped silently over to the wall and lifted down the curved stoneman's sword. Handing her knife to Ondro, she gestured to him to follow her. Then she crept stealthily up the narrow stone staircase and slowly put her head up to look out.

No bear. Two people. She saw the feet first, then the legs. One wore long skirts.

Not stonemen. Nor the old couple she had just been imagining: this pair was young. They looked astonished to see her emerging from the floor; almost as astonished as she was to see them – and what was more, to recognise their faces.

"Anneke!"

The former schoolmistress put both her hands up to her mouth.

"Then there *is* someone here! Berlo saw the footprints." She turned to the young bearded man who stood beside her. "So you were right," she said.

Yaret realised that Anneke was heavily pregnant. That was something she hadn't known before she left Obandiro last summer. But Anneke looked healthy: not ragged or begrimed. They were all still staring at each other when Ondro emerged from the trapdoor and went over to take Anneke's arm.

"Come down," he said, "come down out of the wind," speaking as gently as he might to an anxious sheep.

So the couple descended the steps and at once the lamplit cellar was full of greetings and exclamations of delight. Dil ran over and hugged his former teacher. Elket hugged her too, and Charo patted her shoulder in an awkward but affectionate way. Even Shuli looked pleased, which made Yaret think that Anneke must have been a good schoolmistress.

The young man was, of course, her husband: Berlo, who was originally from a village fourteen miles away. They had gone back to stay with his parents two days before the

stonemen came, they explained, tumbling over each other's words, for Anneke to rest before her baby arrived.

"I didn't like the new teacher as much," said Dil reproachfully.

"You didn't have a chance to get to know her," said Anneke, ruffling his hair. Dil put his arms around her waist again and Yaret realised what she herself had failed to offer him in comfort. Not motherly enough. Ah well. Ondro stood one of the old chairs upright and tested it before gesturing to Anneke to sit down.

"The first time we came home," said Berlo, "we saw Obandiro... like this. And still smoking. So we went back to my parents' house. Every so often I rode over this way to look for any sign of life. Last week I saw some smoke down on the south-side, which made me wonder... and then I saw somebody moving around."

"Who?" said Dil accusingly.

"I don't know. It doesn't matter. But when I went back and told Anneke, she decided we should both come here and see."

"His parents were running out of food," put in Anneke.

"And no-one's selling anything to anybody. We decided if we left they'd have enough for the winter. We knew where there was some food stored in Obandiro; but if we really needed to, we could always go back to my parents. So we came over today in the cart."

"You've got a cart? Then you've got a *horse*?" asked Dil excitedly.

"We've got a cart-horse, parked up outside the town," said Berlo. "And a cart with quite a lot of things in it. We won't need to borrow much from you."

"I didn't know about this cellar," said Anneke, gazing around. "I know of a couple of other well-stocked cellars, though. As well as the store-room underneath the schoolhouse."

"There's a store-room underneath the schoolhouse?" Shuli was both astounded and indignant.

Yaret laughed and Anneke turned around to look at her.

"I know your face, but not your name," she said. "Of course you're too old to have been taught by me." So Yaret introduced herself, as did Ondro. But the sisters Anneke already seemed to know.

"I haven't seen you for a few years," she said thoughtfully. "How are you, Lo? And Renna?"

She held out her hand. Renna walked over and took it. And then to Yaret's amazement, she spoke.

"We're all right now," she said. Her voice was thin and fluting. Everybody else just stared at her.

Anneke did not seem to notice. She smiled and kept holding Renna's hand while asking questions about where and how they all lived. Some of these Renna actually answered. Dil was eager to answer the rest.

"How much room do you have in your cellars on the south-side?" Berlo asked.

"Not much. But there are at least two other cellars where there might be room for you. There's a dead deer hanging in one of them, but we could move it," Yaret said.

"I give you this cellar," Shuli announced grandly. She spread her hands open. "This is my winterfest gift to you. You may use anything in it. Only the sword's mine." She pointed to the sword which was now leaning against the barrel.

"There's wine in that barrel," Dil announced. "I've had some. It's really strong. You should try it, Anneke! Have a drink!"

“Wine might not suit the baby,” replied Anneke with a laugh; but Yaret was worried. What would the teacher think of her offering the children wine? Especially when it was closer to brandy.

“Your baby,” Elket said. “When is it due?”

“About a month now, or a little less.”

So that was another worry, although Anneke and her husband seemed quite calm about it. Once Berlo had tried a sip of wine, and exclaimed his own “Whew,” they all left the cellar. Carrying their gifts, they began to walk back to the south-side to show the couple the inn. While Dil was dancing around Anneke, Yaret fell into step beside Ondro.

“It’ll be good to have them here,” Ondro said with satisfaction. “Good for the children.”

“Yes. Only what about this baby? Maybe she should go back to Berlo’s parents before it’s born. I know nothing about midwifery.”

“I do. I’ve birthed enough lambs.”

“Ondro, it’s not the same.”

“It’s not so different. I’ve birthed one or two babies too, on farms when there was no time to fetch the midwife.” He pointed at Renna. “I birthed her.”

“What?”

“Her mother sent a runner for me. It’s not so bad. We’ll manage.”

“I hope so,” Yaret said. On a day of astonishments, this was just one more.

A year of astonishments. Why had she foreseen and feared one single change? They never stopped.

And tomorrow would see the fresh year start: the first year of this new, impaired, yet still extraordinary world.

Chapter 10

“Veron,” said Huldarion. “Welcome back.”

The man nodded, stripping off his gloves and hooded cloak, which were heavily encrusted with snow. There was no snow at Thield, for the encampment was sheltered; but Veron had ridden hard and far from the north, through the hills and their wild weather.

You wouldn’t have guessed it, though. No sign of tiredness. His face was as alert as ever. He shook his head at Huldarion’s offer of a chair and contented himself with holding his hands out to the central brazier that warmed the tent.

Huldarion waited. You couldn’t rush Veron. Neither could you tell him what to do. The man was half wolf-hunter, and three-quarters wolf, he thought, not for the first time.

Now Veron looked over the brazier at him, his eyes glittering.

“They’ve taken over Erbulet, small fur-trading town in the far north-east,” he said. “Two thousand stonemen, give or take a dozen. About twenty-seven darkburns, stowed away in various sheds and outhouses. They’ve set one or two sheds on fire, accidentally. But they haven’t fired the place by design, not like other towns I saw.”

“Where’s Arguril?”

“Thawing out,” said Veron, “and trying to loosen up. I worked him hard. Give him a week off.”

“I will. Did he do all right?”

“Not bad, considering what he went through last year. He didn’t flinch at the sight of the darkburns.”

“How close to them did you get?”

Veron gave him one of his wolfish grins.

“Close enough.” He rubbed his hands together over the embers. “I ambushed a stray stoneman one night. He was drunk on too much ethlon or whatever they dose themselves with. They get doses twice a day after eating. I’ve watched ’em line up for it like little boys waiting for a treat. The others must have assumed this one had wandered off and got lost in the snow. No alarm bells were set ringing, anyway.”

“What did you do with the body?”

“Down a nice deep crevice over a mile distant. No chance of them finding it there with all its stones dug out of its head. I’ve got some of them in my bag.”

“Not on you?”

“I don’t like carrying them around,” said Veron without explanation. Huldarion was always intrigued by these hints of superstition in a man otherwise so level-headed, and so ruthless.

“And did you get a chance to try the stones’ effects?”

Again, the wolfish grin.

“The next night,” said Veron, “we crept into the town, to a darkburn shed. Easy to spot. All the snow round them and on the roof had melted. Tiles were steaming. And of course you feel ’em. But I’m getting used to that, and Arguril bore up.”

“Nobody saw you?”

"The stonemen hadn't bothered setting sentries. No wariness at all. They'll reckon they've no enemies up there. They've killed off all the locals. And who would follow them all that way up north except a crazy Rider of the Vonn like me?"

Huldarion nodded, and waited.

"So we got to the shed, no trouble. I took one of the stones. We'd managed to hammer it into pieces: so if the stonemen found a piece, it wouldn't be obvious what it was. The darkburn got restless as soon as I crept close. I'd say ten yards, or less. By seven yards away I heard it thump against the far wall. No wooden door, of course. They'd replaced them with iron plates and grids, just like they'd replaced the rafters, or taken them out altogether.

"This shed had a large grid for a door. I got close enough to toss a piece of stone through it. A bit of the pointed end. Retreated fast, before I set myself on fire. But as I backed off, the darkburn calmed down again."

"So the point had no effect."

"No. Next, a piece from the other end of the stone. Part of the domed bit. Did the same thing, tossed it in through the grid. Retreated. This time the darkburn went wild." Veron paused, and shook his head. "I almost felt sorry for the thing. Throwing itself against the walls, trying to get out of there. Made a great dint in the metal grid. Would have climbed the wall, I daresay, if it could."

"But they can't climb?"

"This one couldn't. It banged and crashed around so much that four stonemen came to see what was going on. Darkburn keepers: they wore heavy leather gear. Must have weighed a ton even if they kept the heat off. They wouldn't be able to run in those."

"Worth knowing." Huldarion became aware that he was adopting the same terse form of speech as Veron.

"Could be. They used iron bars to lever up the grid. Only needed to go up an inch or two and then they could lift the whole grid out towards them. Clever mechanism."

"But the darkburn wasn't clever enough to work it out?"

Veron shrugged. "Who knows what darkburns think? If they have minds. But if they could work it out, they've got no limbs to do it with. This one hadn't, anyway. It shot out of its hole as if it was catapulted. Bowled one of the stonemen over and then rushed away from them. Didn't come near us. Zigzagged through the town from the sound of it. Couldn't see it in the moonlight. It probably got right away."

"And is now roaming around the northern wastes?"

"Melting them," said Veron.

Huldarion tapped his fingers on his leg. "So it's not the stone itself that has the effect," he said, "or not the whole stone, just the top. That implies it's something on the stone. Some sort of coating, maybe."

"I reckon so."

"How many stones did you bring back?"

"Only four. The man we ambushed was low-ranking. We tried to get a few more on the way back. Found a troop of eight stonemen, a little out of town. Used the morilan. It works well on 'em. Catches in the stones around their heads."

"But you didn't manage to take any of those stones?"

"No time. Only just killed the eighth man when another company came running," said Veron. "Won't hurt all the same. They'll spread the word."

Huldarion nodded slowly. Veron's weapon of choice, the morilan, was bloody at the best of times. No doubt the word would be duly spread.

"Anything of interest on the bodies?" he enquired.

"Nothing."

"None of their drugs, then."

"Seems that has to be doled out to them. It was kept in one of the houses, always guarded. The only place with sentries. Two at all times."

"Guarded against their own men."

Veron nodded.

"Good," said Huldarion. "Good work, Veron. We'll talk in more detail later, when the others are here. How's your wife? Did you get to see her?"

"She's all right," replied Veron, without elucidation. Huldarion had never met his wife, who lived somewhere up in the northern wastes where Veron's father also came from. Veron hardly ever spoke about her, except to say she was a huntress he had met up north. His mother, who was of the Vonn, had married one of the Northern hunters before being killed by wolves some years ago. Maybe that was why Veron, who seemed to understand and even love wolves like his own kin, also killed them without compunction when they were in the wrong place.

"Many wolves round there this winter?"

"They've been pushed north and further west," said Veron, "like everything else when the stonemen marched through."

"Everything except the people." Huldarion stared into the brazier, grimly contemplating all those deaths by burning: all those devastated farms and villages.

"We couldn't have stopped it," Veron said. "Would have taken an army bigger than the Vonn, with all those darkburns."

"How many burn-outs did you see on you way up there?"

"At least two dozen villages. A few farms. We met one or two survivors, wandering around looking dazed. They said the stonemen took the stock before they fired the buildings. So they didn't get everybody. Just nearly everybody. We saw a couple of bigger towns – Byant and another one – burnt out too. No sign of life. But here and there we noticed smoke rising, long after the darkburns had done their business."

"Much smoke?"

Veron shrugged, again. "The odd fire."

"The odd survivor, then." Huldarion sighed. "Those poor people."

They were not his people, true. It was not his land. Not his job. But it pained him deeply, none the less, that he had been able to protect neither land nor people.

Chapter 11

Dil was carefully writing on the slate the words that Anneke had dictated to him when suddenly she went “Oh!” and straightened up from the dough that she was kneading.

“What is it?” said Dil.

She put her hand to her stomach and pulled a face as if she’d stubbed her toe.

“Whoa,” she said after a minute. “Dil, I think maybe you’d better leave your lesson and go and fetch Berlo for me.”

“Is it the baby?” asked Dil, at once anxious and eagerly alert. He’d been aware all morning that every so often Anneke would go quiet and seem to be counting.

“Yes.”

“Then we shouldn’t leave you alone,” he told her. “I’ll go and get Charo to stay with you and then I’ll find Berlo.”

Charo wasn’t far away. He was just behind the plum-wine cottage – that had become its name by common consent – sorting out the woodstore. Yaret had told him to stay close to Anneke while all the others helped the new family from Byant clear out the houses by the mill.

“I’ll look after her,” said Charo immediately, and he followed Dil back down into the cellar. He began to get out the clean cloths they’d put aside ready, while Dil patted Anneke’s hand to reassure her, and told her he’d be back soon. She nodded, holding her stomach.

While he ran along the streets Dil thought about this baby. At first he’d looked forward to it coming because it would mean he wasn’t the youngest any more. But then two days ago the new family had arrived and that had made him the fourth youngest, all at once, because their children were five and six and eight. They seemed all right although the youngest one cried a lot. The grandfather kept telling him off. He was a very grumbly grandfather but perhaps that was understandable. Old people didn’t like the cold, and now, a full month after winterfest, it was colder than ever.

The snow that had arrived three weeks ago still lay thick on the ground. They had had to spend the first week of those three huddled in the cellars while the blizzard blew outside. It wasn’t too boring because Anneke began to go through his last year’s lessons. He found them surprisingly welcome. They played lots of games as well, and he started to learn the lutine. After Elket showed him where to place his fingers on the strings he found he could work out little tunes for himself, and was pleased when Shuli couldn’t.

The donkeys had been a worry. Dil had wanted to go out and check on them several times a day, and the others wouldn’t let him go alone. He understood why; for whenever he had ventured up into the street he had nearly been blown off his feet by the force of the wind and the blast of the snow. Without its former buildings to shelter it, the town soon filled with snowdrifts. It made walking around difficult. It ought to have been fun, but wasn’t.

However, to his relief the donkeys and the horse seemed to be all right in their own broken-down stable despite its lack of roof. Ondro shovelled out any snow and when the wind dropped cleared a patch of grass so Dil could lead them out to graze. Dil fed the donkeys red roots and amazingly they seemed to like them.

Once the snow had stopped falling, Ondro had cleared the routes between the inhabited houses. He never seemed to get tired. Yaret said that shepherds walked all day, and certainly Ondro always strode round at a great rate. Dil had to run to keep up with him.

Now he ran through the snowy streets towards the miller's house. Beyond the forge he spotted Shuli practising her archery and shouted at her,

"The baby's coming!"

Shuli turned round and lowered her bow. "Tell me when it's over," she said, before aiming at her target again.

Dil ran on to the houses by the mill and told his news to everyone there. Yaret immediately put down her wooden shovel.

"Berlo, Ondro, we'd better go," she said. "Dil? Do you want to stay here?"

"I'll come back with you to run errands," said Dil. He didn't care for shovelling ash. The new family from Byant would have quite a nice house, though, when it was done; it used to be the miller's own house and once it had been cleared it would only need a new roof and a few repairs. They were clearing out a small, adjoining house next door as well. The grandfather wanted his own, apparently. A cellar wasn't good enough for him.

He looked at the youngest child, Paro. Crying again. Dil went over to him and patted his shoulder.

"It's all right," he said. "Babies are usually all right." In fact he knew this wasn't true in his own family's case, but he also knew he shouldn't say that now. "I'll come and tell you when it's born. You won't be the youngest any more then."

Since that prospect didn't seem to make Paro any happier he cast around for something else kind to say. "And you can give the baby a present. Look for something in the ash. If you find something bright or shiny, Anneke says babies like to look at shiny things."

Paro gazed up at him silently, the tears running down his cheeks. Dil knew why he was crying, really. It was because his father had died back in Byant just before they came here through the snow. The older boy, Korli, had told Dil that his father had been badly burnt and had never recovered. The middle one was a girl called Frali. She had four braids in her hair. Now she came over and gave Paro a hug.

"Is Anneke a kind teacher?" she asked Dil.

"Yes. You'll like her," Dil assured them. "She's really nice."

"She won't be teaching with a baby, though, will she?" said the grandfather testily. Everything was a grumble with him.

"I'll tell you what happens," promised Dil, and he ran after the others.

Elket and Lo and Renna stayed to help the children's mother. The mother was very quiet, though not as quiet as Renna, who still hardly ever talked. Dil wasn't sure how much use Renna would be at clearing up, although she did more now than she used to. He knew that Elket didn't want to see the baby because of those sick babies of their mother's. Dil found that he was hoping very much that this one didn't die. The tight knot that had been slowly loosening inside him over the last few weeks seemed suddenly to have tied itself into new complicated coils.

Back at Anneke's cellar not much was happening at all. However, Dil did not feel that he could wander off to play: duty kept him at his post by the fireplace of the kitchen that was open to the sky. They wanted warm water, probably to wash the baby in when it was born. So he looked after the bucket and stoked the fire and put some food on to warm as well.

Still nothing happened. Charo came out and sat with him and talked about this and that. Dil wasn't really listening. They tried to play *Look over there!* but it petered out quite quickly. He could tell that Charo was worried too. Ondro came out and got some water and said everything was fine. He looked quite cheerful but then he always did.

After a while Dil ran over to the mill to give a report that nothing much was happening; but when he got back to the inn a lot was happening. He could hear Anneke groaning and crying out, and he was just worrying that he would need to tell everything to go away when Charo came up out of the cellar and said smiling that the baby had been born. And it was a little girl. And it was all right, and so was Anneke. And they were going to call it Royet.

Dil's relief was huge. "Can I see it now?" he begged. Five minutes later he was allowed down to peep at the tiny bit of the baby he could see, mostly red cheek and nose as Anneke held it close and wrapped up. She sat up on the bed and gave Dil a kiss and told him what a big help it had been to have him there as errand boy.

So then he went to give the news to Shuli – who put down her bow at last – and the others busy digging with the Byant family. Paro wasn't crying now, and when Dil told them about Royet he silently opened his clenched palm to reveal a coin.

"Is that your present?" Dil asked. Paro nodded.

"That's a good present. We'll polish it up." Dil wet his finger and rubbed the sooty coin. Underneath it looked a bit like silver. "It'll be nice and shiny. Where did you find it?"

"Frali found it," said the older boy. "It was over there." Dil went and poked in the corner which he was pointing at. The floor was thick with powdery ash that he thought might have been flour. At the bottom of the pile he could feel more coins.

He looked up at Frali.

"Better go and get your mother," he said. "I think you might have just found treasure." On seeing their eyes widen, Dil hoped that he was right.

So that evening there were plenty of Best Things for the council. Dil knew it should be called Thanks-saying; but now that the little children had arrived it seemed more sensible to stick with Best Things. They didn't seem to have heard of evening council although Elket had explained it to them.

This evening they held it in Standard, because the new family did not speak Bandiran. Even though the children always seemed to understand him, Dil was not entirely comfortable with Standard. However, Anneke had told him it was important to keep practising. They had the council by the fire in the plum-wine kitchen, some of them sitting on logs, so that Anneke and the baby could be there; and of course the first thing was the blessing of the baby. Most of the Best Things were the baby too – although not all.

Shuli said, "The baby, and I hit my target three times in a row."

Paro's mother said, "The safe arrival of the baby, and the help with our two houses." She smiled around at them. "Thank you all."

Frali only said, "The baby," although she had found the money. They had retrieved quite a lot of coins – thirty-four so far, mostly silver, some strange and foreign. It was Korli who said, "The baby and the treasure."

Little Paro just held up his coin silently. At least he wasn't crying – not until his grandfather said,

"Obviously we're pleased about the baby. Can't see that we've got much else to be thankful for."

"The houses," whispered Paro's mother. "The food."

"Hmph," said the grandfather. "This is all very childish if you ask me."

"We didn't ask you," said Shuli.

"Shuli," said Yaret, and although it did not sound as if she was telling her off Shuli closed her mouth and looked down. "We will now say Oveyen," continued Yaret, "which is our thanks and blessing to the dead who lie around us and who will not be forgotten. And to your dead also, who lie in Byant and will not be forgotten. I will say it in Bandiran and Lo will translate."

Lo was good at translating. She could come up with exactly the right words quickly, which Dil found it difficult to do. But there were not so many words tonight because it was not the Ulthared version, just the ordinary one. Dil understood that this was not just because the new family were strangers, but because three of them were too young. He felt himself grow a little taller with his own knowledge of the Ulthared.

But at the end the grandfather said, "What use is this to anybody? It won't bring any of them back."

"We know that," Yaret said. "That is why we honour them."

"It's gibberish."

"You're very rude," said Shuli.

He looked at her and threw his head back. "And so are you, young lady, although I think lady is hardly the word. You should respect your elders."

"And you should respect your hosts," said Shuli.

"I didn't ask to be here!"

"Then go somewhere else," said Shuli, ignoring Elket's attempts to shush her.

"Shuli," said Yaret, and this time she was definitely telling her off. But the grandfather had already got up from his log and stalked out of the house.

Paro's mother began to get up too, but Yaret said, "Stay. Let him have some time to himself."

She sat down again. "I'm sorry. He's grieving for his son."

"Well, aren't you all?" said Shuli. "I don't see what makes him so special."

"Shuli," said Yaret for a third time.

"What? He needed telling."

Then Yaret spoke some words in Bandiran which Dil was instantly sure were Ulthared although he had never heard them before. It was about how we cannot know the minds of others, but we ought always to try, even for the smallest thing. Be a child. Be a bird. Be a mouse.

Dil liked it. Be a donkey, he thought. It shut Shuli up, too, but now Paro was crying again, quite loudly, although his mother tried to quiet him.

He looked at Yaret and said, "Can I sit next to Paro?"

"If he wants you to."

Dil looked at Paro. "Do you want me to sit next to you?" Paro gave the tiniest nod through his sobbing so he went and sat next to him on the log. Then he said the first thing he could think of that might cheer Paro up.

"Did you know that Yaret has a wooden leg?"

Paro stopped crying in mid-sob. He stared at Dil and then at Yaret.

"It's quite true," said Yaret. "Although it's not my whole leg. It's just from here down." She touched her leg between knee and ankle.

"There's a long story," said Dil, "all about how she got the wooden leg, in a magic forest. It's a story about the donkeys and the horse and other people too. Do you like my donkeys?"

Paro nodded.

"Would you like to hear the story?"

Paro nodded, again.

"Then I'll start telling it to you tomorrow," promised Dil, "and Korli and Frali can listen if they want." He looked at Yaret. "It's all right," he said. "I'll leave out the really gory bits."

"Thank you, Dil," said Yaret. "Shall we go on with council? Plans for tomorrow. I think we know yours already."

So evening council went on, rather mutedly. Dil felt very protective of Paro, sitting small and warm next to him, and thankfully not crying any more. It made him think about his dead brothers – he thought that as well as baby Jeret there had been at least two others, from something Elket said, although he wasn't sure. He hardly ever thought about them because he hadn't known them. He usually forgot about them. But now he wondered what they would have been like, and what it would have been like for him to be a big brother.

It made him feel a little weepy, which was stupid. But maybe it wasn't. He had never thought of those dead babies when they said Oveyen. But now he said Oveyen for them, inside his head, and found it was a comfort.

After the council was over, and because it was not yet dark, he ran races with the younger children in the snow-cleared streets. He was just wondering whether to let Korli win a race, when Korli won it anyway. Dil didn't mind. He felt generous.

Korli made up a game called *Bear* – for Dil had already told them all about the bear – and they took it in turns to be the bear while the others joined hands and sang and shouted. Dil told Frali that she made a very good bear, which was true. She had the growl.

Then he showed them how to dance the Rannikan: they liked that. It was not the same as having Armendo with him, but he now thought that Armendo probably wasn't coming back. Although sometimes he imagined that Armendo had found a safe place to live, more often now he knew he hadn't. It made him ache inside.

Yaret had said they should put everyone in songs because songs were easy to remember. So they were making up new songs in the evenings amidst all the old rounds and ballads. It made him ache even more to put Armendo in a song. But it was also a bit like putting him in a safe place.

Once their mother had taken the three children away Dil ran home and on the way saw Yaret and the grandfather sitting on a wall and talking. They hadn't noticed him so he sneaked along the inside of the wall to listen. He heard Yaret saying,

"We have all lost someone that we love. Some of us have lost everyone we love: Charo, for example, and Shuli, and Ondro."

The grandfather just snorted. At least it sounded like a snort. After a moment Yaret spoke again.

"I know there seems to be nothing for you now but grief. But that will change. I know you don't want to be here. But for the moment here is the best place for your family, and your responsibility is for them and not just for yourself."

Still no answer. Just another snort.

“We will make a memorial to your son here, if you wish: or at his homeplace, in the future. Meanwhile we will honour him every evening at the council. We will look after his wife and children.”

The grandfather grunted something that Dil couldn't catch.

“That is your prerogative,” said Yaret, and she stood up and walked away. Dil felt quite impatient with the old man and wondered if she did too. He didn't seem to pay much attention to his grandchildren except to tell them off. Dil and all the others would have to make up for that.

Just because you were old you didn't have to grumble. *Be an old man, be a grumpy grandfather*, he told himself, experimentally. No, that was too hard. He couldn't be a grandfather. But the grandfather ought to be able to be a child, because he'd been one before.

And Dil knew what it was like to lose people, yet he didn't grumble. Yaret was quite right. Charo had lost everybody but he didn't grumble. Nobody grumbled. Well, Shuli grumbled, but not about losing people.

It occurred to him that surely Yaret too had lost everyone she loved. She hadn't mentioned that. But of course Yaret loved her donkeys; although maybe not as much as Dil himself did, or she wouldn't have made him their official keeper. Because you didn't give up the things you loved so easily, without a tear.

Chapter 12

The third time Bruilde went back to her ruined farmstead at Deloran, she found that someone else had moved in.

The place was smoking all over again, but this time from the chimney. She cursed as she dismounted stiffly from her horse – her long trip along the Darkburn having left a legacy of aching muscles and stiff joints – and stalked over to the building to confront the intruder. She knew it wasn't any of her own people; she'd just come from visiting them in the village a few miles away.

She drew her sword before she entered, moving as stealthily as she knew how. In the hands of a rheumatic old lady the sight of the sword wouldn't scare off bold invaders; but she knew how to use it. They would discover that if necessary.

However, she at once perceived that there was only one intruder, squatting huddled by the great stone fireplace where the remnants of the roof still gave some cover. The fire was smoking dreadfully and the cloaked and hooded trespasser was poking it with a stick to try and rouse the flames. After a moment, with an impatient exclamation, he dropped the stick and pointed a thin finger at the hearth. At once the fire sparked and crackled with energy.

And then Bruilde knew who it was. She stepped forward.

"You're on my property, Leor," she said coldly.

The intruder stood up and turned round. He let his hood fall back to reveal a head of startlingly red hair, tempered with two long streaks of white. He was very tall, and just as upright as he had ever been.

"Hello, Bruilde." The same deep voice. It seemed to speak out of the earth. It had always pulled her to listen.

"What are you doing here, Leor?"

"I came to ask you for your hospitality. I've been travelling a lot lately, and hoped to find some rest and comfort."

"Well, you won't find it here," said Bruilde tersely. "You can see what's happened. It was months ago now. Where have you been?"

"I've been all over," Leor said, "gathering news, and hunting."

"Then you won't need me to tell you what's been going on." Bruilde knew she sounded waspish. But what did he expect? The cheek of the man – the wizard, rather – turning up like this after a year's unexplained absence and then not even bothering to say *Sorry about your farm...*

Instead he asked, "Have you got anything to eat?"

"In my saddle-bags," she said coldly, and made no move to fetch them.

"Bruilde, please will you put that sword away?"

She compressed her lips and did so, sending it reluctantly back into its scabbard with a long metallic sigh.

And now he came over to her and took one of her cold hands in both his warm ones.

"Bruilde. I'm sorry about what happened here."

"You could have prevented it," she said, pulling her hand away.

"How?"

"You could have used your wizardry. You could have prevented all this—" she waved her arm to indicate not just her farmhouse but the wider world beyond – "all this mess. You could have stopped Adon, who surely is behind it all."

"I could only have stopped him if I knew where he was. And not even then."

"No? So you allow him all the power in the world to use his magic, and you won't use yours to thwart him?"

"You know I have forsworn all wizardry," Leor said gravely. For once his eyes were dull, not alive and bright as usual.

"No, you haven't. You miss it too much to do that," said Bruilde sharply. "I saw you light the fire just now."

"That was nothing. A small faradiddle."

"Fire is never a small faradiddle. Look around you! Is this a faradiddle?"

"I couldn't make it any worse," said Leor. "That's why I risked lighting the fire."

"And yet you won't use your wizardry for anything that counts. A senseless decision if you ask me. What's the point of being a wizard if you renounce all use of magic?"

"The point of being a wizard is to be wise. And I have not been, in the past."

"Oh, for goodness sake," said Bruilde. She shook her head. "Wait here. I'll go and get some food."

She marched outside and Leor followed.

"Hallo, Hama," he said to the horse, who responded with a whinny of recognition and an investigating nose. Leor had an annoyingly good way with horses; with all animals. Perhaps it was from long years – or centuries – of learning how to deal with them. But she suspected some residual magic that clung to him in spite of his vow.

"You could mend these walls for me, Leor," she said, pointing to the ruins around them. Many stones had cracked and crumbled in the heat. "It'll take me most of this year to rebuild. Then two years to restock. You could do it in a moment."

"I couldn't. I can't make sheep and cows breed any faster than they should."

"You know that's not what I mean! Anyway, I expect you could do even that if you tried."

"I wouldn't want to try," he said, caressing Hama's head. "You shouldn't tamper with biology. There are always unforeseen consequences: I've found that in the past."

Bruilde sighed. Then, digging the loaf of bread out from her pack, she broke it and gave Leor half. She leaned against the blackened wall to study him.

He looked just the same as he had over the fifty years – almost sixty – that she'd known him. A little younger maybe: though most likely that was just because she herself was old now. She was leaving him behind. Heading towards the death that he would never know.

Bruilde gave herself a mental shake. She had no plans to let death catch her for a long while yet.

"So what are you doing here, Leor?"

"Like I said – looking for rest and comfort."

"And what else? Why didn't you just go away again when you saw the place burnt out?"

"I knew you'd been here, Bruilde, and I knew you'd come back. I wanted to see you, because I have news from Ilo."

Bruilde paused with her bread halfway to her mouth. This was awkward. Leor had been her lover too, once; long before Ilo, when she had still been young. Too young for Leor, she thought now. Another instance where he ought to have known better – even if she had

made the running. She had been the one who wanted him. That voice. That sense of wisdom. She had assumed, back then, that Leor was wise.

But that had been more than fifty years ago. If she had been too young for Leor then, she was too old now; and she had no wish to revisit that particular past. It was over.

"News from Ilo?" she repeated. "The weaver in Obandiro? So what did he have to say? No, don't tell me. I think I can probably guess. I had a letter from him. Or I should have had a letter. I heard enough about the contents."

Leor was silent. She turned to look harder at him. "Well? What did Ilo say?"

"He said nothing. Bruilde – I'm afraid he's dead."

"Ilo's dead? Oh..." She let out a long breath and rubbed her face. "Oh, Ilo. The old charmer. I know he was eighty, but I thought he'd keep going for a few years yet. Did you see his wife when you were up north? How is she? I know you were always more friendly with Thuli than with Ilo."

"Thuli knew a lot of interesting old lore. I used to be friendly with them both, many years ago. But I hadn't seen them lately, not for twenty years and more. Nor did I see them this time – not alive. I'm afraid Thuli is dead too."

She stared at him. "Both of them? Was it the fever? What happened?"

"A darkburn happened," said Leor soberly. "Along with a stoneman army which swept through the area. Obandiro wasn't the only place."

"Obandiro? What... Burnt? The whole town? Leor, you can't mean that!"

But he nodded.

Bruilde put down her bread. Her appetite had gone. She gazed across at the farmhouse, seeing it again in flames: feeling the heat's murderous intensity, hearing the dreadful roaring fury of the fire.

But she'd had warning. She'd got out in time.

"What about the people?" she said, her mouth dry.

He shook his head.

"Leor, there must have been some survivors."

"Maybe there were, somewhere. I don't know. I didn't see any." He sounded very weary. "I didn't stay long: I was passing through, travelling down to Farwithiel from the north. I wanted to talk to the Farwth."

Bruilde rested her head in her hands for a moment before raising it again. "Was Yaret still in Farwithiel when you got there? Ilo's grand-daughter. She was staying there for a while."

"Yaret... Do you know, I'd forgotten her. I haven't seen her since she was a toddler. No, I didn't see anyone in Farwithiel, not even the Wardens. My business was only with the Farwth."

"I hope it had something useful to tell you," said Bruilde bitterly, "worth abandoning a whole razed town for."

"It told me only what I already knew: of fire and destruction. It had no remedy for the burnings and neither did I. There was nothing that I could have done," said Leor, his voice very low.

She knew that was probably true. Her anger should not be at him. The knowledge did not lessen it.

"If you had allowed yourself to use your magic, Leor, would you have known of this disaster in advance? Would you have been able to act against it?" she demanded.

Leor did not answer; nor did he even look at her. Instead he strode over to a portion of the farmyard wall where the sooty stones had cracked and splintered in the heat and had fallen to the ground. As he bent to pick one up, it split some more, revealing an interior that was as clean and sandy-pale as a ripe apricot. He placed the stone on the broken wall, picked up another and jammed it in next to the first. Took up a third and tried to prise it in.

Bruilde stood back and watched his hands at work as more stones were clunked on to the wall. The gap was slowly filling but left many smaller gaps. The sight of his long fingers filled her at first with the shadow of fond memories, and then with exasperation.

"What are you trying to prove?" she said. "That you don't need magic to rebuild a wall? Well, that one is full of holes. And it's already bulging. You don't need magic, but you do need skill."

Leor hefted up another stone without replying. His knuckles were bleeding: she saw red scrapes amidst the soot.

"And how else do I gain the skill," he said slightly breathlessly, "except by trying?"

"You ask somebody who knows."

"And how did they gain the skill?" More stones clunked on to the ragged wall. They would not fit. Leor pushed and pulled at them in vain until three fell clattering to the ground, narrowly missing his foot. He was inept.

When he paused to wipe his brow, Bruilde noticed that the bloody scrapes on his hand had gone. Did he do that himself, or was it some gift inflicted on his body? Just an everyday miracle for Leor, no doubt. Despite the pain in her own hip and knee, she felt no jealousy. She'd rather be human than be him.

Leor leant against the wall, and another stone fell off.

"I only learned the stoneman army was marching," he said in a low voice, "once it was too late. And when I was in the north they almost caught me. I had to..." He stopped, and after waiting for a moment she filled in the words for him.

"You had to use your wizardry to hide. You turned yourself into a jackdaw. Something of the sort. Didn't you?"

"Not a jackdaw."

"You fraud," she said. "Hypocrite. So you'll use magic to save your own skin."

"The smallest amount possible. I'd gone north on an errand," said Leor, "looking for something that I think may offer a defence against the darkburns. It wasn't just a casual journey."

"And did you find it?"

"No. The stonemen got there first."

"So what marvellous weapon were you looking for?"

"Not a weapon. A defence. It's something I made a great mistake about, many years ago. I was hoping I might set it right. Or alleviate it, at least."

Bruilde put her bread back in the saddle bag. She couldn't eat. What had the population of Obandiro been? A thousand? A thousand and a half? All slain by stonemen or annihilated by darkburns. Her imagination began to work, too efficiently. To stop it she said,

"You'd better explain that to me. What mistake?"

Leor sighed. "Many years ago – two centuries ago – I brought some seedlings down to the southern coastlands from the far northern wastes, and planted them where they should not have been planted. I did it as a favour to the people living by the sea, who revered those

particular trees in their worship, and whose own sacred trees had died. There was no more to it than that – simply goodwill. I used my wizardry to make the seedlings thrive. I meant well, but it was an error.”

“What people?”

Again he paused. “Don’t shout at me.”

“Am I shouting?”

“No. But you will. They were stonemen, only they weren’t called that then, and they weren’t as they are now.”

“Stonemen. I’m not shouting. But I am surprised.”

“This was two hundred years ago,” said Leor.

“All right. What were these seedlings?” Bruilde’s eyes narrowed as she made deductions. “Were they used for a drug? Because we know the stonemen drug themselves.”

But he shook his head. “They didn’t back then. It’s not a drug. The stonemen’s ancestors had carried the trees with them in some long-ago migration. As the trees aged and died, they asked me to look for others on my travels. It seemed a harmless enough request.”

“A harmless request from stonemen.”

He shrugged with something like despair. “Like I say, they weren’t then as they are now. They worshipped stones, it’s true – or rather, the spirits of the stones and of the earth – but back then, they didn’t drill stones into their own skulls. That only started after they came into contact with Adon.”

“So what did they use these sacred trees for?”

“To make incense for their rituals. They felt it gave them control over the spirits. I didn’t think much of it at the time. But recently I learnt the stonemen have been hunting for these trees again: so the replacements that I brought them must have died. I think the trees may offer a defence against the darkburns, or hold some power over them – hence the stonemen’s urgency to find more.”

“As far as I am aware,” said Bruilde coldly, “the stoneman army marched up to Outer Kelyha to raid and invade, not to do a little light gardening.”

“But that army heading north split into two. Half the stonemen turned north-east towards the wastes where those trees grow. I know because I arrived up there before them.”

“To do what?” she demanded.

“To prevent them from getting their supplies, if I could.”

Now she was angry. “You gave the stonemen this means of power over darkburns, and it took you two hundred years to realise that, oops, that wasn’t such a good idea?”

Again he shook his head, the red hair rising briefly against the breeze like a smoking flame. It brought an answering flame of memory. That first time she had seen him... Well, she had been young and foolish; so she ignored the unwanted lurch of her heart.

“You must remember that darkburns didn’t even exist all those years ago. Believe me, Bruilde, I meant nothing but good. Don’t be angry with me.”

“We all mean nothing but good,” she said. “Or we think we do.”

“Most of us do. Not all. Not Adon. He means nothing but harm. He enjoys harm. He enjoys destruction. He’s behind the darkburns: I don’t know how or why, but I am sure of that much.” Leor’s voice was hard again.

“And yet he’s your brother.”

“He’s not. Never call him that. We were made from the same clay, that’s all. Wizards can’t have brothers. They don’t have parents.”

She wanted to ask him what they did have, then; but that was not important right now. Instead she asked,

“What sort of tree is it, that repels the darkburns?”

“An ancient one,” said Leor quietly. “A very rare tree, called by some the skeln, and very hard to grow. It was the trees’ resin which the stonemen valued.”

“And did you find these trees, on your trip up north?”

“Yes, I found them.”

She waited. “And you destroyed them before the stonemen got there?”

“There was no need,” said Leor. “They were already dead. And they were the last of their kind.”

“Can you be sure of that?”

“I hunted through the region without finding any more. That’s why I then went south to consult with the Farwth, because of its unsurpassed knowledge of all things that grow.”

“And what did the Farwth tell you?”

“It said I had confirmed what it already feared. It was saddened. It seemed to mourn – in fact, it grieved more for those lost trees than for all the burnt-out houses and their dead. Walls can be rebuilt, it said, and humans will insist on breeding: but a family of trees once lost cannot return. The Farwth told me that no more skeln remain alive within its reach. And its reach is very wide indeed.”

Chapter 13

Charo found himself surprisingly reluctant to leave baby Royet behind. He was leaving all the others too, of course, but it was the baby he thought about as they rode north. Which was ridiculous when she was only six weeks old and almost certainly didn't even know who he was.

It must be because he'd seen her born, he thought, or almost had, at least. Anneke had told him that he'd been a real support while they had waited for the others to arrive. Although Charo doubted that this was altogether true, it might not be altogether false.

It was strange how his relationship with Anneke had changed. He would have thought he would be horribly embarrassed being present while his former teacher gave birth, but when it happened he'd felt adult and sensible and calm. He had surprised himself. And although she was still teaching him occasionally – mainly Standard grammar, and calculations – it was more like being advised by a friend. A friend who carried a sling containing a squeaking baby. Because Royet did squeak. She was funny.

Now he became aware of Yaret eyeing him as they rode along.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Baby Royet," he said, since there was no reason to lie. "I'll miss her squeaking."

"So will I," said Yaret, with a sudden smile. "But we'll only be away for eight or nine days. Maybe ten, at most."

He nodded. This expedition had been Yaret's idea. She'd put the plan before the council soon after the two injured brothers had appeared from the north, seeking shelter. The new men were quite young, only in their twenties; but both were badly burned, and one was almost blind. It was amazing that they had survived at all, let alone managed to ride for four days to reach Obandiro.

But then they were tough men, being trappers. One night, just before the dawn, they said, they'd been awoken by the sound and smell of fire. The stonemen had raged past their snowy hut in the woods, the darkburns at the front melting a path and setting alight anything that would burn.

The stonemen didn't bother stopping at the blazing hut – that wasn't their target; it had just been in their way. The trappers got out alive but injured. They described an army of hundreds, maybe thousands of stonemen, in long streams heading west. Charo didn't want to believe that estimate, but it must have been a lot.

Luckily the fires had fizzled out quite quickly in the snow. The pair had sheltered in the half-hut that was left to them, the younger tending his blinded brother despite his own severe burns. After two days he managed to find their horses – which had ripped out their tethers and fled – and they set off to ride south in search of help.

And they had found Obandiro. It had been Ziya, the mother of the young family, who had run to meet them, ignoring the grandfather's warnings, and who had tended their burns diligently since then. The grandfather had reluctantly allowed the two to stay with him in his little house. He said they were less noisy than the children.

Not long afterwards Yaret announced her intention of riding north to the trappers' territory, to see where the stonemen had been. She wanted to look for other survivors, as well as to work out where the army had been heading for. She was quietly resolute and no-

one could dissuade her. Since the winter snows had melted, she said, the round trip would only take about ten days at most. Eventually Charo had announced that he would go north too.

So here he was now, mounted in state on Poda, while Yaret was riding the blind trapper's horse. It was smaller and rougher-haired than Poda and a little wayward. But it trotted fast enough over the dry ground, which was free of snow now, although the peaks that slowly loomed to the far north were still white-topped.

This was the third day of their journey and already Charo felt himself to be lost in a world that was far wider and more daunting than he had ever realised. All familiar landmarks were left far behind: they had skirted unknown hills and crossed a leaping river he had never heard of by a treacherous stone bridge.

But Yaret seemed to know where they were going, whether by lore or the trappers' directions or from her previous travels. She spoke aloud her means of navigation, discussing the positions of the sun or stars with him as if he knew the way north just as well as she did. She pointed out unusual landforms as if she were merely reminding Charo of their names. These woods that they were passing through she called the Hallik. It sounded like a trapper word.

And three times she stopped her horse Wulchak – which was a strange name for a horse, but the trappers' language was full of sounds like an axe falling – and turned in the saddle to stare across at something that he could not see.

"What is it?" he would ask.

"Lin." And then he'd hear her murmuring the rhyme.

"I didn't see it."

"It wasn't close. It might have been a woodwone," she said the third time it happened, "given the burning of all these trees. I suppose they have to go somewhere."

Great stretches of the Hallik woodlands were burnt through and cold. They rode on paths of charcoal. Still, Charo was not convinced that there was a woodwone or anything there at all, although he was a little too much in awe of Yaret to say so. She was a friend yet he sometimes felt he did not know her.

For she seemed unlike any woman he had known, even in Obandiro where male mode was fairly common. His two neighbours who had used male mode had been brisk and businesslike and loud. They had wielded axes and chopped trees but they had not wielded swords. If it came to that, nobody in Obandiro had wielded swords except on ceremonial occasions. The mayor, the miller...

The miller must have been richer than anyone had known. All that money under the ashes of his floorboards – when they dug it out, there had been a hundred coins and more. Both he and Yaret carried some of the silver in their pockets now, although he was not sure how much use it would be, since there appeared to be nowhere in this wilderness they could spend it.

Suddenly Yaret brought Wulchak to a halt again. This time he could see that it was not for a lin.

It was a cart – two carts, coming slowly towards them along the old worn grassy road which threaded between the patches of woodland. The carts were moving so slowly that it seemed a long time before they met. Yaret did not hurry forward.

"We don't want to alarm them," she said. However, Charo noticed that she did not attempt to move her sword and bow out of sight as she had yesterday, before they'd spoken to the woodcutter.

Yet the woodcutter had far been surlier than these carts' inhabitants. He'd refused to answer any questions, and had snapped at them to leave. These people in the carts just looked exhausted; they hardly spoke even when Yaret told them that Obandiro was only two or three days away. There were eight of them including two small children, and a hungry looking dog.

They were all hungry, not just the dog. Because they looked too tired to set a fire, Charo gathered wood and made a fire for everyone to share. Yaret cooked and handed round the two rabbits which she had shot that morning, along with tough old wintergreens and the last of their bread. It didn't go far. Still, the two families seemed better after eating, and talked a little more in the firelight.

It was the same old story, of course, told in hesitant murmurs: the sudden waking to dreadful fear, the burning – burning that would not stop; the ashes and the desolation and the blankness afterwards.

"I know," said Charo to the youngest man and woman, who he thought were probably not much older than he was beneath the soot and grime. "We all know. It's been the same for all of us."

"You too? The... the things... and the burning?"

"Most of our town died," said Charo. It felt very strange to say it aloud. He had never had to say it aloud before because everybody knew and it did not even need to be discussed.

He cleared his throat. "I only escaped because I was a baker's apprentice. I had to get up early to set the loaves in the oven; and when I was half way up the street I heard something coming, and then I smelt the darkburn, and then I – I just felt so scared that, that I had to run away."

"So did I." This was spoken in a very low voice.

"I kept thinking I should have gone back to wake my family. But by then it would have already been too late and we would all have died. There was nothing anybody could have done to stop it," Charo said. It was Yaret who had talked it through with him and made him see this. She was right: he would have died beside his family if he'd gone back home. The stonemen were to blame, and no-one else.

But he brooded now, as he often did, on how it had been his own error that had saved his life. He'd woken in the night, remembering with a lurch of panic that he hadn't set the loaves in the warming oven to prove. *Stupid, stupid*, he'd berated himself as he struggled out of bed.

That was the reason he'd been up before the dawn. It was because he was an absent-minded idiot. His own stupidity had led to him being the only one of his household – and the baker's – to survive. He had never told anybody this.

And his parents, and his older sisters, whom he had taken for granted, whom he had never really thought about as being separate people, just part of his surroundings, had ended up on the other side of that great burning divide. They were Then and he was Now. There was no bridge across.

For weeks he hadn't even dared to think about them. For the first two weeks all he could think of was his own traitorous idiocy. How he had let them down by not dying alongside

them. He couldn't put his mess of feelings into any sort of order. Only recently had he ventured to remember them deliberately.

Other memories arose unbidden. It was sometimes dreadful when that happened; but not always. Sometimes he could think of them without having to recall that fatal dawn, that nightmare that had enveloped the streets and transformed everything.

"I know it seems like the end of the world," he said to the forlorn pair now. "But things will change. They will get better." Yaret was already drawing a map in the dirt to show the travellers how to reach Obandiro.

But at nightfall, after they had left the occupants of the carts to sleep, he said to Yaret, "Are you sure we should be sending everybody to Obandiro?"

"Everybody? It's two families. That woodcutter yesterday won't go."

"Yes, but what if more people follow? What if word gets around and too many people turn up wanting food and shelter?"

"Then we'll cope," said Yaret. "We've got shelter enough and we can rebuild once the weather's better, and we can sow more crops too."

"We've got no grain to sow," he objected.

"Barley's already starting to come up in a couple of the old fields. Oats too. The beets and roots will have seeded themselves as well. There'll be enough to get us going." She looked directly at him. "What would you have me do? Say no, you must go home to your houses full of ash?"

"No, of course not. But... they don't even speak Bandiran."

"The children will learn," she said, which made him realise with a jolt that she regarded these visitors as long-term, even permanent. "They can make Obandiro a town again. They will all bring something, different skills. We saw that with the grandfather."

The grandfather was still bad-tempered. He did not like to be called by his name, Lundo, saying it was disrespectful, and demanding to be given the customary honorific for the unknown elderly, *Great-uncle*. However, he had turned out to be more useful than Charo had expected; for he was a tanner and leatherworker – the stink of his trade being the reason the family had lived outside Byant and hence avoided the worst of the burning. He had brought with him his awl and shears.

Charo had decided that when he got back home, he would have a go at making shoes for the children, if the grandfather would tan some skins as he had promised. Although they now had a number of deerskins and sheepskins, these were hard and somewhat smelly. Ondro said that in the spring he might go south to try and find some cows, which could mean proper leather. Charo had already taken apart his old boots to see how they were made. It didn't look that difficult. His new boots were a good fit, with Lo's knitted socks to pad them out. They were well-made and had kept his feet dry through the worst of winter.

So he went to sleep thinking about shoe design and got woken up by Yaret creeping away in search of deer. She came back soon after dawn with a stag slung over Wulchak's back. They revived the fire and cooked the offal for breakfast. Yaret gave the travellers most of the remaining meat to take with them on their onward journey.

"They should just about make it," she said, watching the departing carts. Then she set her face to the north and urged Wulchak on again.

Chapter 14

As they continued north the air unexpectedly grew milder. Yaret said it was the beginnings of spring, although the trees were leafless and the birds still huddled disconsolately on their boughs and did not warble.

The trees here were not large, but they were many, scattered across the rocky landscape like giant ragged weeds. And they were not burnt, which reassured Charo, until the horses emerged from a patch of thicker woodland onto a long, wide, charred-black trail. It ran right across their path from east to west.

"Here we go east," said Yaret to his relief. The trappers had told them that the stonemen had gone west; and he hoped that it was true.

Three miles up the trail, in a depression backed by a long low hill, they saw the town. From that distance it was like a patch of burnt mess in a frying pan. It looked horribly familiar. A thin grey haze lay over the ruins and the smell of smoke was bitter in his nostrils. He swallowed hard.

"What's it called?" he asked, trying to sound casual, although this place's name could have no meaning now.

"It was called Erbulet," she murmured.

"Do you think there's anybody left?"

She squinted at the haze. "I don't see any sign of cooking fires. But we won't know until we go and look."

Charo did not much want to go and look. Even without the dead town stretched out in the foreground, this land seemed bleak and hostile. The whole place felt as vividly alarming as a nightmare, but one from which he could not wake. Around the corpse of the town the bare trees shrank and crouched like old men weakened to the point of paralysis; but to the north a threatening mass of dark pine or fir forest loomed over the lower slopes of the long hill. Above the trees the hill came to an abrupt flat top where all was bare, raw, grey-purple rock: the colour of dried meat.

He felt that they'd gone far enough. This world was way too dark and hard and strange. Although he knew he ought to hope for survivors, he found that he did not. He didn't want to see any ragged children creep out of lightless cellars. It had been bad enough for him: he couldn't wish that horror and grief on anybody else.

But that meant he had to wish them dead. Everybody, the whole lot. He felt guilty for hoping the little town would prove to be empty, so that Yaret would be done with her exploring and they could set off home again.

As he followed her horse towards the fallen town, he looked at its grey silence, and then at his own thoughts. He felt ashamed: deflated. It made no difference what he hoped for in any case. Things were as they were. A nightmare of sad crumbling streets.

He had imagined this trip would be a fine adventure. Somehow he'd seen himself beforehand as a hero, riding boldly across the plain on his high-stepping horse, his sword ready by his pommel, in search of some brave deed or other. But at no point had he had any notion of what that brave deed might be.

So far, the expedition had just brought aching legs from spending too long in the saddle, and inadequate meals, and nightly shivering in his sleep. Although the cellar back home was

not exactly warm – there had been winter nights when they had all huddled together and had barely slept for cold – it had at least kept the wind out. They had felt themselves become worryingly weak and tired but they had survived.

Charo had assumed that he was tougher than Yaret, being younger; but now, she seemed unmoved by these chilly wastes, while he just wanted to be home and near a warm fire. Even Poda appeared more eager than he was to reach the ruined town. Yaret turned to him as if she guessed his thoughts.

“Not far now,” she said reassuringly. “We’ll find some building where we can shelter out of this wind tonight. Then tomorrow we can have a look around before we head off home.”

He nodded glumly. They entered up what must have been the main street, passing empty, blackened shells that were full of ash and dotted with occasional charcoal remains. Guardians with nobody to guard. Nobody to name them. He tried to ignore them, but despite their lack of names or eyes they all seemed to be watching.

They rode through the ashen streets seeing nobody apart from the burnt watchers until Yaret stopped abruptly, putting her hand out to make Charo stop as well. He sat frozen in the saddle.

Then he heard it: a faint thump from somewhere further down the road, behind the sooty walls. His own heart thumped as if in answer. The nightmare had come suddenly alive.

Probably an animal, he told himself, it had to be an animal. He wondered what he should do if it were a bear. Sword or bow? His recently made bow was over-firm and hard to use. His sword was buckled to his saddle. Should he draw it?

But it might be just some harmless survivor. While he was hesitating, Yaret quietly dismounted, drew her own bow and nocked an arrow to the string. When Charo saw that, he did the same. She walked noiselessly to the corner of the street: looked round it, and let the bow drop.

He followed her to see what it was. Immediately he recognised this as the market square, with the remains of a hall not unlike Obandiro’s. Its stone tower still stood erect amidst the jumbled ash and debris.

And standing by the tower was a man – a live man, streaked in ash and blood. He did not look their way. As Charo watched, he banged his head against the tower wall.

Then Charo registered the tunic, red beneath its layer of soot; and when the man raised his head he saw a stone there in his forehead, surrounded by dark bruises and smeared with blood.

Yaret laid down her bow upon the ground and walked up to the stoneman. But Charo ran back to Poda to draw his sword before he followed her with its hilt clenched firmly in his fist. He had no intention of approaching the stoneman unarmed and thought her alarmingly foolhardy. She only had her knife. As he came up behind her he held his sword outstretched in warning.

When the stoneman turned he did not seem to see the sword; at least, he did not react. Maybe he was stunned, thought Charo, or blinded by the blood that ran into his eyes.

But he could see them, for he spoke. His voice was husky, with a strange accent.

“Where are they? Are they coming back?”

“Do you mean your companions?” Yaret asked. She was only a yard away from the enemy. Charo gritted his teeth, trying to make himself ready to strike with his sword at any sign of danger. The stoneman seemed to be unarmed, but still...

“Where are they? When are they coming back?”

“They have all gone west, I think,” she said. “At least, we saw the tracks of an army headed out in that direction. There’s nobody else left here in town, so far as we can tell. What happened?” Charo could not believe she was talking to a stoneman in this way, as quietly as if he was – as if he was Dil.

“Kill him,” he muttered. He would have leapt forward and killed the stoneman himself, if he had known how to do it cleanly. But he might so easily get it wrong. And then the man would be enraged.

Neither Yaret nor the stoneman seemed to hear him.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“I got left behind on the hills,” the stoneman said. His words sounded thick and blurred as if he could hardly talk.

“Why were you up there alone?”

“I was looking for the burner. I got lost. I don’t know where the others are. Can you find them for me? I need them. I need athelid.”

“Do you mean ethlon?”

“Athelid. Have you got any? Can you find some? I need some athelid! I’ve been waiting so long! It’s hurting! I can’t stand it any more!”

And to Charo’s bewilderment he threw himself at the wall again, hammering it with his head as if to hammer the stones further into his skull.

Yaret caught at his arm. “Stop. Come away from there,” she said. “Stop it. That won’t help. How long is it since you last had athelid?”

“Days, days, I don’t know. Please, give me some athelid.” The words slurred and Charo realised to his horror that the man was crying.

Yaret held the stoneman’s arm, and then his hand, as if he were a child. He raised his other hand to his head as if he could hardly bear to touch it.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Brael. Oh, it hurts. It hurts.”

“How old are you, Brael?”

“I’m ten. Please give me some. I need it. Please.”

“I have no athelid,” said Yaret.

The stoneman stared at them through the blood and tears. He seemed to see Charo’s sword now for the first time, and made a lunge at it. Charo pulled it away, out of his reach.

“Stop,” said Yaret, holding firmly onto the stoneman’s arm, “stop it. No swords.” It was lucky, thought Charo, that the stoneman must have been weakened by pain and maybe hunger too, for he was bigger than either of them. A big stumbling bully. Not so brave now, without his darkburns.

“I’ll kill him,” he said breathlessly.

“Give me the sword! I’ll kill, I’ll kill myself,” the stoneman stammered thickly. “If there’s no athelid and they’ve all gone, I have to. Have to kill myself. Stop it hurting. Or kill me. Please.”

“Wait,” said Yaret. “What were you and your army doing here?”

“Kill me.”

“Answer me first.”

"We came here..." He shook his head as if he couldn't remember, and then groaned and put his hands to his head again as if the very shaking of it caused him agony.

"You came here to destroy and murder," Charo said accusingly. His voice sounded too high. He was angry and did not know what to do with his anger except to throw it at the stoneman. Run him through. Cut off his hands. Slice off his head and use it as a football... He began to feel a little sickened, but had this man and his companions not done even worse? Had they not murdered his entire people?

"Wait," said Yaret again, with commanding patience. "Why this town?"

"The hills," the stoneman said. "It's in the hills."

"What is?"

"The skeln," he said. "Now kill me. Kill me now."

Yaret seemed to go completely still. "What is the skeln?"

"Up, up there, on those hills. The trees." The stoneman waved his trembling arm towards the bare, bruised slopes above the town.

"Trees."

"All dead. None left any more."

"What do you use the skeln for?"

"Heads. Please. It hurts."

"Is the skeln a medicine? Does it make the pain go away?" she asked; again, thought Charo, far too gently.

"No. That's athelid. Please, give me some athelid! I need it."

"I have none. Your companions took it. Where can I find them? Where were they going?"

"Somewhere called, called Kelvha. I don't know where it is. Please find them. Please get me athelid."

"I'm afraid they have long gone."

The stoneman began to tremble all over, not just his hands. Then he was crying again. "I have to die. You have to kill me. Hurts too much. I can't do it. Not on my own."

Charo's mouth was dry. He felt sick; but he would have to do this. He just didn't know how. All these months he'd thought he longed to kill a stoneman: to plunge the sword in through the odious red tunic and see his enemy collapse in fear and disbelief. Now he just felt paralysed. He couldn't kill a crying man.

He raised the sword without knowing how he would use it. Yaret put her hand against his arm. "Wait," she said, with the same quiet authority as before, and he lowered the sword again.

"Brael," she said to the stoneman.

"Kill. Kill me now." The eyes that stared at her were full of blood. The man was shaking from head to foot.

"Brael. Know that you have served with loyalty, and that you die with honour."

Then she drew her knife. The stoneman seized her hand and together they drove the blade down through the tunic, deep into the man's breast. He gazed into her face and let out a long, slow sigh and then began to pant. She supported him with one arm round his shoulders, her other hand still clasped by his around the knife-hilt, as he sank down to the ground.

Eventually his hand fell away. It was another moment before she pulled out the knife. Charo could not see her face; but he heard her say Oveyn, and then he burst out.

"That was a stoneman! What are you saying Oveyn for? Why did you tell him that he died with honour when he killed all our people?" He was shaking almost as badly as the stoneman had, and now he felt ashamed that he hadn't used the sword himself right at the start.

"He was ten," said Yaret.

"He was crazy."

"Yes, he was crazed, that's true. And he was ten."

"That's ridiculous. He can't have been ten. He was at least eighteen!"

"That was what I thought too, when I asked his age. I expected eighteen or twenty. I didn't expect ten. But I had to take him at his word." She was wiping the knife on the stoneman's tunic. She seemed quite calm. Charo didn't know how to stop himself from shaking. He was no better than the stoneman. It was terrible.

Thankfully she wasn't looking at him: she was looking at the stoneman's hands.

"Such fine skin," she said. "Uncalloused. His face, too, so unweathered. He was young." Her voice was meditative.

"I hope you don't want to bury him as well," said Charo, trying to sound indifferent, although his voice came out high and harsh.

"No." She stood up. "What I want to do now is to go and look for the skeln, up in those hills."

"It's in the wrong direction!" Then he felt ashamed again.

"Yes, it is; but it's not far. We can be there and back before nightfall." She looked at him. "You stay here if you wish."

"No, I'll come with you," said Charo. He didn't want her to think he was a coward. Nor did he want to be left alone in this nightmarish town, with its pointless guardians and the dead stoneman – stoneboy – stoneman – seeping blood into the gutter.

She nodded and began walking back towards the horses. Charo looked down at the stoneman again. How could he be ten? He was simply mad with pain. Delirious. All that blood around his battered head. Beating it against the wall.

Charo swallowed and said Oveyn hurriedly, underneath his breath, before he stumbled back to remount Poda. His limbs did not seem to be working properly and he was glad when Poda followed Wulchak of her own accord. He wanted to get out of this dead place as fast as possible.

Chapter 15

Yaret did not talk. She sat upright and steady in the saddle, gazing out at their surroundings, and yet he felt that she was different. Or maybe it was because his view of her was different. He had never thought that she could kill a man...

But she had, and now he did not seem to know her. He felt even less of a hero than he had before, more lost and smaller, as they rode across the dreary plain towards the looming flat-topped hill. The wind was bitterer than ever and after a while he took out the woolly cap which Lo had spun and knitted for him, and jammed it on his head. It wasn't a hero's hat but it didn't matter what he looked like. Nobody was watching. Nobody cared.

At least the hat was warm, and it made him think of Lo. He might be able to tell her about this. No, he wouldn't. Not the stoneman. But he could tell her that he wore her cap. He liked her best of all the girls, although she was the oldest. A woman really. But Lo was interested in him; she would want to hear his story.

So there had better be something that he could tell. The thought made Charo overcome his strange stiffness to urge Poda into a trot and then a canter. Yaret had to speed up behind him, and by the time they halted at the hill's base she was breathless.

"My word, but Wulchak's a bone-jolter," she said. "You ride Poda well." And then as they climbed the slope, winding between tall, forbidding conifers, she began to talk once more in the old familiar way, making jokes about the blind man's ungainly horse and wondering how its owner, the trapper, was getting on, and what the children would be doing back home.

She also remarked on any signs of life they passed. Which were not many: a badger's earth or two, claw scratches on the trees that might be bear; but nothing else until they found a distinct, much-trampled path, leading upwards through the trees.

"That looks like an old trail," observed Charo, trying to speak as normally as Yaret did, "though there have been lots of stonemen here lately. Those footprints with the cross-roped soles: they're the same as we saw earlier. But this path's even cobbled in places – that must have been done years ago. Why would anybody bother laying cobbles? Who would come up here, to this star-forsaken place? What for?"

"For skeln, perhaps, whatever skeln may be."

"A tree... Do you think it's something like the Farwth?"

"I have no idea," said Yaret, "nor why it might be so important."

When they emerged from the mass of crowded firs onto bare rocky slopes and climbed wearily on foot, leading the horses to the flattened summit, they were none the wiser. Charo had thought that the nightmare lay behind him in the town, but it was here too. There was no escape from it – from the uncaring emptiness.

The sun sinking on their left gave the landscape a sour, bilious appearance. The land did not fall away again, but spread in a level, bleak expanse of sickly yellow grass blotched with purpled rock, to the distance where it changed to white. As white as bone, he thought, although he knew it must be snow. Behind the white plateau, far jagged peaks rose up like snarling teeth.

Then, not far away, he saw them: a twisted clump of old, bare tree-trunks.

"They look dead," said Yaret softly. They left the horses and walked towards the clump. There were several gnarled and convoluted trunks, bigger than Charo had thought at first –

and very dead indeed. They were mostly bare of bark, with not a single bud or even twig to be seen. True, it was still winter, but no dead leaves from last year or the years before lay piled beneath.

He pointed this out to Yaret.

"You're right. Old age... or maybe they've been over-harvested," she said.

"Harvested? What for?"

"For resin. Like myrrh or balsam. See the marks." She pointed.

He had already noticed the multitude of cuts along each trunk. Some were more like gouges. He ran a finger over them. They looked old. Whatever bark remained was rotting; there was no sign of any resin leaking from the cuts.

"What would they use resin for?"

"Well, it's usually for medicine. Or else in religious ceremonies, I think."

"He – the stoneman – he said it was for their heads."

"Yes. But not medicine. Not a painkiller. He called that athelid; it's something different. So what is skeln? What do they want it for?"

"It's for their stones," said Charo, with sudden certainty. "If it's for their heads, it's something they put on the stones. Maybe they make a sort of varnish, or a coating."

"The stones... Well. You could just be right, Charo. The stones on Brael's head, close up, did look as if they might have had some sort of coating."

Charo did not want to think about Brael. He said, "But it can't be just for looks, surely. It must be really important or they wouldn't bother coming all this way to search for it."

"Those stonemen back at Obandiro," she said thoughtfully, "digging out the stones from corpses' heads..."

"Maybe they're running short of it, whatever it is," said Charo. "If there's none left here, then maybe the only place they can get it is from dead bodies."

Yaret nodded. "You're right. Skeln must be something vital to them. I never told you in the tale about my travels, but when I was in Farwithiel the Farwth told us to look for the skeln. It wouldn't or couldn't give us any details. I had an idea it might be in a song by Madeo, so I hunted through my mental store of songs. But I never found it there, although I spent long enough thinking about it."

Charo said, "I wonder if there's any resin here that the stonemen missed."

They both searched the lacerated trunks, feeling with their fingers, and then hunted around the base of the lifeless trees. They found nothing. Charo was about to give up when, a few yards away, a tiny lump on the ground like a dull brown teardrop caught his eye.

He picked it up and held it in his palm. Although it was the size of a piece of gravel, it was not stone: he could mark it with a fingernail. "Do you think that's resin?"

"It could be. Keep it just in case."

He put it carefully in his pocket. They knelt to scan the ground again, without seeing any more.

"I guess if there was any to find, the stonemen would have found it," Charo said at last. He raised his head to gaze north across the wilderness towards the white horizon.

Then he frowned. There was something out there, small and dark against the snow – and it was moving.

"What's that?" He stood up. It was coming towards them.

"I don't know," said Yaret, getting hurriedly to her feet and screwing up her eyes. "It's..."

“Smoking.”

“Or steaming. It looks like.... Oh, stars, it must be a darkburn.”

“We have to get away,” said Charo, and they both began to run towards the horses. But he knew they could not ride them down from this summit – or even gallop away along its edge, for the ground was too uneven. Whichever way they went they would have to lead the horses. Slowly.

And all the while the blurred dark object was drawing closer.

“We can’t get down in time,” he said. Suddenly it was hard for him to breathe.

“Then better to meet it up here where it’s flat, and we can fight it.” Yaret drew her sword ringingly from its sheath on Wulchak’s saddle, and Charo did the same. “Leave the horses here. Move back towards the trees. Stay behind the skeln. We can hide there, perhaps.”

“It’ll burn the trees.”

“At least they’ll be a barrier. There’s no other place up here with any cover.”

But Charo knew the thing would burn straight through the trees, and then it would run them down and burn them too, burn them alive. He stared at the advancing darkburn. How could it move so fast? It had no legs that he could see. Its body seemed like a core of darkness enveloped in smoke.

And now he smelt it. The memories of that night rushed back at him. That night that had never ended, that had lasted ever since.

And now he felt it: the dread and desperation that he had tried so hard, so often, to forget. The horror. The nightmare was fully round him now, enveloping, encircling him, and he was trapped. Smothered by it. He could not move.

“I know,” said Yaret next to him. “Hold on to your sword. They can be killed.” She stepped in front of him, although from the way she gripped her sword in both hands he knew that it had become a difficulty.

He could barely keep hold of his own hilt: the blade had dropped and was resting on the ground. When he tried to raise it he could not. It might have weighed a ton. He wanted to just curl up in a ball and hide. The dread was overwhelming.

The darkburn was growing swiftly now, not big in size but huge in fear and heat. Already the air was warm, although it was twenty yards away or more on the far side of the dead gnarled trees. Fifteen yards. Ten.

And then it stopped. A shadow made solid but without features. He seemed to feel it studying them through the dead bare branches although it had no eyes. He could not move. After a second or two it veered away to his right and headed for the horses.

But even as they began to bolt and panic it veered away from them again, now seeming to spin. It rushed back towards him and Yaret as they cowered behind the trees, and stopped again ten yards away, a blur of darkness. Towards the horses. Swerved and stopped. Towards them: stopped, and then rushed to and fro as if it could not decide.

He stared through the dead branches at it, his sword still unmovable in his hand. He would have turned and run had he had the strength. But he seemed to have no strength at all.

The darkburn paused, heat radiating from its smoky shadow. Then, as if driven by some unseen force, it began to hurtle back the way that it had come, a small dark whirlwind made of terror. It was rushing north again, rapidly diminishing. The heat and fear receded, yet Charo still felt all his limbs trembling as he watched the plume of smoke rise up across the

empty land. Soon the darkburn – tiny now – must have met the snow; for a great cloud of steam boiled up into the air and hid it from their sight.

He let out a long, shuddering breath.

“What happened? How did we drive it away?” he asked. His voice seemed to have disappeared along with the darkburn.

“It wasn’t us. It was the trees, I think, that did it,” murmured Yaret. She touched the nearest branch.

“The skeln. So they repel the darkburns,” Charo said. “But no, that doesn’t make sense – because it ran away from the horses too.”

“In Wulchak’s saddle-bag is one of the stones from the dead man by the Dondel Bridge.”

Charo thought about this. “So if the stones are coated with the resin, it’s to keep darkburns away. To control them. That’s why the stonemen need it.”

“And they need it badly,” Yaret said.

“But where did that darkburn come from? Do you think there are stonemen around as well?” He looked round wildly in sudden fear.

Yaret was gazing north. “Brael said he was looking for the burner,” she replied. “That must mean a darkburn. I’d guess one got loose and ran away, and he got lost trying to find it – and was left behind.”

“So it could have been running around up here for days. Weeks, maybe.”

“Yes. Until it detected us. And then it came straight for us.” She sounded meditative. “I wonder why?”

“They must be trained to hunt down humans,” Charo said.

“Perhaps. I suggest we leave now, in case it comes back. I know you have the piece of resin and I have the stone, but I don’t feel inclined to put them to the test again.”

Charo couldn’t wait to leave. But before they descended from the hill, Yaret paused on a high point to gaze south, studying the burnt trail left by the stonemen many days ago. It was clearly visible below, leading west as far as his eye could see.

“All right,” she said, nodding, and then turned to soothe Poda, who was nervy and restlessly stamping. “At least it didn’t get so close to her this time,” she said. “I think she’ll be all right. I’ll lead her down to start with; you lead Wulchak.” She handed him the bridle. Half-way down the slope she added, “I think you worked it out. The skeln is a darkburn repellent.”

They said nothing more until they were on the fringes of the burnt-out town. Then Charo spoke his thoughts.

“Even if the darkburn comes down off the hill to look for us, it won’t come near that dead stoneman. If we sleep inside the market tower we’ll be close enough to have protection from his stones. And I can leave my bit of resin with Poda to protect her too.”

“Good thinking,” Yaret said.

Back in the market square, she asked him to build the fire and prepare the supper while she checked the streets for any survivors. He did not expect her to find any, and he was right. When she returned they ate without speaking, listening to the wailing wind blow off the hill.

Charo did not think that he would sleep that night, with the dead stoneman so close and the call of the wind hunting through the empty town and the knowledge of the darkburn running wild and lost up on the snowy plateau. This was a place beyond normal human life.

He wondered how long it would take before the wilderness reclaimed it: before the buildings tumbled down completely and the forests began a slow march into the streets.

He expected the nightmare to attack him as it had so many nights back in Obandiro. Once he had asked Elket if she had that dream too: the screams, the running in the streets, the roaring walls of fire. She had merely nodded, as if it was quite normal.

So he foresaw no respite now. But the shelter in the narrow market tower was the best they'd had all trip, and the shifting ash beneath his cloak felt like a feather bed after the hard ground. He'd no sooner finished his cheese and biscuit than he fell asleep. He had no dreams at all.

He awoke to find Yaret repacking saddle-bags.

"We'll set off home as soon as you're ready," she said.

"I thought you wanted to follow the stonemen's trail?"

But she shook her head. "I don't think there's much more to be gained from that. We've seen the trail heading west. We know they're going towards Kelvha. We've done what we set out to. We found two cartloads of survivors even if there are no more here. And we've found the skeln, and gained some useful knowledge. That's enough."

He felt a huge gladness to be going home at last. As they crossed the market place, he glanced down from Poda's saddle at the dead stoneman lying slumped against the wall. The stones were missing from his head. He'd only had the two – but now he had none, just two black holes.

He glanced at Yaret. "Did you...?"

"I thought they might be useful. We could use them to protect Obandiro," said Yaret distantly. She seemed a stranger again as they rode out of town and headed south. But within a couple of miles she began to chat as normal, and he gradually relaxed.

"It's been a tough journey, Charo," she said suddenly. "Harder than I expected. I thought it would be easier. I wish I knew how the Riders of the Vonn did this."

He was surprised. "I thought... you seemed to know what you were doing."

"I assumed I would. I've travelled enough, but only through the summer months. Coming north in winter has taught me how difficult it is. To be honest I'm just making it up as I go along."

"It doesn't show."

"Well. Thank you. But if the weather had turned bad we could have been in trouble. I probably shouldn't have brought you here."

"I'm glad you did," he said.

She smiled at him. "I'm glad you came."

Charo felt warmed by that smile. And something that had been running in the background of his head came to the forefront now.

"I know where the skeln is!" he exclaimed.

"Whatever do you mean?"

In answer, he began to sing.

*"Above the snow the skellen tree,
Beneath the snow lie you and me,
And all around and looking in
The gentle faces of the lin..."*

Yaret stared at him. "The skellen tree! That's from..."

"The Last Guard."

"Yes. I never understood that song. I always thought it was a *skellentry*, all one strange word. I didn't know it was an actual tree. I had no idea what the song meant. Still don't, if it comes to that."

"I don't see any gentle faces of the lin," said Charo, glancing around.

She laughed. "Don't worry, we will. Or I will, anyway. Admittedly I haven't seen any up here, but further south I expect they'll be there again."

"Do they have gentle faces?"

"I don't know. They're never visible for long enough. They don't seem ill-disposed, at least."

"Tell me when you next see one."

"It's always too late," said Yaret wryly. "But that's the song about the skeln all right. Well done."

She began to sing it softly as they rode along. Charo glanced backwards at the sullen hills, which were now receding rapidly. He was going home: not to a nightmare, although Obandiro had seemed like one for a while; but to the place where his friends waited.

Maybe the trip hadn't gone so badly in the end. As Yaret said, they'd gained some useful knowledge: and he had been the one who worked it out. They'd confronted an attacking darkburn, and had survived unscathed. Plenty to tell Lo there, after all.

Chapter 16

The Gyr Tarn was beautiful, thought Maeneb, even in this dull grey light. Or especially in this dull grey light. Its polished surface cradled the reflection of the domed hills like a leaden mirror.

She loved this place for its remoteness: for the sense of solitude. Nothing moved – not even the smallest breeze ruffled the metallic sheet of water laid before her. It looked so smooth she felt she could have walked across it. She had no idea how deep it was. The only flicker on the surface was not a wave but a reflection: she glanced upwards to see some bird of prey spiralling far above her in the sky.

And there was another, noisier movement behind her. Durba with the horses. It was impossible to have true solitude, even though the other woman was normally so quiet that Maeneb could almost forget that she was there. Almost. On all the long journey from Thield across the strange empty highlands and the rancid swamplands, Durba had made perhaps two dozen remarks. Say three a day.

“Shall we camp here?” being one. Durba said it now.

Maeneb nodded. “In the cave. But first we’d better do what we came here for.”

She wasn’t looking forward to it. She had the tool ready in her saddle-bag: a pair of slightly round-ended pliers. Best get it over with.

They led the horses along the last stretch of the tarn’s edge. Again she stopped to gaze out at its heavy beauty. So still, so obscure... she felt an odd emotion ripple through her: almost love. She could feel it for places if not for people.

Enough of that. Now she could see the cleft that led up to the Gyr cave, and had to set her mind to her task. Taking the pliers from her pack, she walked up the narrow passageway alongside the stream, towards the cavern with its hidden entrance.

The corpses were still there, although not in the pile in which the Riders had left them months ago, before the winter. They were scattered round like bits of scarecrow that the rooks had been at. Not rooks, though, in this case: the stonemen’s bodies were dismembered and several limbs were missing. Animals had torn at them – moorhounds, or perhaps even lions. She pulled a face at the disorder and the smell.

It wasn’t the fact that they were dead that was the problem. It was the fact that they were bodies. Maeneb disliked touching any bodies, alive or dead, and in some ways dead were preferable. At least they didn’t try to touch back.

Behind her Durba held out the bag that was to take the stones. Maeneb squatted down to the nearest body with a grimace. The head was partly eaten and what flesh remained was shredded and discoloured.

And the stones had gone. She turned the head with the pliers to make sure.

“They’ve already been taken.”

Standing up, she went to check the other bodies. They were all the same, with stained holes gaping in the skulls where the stones had once been. One had a full twelve holes; the others, between six and eight. Twelve stones denoted command, supposedly. Well, he wasn’t commanding anybody now.

And her journey had been wasted.

“Who did it?” said Durba. Her fourth remark today.

“Other stonemen – I presume. It certainly wasn’t animals. Let’s look around for any marks.” She could see no footprints on the cold wet rock.

But once they ventured through the narrow entrance to the cave – which was no colder than the outside – she pointed at the earthen floor. “There. Those are stonemen’s boot-prints: the crossed cord underneath the sole.”

Durba nodded and picked up a checked woollen square which lay damp and dirty on the ground. She gave Maeneb an inquiring look.

“Yaret left that,” said Maeneb. “I think she left a pan and other things as well: but they’ve gone now. I’m fairly sure that stonemen have been here for the same purpose as us – to take the stones. It’s hard to say how recently, however.”

Durba nodded again. Without being told, she went to fetch the horses and lead them carefully inside the spacious cave.

Maeneb looked around, remembering Yaret when she had been whole. And Eled, who had not been whole at all. Occasionally, when she was least expecting it, an image from the Farwth would blaze briefly in her mind: Eled in a Warden’s hut, or beside a pool, smiling, talking. It seemed that he was doing well. Or well enough. Of Yaret, although she asked, there came no word from the Farwth. It worried her a little. Although Yaret had been foreign to her she had not disliked her.

Durba began to fix the evening’s meal: the dried meat had been soaking in a leather bag all day, along with the dried fruit. They had finished the bread two days ago and made do with biscuit.

“A pointless journey,” Maeneb commented as they ate.

Durba shrugged.

Maeneb half-laughed. “You *are* allowed to talk,” she said.

The younger woman looked up at her a little shyly. “I know you prefer your companions to be quiet.”

“I do. But they don’t have to be silent. I’m not totally averse to speech.”

“I’m quite averse to talking, though,” said Durba. “So many of my thoughts sound like gibberish when they come out.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“I haven’t talked.”

“Well, try me now. I’ll tell you if it’s gibberish.”

But Durba hesitated. “You’ll think this remark is,” she said eventually, “but on the journey here – especially on the uplands – I kept thinking that I saw someone.”

“Who? A shepherd? Or a stoneman?”

“Neither. Somebody quite small, who disappeared when I looked harder. There wasn’t anybody there. I’m not explaining very well. But I wondered... if that area is known for mirages or something like that? I’ve never ridden out this way before.”

“No, not mirages,” said Maeneb thoughtfully, “although I believe the area may be known for lins. That’s what you’re seeing.”

“Lins?” Durba looked blank.

“Hobs? Secret folk. Well, folk isn’t the right word. They’re not people. Spirits of the land, maybe.”

“I’ve heard of hobs,” said Durba slowly, “only I thought they were just stories made up by old people to tease children with. Except...”

“What?”

“Well... in Thield’s last camp but one, that farm nearby that we bought supplies from: the old woman there wouldn’t sell me damsons because she said the hob liked them. I thought she was just being awkward when I saw her set them down before the hearthstone. But then...

“Then what?”

Durba shrugged. “Something seemed to flicker just beside her hearth. Even when there was no fire. Something...” She spread her hands and did not finish.

“Some people see them quite a lot. Yaret saw several lins, I think,” said Maeneb. “Hobs are indoor: lins are outdoor. So how many did you see on the uplands on the way here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe twenty.”

“Twenty?”

“But it might have been all the same one, twenty times.” Durba looked embarrassed. “Or two or three of them, at least. They weren’t all the same size and shape.”

“What size and shape were they?” asked Maeneb, curious.

Durba spread her hands. “Ah... hard to say. But some were squat and some were taller. I don’t know. When I looked properly there was nothing there. It’s all just an impression.”

“It’s an impression that I’ve never had,” said Maeneb, aware that she felt a slight, unreasonable resentment. Wasn’t she meant to be the one with special powers?

“You’ve never... detected them, the way you can detect people?”

“No, I’ve never felt a lin. Tell me next time you see one.”

“I will.” Again the younger woman hesitated. “Maeneb. Can you... when you feel people in your mind, can you feel me?”

“I know you’re there,” said Maeneb. “Barely. You’re very quiet. In mind, I mean, as well as in speech. I can’t read your thoughts.”

Durba seemed to relax noticeably. “Well, I’ll try not to think loud thoughts while we sleep!”

“I’ll appreciate that,” said Maeneb.

Soon afterwards they blew out the lamp and lay in the cool peace of the cave, their breathing and the faint gurgling of the brook outside the only audible sounds.

Maeneb lay awake, listening not with her ears but with her other senses. They were such a long way from anybody that all that she could hear were distant murmurs. Quite a disturbing tone to some of them; there was a great mass of stonemen somewhere, but they were far away to the north and west and not near any of her kin.

Also to the north but closer was the Farwth, a dense green bulk, a barrier: just now it told her nothing. She could just feel the presence of the Riders back in Thield and elsewhere as faint prickles on her consciousness, but they were so far away as to be barely distinguishable.

Nearer to her though, Durba’s mind was perfectly distinguishable although she was pretending to be asleep. While it was true that Maeneb could not read her thoughts, she could sense the cast and colour of them. And she knew that Durba was happy.

Durba had been happy throughout this journey, which was slightly puzzling. Even the loss of the stones did not perturb her. This was their first time travelling together as riding partners, so maybe happiness was the norm for Durba. Maybe she just liked journeying. Maeneb could sympathise with that.

But she had the feeling it was more, because she'd sensed this happiness in Durba previously, before the trip. In Olbeth's house at winterfest it had been quite noticeable. Maeneb had arrived a day after Durba, blown into the hall by the winter wind. Durba had been busy chopping something at the table; there'd been nothing unusual at all about her frame of mind until she looked up and saw Maeneb. And then her thoughts lit up like a lantern. She was happy.

It worried Maeneb slightly, that maybe she was happy because Maeneb was there.

Chapter 17

The oats and barley were growing strongly, if sparsely, now that the days were more rapidly lengthening. The warmth of early spring was welcome, although the rains were not so greatly appreciated – not in the town, at any rate. The plum-wine cellar had flooded and Anneke and Berlo had moved in with Lundo, the grumbly grandfather, until it dried out. Giving him something else to grumble about. He wasn't a tavern, he said, the trappers had been bad enough; and no sooner had they moved out than he was lumbered with a squalling baby. Nonetheless he had been caught crooning to it.

Yaret smiled as she stood up, wiping soil from her hands. It was almost time to sow the beans and peas; this patch on the east-side by the barley field should do fine. That would be Lo and Renna's responsibility. Their grasp of farming knowledge – especially Lo's – was becoming evident and increasingly useful.

Lo was intent on cultivating spearweed too. While it was nobody's favourite food, it grew fast and easily. And on the north-side the callanet was already pushing up its feathery spikes. It must thrive on ash. That was fortunate, not just for her – she had dried some for her own use and for Elket – but for the older girls in Obandiro. With the number of young men and women now living in the town since the carts arrived, the inevitable would soon happen without callanet. Better that they should be able to plan for children.

Two of the young men, the trapper brothers, were currently out hunting: for meat, not furs, although Yaret did not expect anything bigger than a rabbit to be brought home. The blind brother was determined to ride out on Wulchak, having regained perhaps a quarter of his sight, and she admired his strength of purpose.

However, they were not dependent on such hunting. A supply of small dead lambs and worn-out sheep was trickling in with spring. And soon Obandiro would have beef as well. Ondro, on his cattle-search, had found the newest arrivals: a cowherd and his teenage son, who had survived the winter alone on a remote farmstead. Now that their supplies of flour had run out they had promised to bring their herd closer to the town.

That made... She counted on her fingers. Twenty-eight inhabitants, including baby Royet. Not a town again by any means, but a respectable size for a village.

But it will be back to twenty-seven soon, she thought, as she walked towards the houses. Ondro came out into the field to meet her.

"The oats are looking healthy," he observed.

"Not bad, are they? How about your lambs?"

"Another two born today," said Ondro. "Tomorrow I'll go up to the hut and spend a couple of weeks there while the lambing's in full swing." He had rebuilt his shepherd's hut sufficiently to make it habitable.

"Alone?"

"I'll take Shuli. I think it'll be good for her to help out with the lambing. Teach her a bit of care. And small hands, should be useful. I'd take Dil, too, if he didn't always have three little followers trailing after him."

Yaret laughed. "He makes a good big brother for them. I think Paro actually worships Dil."

"I think Paro actually worships you, because of the wooden leg."

"It doesn't take much, does it? To be worshipped, I mean."

Ondro paused. "Yaret. Stop. Stay here a minute. Don't go on just yet. I've got something that I need to say." She stopped in the middle of the field, while he seemed to fumble for words. "I don't worship you, I mean – I mean not exactly worship, that's the wrong word, but I do respect and like you very much, and I think – I mean, I hope, I hope I could make you happy. I'd certainly try, and it would give the place something more to build on, maybe another family, you know?"

Yaret drew in her breath. She wasn't totally surprised, yet she was taken by surprise. Unsure of what to say, she waited. The words were pouring out of Ondro now.

"What I mean is, would you marry me? I'd be so glad. We could have the ceremony in the burial ground, I mean the remembrance circle, and I'm going to start rebuilding that end cottage on the Cross-street once the lambing's over. Brichek says he'll help and I'm sure Berlo will as well. And we could... start again."

"Oh, Ondro."

She saw the hope in his cheerful face collapse. "That's a no, then."

"That's a no. I'm sorry, because I do respect and like you very much as well. You're a good man, Ondro." And now she found herself fumbling in her turn, because she did not want to give him false hopes, but she did not want to blight him either. "If things were different... but they'd have to be very different, and I just don't think that it would work. In any case, I won't be here much longer. In a few days I'm hoping to go west."

"What?"

"I've been thinking about it since I got back from the trip up north. The stonemen all marched west to Kelvha and I think there's going to be a war. Well, I know there's going to be a war."

"What does that have to do with us?"

"It has everything to do with us." She began to walk through the newly sprouting field back to the streets, which were no longer still and ashen. There were signs of rebuilding work in the market and elsewhere, now that all the guardians had been removed and buried.

On the burial day everyone had stood in a circle and sung the Memorial Song that they had been composing slowly through the winter evenings, accompanied by Elket's lutine. Too many undirected, helpless tears had been shed over the winter, Yaret thought: but the ritual gave their grief a shape if not a meaning.

Dil and the other young children had made up their own words to say over the mass graves. Even Bidi, who had arrived in the carts and was only four, took her part.

"Have a happy time, and have nice dreams, and lots of dogs to play with," Bidi had carefully announced, and then helped their dog wave its thin paw. It would have made Gramma smile, thought Yaret.

But although their remains were safely underground, the dead still stood there at her shoulders, urging her to action. Or something did.

"If war is coming," she told Ondro now, "I don't want it to come here. I don't want the stonemen here ever again. And I think the best way to prevent that is to join in the fight against them, whether with Kelvha or someone else. I know I can't really make any difference: but I feel that if there is to be a war against the stonemen, Obandiro ought to be represented."

"But that would be dangerous!"

"Maybe. I don't know. It can't be as dangerous as having the stonemen return here."

"Well... I suppose you're right. But I'd rather you didn't go. If anyone goes off to fight, then I should be the one to do it, really," said Ondro mournfully.

She looked at him with compassion. "Do you want to go to battle?"

"I wouldn't know where to start. But I'm the only man in the town who's not too old or too young, or blind or burnt, or doesn't have small children."

"That's why you're needed here, Ondro. Your strength and fitness are far more useful here than they could be on the battlefield."

"It's true I've never touched a sword." He sounded both relieved and rueful.

"Whereas I have, and I've travelled west many times before; I know where I'm going. I just need to get the others to agree. I intend to tell them my plan at council tonight. But I wanted you to hear it first, so that you wouldn't think I'm leaving because of you."

By now they had crossed the Dondel brook and were walking up towards the market place. The sound of hammering rang through the spring-scented air.

"When will you set out?" asked Ondro.

"In two or three days, if the weather holds."

"All right. Then since I'm moving up to my hut tomorrow, I'll say my goodbye now." Once more he halted, turning round to face her. "I'll come to this evening's council but I can't say it there. So. Yaret. I wish you all good speed and good luck and I just hope to the stars that there is no war, or that you get through it and come back home safely. You have to, you know, for the sake of all these children."

"They don't need me any more," she said, somewhat ruefully. "They've got more important people than me now – people like Anneke and Ziya. And I think Habiya will become important to them too." Habiya, Bidi's grandmother from the carts, was already proving both patient and practical.

"You're still important to them. You rescued them, the first four, and they won't forget it. So don't you forget it either."

"You did some rescuing yourself, Ondro."

He shook his head. "Not much. I'd wait for you, if I thought it would do any good."

Yaret bit her lip. Would it do any good? It wasn't impossible... yet she didn't think so. Things would have to be very different. But maybe they would be very different.

"There will be other women, other chances," she said at last.

"Not for me."

"You don't know that for sure. Everything changes, all the time."

"And not always for the worse. That's your favourite saying, isn't it? But some things don't change. Some feelings." He looked at her with unusual solemnity, and then he turned and walked away.

Yaret had to sit down on the nearest wall. Such a good man, she thought. So strong and able in so many ways, and not a fool at all. Well, he can't be a fool if he chooses me, can he?

Although she tried to laugh at herself, she felt a little shaky. Overwhelmed. It was no light thing to be so wanted; albeit by a man without much choice.

Have I made the right choice? I have just taken a fork in the road, she thought, without even pausing to consider it deeply. Before I've even taken one step west. Before I even know if I can go.

She was not sure what she would do, if too many people opposed her at the evening council. She might have to give way to them. But to her surprise, when it came to it there was no opposition.

All the town was there. The two new families from the carts had taken to holding their own council every other evening in the market square; and the grandfather and the trappers were often absent also – the grandfather seeing it as irrelevant, and the two brothers being busy with their snares. But this evening they all came.

And the first news was from Dil.

“Yaret wants to go away and fight the stonemen,” he announced to everybody.

“Thanks, Ondro,” she said wryly.

“I passed it on, because people needed time to think about it,” Ondro answered.

“But where will you go?” Elket asked her.

“I believe the stonemen are planning an attack on Kelvha, probably striking at the outer provinces first – the least well defended. So I’ll go to Gostard, where I’m known, and see what’s happening there.”

“I should go instead,” said Brichek, the younger trapper.

“No; your leg’s not healed yet. Yaret’s the best person,” put in Shuli. “She’s been west before and she’s fought stonemen. And I agree that somebody from Obandiro ought to go and fight to represent us. I’d like to go with her but I know she won’t let me.”

“You’re right there,” Yaret said.

Nobody tried to tell her how dangerous it would be. They had all lived too close to danger for too long, she thought, to worry about that. On the contrary, everyone agreed that someone ought to go and fight. Only Ziya made any objection to it being Yaret, on the basis of her gender.

“A woman’s place is to protect,” said Ziya, who had become more assertive lately. “To heal. It’s not a woman’s job to fight. Nor kill. We have enough of that from men. Women shouldn’t be doing it too.”

“I hope by fighting to protect those who can’t,” said Yaret. “If somebody attacked Paro and your other children, what would you do?”

“I’d fight them like a bear,” said Ziya. “Only not like a bear, because I’m not strong enough. So I would lose. And then I’d be dead and my fighting wouldn’t have helped anyone, least of all my children. I would have been better off hiding them to start with, or negotiating with the attackers.”

“Have you tried negotiating with stonemen?”

Ziya shrugged. “Have you? And how much did fighting back help any of the people in Obandiro?”

“And you’ve got a wooden leg,” added the grandfather. “How much use do you think you’re really going to be?”

“Some,” said Yaret firmly. “At least the leg’s impervious to blows.” She noticed with dismay that the smallest ones had started to look solemn and even tearful at the mention of stonemen and fighting. Paro took a great sniff, apparently resolving not to cry.

“You could kick the stonemen really hard,” said Dil, who had also noticed Paro’s trembling lip. “And go hopping into battle.” He demonstrated. Paro did not laugh, but at least he did not burst into tears.

"Indeed I could," said Yaret. "Although I think that I'd prefer to ride. I plan to take Poda, because I suspect she's used to conflict."

"You won't take the donkeys?"

"Not on this trip." She saw Dil relax a little.

"You'll need a lot of gear," said Charo. "I'll help you sort it out." She knew from his manner that he felt he ought to ride out with her. But she did not think he actually wanted to, and she would certainly not encourage him to do so. So she merely nodded.

Fraili put up her hand. "Who will look after the town while you're away?"

"Everybody," said Yaret. "You all know what to do if stonemen come. But I don't think they will, not for a long time anyway. They've all marched to the west. That's why I'm going there."

"But," said eight year old Korli, "but, but, what if other people come here?"

"I hope they will. And I hope you'll make them welcome."

"But what if a lot of people come?"

"From where?" said Yaret, somewhat sadly.

"But," said Korli, "but, but, what happens if those Riders of the Vonn come here?"

"I've told them most of the story," explained Dil.

"It's not very likely they'll come here," said Yaret. "But if they do, then you can make them doubly welcome."

"But," said Korli, "but, how can we tell if they're real? There are some bad men out there."

"There certainly are," said the grumbly grandfather. "You never know who you're letting in. Could be anybody."

I sometimes wish I hadn't let you in, thought Yaret. But since Korli was looking genuinely anxious, she thought for a moment and then said,

"That's easy. If somebody rides into town claiming to be one of the Vonn, just ask them if they know Rothir the dwarf."

"How will that help?" demanded Korli. "Because Dil said he's not a dwarf at all. Is he?"

"No, he's not. He's quite tall really. But, Korli, you stand there: and just imagine you're guarding the south-gate. Now, I'm a stranger who comes riding up the road." Korli jumped off his seat and took up a fist-fighter's stance while she walked towards him. "Clippety clop, clippety clop."

"Who goes there?" yelled Korli.

"Ah, hallo there, sentry. This looks like a nice town. I'm a Rider of the Vonn and I think I'd like to stay here. Now, what do you ask me?"

"Do you know Rothir the Dwarf?" shouted Korli at the top of his voice.

"Rothir? Yes, I know Rothir," said Yaret. "Now you say, tell me about him."

"Tell me about him!" shouted Korli.

Yaret scratched her head. "Well, for a start, he's obviously a dwarf," she said.

"No, he's not! He's not! You don't know him at all! You're an enemy spy!" And Korli charged at her legs. As she caught him and swung him up and round in the air, all the other children laughed, even Paro – although he looked completely baffled.

So that turned out all right. The children wouldn't feel her leaving as a loss, now that they had so many others to look after them.

Two days later she was ready to set out, having said only brief, unsentimental farewells. She did not want to make too much of this journey, in case she were to come crawling back a fortnight later with her tail between her legs. It was not out of the question.

Charo helped her load up Poda. Clothes, food, weapons – her sword, her bow and as many arrows as she'd been able to knap stone heads for. Without a working forge, she'd scoured the eastern fields for flints, and used the stone-chipping skills she'd learnt three years ago from the father of her one-time lover, Dalko.

She had chosen not to think of Dalko for the last few months. She thought more often of his father, Colne the fletcher, who had painstakingly taught her the old craft of knapping – while Dalko, looking on, had laughed at her for wasting time in learning it.

It had annoyed her. But forget it now. No room for unwanted memories any more than sentimental ones. Yet she had kept room in her pack for her one-string gourd, wrapped in a woollen pouch made from the last of the slightly blood-stained samples.

"If you're not back in a year, I'll come after you," said Charo as he strapped up her bags.

She found she could not speak. A year? But that too was not out of the question.

Charo added, "Don't worry about us. We'll be careful. We'll keep practising our archery and keep lookouts and we'll defend the town if need be."

"I hope it needn't be. The stones should give you some protection against darkburns, at least." For the stones that she had gathered from the stonemen – eight in all – were mostly distributed around the town: four were placed strategically by the main roads at the town's margins, one was at the Dondel Bridge, and one was in the cellar at the inn. The remaining two she kept herself. Although there was no certainty about how well they would keep darkburns away, or how long they would work for, it made her feel a little better to know that the town had some defence.

As she mounted the laden Poda, Charo said, "Just wait a minute." Then he beckoned down the Cross-street. All the children, and teenagers too, and Anneke, appeared flowing in a stream from the house where they'd set up the school after fitting the new roof. They arrayed themselves along the road.

Charo waved at them and they began to sing. It was the Journeying Song, that strange wistful mixture of sadness and anticipation; and Yaret paused to listen.

Then, while they were still singing, she nudged at Poda's flanks and rode on slowly past them, turning only once to wave as she left the edge of town. It was a good way to go, she thought. It saved any more farewells.

The singing voices drifted after her as she set out on the track leading west. After fording the Dondel upstream from the bridge, she turned to look again. She could no longer see anyone. But the remnant of voices still hung in the air like the thinnest wisp of smoke.

So this was it. It hurt to be leaving now, as it had never hurt to leave her grandparents on her annual journey. Perhaps the old couple stood at her shoulders with all the other dead.

You too, Grandda. The only people who have loved me, she reflected, other than the parents that I never knew. Just those few fleeting images I have of my father walking alongside me, so high up. My mother who left no memories at all. Yet I have been assured that she loved me... Which Dalko never did. Everything was a laugh with him: it was refreshing until it became wearisome, and then painful. When he said he loved me, that was just another joke.

I will not marry an insincere man, she thought, or one whom I cannot respect. I can respect Ondro. Maybe I could grow to love him, if. If. So many ifs.

If I even make anything of this journey. Where will it lead? What am I doing? How do the Vonn manage this – the travelling into unknown risk, the heading off to battle? I am like a child with a toy sword pretending to be a soldier. Although I told Ondro that I knew what I was doing, I have no idea.

Just making it up as I go along... Charo assured me that it didn't show. But it's true none the less.

I leave behind a trail of my errors and omissions, she thought. I hope this journey doesn't prove to be the biggest one of all.

Chapter 18

As the land slipped past her, the sadness did as well. Yaret knew this territory; she knew her horse, and she began to breathe more easily as the quiet landscape unfolded before her. After the constant demands of Obandiro's twenty-eight people she admitted to herself that it came as a relief to be alone.

When she set Poda to a canter the horse sped willingly along the dirt trail that led due west. It was overgrown with weeds, making her wonder if anyone had used it in the last few months. Many miles to the north the stonemen also had marched west; but she would rather take this trail than theirs. She knew the spots to camp and sleep and shelter, and for the first day or two could almost pretend she was on her usual annual journey with her load of woollen samples.

But without her donkeys. She missed the donkeys until she resolutely visualised them thriving under Dil's diligent care. Dolm was a handful, and together with the cart-horses and the trappers' horses, kept Dil busy; it meant that he would not have time to feel the loss of Poda. Better for them all that way.

As Yaret crossed the Birchfields – which were not fields at all, but swampy woodlands of thin, lichen-decorated trees – the sense of normality increased. This place was untouched by fire; she could almost imagine that no such devastation had happened after all.

When she found a spot amongst the spindly birches that was dry enough to camp, she ate her bread and apple and then rolled herself in her blanket beneath the lacy boughs, as if she was on her usual summer journey. A little cold for summer, though not as chilly as the winter they had endured down in the cellars. It had been a worrying time, as she had needed to ensure that everyone stayed warm enough. The hot stones had worked in the evening but by morning all the heat had gone.

The next dawn she was awoken by the hopeful song of warblers. Early bog-bean was flowering by the ponds; in the water were dim clouds of frogspawn waiting for the spring. She passed two beaver dams that were newly built since last year. Not everything had been destroyed. Not even most things; in here she could pretend that all was as it should be.

Emerging on the far side of the Birchfields to the meagre pasture with its scattered farmsteads, she clung on that sense of normality for a while, until gradually the differences became too obvious to ignore. While the farmsteads here were not burnt out, some were empty and seemed to be abandoned. At several others she got the impression that the inhabitants were hiding. On her approach to one house that she knew well, a strange man appeared round the corner of the building and pulled a bow on her.

"Where is Bina?" she said, naming the owner, but perhaps too quietly for him to hear. At any rate he stood still aiming at her with his bow and saying nothing, until she went away.

Two miles further on, the signs of many feet marching over this land became obvious even to her untrained eye. She could not tell how recently it might have been invaded; for none of the footprints had survived, only the deeply trampled trail. There must have been hundreds of them.

After crossing several empty fields through broken fences, she stopped at a long farmhouse where she'd previously done business. As she approached, an elderly woman came to the door. Yaret recognised her as the place's grandmother; but to her civil greeting

the woman made no reply except to say curtly, "Leave us alone." She had two small children clinging to her skirts.

"Where are the menfolk?"

"They took them. And the animals."

"Who did? The stonemen?"

"Is that what you call them? I call them monsters. Go away. Leave us alone."

When Yaret tried to tell her about Obandiro and the help to be found there, the woman shook her head as if she'd never heard of it. It might as well have been a thousand miles away.

There was nothing to be done except move on. The fields were showing signs of new crops, even if they were only roots and spearweed. This was not fertile country. But the sodden water-meadows were as empty of cattle as their farmsteads were of people. Yaret presumed the cattle had been stolen to eat; but what of all the men? Had they been taken as slaves? Or killed and thrown into some ditch? Although she saw no evidence of such burials, it seemed all too possible.

She rode on doggedly but in increasing apprehension of what might lie ahead. The sparse farms and empty pastures petered out again: in place of them arose the knobbly unremarkable hills known as the Uin-Buin. They were really hardly tall enough to be called hills – rather, they were mounds, but too steep and shrubby to grow crops easily.

None the less they were inhabited. Or so she hoped. If the farmsteads had been vulnerable, the people here were doubly so.

As Poda trudged uphill on the winding track between green hillocks, Yaret looked round with trepidation. The path was too rainwashed for her to read any footprints here. The groves of plum and cherry trees that nestled in the shelter of the Uin-Buin were thankfully unburnt, though still bare of leaves; and the place was worryingly bare of people. Only three fat wood-pigeons plodded complacently underneath the boughs.

The track dipped down again between the steeply rising slopes. She passed through glades that were overhung with leggy hazel stems. No voice was heard: no inhabitant was visible, although a thin waft of smoke drifted in the air. That was not altogether reassuring.

When she reached a tiny glade hidden between two mounds, Yaret pulled Poda up. Dismounting, she unstrapped her saddlebags and looked around. Still no sign of anyone.

But just as her concern was growing, the grassy slope ahead of her was disturbed by an abrupt movement of the turf. An oval door popped open and a head poked out.

"Not today, thank you," it said, and disappeared again.

Yaret grinned in relief. "Rubila? Is that you?" she called. "It's Yaretkoro the cloth. I'm not selling today, but I'll happily buy food off you if you have any to spare."

The door popped open again, with a faint but distinct noise as of a cork being unstuck. She knew that despite appearances the oval door was made not just of turf, but of scored wood cleverly covered with a living layer of grass, close-fitting in its frame.

"Yaretkoro the cloth is it? You're very early this year," said Rubila, shuffling out and squinting against the light, even though the sun was well-shrouded by a thick layer of grey cloud.

"I know I'm too early," said Yaret. "I'm travelling. It's a long story."

As she had hoped, the word *story* was a key that unlocked the green oval doors of other groundhouses. These doors did not pop but squeaked open as more heads poked out to listen.

“Who’s that? Is that Yaretkoro?”

“It is, and greetings to you, Hubilo,” Yaret called out.

Meanwhile Rubila continued her sideways shuffle down the path to the track where Yaret stood with Poda stamping alongside her. Yaret put out a hand to take her outstretched fingers: Rubila gently stroked it and then reached up to touch Yaret’s wet hair before turning her attention to the horse.

“What happened to your donkeys?” Her stubby fingers were as gentle as a breeze on Poda’s coat. “This one’s big. Smells noble.”

Yaret laughed. “More noble than the donkeys? I don’t think Dolm would agree. But I left them behind this time. I left ...” She stopped, unable to list the many things that she had left behind since visiting the Uin-Buin hills last year. So much explaining she would have to do, and she did not know where to begin.

“And how are your grandparents?” asked Rubila.

Yaret swallowed, opened her mouth and said nothing.

But Rubila, her head cocked on one side, heard something in that nothing. “Ah,” she said, “better come in and tell us all about it.” Patting Yaret’s arm, she turned and began to walk crablike back towards her doorway. Considering that Rubila could see neither door nor path, she moved quickly. Yaret hurriedly rummaged in her pack for a pair of candles before she ran to catch her up. The Fiordal people had no use for candles and kept none.

Inside the groundhouse, she had to crouch in order not to bang her head on the passage roof. Her grandfather had always come away from here with a variety of scrapes and scratches on his balding scalp; and Yaret, though not so tall as him, was still taller than most of the Fiordal. The walls and floor of the tunnel were hacked out of a gritty sandstone that was rough against her fingers. However, her candles were not needed, for as her eyes adjusted to the dark a faint glow from the fire-room turned the walls to orange-brown shadow, providing just enough light for her to see her way.

When she emerged into the fire-room itself, a square-sided chamber carved out of the rock, it was like stepping into a wide, low-ceilinged cellar – a warm one, however; much warmer than the cellars she had left behind. Although the fire in one wall was burning low beneath its narrow chimney, the stoves on either side emitted trickles of steam and smells of baking.

Many racks of drying clothes curtained the far end of the room. From behind them, Rubila’s family emerged: all five of them, no longer children now, although none had yet married and set up their own house. Yaret thought, with a pang, that maybe there were too few others for them to choose from – too few potential partners in the groundhouses. And if this place could not manage to regenerate, with its forty houses, how could Obandiro with its mere half a dozen?

But when the common door beside the fireplace was pushed open, with a “Can we come in?” she realised that maybe she’d been too pessimistic. For a couple of the newcomers, stocky young men, were immediately hailed by Rubila’s daughters. Despite their blindness they confidently crossed the room, walking over to exchange fond hugs before they turned to give Yaret a gentle greeting.

Then more of the Fiordal came hurrying in by the same common door, which linked Rubila's house by tunnels with a dozen other groundhouses – all the ones within this mound. But Rubila's had the biggest fire-room. Before long there were over thirty people nestled in the kitchen, sitting on low benches or standing round the edges of the room: perhaps a quarter of the Fiordal.

Only two of them were children. Igolo and Brula ran up to her and stroked her gently up and down before clasping her hands.

"You've got older," said Igolo. Yaret knew her hands were rough and chapped from the winter's work.

"And you've got taller," she told them both.

Although she was smiling, the Fiordal must somehow have realised that all was not well, for they immediately took charge of her. Rubila sat her on the bench and gave her a bowl of soup to warm her hands on. Blankets were brought in – rugs of her grandfather's and her own weaving – and were wrapped around her until she was, if anything, too warm.

Even more warming than either soup or rugs were the children who snuggled up to her on either side, keen to hear her story. They all were keen to hear it; their only news from outside came from occasional wandering traders like herself. But the adults' sombre faces showed their apprehension that her news would not be good.

And it was not easy news to tell. Yaret found herself stumbling over the words as she tried to describe the destruction of Obandiro and her grandparents' farm, but in shielded terms that would not distress the children overmuch.

Igolo and Brula were agog but stayed undistressed. It was the adults – those who had known her grandfather for many years – who wept openly. The children squeezed her arms and patted her shoulders. "There, there," said Igolo.

"And these people were called stonemen?" asked old Hubilo, tears running down his face from his dark eyes – seemingly all pupil – into his stubbly grey beard.

"Yes. Have you seen any?" Yaret caught herself in time to rephrase the question. "Have you heard any sounds of marching men coming through here lately? Or smelt anything strange?" For they would have seen nothing – at most a hint of a movement, a stir of shadow; she understood that their vision extended no further than the distinction between light and dark.

They had always lived this way, Rubila had once told her. Blind was a word not in their vocabulary. They found it difficult to grasp what Yaret meant by *seeing*. Shapes they understood, for they could touch them; but they could not see them in their minds.

However, if darkburns had passed this way, she thought, the villagers would undoubtedly have registered their deathly stink. And if stonemen had marched past they would have felt and heard them even deep within the groundhouses. She was relieved when the Fiordal shook their heads, murmuring their incomprehension of such people.

Then they fed her more soup while she spoke of how things were at present in Obandiro. It was as if they hoped that warmth and food could ward off sorrow. So she tried to tell them that the situation were not altogether dark – although she refuted the use of that word. Dark. Why should dark be evil, be terrible? Night had always been her friend. And the stonemen had brought hideous fire and killing heat, not darkness. To the Fiordal, too, light was the enemy – sunlight, anyway, which hurt their eyes.

"But what do they want, these men who plant stones in their heads?" asked Hubilo.

“To conquer. To destroy. I don’t know. It’s not as if they care about the land. They steal livestock but just leave the farms and towns abandoned if they don’t set them on fire.”

“Yet they must have a purpose.”

“I suppose so. Or their leader must, at least. But I don’t know what it is.”

There were baffled murmurings and much shaking of heads. The concept that some people might cause destruction just for the thrill of power, the will for domination, or love of other people’s pain, seemed not to occur to them.

Yet it was something she had reflected on through the long cold winter nights. She could only liken it to the destructive urge of a thwarted toddler. But a toddler had excuses, not least its ignorance of consequences. Whoever ordered the firing of Obandiro, she thought, could have no true reason. No excuse.

Rubila wriggled off the bench. “Come,” she said, “now if ever is the time for sooth-saying.”

“No, thank you,” answered Yaret politely. On every visit to the Fiordal people, they made this same offer of sooth-saying. She had no idea what it involved and did not wish to find out. Her grandfather had once, years ago, given in to their insistence that he should have his fortune told. “Very odd,” was all that he would say about it afterwards.

“Don’t be scared,” Rubila told her now. “The sooth-saying predicts no deaths. That’s not what it’s about.”

“Thank you anyway, but no.”

“Yes,” said Hubilo, standing up also. Brula and Igolo next to her began to pull at her hands to drag her to her feet. She resisted. What use could she make of any sort of sooth-saying? If it was bad, she would only worry in case it should come true: if it was good, it might make her complacent. Unguarded.

“We will go together to the Fioronhall,” announced Rubila, “and there you can decide.”

“Go on, go on,” Brula urged. “It’s fun.”

“It is not fun,” said Rubila reprovingly.

“Yes, it is.”

“Hmph,” said Rubila. “Well, come along anyway.”

It couldn’t be all that serious if a child thought it was fun. The two children were both tugging at her. So Yaret did not resist those small warm hands, but laughingly allowed herself to be pulled up and dragged towards the common door.

She had never been through this way before, and when she saw how dark it was beyond she said, “Wait: I need to light a candle or I’ll bang my head.”

They waited patiently while she retrieved her two candles and lit them at the fire. With them flickering in the bronze candle-holder – a sole find in an otherwise empty cellar – she followed Rubila through the door and down the sandstone passage. In places she had to squirm to avoid being scraped along the tunnel’s sides.

This place was not as old as Obandiro had been, she thought, but old enough. At least, being underground, the people ought to be much safer from attack and fire... She sighed.

“Don’t worry,” said Rubila just ahead of her. “If you really don’t want to hear anything in the Fioronhall, then you won’t.”

In that case she would hear nothing, Yaret decided.

The twining passage seemed to lead into the middle of the hill. The Fiordal before her and behind her walked more easily than she did, without ducking or twisting, hardly even

putting out a finger to check where they were. Perhaps they could discern the walls' presence by the movement of the air.

And now she herself could feel the air move. A moment later they emerged into a cavern.

A big cavern – as big as the Gyr cave, no, bigger; although this space was very different. Unlike the Gyr, it bore no marks of mining. This chamber was not hand-worked as the tunnels and the fire-room had been. Her candles lit up walls shaped smoothly into wave-like hollows, and striped with bands of greeny-gold and copper, rust-reds and pinks and browns, like drifting layers of sand all petrified by time. At its far edge columns rose to meet the roof, twined with the same soft colours. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

Half a dozen of the adults, as well as the two children, had followed her in. She wished that they could behold it as she did, glowing faintly in the candlelight: that they could see the huge banded waves that seemed to move and drift and turn like some vast slow sea created out of stone. Presumably it was water that had worked these undulating walls, long centuries ago.

Despite their blindness the Fiordal were smiling as if they too could see the marvellous sight. Surefootedly, Rubila led them forward until she stood in the middle of the cavern; there she turned around a few times before nodding.

"Here," she said. Her voice echoed softly. As the others gathered around her with heads slightly tilted Yaret realised that they were listening. All became very still. Even their breathing became muted. Not a movement, not a rustle, not a whisper now escaped them, the children no less silent than the adults.

Such a vast space, thought Yaret; beautiful, it's true, yet as hollow as the home I've left behind, as empty as my life that now is gone. I feel the void inside myself as great as in this cavern.

None the less. Respect your hosts. Pretend, at least. Do as they do. So listen.

At first she thought that she heard nothing. Then she realised that somewhere far away there was a faint ringing, like a distant bell. It came and went. She closed her eyes to hear the better. Some movement of unseen water caused it, maybe: drips falling on one of those twisted columns, or on some sheet of stone, tapping it like a muted cymbal or a chime.

After a while the sound seemed to grow, not fade. More water? She stopped puzzling over the mechanism of it and merely listened, letting the faintly ringing notes wash over her, coming and going, their echoes seeming to revolve all round her as if she were caught in some languorous whirlpool of eddying sound. It was strangely relaxing.

And also strange was the fact that gradually within the sound she began to hear words. Someone was speaking to her through the waves, the waterfall, the swirling toll of many distant bells or one. Was it a male voice, or female? She couldn't tell. It was probably her own mind struggling to find meaning in the unfamiliar, trying to turn the sound to words.

Yet a word was clearly there, whether conjured by her own mind or not.

Horse.

No surprise. She thought of Poda, grazing patiently outside, the bow and quiver still strapped to the saddle. A great gift.

The word transmuted, changed its shape.

Hunters, hunters.

Or was it *huntress*? Either way, no surprise, again. She remembered the patient hours spent waiting for a deer; the crackle and snap before the bear had emerged from its thicket.

Listen.

Yes. She should have listened better then. So listen now. The chiming whispers encircled her but did not make her feel hemmed in. They gave her rather a sensation of huge space, as limitless as the sky. She listened to their ebb and flow as they regrew around her.

Home is where you are.

The emphasis was on the *you*. Who is *you*? she wondered. Is my home here with the Fiordal? Or simply where I am? That was one to think about. But later on. For now, just listen.

The waves washed over her.

Oh, my dear.

Oh... That surely was her mother's voice, which she did not remember ever hearing.

Oh, my dear. My dear.

Such love was in it. Yaret caught at the sounds and let them settle in her heart which seemed to be turning over and over. *Oh, my dear. Oh, my mother.*

But now it was repeated, seemingly by different voices, from all sides of the cavern. *My dear.* One or two of the voices seemed familiar. Was that her father speaking, a vague memory of smiling tallness? Her grandmother? Someone else?

Or all of them. A whole dead town, she thought, all those former friends and neighbours who stand now at my shoulders; and her eyes flew open, in case they might be standing there around her, their eyes fixed on hers.

But there were only the Fiordal, listening rapt and silent in the candlelight. She wondered if they heard the same words she did. Or did their minds create their own meanings from the whispering stone?

My mind is merciful, she thought: it has given me the words that tell me what I need to hear. That in spite of everything I have a home. That I have been beloved.

She closed her eyes and listened once again.

But now there were no words for her to hear, only the shivering chime and hush of pulsing waves, as if the banded cave held some great shivering gong. The murmurings swept over and around her, time after time, in an endless drift and flow and eddy; and it came to her that – although she had never heard it in her life – what rolled and whispered past her, wordless now, was the long sound of the sea.

Chapter 19

"You're determined to go on to battle, then?"

Yaret paused in loading baggage on to Poda. "Yes, I am."

Rubila sucked her teeth. "Did the cave not advise you against it?"

"No. It said nothing about battles."

Rubila waited, her head a little on one side. She was obviously hoping for more information about what the cave had said – for Yaret had told her the previous evening only that she had indeed heard several words. She had added, "It was very odd," and that was all.

Nor did she feel that she was willing to tell Rubila now the phrases she had heard, in case the other woman placed some unwelcome interpretation on them. Even so she did not want to hurt Rubila's feelings. So she said placatingly,

"There was nothing about death in the words, as you assured me. Nothing for me to fear."

"Then perhaps there will be no battle after all," said Rubila, "and you are riding all that way for nothing. You can always stay on here with us, you know."

Home is where you are... She could decide that it meant the Fiordal. It was tempting to remain here, so cocooned and cared for. But if she were to abandon this journey, it ought to be to Obandiro that she returned.

"Thank you, but no," she said, and to appease Rubila she added, "After the words, I thought I heard the sea."

"The sea?" repeated Rubila blankly. Of course she had never been there either. "The sea! Ah, well. If that's what you heard, I expect that's what you need to go and find. But be safe and come back soon."

Yaret had just begun to explain that she did not intend to search for the sea, when Igolo and Brula came running out – they had no fear of falling, those children – and thrust towards her little bags of offerings to add to the tough dried roots and plums that Rubila had already given her, refusing any payment.

She opened one bag. Inside, wrapped in leaves, were a dozen cherries stickily preserved in honey. She was touched, for this was a real treat given up by Igolo on her behalf. Brula's bag held five glossy hard-boiled pigeon eggs.

"Thank you," she said, and bowed, even though they could not see her. But they would hear the bow as she went on, "I will visit you again next year, no doubt. When you will be still taller."

"Come back before that!" said Igolo. Brula hugged her and they ran off together.

Yaret bent to kiss Rubila's wrinkled cheek before she mounted Poda. This was a good home, but it was not hers. All the same, an unexpected feeling of regret pulled at her as she rode away.

My dear. Did she take those dead with her? She imagined them still standing in the whispering stone hall, like eternal statues.

But they had no more reason to remain there than she did. So out of the Uin-Buin she rode determinedly, away from the murmuring waves hidden beneath the earth, past the mounds and across the many streamlets.

The landscape here was just awakening into green and gold. The air smelt fresh – for the first few hours, at least. In was several hours later, when she reached the next stretch of farmland, that the scent of smoke began to taint the air, and grew thicker as she rode.

Soon there were more signs of burning: hayricks, spinneys, one whole wood of coppiced willow, many acres razed to black with no sign of new growth. This felt worse than the countryside around Obandiro, which had largely escaped the fire, and Yaret began to canter through it as fast as Poda would allow. She continued to ride as night fell, hearing the hoofbeats pound rhythmically across the moonlit desert. The same frantic thudding she had heard down by the Darkburn, before Poda had burst through the undergrowth, riderless and snorting... Now that heartbeat seemed to be the only sound in all this land.

When finally she halted and lay down to sleep beside the burnt, cold remnants of a hayrick, the smell of smoke immersing her like an unwelcome extra cloak, she asked the Farwth, whispering through the ground, *What has happened here?*

She neither expected nor got any answer. But the land felt somehow paralysed with shock. It made her think of Eled, that gentle, dazed young man. She hoped he was still safe in Farwithiel – and that Farwithiel itself was safe. Surely it must be, given the power of the Farwth to dispel intruders.

As she lay huddled on the smoky ground her mind turned to the other Riders of the Vonn, remembering how they had rested in that huge hollow tree. Back in Obandiro she had seldom allowed herself to think about the Riders except during the telling of her evening tale. Only now and then would she pull out memories to give her information, or simply comfort. She rationed herself, because it had seemed so unlikely that she would ever see them again. And she wanted to see them again: she admitted that now. They seemed to beckon her from some obscure horizon.

“Parthenal,” she murmured to the smoky darkness, aware that it sounded like an incantation, or a prayer. “Rothir. Tiburé. Maeneb.”

She might have put too much faith in those memories, she thought. She might have made of the Riders more than they actually were. Parthenal, after all, was slightly dazzling; more than slightly. Maeneb’s gift had fascinated her, although she’d been careful not to show her curiosity. Tiburé had commanded her respect.

And Rothir. He had saved her life. No, she had not put too much faith in them. She owed it to the Riders to show equal courage, if she could, in the fight against the stonemen.

“Give me fortitude,” she whispered to the moon. “Show me the way.”

Yet she had no notion where the Riders were right now. Hundreds of miles south, most probably, in that mysterious place called Thield, or with that equally mysterious person called Huldarion. Intent on their own tasks. What a fool she was to try and make herself into a Rider... So much to get wrong.

Last night, in the warm shelter of Rubila’s fire-room, she had slept dreamlessly; but tonight her sleep was full of rumbling hooves and wailing wolves and worse. She woke to a clatter of spears that dissolved into the silence of the smoke-stained dawn.

I heard the voices of the cave, she thought as she arose, half-dazed, but the whole world is my cavern now; the vast bowl of the sky can send me echoes from anywhere it wills. So listen. And observe.

She ate her tough dried plums and then three honeyed cherries, before she mounted Poda and set out again.

At the next junction of paths she found the tracks of many feet and cart-wheels crossing her path. They were heading north-west on the old Tuatha, an ancient and in places sunken road which was little used except by farmers and small traders.

And now, stonemen. They seemed to be long gone. She followed their trail along this road that was almost half-submerged in earth, so steep were the banks on either side: she knew that it led to the north of Outer Kelvha, where she was heading too. But she saw no other sign of the stoneman army's passing, until in the distance ahead a black blotch appeared in the middle of the road.

Yaret stopped dead and studied it intently. It did not move. It was inanimate: a square.

As she cautiously approached, the square resolved itself into an iron cage, lying broken and rusting beside the burnt-out remnants of a wooden cart. When she touched it, it was cold. When she put her head inside the broken cage she found no clues. An unexplained wreck in a silent land.

A few miles further along the Tuatha road, she saw the smoke, hanging over a strip of woodland. This was more than just the general haze – and much more than the thin trickle that might signify a campfire. It was a wide thick pall which she had learnt was never a good sign. The trees themselves did not appear to be burnt; but behind them, she knew, was a hamlet where she'd previously done business, and her heart began to beat a little faster in dismay.

Climbing out of the sunken Tuatha, she rode towards the wood. Although the smell of smoke was strong, the trees had not been touched by fire; so she continued through them to the far side. There she saw between the trunks a dull red glow.

Yaret dismounted and commanded Poda, in Vonnish, to stay where she was. Then taking up her bow she cautiously progressed on foot, creeping to the margin of the trees to see what lay beyond.

Not cold and black, this one. The farmstead just ahead of her seemed made of embers. It was not ablaze, yet all its innards were red-hot, as if it were some huge just-slaughtered animal spilling out its guts and blood. No life was visible: no farmers, and no stonemen either. The pasture was devoid of animals. No birds flew. The heavy drifting smoke was the only thing that moved.

With a sense of growing dread, Yaret left the shelter of the trees to walk warily towards the smouldering wreck. There was smoke everywhere: it even seemed to be coming out of the ground itself.

Half way to the farm, she slowed. It was not an illusion. The smoke was seeping from the ground ahead of her. Was it burning peat? No, more than that...

The feeling hit her at the same time as the smell. Darkburn.

She stopped abruptly. The stench was almost familiar now, the stink of every rank and bitter rotting thing she could imagine. But the feeling... Without realising it, she'd already felt it as she approached; but now, full on, it was a horror that made her weak.

She wanted to run straight back to Poda. Instead she tensed her limbs against the weakness and made herself observe. No darkburn was in sight. No blot of darkness rushed towards her. Perhaps the thing was trapped somewhere: so no need to run away just yet.

What was she feeling? She remembered the ferocity and hatred created by the creeping darkburn in the forest, so many months ago. The start of everything; although at the time it

had felt like the end of everything. That first darkburn had been full of fury. This was different, for here too was fury – but what she mostly felt was fear. Worse than fear: despair.

Gritting her teeth against it she continued walking through its rising tide. Only a few paces on, she saw the pit that had been dug across the track, narrow but long and deep – deeper than a man's height. Perhaps it had been originally intended as a drainage ditch. But it had been dug recently enough for the earthen sides to be still sharp and free of weeds. And it contained the darkburn.

Yaret could barely breathe when she looked in. The fear was suffocating, drowning her, a horror out of all proportion to the ditch's mundane appearance. At its base she saw a huddle of shadow, moving rapidly – not towards her, but to the far end of the pit. The darkburn hurled itself against the end wall; she was reminded of the lonely stoneman dashing his head against the tower.

It was trying to get away from her. Of course – one of the stones was in her pocket. The other was with Poda in the saddlebag.

The darkburn threw itself against the wall again as if it would like to burrow its way into the earth. But that feat seemed beyond it; and evidently it could not climb out either. The pit was smoking where the peat had dried sufficiently to smoulder. How long had the thing been trapped in here?

The dread and fear were clouding her thoughts. They told her to lie down and die. So she retreated, walked back to the trees to fetch Poda, and sat down at the woodland's margin while she waited for her head to clear. Then she pieced facts together.

The hotly glowing farmhouse... The fields that were littered with drying cowpats, but no cattle. So the stonemen who had passed this way had stolen livestock, but at the same time had lost their darkburn from the overturned cart. A cage would be the only way to carry it; but evidently not a safe way.

Perhaps they had fired the farmhouse, or the escaped darkburn had done it independently. If the stonemen had been unable to catch it – and it would be a difficult thing to catch once loose – they might simply have moved on; especially if they had other darkburns. She had seen the tracks of many carts.

But the pit had done what the stonemen could not, and had caught the darkburn. Then what? Where were the ditch's diggers? Maybe they lay dead in that inferno of a farmhouse, or had run away. Even without the fire, the darkburn's presence would be too oppressive for anyone to hang around the place for long.

Even at this distance she could feel it. But although Poda stamped once or twice, uneasily, at least she was not panicking. Perhaps the horse was becoming accustomed to the fear.

So I ought to be able to accustom myself too, thought Yaret. I should acclimatise myself while I have a captive darkburn close to hand. I really don't want to, but I should.

Taking the stone from her pocket, she tucked it into Poda's saddle-bag. "Stay here," she told the horse in Vonnish. "You'll be fine." Then, while she walked towards the pit once more, she analysed the feelings as they grew.

Don't take them personally. Just observe them. Fear. Yes. Horror. Yes. Sorrow; grief. Anger. Abandonment. Misery. Loneliness. The end of everything. Just die.

She had to stop.

Were these her feelings, amplified, or the darkburn's own? Was it putting sensations in her head to weaken her, or was she simply feeling what it felt? The Riders of the Vonn would

say the former: they had told her that the darkburns manufactured horror purely to disable and disarm.

Slowly she moved forward again. Pain. There was some sort of pain here – something that would not stop, that would not go away. Something that removed all hope. At the bottom of the pit was a concentration of despair.

She was looking down into the pit, and now that she no longer had the stone, the darkburn was not trying to climb its walls to get away but was rushing back along its length towards her. She pulled back, tugging against the horror that was like a heavy rope, a weight, a leaden anchor trying to pull her down and in.

But the darkburn could not pull her in. And it could not get out. Nonetheless as it reached her end of the pit the heat grew so intense that she had to withdraw a few steps until she was shielded by the earth. Then she sat down before she fell. Still the dread and horror surged through her in a sickening tide.

Shuffling a little further back, she waited for the feelings to recede before she tried again. Making herself stand up, she walked towards the pit.

The darkburn's indistinct body was pressed against the earth as if it wished to tunnel through to get to her. It threw pain and terror at her in great waves. And the heat. Such heat, attacking both brain and body...

Again she retreated, sat down, forced herself to breathe. Then she braced herself, and wrapping her cloak around her as some poor defence against the heat, she advanced towards the pit a third time.

It became no easier. But perhaps the feelings were a little more distinct. They grasped at her. The darkburn wanted her; or it wanted something she could give it.

What could it want? What could she give it?

Rescue, she thought. But she couldn't rescue it. If it were free of the pit the darkburn would rush at her and burn her up within a moment. So it must want her for fuel – for food.

Yet hunger was not one of the emotions that she felt. Instead there was a sense of pulling; almost pleading. Like Brula tugging at her hand. Or like Brael, the lonely stoneman, begging her for athelid, then for a knife.

As the horror mounted she staggered back again to the refuge of the tussocky grass and sat down with her head upon her knees. This was dreadful. But not unbearable, as it had seemed at first. Not quite. One more attempt, then she would stop.

So, reluctantly, after a few minutes she forced herself back to the pit's edge, kneeling down so that she could not tumble in. The heat instantly engulfed her.

"I don't understand," she said aloud. "Tell me what it is you want."

Of course it didn't understand either. It had no words. There was only raging heat, and the feelings, so agonised, so fierce, so desperately begging in their need that she had to crawl right away this time, thinking no, I was wrong, it is unbearable; and then it took a while before she had the strength to struggle to her feet and stumble, trembling, back to Poda. Once out of the darkburn's range she clung to the horse and gasped, until gradually the fear and desperation receded from her mind.

Well, she'd got as close to a darkburn as she could without dying. If it had rushed at her on level ground, when she didn't have the protection of the stones, would she be able to stand and fight it?

She didn't think so. Not like the Riders. She remembered Parthenal and Rothir on the cliffs above the Thore, slashing at the darkburn with the waters roaring far below.

That darkburn had fallen over the cliff edge... and then she'd followed it, hurtling through the rushing air. Without warning she found herself reliving the moment of the fall. This still happened quite a lot. Gripping Poda's bridle, she waited for the memory to fade, as the darkburn's dread had faded: although it was a vivid shock of recall quite different to the darkburn's stifling fear.

When the fall had happened, there'd been no time for fear. There'd been no time for anything except surprise; and then the tree had caught her, and then the other tree, and finally the river.

She'd been lucky. But, she thought now, imagine a longer fall – a fall that went on for hours, for days, for weeks, in full consciousness of falling. What would she feel then? Something like the darkburn.

Beyond imagining. Yaret shook her head, and then shook her whole body to try and rid herself of those appalling feelings. Over in the pit the darkburn raged and stank and smouldered but she would not go close to it again. As she walked over to collect Poda, she glanced back at the pit and saw the lin.

It was near the edge. When she stared harder, it was just a tussock. All the same she said the lin's grace aloud before she swung herself up on to Poda. She'd had enough of darkburns: enough of sickening despair and grief and that dreadful feeling of abandonment.

As she set Poda moving she had the strangest sense that she was abandoning the darkburn. Yet what else could she do? The only thing that she could give it was her life. That must be what it wanted: death. Because to get too close to it – unless she became a much stronger and more skilful fighter than she was now – would mean instant and inevitable death by burning.

For relief she turned her mind towards the thought of lins, the opposite of darkburns. To see a lin brought not despair and rage, but something lighter, something hard to analyse. It was like a reminder: a small jolt of some partly-known awareness. A half-remembered dream. It was always pleasant, if disconcerting, to see a lin.

What had a lin been doing there, by the ditch? Just chance, no doubt. Before she rode too far she looked back over her shoulder.

There were more lin: maybe half a dozen of them, grouped around the pit.

No, that couldn't be right. Half a dozen? She'd never in her life seen more than one lin at a time.

Turning Poda, she began to ride towards them even though it meant returning to the darkburn. She stopped again, because they now were merely clumps of grass. Maybe they always had been.

Or maybe not. Was the darkburn drawing lins towards it somehow? That worried her, until she reflected that it couldn't hurt them – not least because they probably weren't really there. In weary bafflement, she said the lin's grace again before she finally rode away.

She reflected that since she and Charo had returned from their trip north, they had seen hardly any lin. Dil had commented on it more than once: she remembered him mourning the lack of the school hob. He had felt abandoned by it.

Unexpectedly she found her eyes were wet. And Dil has been abandoned now by me, she thought. But I'm going away to fight for them. So better make sure I do. This trip needs to be worth it.

No crying; stop the tears. Ride on.

Chapter 20

One day, and then another, passed in cloud-wreathed gloom. Yaret, alarmed by the finding of the darkburn, and fearing to come across more broken carts, left the Tuatha and the stonemen's trail to trek directly west. This route took her across sad boggy pastures, punctuated by small prickly bushes. No majestic hutila trees here. It was all redthorn, greythorn, winterthorn, every sort of thorn.

Nevertheless, she had always liked these unobtrusive wildlands, the birdsong that had bubbled from the spiky thickets, the slinking glimpses of small secret animals. But this time the region seemed too quiet: immobile, full of dark foreboding, so that she felt her solitude as she never had before. Nobody stood at her shoulders, no dead, no living, no-one. She tried to sing: a travelling song, part Madeo's, part her own. The sound of her own voice wavering in the emptiness merely made her solitude seem all the greater.

On the third day the distant sight of Gostard on Outer Kelvha's fringes brought a disproportionate relief. Here, romping on green meadows, were flocks of sheep and shaggy goats along with their wobbly-legged young; here were fields lately ploughed and sown, as normal, even if there were fewer people to be seen than she would normally expect.

When she called at one of her usual farmhouse stops she found it deserted. A little closer to the town, at the Gostard Mill, she was greeted by an unknown apprentice who squinted at her askance before shutting the door firmly in her face. But the mere sound of human voices raised her spirits, as did the evidence that no darkburn had laid waste to this land.

So she made her way down the road to the Gostard Inn, ready to spend some of her carefully hidden silver on a decent bed and a hot meal. She wouldn't mind a little company in the parlour. Some music would be a treat.

The inn was quiet. No carts or horses stood in the stableyard except her own. But when she stepped inside the gloomy, almost empty parlour, Rud the innkeeper was still standing in his long stained apron behind the equally stained counter, as if he'd never moved since her visit there last year.

"Yaret! What are you doing here?" He stared at her before breaking into his slow smile. "I wasn't expecting you for a few more months yet, if at all."

"But here I am. How goes it, Rud?"

He answered with a grimace. "Well... Not so good, as you can see."

"I can see it's quiet. Have you got any food on? Egg pie?"

"No pie. We've got eggs."

She ordered eggs. Once they were fried and set before her with the bread and pickles and hot sauce, she asked him, "So, Rud, what's been going on since I was here last?"

Leaning on the counter, he began to tell her. It was a confused and confusing account. Over the last few months, he said, raids and fires and robberies had afflicted several areas nearby. Strange violent brigands from the south had reportedly been crossing the region, some as close as an hour's ride away; but no closer, and he was vague about the details.

Then sad streams of country people had started trickling through Gostard, saying they were fleeing the raiders. While Rud expressed sympathy for some of these refugees, he blamed others for thefts in the town, and was sceptical about their testimony. He had little

idea of what the stonemen were like, and did not even mention darkburns except as a nasty distant rumour of firestorms and magic.

Yaret did not enlighten him because she suspected he would disbelieve her too. Instead she asked, "How long since those raiders passed through the area?"

"A load of them went north before the winter set in, and more have followed recently, by all accounts. Practically an army. I've heard that there were several thousands altogether though I can't vouch for that. Some people blame Kelvha for all the trouble," he said, shaking his head.

"Kelvha? Why? These raiders aren't from Kelvha, are they?"

"Well, it's true they don't sound like your average Kelvhan soldiers. No cavalry for a start. But on the other hand, Kelvha have done nothing to stop them, have they? After all we've done for Kelvha," – which was little enough, thought Yaret, except supplying beer and barley – "they've sent no troops up here to help us out. Some folks think Kelvha know all about what's going on and are content to let it happen. They say they're in league with those invaders – what did you call them?"

"Stonemen. So none have come to Gostard?"

"No, thank goodness. They sound like a dodgy lot. But people round here have been alarmed enough to take up arms. I'm too old to be much use, but a group of Gostard men have ridden off to Melmet to join forces with the Baron of the Broc, if he'll allow. He's closer to us than Kelvha and a better ally. They want to get the Baron to hunt these raiders down before they can come here."

"When did that group leave for Melmet?"

"Two days ago. So what's been going on in Obandiro, then, Yaret?"

Obandiro is burnt down to the ground was ready on her tongue. But she felt obscurely that it would be unwise to admit the town's vulnerability, even to stout old Rud, and despite the fact that it was such a long way off. So she told Rud only a small portion of the truth: that her grandfather's house had been attacked by stonemen while she was away, and both grandparents killed.

He shook his head, appearing deeply affected by the news. "A fine old man," he kept saying.

"In many respects," said Yaret. "So here I am, looking for information as much as anything. Rud – have you heard of a people called the Vonn? The Riders of the Vonn."

"The Vonn? I may have." Although his head went up in recognition, he was cautious. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh... just because I met a couple of them on my journeyings last year. I gathered they were hunting down these stonemen."

Rud picked up a grubby cloth and pushed it around the counter, not quite casually enough. "Do you know the names of any of those Riders?"

"I didn't ask," she said, which happened to be true. She had the sense that she and Rud were circling round each other as if unsure of how much they could say. Yet she had always thought of Rud as a man that she could trust.

So trust him now, she thought.

"Those Riders saved my life," she said, "when we were on the same road and a group of stonemen ambushed us. I owe them a great debt. Their leader was called Tiburé. If they're

fighting stonemen, maybe a messenger could be sent to tell them about the army marching through these parts.”

“I think they already know.”

“What makes you say that?”

Rud leant on the counter with his chin on his hands, ruminating.

“I’ve met a few Riders of the Vonn from time to time,” he said at last. “None called Tiburé. But we had a couple of them stop here a few weeks ago. Don’t know if they were hunting stonemen; it seems quite likely to me now, although they didn’t say. They don’t talk about their business, though everyone knows it’s usually wolves up this end of the world, especially in winter. One of them was the wolf-hunter.”

“A wolf-hunter?”

“Name of Veron. Small dark man in a wolfskin cloak. You know him?”

“No.”

“Now there’s a man I wouldn’t tangle with. No trouble, mind you, pays his bill. Polite enough. But.” He shook his head. “Well, this time he had a younger rider with him who got into a fight.”

“What about?”

“It was all to do with Kelvha and those stonemen, as you call them. Veron’s companion didn’t like Kelvha being bad-mouthed. One of my regulars had had a bit too much to drink and starting cursing Kelvha, saying they’re encouraging these stonemen to come up here and run riot. It’s only what lots of people have been saying, but this young Rider didn’t like it. He put down his fork and told Abrel he was an idiot. Well, he was right there: Abrel’s generally an idiot, but I don’t like fighting in my inn.”

“Who won?”

“The young Rider. It didn’t take him long to deck Abrel. Nobody else got involved – Abrel isn’t much liked. I saw Veron watching and waiting just in case he needed to step in. He didn’t, though, and Abrel can be thankful for it. That would have been more likely to end with a knife in the throat than a punch on the nose.”

“Where did they go afterwards? The two Riders, I mean?”

“South. That’s all I know.”

“Not to Melmet, then.”

“Who knows? They get around.”

“You don’t know where they’re based?” The name of Thield was on her lips, but she did not speak it.

“South,” repeated Rud. “That’s all I know.” He compressed his mouth as if he’d said more than he’d intended. He didn’t move away, however, so after polishing her plate with the last piece of bread, she ventured to ask one more thing.

“Rud. What about Leori? The wizard that you told me about last time I was here. Could he help fend off these stonemen?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Leori? You didn’t meet him on your travels too, did you?”

“I’ve never set eyes on him as far as I know. It’s just that being here reminded me of last year, when you talked about him.”

“Well, I probably shouldn’t have,” said Rud, and this time he did move away and had a desultory go at cleaning tables. There was nothing more to be got out of him that evening, so she went to her room. The bed felt damp and unused.

When she came down the next morning, however, the landlord was a little friendlier again. Perhaps the sight of her silver helped, when she settled up the bill.

“Leori,” he said, counting coins. “I’ve been thinking about him. Why exactly did you mention him yesterday, Yaret?”

“Like I said, I just remembered some remark you made last year. And a wizard could be really useful now.”

“Maybe Leori would be useful – if he could be persuaded to do magic. He wouldn’t do any for me, when I asked him to seal my roof after a storm. I offered him good money, too.”

“Perhaps roof-sealing isn’t in his line of work,” said Yaret, faintly amused.

“Magic’s magic, though, isn’t it? It wouldn’t have been hard for him to do. You’d think he should be able to turn his hand to anything. His brother can, they say.”

Now she stared at him. “What brother?”

“Adon.” Rud divided the coins carefully into little piles. “Now Adon’s the real deal by all accounts. Lightning bolts and rivers of molten rock. He can tear the earth apart, apparently.”

“And can he mend it afterwards?”

Rud laughed. “Unknown. Have you heard of Adon?”

“Never.”

“I think he’s had other names. So has Leori. He’s no friend of Leori, though.”

“So which of them would you trust?” she asked.

“I’d trust Leori, even if he wouldn’t mend my roof,” Rud said without hesitation. He was serious again; solemn, even. “But Adon has his supporters. Some people round here who don’t like Kelvha seem to think Adon will have the answer to their problems.”

“And will he?”

“I doubt it. But it sounds as if he’s been stirring things up – or someone has, on his behalf. I don’t know where he is, himself. But it’s all a bit strange.” Then he looked directly at her. “You’re not the least strange part of this,” he said abruptly. “Yaret, what are you really doing here? You haven’t ridden a hundred miles and more just to gather news. You’ve brought no samples and no donkeys. You’re asking about Leori and the Vonn. You’ve put a high-bred war-horse in my stables if ever I saw one. And you’re carrying a sword. So where did that come from?”

“From our forge in Obandiro.” There seemed no point in hiding this part of the truth. “I’ve come here because I want to fight. I’m going to follow that group that went to Melmet, if that’s where the fighting is. I want to stop the stonemen from doing to anyone else what they did to – to my grandparents. Rud, their farm was nothing but ash.”

“You want to fight,” he repeated flatly.

“Yes. I know what you’re thinking, and I’m thinking it too. I’m only one person, and a female at that, with a sword I’ve never used except to chop up roots. All the same, if there’s any fighting to be done, I want to be there.”

As he gazed at her she could see the wheels of slow thought turning behind his deep-set eyes. He drummed his fingers on the table.

“Jerred the carpenter organised the group that went off to Melmet,” he said eventually.

“I know Jerred. He bought a cloak off us every other year. I used to stop there for a meal.”

“Then you’ll know that he’s an honourable man. Look for him in Melmet and he might let you join his little troop. I can’t promise. It might be up to the Baron – what’s his name?”

“The Baron of the Broc? Grusald, I think.”

“That’s the one.” Rud heaved a deep sigh and pushed three of the silver coins back over the counter to her. “You might need those.”

“But so do you, Rud.”

“Take them,” he said heavily. “I’m too unfit and too much of a coward to go and fight. If I were a better man I’d come with you. Take the money.”

“Thank you, Rud,” she said, and took it.

Then she led Poda from the empty stables. Was her steed so obviously a high-bred war-horse? Yes; undoubtedly. Poda was conspicuous – far more so than Yaret was herself. Whether that was a good thing or not, only time would tell.

Chapter 21

The road north to Melmet was strangely empty. No traders joined her, no pedlars, no journeymen laden with toolbags or laughing groups of women carrying wicker boxes full of chickens. Where had everybody gone?

Gone to fight, thought Yaret, or else gone into hiding. She urged Poda on fast all day and by the time she reached the rolling borderlands she was tired and aching. All the same she took the trouble to rub the horse down properly before she slept in a deserted cow-byre.

Next day she rode into Melmet town. She had travelled this way several times, and although she had not stopped for long she had always liked the look of the place. It was not too far from her grandmother's homeland of Ioben, which was further north again, and both places shared the same old-fashioned feel. Melmet town was solidly built, yet its builders had been fond of curves: arches and domes and roofs that undulated with a gentle smile. There were even a few antique roundhouses, though not so many as Ioben held. The streets used to have a tranquil, muted air, hoofbeats muffled on the earthen roads.

Now the tranquillity was gone. There were sentries set along the wall and she was stopped by armed men at the gates. When she told them she was looking for a group from Gostard they nodded and told her to try the Broc, before letting her ride through. They were on guard for armies, not solitary horsemen.

And here Yaret needed to be a horseman, not a horsewoman. She tried to think herself back into the male mode which had not been required in the wilderness, nor at the Gostard Inn. It was difficult to put on the assurance. Every right to be here, she told herself. A touch of swagger. Look severe, preoccupied. *That* wasn't difficult.

The town was much busier than Gostard had been; crudely-armed men roamed the streets in purposeful groups. Many looked at her with narrow-eyed attention and she quickly realised that their interest was raised not so much by her as by the horse. Most of the horses she saw here were small and rough-haired, some hardly more than ponies, and Poda was conspicuous indeed.

As Yaret rode her war-horse through the town, at the far end of the main street she saw the Broc rise up before her like another sentry. A squat circular fortress whose defensive function had been symbolic for many years, it was now once more the mustering place for soldiers. A couple of hundred men were gathered within the Broc's outer wall – which was no more than two feet high, having been used as a source of building-stone for centuries – and she quickly spotted the burly, balding figure of Jerred with his companions. There seemed to be about twelve or fifteen in the group from Gostard, some of whom she recognised.

Jerred didn't recognise her at first, however. It was the horse that drew his gaze as she approached the group. Not until she dismounted did his eyes widen in realisation.

"Yaret the weaver! What the stars are you doing here? And on that horse?"

"Jerred. How goes it? I've been searching for you." Then she explained her mission briefly, in the terms that she had used to Rud: her grandparents killed, the farm burnt down. "So I've come here to fight. I'd like to join your troop here, if you'll let me," she finished.

"You came alone? Nobody else here with you from Obandiro?"

She shrugged. "I'm used to travelling alone. Others may follow, I suppose."

Thankfully, despite a disapproving shake of his head, Jerred didn't question that. No doubt he put her decision down to female wrong-headedness.

But the femaleness, she saw immediately, was a problem. When she repeated her request to join his group, his expression told her that he was going to say no. The other men who knew her and her grandfather also looked surprised and wary. Although they'd been on friendly terms over the past years, this was a different time; a different situation.

She nodded to them. "Bred. Hansod. Morad. Good to see you. I hope your families are well?" A couple of them smiled, which was a start. "I understand your reservations about me joining you," she went on. "But I'm here to avenge my grandfather Ilo. I have no doubt that he'd approve of what I'm doing. He'd have wanted to have come here to fight himself, bad hip and all."

"He was a fine old man," Bred offered.

"Indeed. If I join you, I'll give you less trouble than Ilo would have. I'll make no special demands or hold you up on the march. I'll look after myself and I don't expect anyone to look after me."

"We all look after each other here," said Morad; he was the miller whose apprentice had given her such a surly rebuff back at the Gostard mill. Morad himself was not surly, but seemed undecided. "We're grateful for all the men we can get. But..." He grimaced.

"But not women? The thing is, I've come here to fight the stonemen, and fight I will, one way or another, but I think I'll be safer amongst you than with men that I don't know."

They all looked at Jerred.

"Nice horse," he said. "Yours?"

"Yes." She wondered if he coveted Poda: if that would be the price for her admission to his troop. She did not feel inclined to pay it, for Poda had been a precious gift and she did not want to give her up.

Jerred ran his hand across his stubbly head, still frowning at the horse.

"We'll take a vote," he said. "In favour?" Seven hands went up, six of them men she knew. "Against?" There were three. Three had not voted. Jerred nodded. "Very well. That's in your favour. But ultimately it's not my decision – I'll have to put it to Grusald. He's in charge."

"The Baron? Where is he?" She had never seen the Baron of the Broc in person.

"That's him over there." Jerred pointed to a short, grizzled man standing fifty yards away. With a weathered face and a determined set to his jaw, he was busy giving orders to the surrounding men. He looked like an old soldier, which was mildly reassuring.

"I'll go and have a word with him," continued Jerred. "He's labelled me official captain of our group. And he looks as happy right now as he ever does, which isn't a whole lot. Come with me. Bring the horse. Stand next to it and don't say anything unless you're asked. And as little as possible then."

So she followed Jerred. As the men around the Baron parted to let them through, she heard murmurs about the horse and speculation about herself. Had the peasant stolen it? Found it strayed? Or won it in a bet?

The Baron himself eyed her with cold scepticism, while Jerred bowed and muttered in his ear. She could not hear any of the words that were exchanged until Grusald said,

"Step forward."

She did so.

"I'm told you are a pedlar from the east and that you wish to join us. But you are... a stranger to us. We do not know if you can fight."

"I do not know if I can fight," said Yaret. "But I can try."

"Sword skills?"

"Rudimentary."

"Archery? I see you have a bow."

"Fair. I hunt. I don't draw a great deal of weight, but I'm accurate."

"Have you any experience of warfare?"

In answer she drew her sword and stabbed at her false leg with its point.

"This is wood," she said. "A stoneman's axe cut off my foot last year. I'd like the chance to take revenge."

That made Grusald pause – and not just Grusald. Jerred looked taken aback too. The Baron studied her a little harder, and then frowned at Poda.

"Where did you get the horse?" he demanded. "That's not a pedlar's steed."

"It was a gift."

"From whom?"

"From someone whom I rescued, after he was pursued by a darkburn."

"A darkburn."

"By one of the creatures that set the fires–"

"I know what they are," cut in Grusald, "but I have not heard many people call them by that name." He considered: she waited.

"I'm not against your joining us," he said eventually, "so long as you keep your foreign ways to yourself. You understand me?"

"Yes."

"You may enlist in my service as an archer. But the horse is a problem. It is unsuitable for an enlisted man. That is a commander's horse."

"Ah." Now she understood the price that would be paid: not to Jerred, but to the Baron.

"We'll make an exchange. Devald here will find you a horse more suitable for your rank." Grusald beckoned to the man next to him, giving him instructions.

Yaret bowed, although she felt slightly sickened at the realisation that she would have to give up Poda. But it was necessary. She followed Devald round the Broc to the stables at the back, and there unloaded Poda of her gear.

"Leave the saddle," Devald told her, so she merely stroked Poda for the last time and murmured words of thanks to her. Meanwhile Devald untethered a horse and walked it over. "You can have this one," he said. "I'll get you a saddle that'll fit her."

This certainly wasn't one of Grusald's horses; the Baron would never have ridden this scruffy mare with her patchy coat and ragged ear. Yaret felt down the mare's legs and looked in her mouth. She was old. On the other hand, she was docile.

"Her name's Helba. She's only shedding because it's spring," said Devald.

"What's her wind like?"

"Oh, she's sound enough. Just don't expect to do too much galloping."

"All right," said Yaret, since she didn't seem to have much choice. Resignedly she led Helba away to where the Gostard horses were corralled. Helba looked scruffy even in comparison to them.

But now she was in, that was the main thing: she was accepted. And she had got here just in time. For now she learned that the next day they would all march west to fight.

Chapter 22

“Good balance,” said Parthenal. He held out the sword at arm’s length and tested it with a few sibilant strokes through the air. Then he put the point to the ground and flexed the blade. “Not too much give.”

“I don’t like too much give. That one’s my best attempt so far,” said Rothir. “Took me a full day to forge. Not sure whether to trust it in battle, though. I’ll keep it as a spare.”

Parthenal carefully sheathed the sword – which was sharp enough to slice a hair lengthwise – and passed it back to his friend.

“If it proves itself, you can make me one,” he said. “A touch longer maybe. Same weight. Longer hilt. Who did the leatherwork? Not you.”

“Olbeth. The decoration’s not quite worthy of Kelvha, but it’s good strong stitching.”

“I don’t think any of our battle-gear will shine compared to Kelvha’s,” commented Parthenal.

“It will do the job. We’ll find out soon enough how it compares.”

Parthenal looked at his friend and smiled. “We’ll find out soon enough how we compare. Your gear may not be shiny, dwarf, but I think you’ll stand comparison with the best Kelvha has to offer. You’ve put more muscle on those brawny arms. Weren’t you wide enough?”

“That’s what three months of blacksmithing does,” said Rothir soberly.

Parthenal shook his head. The prospect of battle energised him. In contrast, it made Rothir grim and grave. He confessed to not enjoying killing even stonemen. Parthenal felt differently. To him, stonemen were just moving targets; highly aggressive but often singularly stupid ones.

“We’ll soon know where we’re going, at least,” he said. “My money’s on the north. What do you think?”

“I think we’ll find out in a minute,” said Rothir, standing up. Thoronal had emerged from the largest of the tents and was summoning them impatiently. Not just them: two dozen of the senior Riders were lingering amongst the tents of Thield, waiting for instructions. Now they filed into the main tent past the sentry.

Once they were all gathered Huldarion scanned the faces.

“The reports are in,” he said.

There had been a change in Huldarion these last few weeks, thought Parthenal. He was still the friend that he had ever been, but there was something newly formal and austere about his manner; as if he were preparing to be king. It was a difficult balance to be both friend and ruler. Parthenal had felt that difficulty himself, at a lower level, when commanding men whom he knew well. He did not doubt his own ability, yet he hesitated to impose his will on others and create a gap between them – even when he knew the gap was necessary.

Was Huldarion feeling the same ambivalence? There was something in his look that Parthenal had not seen before; and he had spent years trying, surreptitiously, to read that scarred, almost immobile face.

“There is movement in the north,” said Huldarion in his measured voice, its slight huskiness a heritage of his burns. “Veron sends word that over two thousand stonemen have lately fired their winter quarters in Erbulet and are heading west. Twenty-five darkburns. He

thinks some thousands more of stonemen will soon follow – or are already following – from other bases in the east. There is no sign of movement yet from the Outland Forts; but we can sure that it will not be long.”

He looked around at them all. “I myself and Uld will join Veron in the north, where we will meet with General Istard from West Vale. We have been informed that Kelvha will dispatch their own troops and commanders there to join us. We will take with us three hundred Riders. Unfortunately I can appoint no women as captains in this campaign: it would be unacceptable to the Kelvhans to find themselves fighting alongside women in positions of authority. I don’t like it, but that’s the way it is for now.”

Delgeb, the most senior of the women present, nodded. “Understood,” she said.

“Within the troops, however, it’s a different matter. Kelvha will have to put up with you there. Delgeb, you and Hilbré will ride north with us and take your place within the troops alongside other female riders. You will not be named as captains but none the less I look to you for captaincy in battle.”

Again Delgeb nodded.

“Additionally,” said Huldarion. “Leor is to be up there with us.”

“What?” exclaimed Thoronal. Obviously this was news to him. “What’s Leor going to be doing?”

“Assisting us in any way he can,” replied Huldarion.

“Assisting us with what? He’s refusing to do wizardry, according to Bruilde. So what possible use can he be?”

“I’m useful with a sword as well as other weapons. And I hope that I can be of some use in advising you.” Saying this, the tall sentry at the door strode forward into the middle of the group.

Parthenal frowned in surprise and suspicion. How could he have missed seeing Leor when he entered the tent? His height made the wizard stand out; and the red hair was unmistakable even if Leor had changed his long robes for drab riding gear. Glancing at Rothir, he saw the same puzzlement in his eyes.

“Pardon me,” he said, addressing Leor courteously, for he had always liked the man although he did not understand him. “But did you not use wizardry to escape our notice till just now?”

“I did not use it to change my appearance,” answered Leor, equally courteously.

“That’s not quite a complete answer,” rumbled Rothir. Leor merely bowed.

“Pardon me,” said Thoronal, less courteously than Parthenal, “but a wizard who forswears wizardry is useless. A wizard who pretends to forswear wizardry and then uses it to suit himself is worse than useless – he is dangerous.”

“I only use it where it cannot make a difference,” said Leor mildly.

“Then what’s the point?”

Huldarion made a gesture of impatience. “Enough! Leor is our friend, and has a considerable fund of knowledge for us to draw on.”

“Not about darkburns,” said Thoronal. Huldarion gave him a long look, until Thoronal turned his head aside.

“If it must be, it must,” he muttered.

“So much for the north,” said Huldarion. “A small detachment under Solon will be sent further west of the Outland Forts to monitor activity. For the rest of you, Thoronal will be

your commander—" at this news, Parthenal groaned inwardly – "and you will be riding the other way, east and south. Reports have just come in from a new direction. A further army is emerging from the Darkburn Forest."

He paused, and in the stillness Parthenal enquired, "How many?"

"A mere six hundred so far; but doubtless many more to follow."

"Where?" asked Ebril.

"The forest's southern edge." Huldarion pointed to the map. "From here, it's less than two days' swift ride. Everyone has their gear prepared, I trust? Very well. These are the captains." He named eight men including Parthenal and Rothir, and, for the first time, Sashel. Of Sashel's twin, Gordal, there was no mention.

"Again, no women captains," Huldarion continued. "I regret it, but it's possible that a company may come from Kelvha to assist you. We have requested this of them, not because I think you need their help, but because I would like Kelvha to become involved. So far I have had no answer. But if they do arrive then you shall show them how we fight."

And then they all drew round the map and discussed their possibilities in more detail, Parthenal joining in but thinking, I had rather go north and fight beside Huldarion.

"One weapon that the stonemen do not know we have," said Huldarion, "is the knowledge of the stones and their effect. It's clear that they repel the darkburns. Why, or whether all will work in the same way, we don't yet know; but it is useful knowledge none the less."

"Can we get hold of any stones?" asked Rothir.

"Veron has some, and will try their use in battle in the north. Otherwise, we have none yet. Maeneb and a junior Rider have been back to the Gyr cave, where you left several dead stonemen, but without success. The bodies had already had their stones harvested – which is interesting."

"The stonemen may be aware that we've found out their secret," Rothir said.

"I'm not sure how they could have found that out," replied Huldarion, "except from you, during your expedition chasing after Arguril." Ouch, thought Parthenal.

Leor said peaceably, "Whether they know it now or not, they will find it out soon enough."

"So, any stoneman bodies that we come across," said Sashel, "we extract the stones if possible?"

"Yes. You will be issued tools for the purpose. An unpleasant task, and difficult to carry out on the battlefield itself, but necessary afterwards. Gather all the stones you can."

"To catch a stoneman or two before the battle would be useful," said Parthenal.

"It would. But take no excessive risks."

At the end of the discussion Huldarion looked round all their faces searchingly.

"I value you all equally," he said. "If any one of you is not happy with my choice for this campaign, come to me afterwards and we can talk it through."

Did his gaze linger on Parthenal's face? Did Huldarion guess how strongly he desired to go north? Parthenal knew that he would not ask to discuss it. For what could he say? *I want to be with you. To defend you, to fight for you, to die for you if necessary.*

For now, at last, the time had come for which they had waited twelve long years. That was the meaning of the change in Huldarion's scarred face: it was a sharpening of purpose, a honing of intent. And Parthenal knew he would only hinder that intent by asking for some

special treatment. His part was what it always had been and would always be – to serve Huldarion in any way that he was asked.

So he saluted wordlessly and left the tent with the others, to gather those who would fight under his captaincy, and bid them pack their gear.

They had three hours, but all the Riders were ready before that. Huldarion came up to salute them before they rode out of the camp.

“After you have disposed of this stoneman army, you will be needed in the north,” he told them. “You will have to ride speedily to join me there, and be ready to do battle at short notice.”

“And when will Kelvha deign to join in, do you think?” That was Thoronal.

“As soon as they see the danger encroaching on their borders. Tiburé reports that they are already mustering their troops ready to march north and west.”

“Not east? So we’ll have to go it alone after all,” said Thoronal.

“Possibly. But that is why I have chosen so many of my best people for this task,” replied Huldarion. “Remember our watchwords: honour, care, fidelity. Your care and fidelity must be to each other. Ride fast, fight well, and bring honour to the name of the Vonn.”

Saying that, he looked each of them in the face, in turn, and spoke their names.

Parthenal’s heart leapt in his chest. To hear his name spoken, by that voice, still shook him.

He hoped that Huldarion had not guessed at his brief liaison with the infantryman up by the Outland Forts. The other man had been lean and scarred and while they gasped and thrust against each other he had allowed himself, for a moment, to imagine that he was with Huldarion. It was always ecstasy for a moment and it was always a mistake. He forgot the infantryman almost as soon as they parted, yet that imaginary melding with Huldarion still glowed painfully in his mind. He trusted that it did not show.

Then Huldarion nodded, and they all rode away and left him standing by the tents.

“So, an easy task, then,” said Parthenal, trying to be casual. The farewell affected him more than the knowledge of the fight to come.

Rothir merely nodded and checked the train behind them, speaking briefly to the men and women under his command. They took no provision carts: the spare horses carried food and gear. It gave them better speed.

Once they were away from the trees and on the open ground they were able to urge the horses to a gallop. The miles rolled past beneath their feet, wet pasture turning to dry moorland that as yet showed little sign of spring. Parthenal was aware of the thudding of two thousand hooves that shook the ground like a travelling earthquake, a wave of force and thunder heading swiftly east. His horse Alba was strong and eager, and now that he was on the move Parthenal felt the same way. He wanted to get there fast and do the job. Do what he was good at.

Soon they came to the high edge of an escarpment; beneath it lay more plains, and like a reaching hand, a dark and ominous mass of trees that disappeared into a distant haze. It looked endless. He glanced over at Rothir, a few yards away.

“That’s the edge of the Darkburn forest down below, isn’t it?” he yelled over the wind. “I’ve not been to this spot before.”

“I have,” said Rothir, gazing down upon the place where the infant Darkburn river plunged in between the trees. That was all he said.

But Parthenal had the sense that Rothir, like Huldarion, was reforging his own spirit – placing it upon the anvil to harden it, as he would a blade: tempering and honing himself in preparation for the battlefield ahead.

Chapter 23

They made good progress and camped that evening with only half a day's ride still to go. Rothir compelled himself to sleep: he had learnt the trick of it many years ago on his first campaign. Pretend you were asleep, that was the thing, and after a while your mind forgot to tell the difference. Although it hadn't always worked well for him lately, tonight it did.

However, neither he nor his fifty men and women needed any rousing in the morning. He spoke a few words to each of them, for he knew them all at least slightly, and some well: Calenir, for instance, the young man from Olbeth's farm, and Naileb who had left her milking-parlour to ride out with the Vonn. Rothir was heartily glad that Olbeth was no longer riding. That would have been a burden of responsibility he could do without.

But he had a good strong company, a stalwart second-in-command in Theol, and good horses. Narba was sleekly well-fed after a lazy winter; he galloped as swiftly and as willingly as ever along the southern border of the Darkburn forest. This was the route Bruilde had taken, although they would not need to travel nearly so far as she had. They would not glimpse Caervonn.

Before long they did glimpse something: a line of stonemen marching along the forest edge towards them. Thoronal called a halt and quickly they assessed the ground. Here it was flat and soft, but a little further on, a small rise would give them an advantage.

"What's to say they won't just wait for us to come down to their level?" Sashel asked.

"They don't care about that," said Parthenal. "They'll fight anywhere."

Rothir was inclined to agree. The stonemen, in his experience, did not use tactics other than attack and ambush – and of course the darkburns, which they sent ahead to sow terror and confusion in their enemies. They'll find they are relying on their darkburns too much, he thought grimly.

However, the Riders had, as yet, no defence against the darkburns but their swords. There would be no opportunity to carry out any ambush of their own, and they had come across no stray stonemen to be caught and slaughtered for their stones. That harvesting of stones would have to wait.

Like the others, Rothir now strapped on his armour. The toughened leather cuirass and gorget were almost as effective as plate armour, especially with their metal banding, but were lighter and more comfortable. While not altogether proof against a heavy axe-blow, they would protect against a sword slash – and importantly, they would not heat up in proximity to a darkburn, as metal armour would.

Full leather armour had been Veron's suggestion, apparently, although Rothir doubted if Veron himself would have the patience to wear the lot. He donned the leather helmet and the arm guards, but did without the leg guards. They hampered movement; and speed was of the essence when fighting darkburns.

They rode onward to the rise knowing that the enemy was watching them. Below, the stonemen had begun to draw up in a crude battle formation: carts were being pulled to the front on long ropes or chains. Five of them. The stonemen were shouting – whether to alarm their opponents, or simply as a means of communication, Rothir did not know. He could make out no words.

By contrast, the Riders were almost silent as they collected the horses together on the far side of the rise. Rothir was aware that if a darkburn got too close there would be no controlling them; so the Riders would fight on foot. At present, however, the horses were calm and steady. He returned to his company: a nod, a signal of the hand, was all they needed to take their agreed positions.

"Now we wait," commanded Thoronal.

So Rothir waited, alongside the other captains and a selection of the soldiers – those with the most experience of darkburns, who were to take the lead. The others stood behind. In Thoronal's troop he saw that Maeneb had moved up to the front: Durba stayed further back. On either wing of their small army a dozen archers took up their stance. Arrows would have no effect against the darkburns, however. They were for the stonemen.

While he waited, Rothir felt no fear of battle or of death; that would be what it was. What he chiefly feared was fear. He feared to let down his companions, to be unmanned by the dread and horror that emanated from the darkburns. Now as he waited he readied himself, girding up his will against them.

The carts were opened. He heard the metallic clatter from below, and louder shouts as if to drive the darkburns out. But they required no driving. Within seconds the darkburns were rushing towards the Riders faster than a man could run. Two large, three small; the stench was bad, but not as bad as the horror that came in a wave ahead of the indistinct dark figures.

Behind him someone moaned.

"Hold steady!" he shouted. "Hold up your swords!" And he held up his although it made his muscles quiver with the effort of defying the powerful urge to drop it, turn and run.

Darkburns take no account of swords or armour, he thought. Do they see us?

Well, I see *you*: and with that, Rothir leapt forward to strike the nearest darkburn as it rushed towards him.

It was like hitting a tree. How could such an indistinct thing be so solid? Part of it flew off into the air, and when he smote again, another fragment did the same.

But his leather shield could not give him full protection from the heat that radiated from the darkburn. He had to leap back and let Theol take his place. Two strokes, and Theol had to fall back, giving way for Ebril.

Now the darkburn was in their midst and they had to all withdraw from its incinerating heat, slashing as it came close and then running. It was near-chaos; he was vaguely aware that much the same thing was happening in the companies on either side.

And this was the moment that the stonemen chose to charge.

"Hold your ground!" he roared, and jumped forward to strike the darkburn yet again, three times, ignoring the burning of his hands and legs. Finally it fell, crumbling into many pieces at his feet.

At the same time a flight of arrows hissed overhead towards the stonemen. A few of them toppled over – but too few, and then their fellows trampled heedlessly over the injured men in their advance. Immediately the first line of the stoneman army was upon him, shouting and flourishing their swords and battle-axes. No sign of fear.

Yet this was easier than fighting darkburns. Many of the stonemen were unskilled with a sword, although the battle-axes could be lethal even when wielded unhandily. But with a curved sword in one hand and an axe in the other, there was no space for a shield. The few

that carried shields bore them bumping on their backs. Rothir had an idea that stonemen regarded shields as cowardly.

Well, that was fine by him. He hacked his way through the first line without receiving more than a glancing blow on his helmet. Some of the stonemen had no more protection than their tunics, and although a few – those with more stones – wore chain mail, even so their necks and limbs were vulnerable; so that was his first area of attack. The trick was not to think of them as people. He was not a person to the stonemen, after all.

Before long he had accounted for three dead and several injured, while Ebril and Theol on either side were fighting strongly too. The air was full of the dreadful sounds of battle: though there was little breath for shouting now, and not even the screams of wounded men were so audible as the whistling scream of swords and the thunk of axe on leather or worse. Rothir yelled encouragement at his troop, who were holding firm under the onslaught. At the same time he noticed that Sashel's people were in trouble.

A darkburn had run riot through them and two Riders lay contorted on the ground. The stonemen held back while the darkburn did its work, flinging itself at one Rider after another as they tried vainly to destroy it. He saw Sashel, who had lost his helmet, jump forward in attack and retreat with his hair briefly flaming. Kalbe doused the fire with her cloak.

Rothir turned to meet another stoneman running at him. Parrying the sword-thrust, he took the heavy blow from the axe on his shield and while the man was still trying to pull it free he let the shield drop. Then swinging his own sword in a long arc with both hands he swiped the stoneman's head off cleanly.

It fell near his feet. He grabbed it by the ears and flung it, raining blood, into the midst of the shouting melee around Sashel. There was a dreadful noise that might have emanated from the darkburn: he couldn't tell. At any rate the darkburn spun and flung itself away from the rolling head, hurtling out of the affray and down the hill in the opposite direction to the stoneman army.

"Get ready!" shouted Rothir, for even as the darkburn fled, the stonemen began to run at Sashel's troop. Sashel turned to meet the nearest with a fierce blow of his sword. A second later Rothir had to attend to his own attackers again, cutting and hacking with grim concentration until there was a brief lull in the fighting.

Then he paused to take a quick survey of his position. He had five injured, no fatalities. Could be much worse. A scatter of dead stonemen lay around; they would keep darkburns at bay. Down the hill, the remaining ranks of stonemen had gathered together and were noisily consulting. Rothir did not expect them to retreat. His sword was badly notched. He leant on it and tried to catch his breath while he was able.

But behind him came a warning shout of "Mind the horses!" He saw that the runaway darkburn, having zig-zagged to and fro, was veering towards the group of increasingly restless horses. If it got much closer they'd stampede.

Quickly he hacked with his sword at the nearest corpse; this time the damaged blade took three attempts to sever the head. Rothir picked it up and ran with it towards the horses, hurling it so that it rolled amongst their feet. Like some dreadful game of bowls, he thought, watching the darkburn swerve away and veer off again on a random path. It seemed to have no plan.

He grabbed his spare, homemade sword from Narba's saddle before he ran back to the front. It was clear that, unlike the darkburn, the stonemen did have some sort of a plan. Most of them were again beginning to advance, while a smaller group moved backwards to the forest margin. He wondered why. As the heavier force of the enemy surged forward in this fresh attack, it became clear that they were trying to push the Riders back sufficiently to stop them gaining any protection from the corpses with their stones.

"Oh no, you don't," said Rothir, and with a shout of "Don't retreat!" he led the charge again.

This time the fight was long and bitter. Over to his left he glimpsed Parthenal laying about him with his sword, but had no time to see how he was doing. The stonemen in this second wave were tougher and more wily fighters than those of the earlier attack. They sent in the disposables first, but these ones have more stones, so higher rank, he thought, as he took a blow on his cuirass and stabbed the man who'd done it.

"Over here!" he yelled to Sashel. "Re-form!" His group and Sashel's moved together to combine into one unit, with several injured Riders lying within their protective crescent.

The Riders were holding their ground, but only just. Rothir was growing tired. Knowing that his enemy would be tired too, he urged his troop on, shouting praise of every strong blow of a Rider's sword and trying to encourage those who were faltering.

Suddenly the stonemen all fell back.

"What?" said Rothir.

"They're giving up. We've done it," panted Theol. "Shall we charge them?"

"No! Wait. Something's going on." Rothir did not trust this abrupt retreat. Glancing over at Parthenal on his left, he saw him hesitate as well, holding back his own company with his outstretched sword.

But to his right, Thoronal was grinning in triumph. "Forward! Attack!" he shouted. "We have them on the back foot!" He led the charge at a run, with his company following at his heels.

"Wait!" bellowed Rothir. The shout went unheeded. Thoronal's troop were racing down the hill towards the stonemen, who made no attempt to fight, but rapidly withdrew towards the forest. Rothir saw Maeneb standing in their midst, holding back whilst Riders ran past her with their swords upraised.

And then they all came to a sudden, stumbling halt.

"What in the name of all the stars is *that*?" muttered Ebril beside him.

For out of the shadow of the trees, herded by the second group of stonemen, something was emerging: something long and low and creeping, but creeping fast. This was different to any previous foe.

Although it was as charcoaled as a darkburn it was bigger than any that he had come across before; and more distinct – no formless whirl of smoke, but a solid, clawed, yet almost headless shape. Some spur-like objects on its back might be rudimentary wings.

What was more, the malice and hatred that emanated from it were far greater than any he had felt from any darkburn hitherto. The fury. The relentless loathing. The inner voice commanding him to die.

He felt his muscles turn to milk and his limbs begin to tremble. This was what he had feared. When he tried to grip his sword firmly he could barely feel its hilt, let alone raise it.

The darkburn was glowing. Somewhere in the centre of it there was fire. So this was what Bruilde had seen; and Eled. It was nothing like the wonderful creature of the old tales – nothing at all. It was a monster, hideous. Nevertheless, there it was, implacably advancing.

“It’s a firedrake,” he said hoarsely; and then he again bellowed at Thoronal’s troop. “Firedrake! Get back! Get back!”

They needed no telling. Some of them had fallen to their knees in shock and feebleness: others were already turning and starting to stagger back on collapsing legs as the firedrake opened its mouth – or what would have been a mouth, had it not been burnt away.

Inside it was a furnace. From the furnace leapt a stream of flame.

He could feel it from where he stood. It was like the forge multiplied by a hundred. One of Thoronal’s men, unable to run, was caught in the blast. He pitched forward: and an instant later the companion who turned back to help him fell likewise, writhing in the flames. Thoronal was shouting at them in a gasping voice, but the words were indistinguishable.

Rothir yelled again. “Get back behind the stonemen!” He meant the line of fallen foes, whose stones would offer them protection. They did not seem to understand. He ran forward, beckoning his company to follow: they grabbed those of Thoronal’s troop who were close enough, and dragged them forcibly back across the line.

But not far enough back. The stones were not sufficient protection from this enemy. Although the firedrake halted ten yards away, its blunt head slowly swinging, its heat carried far beyond the line of corpses. Inside his leather armour, Rothir felt himself begin to cook.

“Back! Back!” he shouted. The Riders were still moving further back when the firedrake opened its mouth a second time.

“Get down!” He flung himself to the ground as the searing burst of flame poured over him. Several Riders were caught, their screams adding to the horror. It was overwhelming him. But he would not let it. As the firedrake closed its mouth again he scrambled to his feet, trying to push away every thought but the need to work out what to do.

Surely all they could do was to keep retreating. But that would not help for long: for a few stonemen were starting to run in a wide arc round the firedrake to pull the nearest corpses out of the way. When one of them got too close and caught fire his comrades made no attempt to help him.

Still the firedrake stood squatting on its short bowed legs, facing them, if that blunt lump of charcoal could be called a face. With its charred stumps of wings it was a grotesque, ruined thing. Heat pulsed from it: and now it lifted its head for a third assault.

We have to run or die, thought Rothir. Or both. Might as well run this way, then.

He dropped his sword and shield and picked up the two nearest stoneman corpses, seizing one in each hand by the back of their tunics. Holding them in front of him he ran, staggering, towards the firedrake. He couldn’t see beyond the stonemen’s lolling heads. But he could feel the firedrake’s burning – even with his human shield, it was close to unbearable.

It’s no worse than the forge, he told himself, you’re used to that. It’s just the forge.

He had to get still closer before the next surge of flame. So on he ran, half-blind, into the heat, into the furnace. He heard the roar as the darkburn sent out its third stream of fire. He heard the cries of agony.

But this time the cries came from in front of him. The firedrake had turned half away from the corpses that he carried, its head swivelling, so that its fire had hit the stoneman army. It seemed that it did not discriminate between friend and foe.

As long as it can hate and kill, he thought, it doesn't matter who. Although he felt almost on fire himself, Rothir kept lumbering towards it with his bloody burden. And now the firedrake turned fully round from him to face the stonemen in its path.

Instead of advancing to make it move away, the stonemen panicked and began to run. Those in the rear took the full blast of the firedrake's fourth attack: several went up in yellow flames like beacons.

Rothir's human shield was now steaming and sizzling, and he could go no closer. Thrusting the corpses away from him towards the firedrake, he ran back to rejoin his troop. By the time he reached them the firedrake had set out on a new path, creeping fast and low towards the fleeing stonemen, sending wave on wave of fire after them.

As the Riders watched, the surviving stonemen fled into the forest, the firedrake crawling behind them as fast as they could run. It left behind a blackened trail of burning grass and burning men beneath a cloud of smoke.

Then it too lurched into the forest. They saw sudden leaping flames and billows of black smoke mark its progress through the trees. Soon it had disappeared entirely: the only enemies in sight were dead ones. Before them lay an abandoned scene of mud and fire and devastation.

Chapter 24

Maeneb gazed around, trying to penetrate the shadowy knots of undergrowth beneath the trees. The path that the firedrake had taken through the Darkburn forest was easy to distinguish: a track had obviously been cleared earlier by the stonemen, and the point at which the firedrake had plunged across it was marked by scorched tree-trunks and ripped branches. Had it been the height of a dry summer, half the forest could have been on fire by now. Luckily it was the end of a wet winter, so that only the new, tender buds were burnt.

There was neither sight nor sound of the firedrake or the stonemen. When Thoronal asked her, "How close now?" she tested for them again in her mind.

"Two miles away at least."

He nodded soberly. Even though each of the Riders in the forest held a protective stone – prised quickly and unceremoniously from various corpses – nobody showed any inclination to go deeper into the trees in pursuit of the enemy.

"All right," said Thoronal. "That'll do. Let's get back to the others."

Maeneb thought that he ought not to have come down here in the first place, not when at least six of his troop were dead and two dozen badly burnt or wounded. He should have stayed back up on the hill with them. Although she could sense his shame and confusion, she felt little sympathy. He'd been too ready to assume the stonemen were retreating – and he should have led his own retreat as soon as the firedrake appeared. It was only because she had held back that she hadn't ended up burnt herself.

She knew that retreat was not in Thoronal's nature. He hated to be worsted in any conflict, verbal or actual. She also knew that he had burns all down one arm and was trying to ignore them. Pain was easy to detect.

And when they trekked back out of the forest to the others, there was too much pain there, waiting. As well as the six Riders of Thoronal's troop, Sashel had lost three and Orbrel two. About forty were severely hurt, enough to put them out of action. Many of the remainder had minor burns or wounds.

The lesser wounded were now tending the more badly hurt close to the battlefield. On the field itself, Theol and a dozen others worked grimly at prising stones from the skulls of the dead enemy. Maeneb tried to estimate the number of the dead: more than a hundred, maybe two. She felt no triumph.

Walking over to where Rothir sat on the ground, being tended by Parthenal, she squatted down a yard or two away to talk. She was fully aware that Rothir had saved the Riders by his actions, while Thoronal's rash charge had almost caused disaster.

"The enemy are at least two miles away," she said. "And still withdrawing. There's no advantage in trying to pursue them any further through the forest. But there's no knowing how quickly they'll regain control of the firedrake."

Rothir nodded. "We need to move before that happens."

"Hold still," said Parthenal, who was tying up a gash in Rothir's thigh with a curved needle and thread. Rothir held still and winced while the wound was packed with star-moss, and a rough bandage applied.

"You should have worn the leg guards," Parthenal told him curtly.

"They slow me down. It's not too bad." Although Rothir's legs were red, the burns were superficial – unlike those of poor Calenir, who lay and moaned nearby as two Riders tried to alleviate his pain. His part in this campaign was over.

Thoronal walked up and stood over the group. He's spent the last half hour working himself up to this, thought Maeneb, as she waited silently for him to speak.

"I got that wrong," he said after a moment. "Well fought, Rothir."

"We were lucky it worked," said Rothir. "No guarantees. How many stones are we likely to get?"

"Theol estimates at least four hundred. No guarantees of them either, of course; we can't be sure that all the stones will have the same effect. But a good haul." He looked at Parthenal. "Well fought also, Parthenal." Maeneb could tell that it cost him an effort to say that too.

"All the Riders fought well," said Parthenal coolly, securing the bandage around Rothir's leg. He himself was practically unscathed despite having been in the thick of battle. Untouched in his emotions, she thought, as well as in his body. In all her dozen years' experience of warfare, Maeneb had come across no fighter so ruthlessly efficient as Parthenal – except, perhaps, Veron.

"Did you see we had observers?" Parthenal went on, pointing over to a rise where two horses stood. Even at a distance the riders' gear glinted profusely in the sun.

"Oh," said Thoronal heavily. "Kelvha, I presume. No, I hadn't noticed them."

"Nice of them to come and help," said Parthenal.

"I suppose I'd better go and talk to them," said Thoronal. "Not that it'll make any difference to the report that they'll send back."

"It should be a good enough report," said Maeneb.

"In parts, maybe." Thoronal trudged off towards the pair of horsemen. He had not gone very far when they wheeled their horses round and rode away.

"Friendly," commented Parthenal.

"They'll have their orders. You know that," said Rothir. He rubbed at his head and a handful of burnt hair came off in his fingers. His leather helmet sat beside him on the grass, its crown burnt through.

"Don't worry, it suits you having half a head of hair," Parthenal assured him. "Next time, just hold your stonemen to the left, and it'll even up."

Maeneb wished she knew how to make a joke. Rothir looked as if he needed cheering. She tried to think of something positive to say.

"At least we'll get one good night's sleep in Thield before we have to set off north," she offered. And at that he laughed.

"Yes, that'll be a luxury, won't it? That'll do, Parthenal, thanks. You don't need to help me up."

But Parthenal shook his head as he pulled Rothir to his feet. "I do. You're creaking like an old man, dwarf. Your home-made sword proved its worth today, though, didn't it?"

"It did the job," said Rothir, immediately serious again. He laid his hand on the sword's blood-stained hilt as if on the supporting arm of a friend.

"Remember that I've ordered one just like it from you."

"When I get the chance," said Rothir. "That could be a while."

Maeneb left them and went to check on the wounded members of her own troop. Durba was one of those acting as nurse, applying star-moss to Felba's head. She looked up as Maeneb arrived. Still that happiness... it was disturbing, especially after such a battle. Maeneb could not understand it.

Or rather, she didn't want to understand it. What did it mean if Durba was becoming attached to her? What did Durba expect? She herself wanted no relationship with anybody, physical or emotional, male or female. She quite liked Durba for her reticence but that was as far as it went.

"It was a good win in the end," said Durba eagerly, "wasn't it? At least we killed several darkburns and half the stonemen. And we put the others to flight."

"The firedrake put the stonemen to flight. And we killed less than half. And one of the darkburns is still roaming around somewhere."

"But we'll be all right now we've got the stones." Durba seemed quite confident.

"They weren't a good defence against the firedrake," Maeneb pointed out. "The reach of its flames was too long."

"Well, if we can collect enough stones we can just throw them, and repel a firedrake that way. In any case, I don't think they'll be able to take a firedrake all the way up north, will they? I imagine it's too big for a cart, and much harder to control than the usual darkburns. The stonemen could easily get roasted."

"True," admitted Maeneb sombrely. "They would certainly be hard to drive."

"How many firedrakes do you think there are? Bruilde said that she'd seen two."

"So at least two, then."

"I never thought a firedrake would look like that," said Durba. She was irritatingly talkative and enthusiastic, quite unlike the taciturn companion of the journey to the Gyr. "I thought they would be scaly with huge wings."

"They should be, by all accounts." Maeneb thought about the firedrake. The horror and dread of it had almost paralysed her at first; but at the same time, in the middle of that horror, she had reached out with her mind towards it, searching.

And, as with the darkburns, she had found almost nothing there. Or rather, what was there was on a different level to her own mind; as if it was a sound too low for her to hear, or a colour that she could not see...

How could she teach herself to see that colour, to hear that sound – to feel the darkburns? It would be so useful. But she had no idea where to start. She knew it was a failure and it depressed her.

"You'll do now, Felba," said Durba, patting her patient on the shoulder before she looked up again at Maeneb. "Your turn now. Your face looks burnt."

"It's not bad." She moved away, but Durba stood up and followed her.

"It may not be bad, but it looks sore. Let me tend it, Maeneb."

"Leave it," she said sharply. "You know that I don't like to be touched. By anybody."

"Maybe that could change," said Durba.

"Maybe it couldn't."

"Well, all right, but if you're wounded–"

"I'm not wounded."

"A bit of star-moss would just soothe–"

"Stop it, Durba. Why are you talking so much?"

“Am I?”

“The battle excited you.”

“I suppose so. Yes, I think it did. You see, it’s the first time I ever–”

“And you didn’t mind it? Killing people? Seeing people dying?”

“Well, of course I mind it,” Durba said, “but they’re stonemen, after all, and I didn’t really know the Riders who died. I mean, I’m sorry for them, obviously.”

Maeneb looked at her long and hard. “You’re very young.”

“I’m twenty. Not all that young. So am I supposed to fall apart on the battlefield? That wouldn’t be very useful, would it? I thought I coped quite well with the darkburn feelings. I knew that they weren’t real.”

“But the deaths are real. You ought to care about the people you are fighting alongside.”

“I do,” said Durba. “Of course I do. But all the ones I care about are fine. And it *is* exciting, isn’t it?”

“It’s not a game,” said Maeneb.

“But it is an adventure.”

Maeneb sighed. Time would probably teach Durba, so why should she try to disillusion her? All the same, battle ought to mean more to her than this. Even Parthenal, she knew, had never taken killing lightly. Both his skill and ruthlessness had developed over many years.

And here was Durba, to whom this first horrific fight was nothing but a big adventure. For all Maeneb’s insight into the inner lives of other people, this was something that she couldn’t understand.

Chapter 25

Yaret's first battle was against neither darkburns nor the stonemen, but one of her own troop.

She was saddling up the scruffy horse at daybreak, when she felt a hand come round behind her and go down her breeches. She tried to pull it out but the hand was insistent. The arm it was attached to was stronger than hers.

So Yaret pulled out her knife instead; at which the hand stopped its unpleasant fondling and withdrew. She turned round and saw that it belonged to Inthed, one of the men who had voted against her joining the Gostard troop.

"If you do that again," she said, "I'll kill you."

His hand shot out to grip hers round the wrist and forced the knife up towards her own throat.

"I'd like to see you try," he said.

Although she felt the urge to spit in his face she decided that it wouldn't help. So she attempted to wrestle with him, which of course was useless: he was at least one and a half times her weight, and stronger in proportion. She let the knife fall because it would only cause trouble, and instead twisted and writhed and tried to hit him. He seemed to be enjoying it until she kicked him in the shin and scraped her boot down his leg to stamp on his foot, hard, with her wooden one.

That did it. He loosened his grip enough for her to pull free.

"Ow! That hurt! You little..."

"Cut it out, turnip-head," she said. "I've got to fight next to you tomorrow. When a stoneman rushes towards you with his axe upraised, do you want me to shoot him down or not?"

By this time Jerred and a couple of the others had wandered over to see what the scuffle was about. This made her feel a little safer, but not entirely.

"What's going on?"

"He stuck his hand down my breeches uninvited," said Yaret.

"It's only a bit of fun," said Inthed.

"I don't enjoy it."

"Well, I didn't hurt you, did I? No need to pull a knife on me. She said she'd kill me, Jerred!"

Jerred looked at her. She could tell he really didn't want to sort this out.

"All right, I over-reacted," she said. "Next time I'll merely maim you."

"You did maim me," complained Inthed. "I think you broke my foot!"

"Don't go damaging him," said Jerred wearily.

"Sorry. That was the wooden leg. I just forgot."

"The what?" Inthed stopped wincing and rubbing his shin to stare at her. She picked up the knife and stabbed her own leg at the ankle.

"This one's wooden. Surely you knew? I showed to the Baron. Didn't Jerred tell you?" She looked at Jerred, who shrugged.

"I told them. I expect he wasn't listening," he said.

"If I'd known you had a wooden leg, I wouldn't have touched you," declared Inthed, not with remorse but with disgust.

"Oh, good. It has some advantages, then."

"Stop the bickering. We're leaving in five minutes," said Jerred shortly.

"I'll be ready." Sticking her knife back in its sheath, she turned to Helba. The horse had stood unmoved throughout the wrestling and commotion. Impressive. It might do all right in battle.

The others went away to see to their own horses, apart from Inthed. He hung around to ask, "What happened to your leg, then?"

"A stoneman with an axe."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "So no-one shot that stoneman for you first, then."

"No." She tightened Helba's girth-straps. "There was no time to react. We were ambushed."

"Who's *we*?"

"Some people I was travelling with, who rescued me afterwards."

"So who were they?"

"Riders of the Vonn." She expected another *So who were they?* When there was only silence she glanced round at him.

He looked, if anything, afraid. "Was Veron one of them?"

"No. I haven't met Veron. I've heard about him, though. Why do you ask?"

Now Inthed seemed decidedly uncomfortable. "You know that it was only a bit of fun before, don't you?"

"Not fun for me," she said.

"It won't happen again."

"Well, of course it won't," she said. "Wooden leg, remember? It's a great prophylactic."

"A great what?"

"Forget it. Come on, they're leaving." She swung herself up onto Helba's back, while Inthed hurried to mount his own horse.

They rode west in a long train behind the Baron's entourage. The Baron sat aloof and straight on Poda, who held herself as proudly as the queen of horses. No wonder everybody looked at me when I arrived, thought Yaret. The lead soldiers soon broke into a canter, but after the first flush of enthusiasm they slowed to a sedate walk, and she had time to think.

It seemed unfair that she should need to be wary of her fellow-soldiers as well as of the enemy. Still, at least the wooden foot would give her some protection from Inthed.

Ondro hadn't minded it, and she felt even more grateful to him now. But she felt also some dismay, because she guessed that Inthed would not be unique in his revulsion. That didn't matter at the moment; but it might in future. Even her old lover Dalko might have flinched from a wooden leg. He would have found it hard to joke about, although in this case, joking would actually have helped.

Meanwhile, she felt ashamed that she had to rely for her safety on a wooden leg – that, and the mysterious power of Veron's name. She wanted to ask the others more about Veron, but was unwilling to betray her ignorance.

So on she rode, keeping close to Morad and Jerred; for she felt that she could trust those two, to some extent at least.

By now they were passing alongside and at times through the fringes of the great forests of the north: huge, close-packed stands of spruce and pine and gring and selver, and others that she did not recognise. The ground beneath Helba's hooves was soft with needles and scattered with huge cones. Some were as big as her fist and many a horse stumbled on them. Helba, however, seemed nimble for an elderly mare. Yaret tried to catch another glimpse of Poda; but the Baron and his company were too far ahead in the trees now to be seen.

When they stopped and camped, she felt as if the rest of the army could be miles away. In here the air was still: the forest muffled every sound and made her little group seem cut off, adrift on an island of pine needles amidst huge waves of twilight green.

As she ate her rations and prepared to sleep, Yaret was surprised to hear some of the men complain about the meagre food, the hard ground, and the cold. She had no problem with any of those. It made her realise just how accustomed she had grown to hunger and discomfort over the long months of winter in Obandiro. She missed her little pot of salt, but that was all. The pine needles that she lay on felt luxurious after the knobbly sacks down in the cellar. She said a small Thanks in her head; and then Oveyn, because she had forgotten it the last two nights. And she must not forget any of it.

That night she dreamt of home – of where had once been home and now was gone. Children ran through empty streets and screamed for parents who did not reply. Instead, the Guardians lay stiff and mute on every corner. All she could do was watch as the wall of flames engulfed the town. It was a familiar dream and by now she knew both that she was dreaming and also that it was real.

In the morning she made sure to perform Haedath and did not care who watched her do it. She would fight for Obandiro, and nobody would stop her. It was not only the individuals that she mourned – for many of them, after all, she had not known, or had known only by sight – but the town itself, as though Obandiro were a living entity. A long-suffering one: for centuries it had endured blight, famine, fever, summer storms and bitter winters. Ill-fortune had seemed at times to pour upon it. Yet always it had managed to survive – till now.

Again she wondered, should I be there? Or here?

She listened for the dead standing at her shoulder. *Here*, they murmured, *for there must be no more Obandiros*. Whether or not it was the dead that spoke, or merely her own wish, she had no choice left to her now, because they were setting off again.

For half the day the woods marched past them on the right-hand side unchangingly; and then suddenly, without warning or preparation, they were in the thick of battle.

Yaret could not work out what had happened. Nobody seemed to know. Only later did she learn that a dozen darkburns had rushed out simultaneously from the treeline all along the ranks. Such a small number – yet they created such a huge amount of havoc.

At first she only heard wild shrieks and saw the horses just ahead of her begin to bolt. Then the smell hit her, and the cloud of fear as thick as smoke. So she knew at once what she needed to look out for.

The nearest darkburn had already rushed on a group of Melmet men about thirty yards away. One man lay twitching on the ground, in flames. Another ran to his aid – only for the darkburn to whirl upon him too, so that he immediately blazed up in a sheet of fire. The screams and smell of burning flesh were sickening.

One of the stones was in her pocket: she could drive the darkburn away, if the stone worked. But she couldn't risk riding Helba so close. Even the stolid old mare would surely panic at a darkburn.

So Yaret jumped down from the horse, and ran towards the huddle of fire and darkness that still lingered by the burning men, crouching on the bodies, a smoking shadow in the flames. She had to push through a throng of frantic horses and bewildered soldiers – some cowering and moaning, some shouting, but none knowing what to do. None of them could get close to the darkburn for the heat and fear.

As she approached she pushed the fear down. I could bear it before, so I can now, she thought, as she felt her face and hands begin to burn.

And then the darkburn rose up from the prone and smoking bodies, which thankfully had fallen silent; only the flames spoke their own dry laughing language. When she was less than ten yards from it the darkburn began to move away from her. It seemed to be longer and thinner than either the one she'd met above the empty town of Erbulet, or the one she'd found down in the pit; although she could not tell how many legs it had, or whether they were legs at all. It was mostly cloud and darkness.

But the stone that she carried worked. As she got closer the darkburn began to rush away from her more speedily. It hurtled back towards the forest of great pines it had emerged from – just as a stoneman force came charging out.

The darkburn was caught between her and the attacking stonemen. It swerved across the space between the two armies – which was rapidly narrowing – while Yaret ran parallel to it, along the line of Melmet men, trying to keep it away from her own side.

But the force of the stonemen and their many stones must have been too great for it to bear. The darkburn spun through the scattering ranks of the Broc, not pausing to attack any of the frantically shouting men, and raced straight out the other side. Then it careered off across the empty land towards the south, and showed no sign of turning back.

Yaret gave up the chase and stopped to pant. She hadn't run so fast for months: the last time she remembered running was to her tardy donkeys, south of the Thore, and her leg was throbbing. But the stonemen were already almost on them, so she had to run again, this time back to Helba.

She reached the horse just as the first wave of the enemy hit the Melmet troops. Pulling her bow from its saddle-holster she swung round, nocking an arrow to the bowstring: fire, nock, fire, nock, fire...

But all at once there was no time to nock another arrow, because the stonemen were too close, so she had to drop the bow, snatch up her sword, slap Helba on her rump and send her running off to anywhere she would.

Ignore the shouts and screams. Prepare. Observe. Now. Nearest stoneman. He's big. But legs, throat, armpits all exposed. Aim there.

Yet she was fully aware that she was exposed too – for none of her group wore any armour, unlike the Baron and his followers in their chain mail. Most of the Gostard men were not even equipped with shields. So she would have to get in first with her blow. Luckily this stoneman was an even worse swordsman than she was: clumsy, no defence. He had only four stones round his head...

Yaret shut out the thought of the stoneman she had slain in the deserted town up north, and sliced desperately with her sword at his unprotected throat. A lot of blood happened.

He began staggering: another stroke, and he fell over. She was shocked. She had just killed a man – one who had not wished to die – and a lightning bolt of some acute sensation ran through her and froze her for a moment.

Unfreeze, she told herself. All right. I can do this. One down. Where's the next?

The next was on her before she could think, and then thought must have stopped altogether for a while. There was nothing but instinct and automatic reaction as she parried and hacked and slashed at one stoneman after another without any time to plan her moves. Blood was running down her face and into her eyes, although she had no idea how much of it was hers. There seemed to be blood everywhere, and the shivering clash of metal mixed with groans and grunts – not much shouting now, nobody had the energy to spare – while around her she saw fallen bodies slowly accumulating.

As she tired and slowed, Morad rescued her from being felled by an onrushing foe, getting his sword-stab in first; a little later she thought she might have rescued him in turn, when a stoneman who was about to swing his axe down on to Morad's head crumpled underneath her blow. Morad seized the axe from the stonemen's hand to use it on his neck, several times. Yet more blood. When she wiped it from her face she could taste it, metallic, sticky, horrible.

But then, behind Morad, there was a space. A blessed emptiness. A few last stonemen were running back into the trees.

Yaret leant on her sword and gasped for breath. A moment later, since it seemed the stonemen really had retreated, she sat down heavily on the ground. She felt almost unable to move.

Others knelt or sat around her. There was cheering somewhere, though not much. She said Oveyn automatically. But all she could think was, *Well, that was a mess.*

So much blood. Its sour iron taint reeked even through the smoke. And such hard work, this fighting! She had thought that she was fit after a winter of digging and hard labour: yet her arms were trembling with the effort, and her back and shoulders ached. How did people do it for more than a few minutes?

But she had no idea how long the fight had lasted. Half an hour, perhaps? An hour? Inthed and some of the others were clapping each other on the back as if they'd won a whole war. Yet she knew that this was just the start. A mere skirmish. And it had almost done for her. If the stonemen had not been so untrained and un-nimble, she'd be dead. She thought again of Brael up in the burnt, deserted town, and this time the memory would not go away.

Jerred was of her way of thinking, it appeared: there were no cheers from him. He had a sharp word with Inthed, commanding him to stop the celebrations and help to drag away the wounded. Yaret thought to check her limbs to see if she was one of them. It seemed not.

And then a soldier in the Baron's livery rode up and demanded words with all of them.

"That was Yaret," she heard Inthed say. "She's over there."

"*She?*" the messenger exclaimed with outraged surprise.

"He," said Jerred, in exasperation. "You've had one too many blows on the head, Inthed." As the messenger turned towards her she saw Jerred give Inthed another blow on the head, with the back of his hand, for good measure.

"The Baron commands your presence," said the messenger to her coldly.

Well, she had known that this would happen. So she staggered to her feet.

"I'm coming," she said to him. "Just let me get my horse. There's a reason why."

"I'm coming too," said Jerred. "Seeing as he's in my troop." Once she had retrieved Helba – who was calm enough, and had not strayed far, who in fact was already walking back to her – they traipsed along the line of tired soldiers to the Baron. "What happened there?" hissed Jerred. "When you ran at the darkburn and it ran away. Was that wizardry?"

"Maybe." She was aching all over now, not just her shoulders, but legs, arms, everything; and tried to straighten up before she faced the Baron. How did the Riders do this? They must be made of iron. Whereas she was made of twigs and grass.

Baron Grusald was another man of iron, from the sight of him – both in his full-body armour and in his steely, cold, suspicious gaze. As the messenger bowed, murmuring to the Baron and his group of headmen, they all looked at her askance.

Inwardly she cursed Inthed for giving away her gender. She strongly suspected that the Baron had been informed of it by Jerred at the start, and perhaps Inthed's slip hadn't been deliberate; but she would have preferred it if the whole Melmet army didn't know she was a female.

"It's reported that you charged a darkburn and it ran away from you," announced the Baron's spokesman, Devald, with supercilious disapproval. "Explain."

Yaret bowed and touched the side of her hand to her forehead in the archer's salute. Then she held out her other hand to Grusald and opened it to show the stone lying in her palm.

"I had this," she said, "from a stoneman's head. A past incident had given me the idea that the stones might somehow control the darkburns, but I had no opportunity to try it until now. It seemed to work. I would say it repelled the darkburn at a distance of some yards."

Grusald nodded to Devald, who plucked the stone from her outstretched palm. Grusald studied it but did not touch.

"Why did you not tell me this before?" he said levelly.

"Because I had no certainty that it would work."

"And where did you get this one from?"

"From a lone stoneman up north. He'd been left behind when the army marched out."

"I assume he didn't offer it to you."

"No. I killed him."

"And I assume he did not have one stone only?" said Grusald.

"He had only two."

"Where is the other one?"

"In my saddle-bag."

"Find it."

She went over to Helba and retrieved the second stone.

"I trust my horse Poda has served you well," she said as she handed it over; because it wouldn't hurt to remind him.

"Your former horse," said Devald, and she bowed.

Grusald was frowning at her. "I suppose you think you won that battle for us," he growled.

"No. I think the skirmish was won, but not because of me. It was because of all your men who fought so valiantly. However, in the battles to come we may be able to deal more easily with the darkburns if all these stones work in the same way. I can't be sure that they do. Even if they repel the darkburns, we would have to be careful about exactly where we drive the darkburns to. Ideally you'd herd them into a river that could carry them away, or perhaps into a pit dug beforehand to trap them. Otherwise they'll just be roaming around."

Grusald gazed at her for a little longer, still frowning, before he said abruptly, "Very well. Orders will be given to pluck out stones from the dead foemen. I shall then decide how best they may be used. Well? What are you waiting for? Go back to your company. Jerred? Stay a moment."

She led Helba away, aware that she was being stared at. The meeting had a large audience. So much for the anonymity she had hoped for...

And when Jerred returned ten minutes later, he said with a wry shrug, "Well, the Baron can't ignore the fact that you're a female now, thanks to thick-head there." He jerked his head towards Inthed. "Sorry about that. I know you wanted to stay secret. But the messenger protested about having a female in the ranks."

Her heart sank. "What did Grusald say? Have I got to leave?" she asked.

"No. He doesn't take kindly to advice from messengers, as he made quite clear. And I pointed out that our troop doesn't belong to him. Although we're allied for the purposes of war, Gostard isn't under his dominion."

"So he won't kick me out?"

Jerred shook his head. "I reminded him of a couple of things: your wooden leg, and your desire for revenge. That's something he can appreciate."

"Well. Thank you." She reflected bleakly that as word spread, all the army would soon be calling her a peg-leg. Useless female peg-leg. Still, that might not be a bad thing, if it put everyone off as effectively as it had Inthed.

"The horse helped too," said Jerred with a half-smile. "And of course your connection with Veron. I told him about that as well. It didn't hurt."

"But I don't have a connection with Veron. I don't even know him. Why does everybody up here talk about Veron?"

"They're afraid of him," said Jerred.

"Why? Is Veron so dangerous?"

"Oh, yes. Not to his friends, and Melmet is his friend. But they're still afraid of him, quite rightly," answered Jerred, sombre now. "And not just him: his wife."

Chapter 26

Yaret was right about the *Peg-leg* tag. She heard it called out in mirth several times that evening, and by the next day half her own troop had adopted *Peg-leg* as her new name. She didn't mind that. It made her feel slightly more accepted.

She felt more or less accepted by most of them now, anyway. Her own views of them had also changed over the last day or two. Jerred was a much tougher and more ruthless leader than she would have thought from her previous brief contacts with him. Morad, on the other hand, seemed more soft-hearted than he had been in his role as Gostard's miller.

And thankfully none of them followed Inthed's example, although admittedly there was little time for horseplay of that sort. They were all set to work by the Baron: those who weren't tending the wounded or packing up the camp were kept busy prising the stones from the heads of fallen stonemen. It was a nauseating task, during which several heads ended up being smashed.

Yaret, bandaging up burns, tried not to watch as the mutilated enemy dead were piled up unceremoniously. She said Oveyn for them under her breath, still conscious of the shock of killing. It felt like a lightning stroke that had left its mark within her. She forced herself to over-ride it and filched a lightweight shield from one of the discarded corpses.

Next day they all moved on and after a muddy and uneventful march camped some twenty miles further west. The Baron called a halt by a craggy hill that loomed over a long ridge: between the two, the ground was soft.

Here, the following dawn, many men were set to work digging a long trench two or three yards wide. Yaret thought that it was not an ideal place to capture darkburns. However, since she could not see a better site, and no-one was interested in her opinion anyway, she kept her misgivings to herself.

The trench was only part-dug when the warnings came. Lookouts had been set along the ridge: now horns blew, loud and frantic, one after the other, signalling the sighting of the enemy.

And then brief moments later came the swiftly rushing blurs of darkness and the stink and horror of approaching death. Yaret snatched up her bow and fought against the fear that rapidly enveloped her. Whether it was the manufactured fear of darkburns or her own fear of battle, nobody should say she failed in courage because she was a woman.

A couple of the men, however, seemed to be suffering; young Bred was almost in tears as he tried to hold his shaking sword up in both hands. Yaret called out words of support to him while she nocked an arrow to her bow, but almost at once the darkburns – eight or ten of them, spaced out – were rushing at the Melmet line. Close behind them the first stonemen were already emerging, charging from the trees with upraised axes and their strident battle-cries harsh in her ears.

If the first battle had seemed chaotic to her, this one was doubly so. She loosed off arrows at the charging mass without knowing if she hit any of her targets; for the crowd of stonemen was so thick that any injured soldiers in their number were just carried along in the surge or else swiftly trampled underfoot.

The unfinished trench swallowed a number of the darkburns, but because it was still too shallow at one end, the larger ones got out and hurtled on towards the Melmet line – only to

stop several yards away, flailing and spinning, held back by the power of the stones. The Baron's men, encouraged, advanced on them, so that the darkburns were driven back towards the trench once more.

At the same time, the front line of stonemen came hurtling down from the ridge; some of the more unwary of them toppled into the trench too. But others leapt it, swinging their axes as they came, and ignoring the darkburns which now zigzagged in destructive random paths, trapped between the two armies. The darkburns resorted to hurtling through any gap, however small, on either side, leaving men behind them burnt and shrieking. But at least they did not stop for long enough for their heat to often become fatal.

Through all this, amidst the fires and smoke and shouts, Yaret fired arrow after arrow until her quiver was empty. Then she dropped her bow and grabbed up her sword and newly-acquired shield.

The shield proved its worth immediately, with the first blow of a stoneman's sword. The point penetrated it and then stuck fast; and while the stonemen tugged at it, she swiped him with her own sword through the neck. He was still in the act of falling when the next man leapt upon her. Parrying the blow, in the same stroke she sliced across his arm. She saw only surprise and annoyance on his face – no pain – before she stabbed him through the ribs. Although again she felt that jolt of shock there was no time to think about it.

Once again it was bloody, brutal work; but the shield helped, even though it was only made of leather stretched taut over a wooden frame, and soon began to look the worse for wear. The trench and the properties of the stones were giving the Baron's men a clear advantage – and, moreover, the darkburns that they repelled wrought more damage to the stonemen's discipline than to that of Melmet. While the stonemen seemed to have no cohesion, the Barons' troops held their line; and gradually the chaos took a shape as they began to gain the upper hand.

Suddenly the furthest line of stonemen turned and retreated over the ridge, to disappear into the ranks of trees. Yaret was surprised, for she had gained the impression from the Riders of the Vonn that retreat was anathema to stonemen; yet this was the second time she had witnessed them withdraw. She was very glad of it none the less – as were they all. The triumph of the Melmet army was muted by fatigue and wariness.

The Baron sent no men to follow the retreating stonemen into the denseness of the forest. Instead he rode around on Poda assessing the damage done to his own forces. Despite the effectiveness of the stones, there were many Melmet casualties; and while the Gostard men had all survived, several had bad cuts and gashes.

"You've got one yourself," Jerred told her. "On your head. No, the other side."

She had felt nothing. But when she put a hand up to her hair – which she had braided tightly on the right, copying the Melmet archers – she found her temple sticky with blood that she had assumed was the enemy's.

"At least the trenches worked, after a fashion," she remarked.

Jerred handed her a waterskin and a bit of cloth to wipe her head with. "After a fashion," he agreed soberly. "Though we won't be able to use that trick again. They'll be prepared for trenches now. If they have any sense they'll attack as soon as they see us start to dig."

But from now on, it seemed, they would not be allowed to stop to dig, not even to bury their own dead. The Baron ordered the troops to move on with all haste.

When he led them out again on Poda, the straggling line of men behind him was much longer and thinner than it had been at first. Everyone was tired and apprehensive. As she rode, Yaret felt more nervous than the stolid Helba underneath her: she expected another ambush at every moment. When none occurred it simply fuelled her nervousness.

It was a long forced march with no stops until nightfall. On halting, her troop, like others, tried to light a fire; but all the wood nearby was so damp that the smoky flames fizzled weakly before sputtering out. So they ate their rations cold, and shivered through the night.

Yaret awoke multiple times, disturbed by every rustling twitch and murmur of the men around her. When she finally managed to drift into sleep, her dreams were no respite. The deafening orange roar of fire: the shrieks of children... They shook her back into appalled wakefulness, more terrible than the actual noise of battle had been.

In the grey, drizzly daybreak the army set off on the march again. Still they were not attacked. On their coming to the north-road five miles from Ioben, Yaret noted the familiar surroundings with dull surprise, wondering to find herself here without hindrance. The last five miles plodding on their weary horses to Ioben's rugged walls seemed the longest yet, with every man looking round for some sign of the enemy. There was none.

When they arrived at Ioben, it was strangely quiet. Even the Baron's air of dour self-assurance seemed to leave him as the Melmet army rode up to the main gate, their hoofbeats and jangling harnesses the only sound.

Yaret and her troop were not far behind the Baron: Jerred had kept them well up towards the front, with a stern insistence which some of his men did not appreciate. But Yaret guessed at his reasoning – that the closer they were to Grusald and his hard-bitten bodyguard, the safer they would be. The men of the Broc had won her respect over the last few days for their discipline and their resilience.

Outside the gate the Baron, pulling on Poda's reins, came to a frowning halt to consult his headmen. He looked aggrieved. Where were the Ioben troops that were to meet them here? Where were the aldermen with their grateful welcome? No cheering crowd awaited them.

Instead, a group of four elderly men and women came hesitantly from the gatehouse. Although they bowed they looked askance at the arriving army.

"We sent messengers ahead," the Baron told them, his harsh voice echoing in the cold air, "to tell you that we were coming to your aid against the stone-heads. Where are your men? Your forces, your commander?"

"Our commander Hreld is trying to muster troops, Baron, north of the town."

"I thought they would have been already mustered," complained Grusald. "Don't you know that the enemy is only a day's march away? We have fought them off half a dozen times merely to get here. And we find that nobody is ready! Take me to Hreld."

After some consultation the gates were opened fully and the army was led through the almost deserted streets. Finally Yaret allowed herself to relax a little.

She looked around with both interest and recognition; for this was her grandmother's birthplace, and she felt a certain sense of belonging here, even though three years had passed since her most recent visit. It was a long diversion from her pedlar's route to get this far north, and the trade last time had not been good enough to justify the journey. Ioben was not a wealthy town.

In truth, it was not even a town at all so much as a collection of clumped houses, many of them built in the old round style in turf and thatch. With small windows set into walls

almost a yard thick, they were gloomy but wind-proof in the biting winters. Goats grazed in the space between.

But the houses themselves seemed to be mostly empty. Not burnt, which was something: and at one or two Yaret saw the dim faces of women and children looking out. When a pair of women called to each other, window to window, she recognised her grandmother's dialect.

"From Melmet, are they? Which side do you think they're on?" called one.

"Ours, it's to be hoped," replied the other. It was odd to hear the familiar tongue, so close to the Bandiran language and yet so far in miles from her own home. But Ioben was where many of her distant relatives had settled four hundred years ago. They had kept to the old ways of their northern origins, while Obandiro, in the east, had been more adaptable. There, the last roundhouses had been replaced many years ago by multi-roomed homes that allowed for privacy and did not fill themselves with smoke.

None the less the ties between the two remained. On her early visits to Ioben with her grandfather, she and Ilo had been welcomed warmly, if with a quaint accent.

There was no warm welcome now as the Melmet army tramped, tired and disgruntled, through the town. On its far side they came upon a field that was full not of goats but of people. This was obviously the mustering camp; for many groups of men lounged by makeshift tents, sharpening rusty swords and comparing home-made spears.

It was a makeshift army, too, thought Yaret; for most of these men wore everyday working clothes or a range of disparate gear. There was the odd ancient breastplate and battered helmet probably taken down from its wall for the occasion. But many of them looked like farmers come to market, rather than soldiers gathering for war.

Not all, however. Some way apart stood a small group of men with the appearance of hunters: they favoured hoods of scruffy fur, and carried a profusion of bows of varying lengths. As she rode past, she noticed that at least three of them bore the red raw scars of recent burns. She looked more closely: though young, they had the grim expressions of men who had experienced too much too recently. She knew something of that feeling.

Jerred was summoned along with the other captains to talk to the Ioben commander, Hreld. That must be him, she thought, standing in the middle of the field – the man built like a barrel with a round bristling head and a harassed air. His mood did not seem to be improved on seeing the Baron and his captains. Although Yaret couldn't hear the words that were exchanged, the looks from Hreld's people were not over-friendly.

And closer to hand, the Ioben men began to gather round the newcomers, eyeing them with suspicion, and discussing them openly and unflatteringly in the Ioben language. She realised that she might well be the only one in the Melmet army who could understand their blunt, idiosyncratic speech.

"Melmet? Think they're a bit grand, don't they? What are they doing here? This isn't their country."

"Aye, well, maybe they want it to be."

"Then they can take a jump. Did Hreld ask them to come here?"

"Not that I know of. They'll say they've come to rescue us – as if we needed it."

"We'll have Kelvha marching up here next," declared the first man, glowering at the arrivals, "and pretending to clear out the stone-heads, and then claiming that it's all their doing and this is all their land."

“Aye, well, that’s what this is all about, isn’t it? That’s what Adonil said. It’s all about territory. Invade it, burn it out and then they can take it over.”

She glanced sidelong at the speakers. They weren’t alone in their opinions: others were nodding in agreement and muttering misgivings. When Jerred returned to the troop after the meeting with Hreld, he looked annoyed.

“Seems we’re not wanted,” he said tersely. “You’d think they’d be glad to see us after everything we’ve gone through to get here. But they’re an ungrateful set of country clods.”

“Then we should go away and leave them to it,” suggested Olked.

Jerred shook his head. “Can’t do that. They can’t hold back the stonemen on their own. They don’t understand what’s coming,”

“They’re suspicious of us,” Yaret said. “They think we want to take over their territory. They’ll think the same of Kelvha too, if they should happen to turn up.”

“They what?” said Jerred with a frown. “How do you know that?”

She shrugged. “I’ve been listening. The Ioben tongue is very similar to Bandiran. You can tell the Baron if you want; I’m willing to act as an interpreter.”

But after brief consideration, Jerred shook his head. “Ach. Why bother? They can all speak Standard, can’t they? If they don’t want us here, they can tell us so outright. I don’t need to give Grusald bad news that he knows already. And do you really want to bring yourself to his attention again?”

“I don’t think he’d kick me out, now that we’ve come this far.”

“Maybe. All the same, they can damn well talk Standard,” grunted Jerred. “Ungrateful lot.”

“They’re worried, not ungrateful,” Yaret tried to explain. “Somebody’s been spreading rumours that Melmet and Kelvha want to annex their country.”

“Who’d want this star-forsaken place?” sneered Inthed.

“Have you heard of anyone called Adonil?” she asked. They all shook their heads. “Adonil was named as a rumour-spreader. If you find he’s one of the Ioben captains–”

“He’s not,” said Jerred. “Hreld made his captains bow to the Baron – not that they wanted to – and none of them was called Adonil. Mind you, he’s expecting more men to arrive soon from the outlying regions to swell his numbers.”

“They could certainly do some with swelling,” remarked Hansod. “And they could do with some proper soldiers. This lot are a joke.”

Yaret wanted to point out that the men of Gostard were themselves hardly crack troops. She kept her mouth shut, because they were doing their best. Anyway, who was she to talk? A lonely female peg-leg... And her whole leg ached as much as the half one did.

Luckily there was no more marching to be done that day, although she saw scouts galloping out in various directions. The Melmet troops spent their time cleaning their gear and trying to buy food from the townspeople, who did not want to sell them any. She was glad of the chance to rest and to wash in a handy horse-trough, although an attempt to sponge the blood from her clothes only spread the stains still further.

“You look like a barbarian,” Bred informed her as she rebraided her damp hair.

“Thanks. I expect we all do, or we will before this is over.”

Bred gave her a rueful half-smile. “I suppose so,” he said. “Do you know, I thought that first battle would be it. I thought that would end it, and then we could all go home. So...” He grimaced. “That was why I...”

"Sure," said Yaret. She pulled the braids on the right side back around her head and fastened them. "You fought bravely," she added. Bred had fought adequately but with resolution. A tall, well-knit, amiable young man, he lacked skill with a sword, as did most of the Gostard men apart from Jerred; but once the battle started he had not lacked courage.

"Everyone did all right," said Jerred, who had stripped to the waist to take his own turn at the horse-trough.

"I just hope there aren't too many more battles still to come," said Bred.

"There'll be a few yet," said Jerred. "The stonemen are still testing us. Looking for weaknesses." Yaret eyed him surreptitiously as he washed. His thick-set body bore a number of old, white scars.

"You've done this before," she said.

"What? Washed? Has been known, on occasion."

"A very rare occasion," said Novad, waiting in the horse-trough queue.

"Watch it or I'll demote you," said Jerred calmly.

"From what?" laughed Novad. "From dogsbody?"

Jerred began to towel himself down with his bloody shirt. "From general dogsbody to official turnip-head."

"Ah, but we've got one of them already. Don't need another."

"Inthed fought well," said Yaret, because it was true, and only fair to say so. Jerred raised his eyebrows, and she turned round to see Inthed smirking at her.

"You noticed, then," he said. "I killed a few stonemen before they could get to you."

"For which I am grateful," she responded formally.

Inthed held out his bag. "Here; say something else nice, and you get first pick."

Yaret peered warily into the bag. She saw three loaves of coarse grey bread, and an end of ham, which looked slightly green.

"How old is that?"

"The bread, two days. The ham, unknown."

"Hmm. Not sure that's worth another compliment."

"It's food, isn't it? I did better than Morad, for all his cajolings," said Inthed.

"Nobody would sell me anything," admitted Morad. "Maybe you should try, Yaret, seeing as you speak the language."

"Maybe she shouldn't," said Jerred firmly. "Don't let them know you understand a word, Yaret. It'll only make them more suspicious."

She nodded. And later on, when she wandered round Ioben, piecing together her three-year-old memories of the town, she took Jerred's advice and spoke to nobody. Even when she came across a shopkeeper that she knew, she made no sign; and the man clearly either didn't remember her, or didn't recognise her in her blood-stained gear and archer's braided hair.

So she restricted herself to looking and listening – both to the townspeople and to the makeshift Ioben soldiers. Hearing their distrustful comments about the incomers, she realised that Jerred was right about the wisdom of staying unobtrusive. She kept her mouth shut and eavesdropped where she could.

The Baron of the Broc was spoken of disparagingly, as a proud old man now far beyond his prime. But to her surprise, the Iobens' opinion of their own leader, Hreld, seemed little

better: they were sceptical about his motives. He had friends in Kelvha, they muttered, who would call in favours of their own.

And once or twice she heard Adonil's name.

"When he was here," said one man, "he told us this would happen."

"Where is he now? We could do with Adonil. He'd soon send this lot packing. No trouble to him."

But the first speaker only shrugged. Who and where Adonil was remained mysterious to her. How he could send an army of sixteen hundred packing was another mystery, and one she did not like the sound of. Adonil – whoever he was – must have considerable forces on his side, unless the Ioben speaker was exaggerating wildly.

She thought of Adon, the wizard named by Rud back at the inn; it felt like half a lifetime ago. Was the similarity of the names a mere coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not... for the other wizard Leor had multiple names too. Liol. Leori. When on her return to her troop she mentioned Adon's name to Jerred, it sparked no recognition. So she was in the dark.

And not just about Adon, she thought ruefully as night fell. Although the streets were lit by intermittent torches, each was an isolated patch of yellow. Between them there was no connection to enable her to piece a map together – no way to see into the blackness.

She was in the dark about everything. Where the stonemen were; how long before the next attack; if Hreld and Grusald would agree on any course of action; where the army might be sent; and whether any of them would come out of this alive.

Chapter 27

Hreld's reinforcements arrived early the next morning. There were less than a hundred of them, by their appearance mainly farmers and goatherds: they marched in through the gate with solemn countenances but with little order. Some of them looked very young. Hreld's entire army now comprised barely seven hundred men, although the townsmen that Yaret overheard seemed to think that was a great number. She would have thought so herself not so long ago.

Various scouts, both Hreld's and Grusald's, had returned the previous night. All gave the same report: that stoneman forces had been spotted to the north and west, while a great many Kelvhan troops were marching from the south, but not towards Ioben. Grusald's scouts had, according to Jerred, approached the Kelvhans and had been told – somewhat loftily – that Kelvha was on its way to the western Outlands to do battle, but would wait for Melmet and Ioben to join it if they wished.

Hreld was not willing to head south to join with Kelvha. Instead, he gave orders that the whole army should be ready to march west as soon as possible.

Nobody could understand that.

"Hreld should at least go and meet the Kelvhans," protested Morad, "if they're that close. Why is he so intent on marching out alone and risking battle now? He should take any help that he can get."

"Don't worry – he will when it comes down to it," said Jerred confidently.

Yaret was not so confident, for she suspected that Hreld was swayed by his men's distrust of Kelvha. However, she said nothing as she doled out the morning's food. That had become her job; partly because food was seen as women's work, but chiefly because she was meticulously fair in portioning. It saved arguments.

Half an hour later they were on their horses and leaving Ioben's walls behind. To Yaret, the column of troops ahead of her seemed never-ending, a long line snaking through a drizzly landscape of recently ploughed fields. Hreld and the Baron of the Broc rode at the front, barely visible in the mist of fine rain; her own small company was, this time, far in the rear.

"How many of us are there?" she murmured to Morad.

"Something over two thousand."

"Is that a lot for an army?"

"I don't know. It's a lot for me."

Yaret felt that it was a lot for her too. But she had no doubt that the stonemen's numbers were far greater. The fact that the Melmet forces had killed many more than they had lost did not particularly reassure her. It simply demonstrated that the stonemen foot-soldiers were so numerous as to be regarded as dispensable. She thought again of Brael, abandoned in that eerie northern town, with a faint queasiness.

She concentrated on steering Helba through this unaccommodating landscape. The ploughed fields soon gave way to craggy pastures interspersed with clumps of pine and juniper. It was lumpy, boggy, up-and-down terrain, clouded in patchy mist or maybe smoke, for certainly the smell of smoke seemed to permeate this land. There were streams

everywhere and the ground squelched underfoot: they rode through mud that had been made semi-liquid by the hundreds that had gone before them.

The drizzle did not help. By midday the path they followed was so slippery and sodden that the Gostard troop was obliged to lead their horses rather ride them, and so lagged behind yet further.

Which meant they didn't know the attack was happening until the panic rippled down the line. There were confused shouts: and then the tell-tale billows of smoke began to rise, and Yaret heard the screams of horror and of pain.

Swifter than the clouds of smoke, the darkburn fear came spreading over them, a stifling, choking shroud of terror. Panic afflicted the Iobens, some of whom were running pell-mell down the line.

"Stand fast. We've got our stones," called out Jerred. "They can't come near us." And the Gostard men held steady. Yaret glanced at Bred; he looked unhappily resolute, and she thought that she herself was definitely becoming hardened to the darkburns if not to battle. Although her limbs felt weak and heavy, she could repress the urge to run.

But she realised with a lurch of her stomach that the fleeing Iobens could have no stones – no protection from the darkburns. Instinctively she began to move towards them, her hand on the two recently-harvested stones she had in her pocket.

"Leave them," commanded Jerred sharply. "Let's do our job here. Form the crescent."

As he barked out his orders his men assumed their usual battle formation, making a semi-circle with Yaret and the other archers to one side. A squadron from Melmet was assembling at their back. When she glanced over at the Iobens, she saw to her relief that some of the Baron's men were riding to their aid. Only then did she catch her first glimpse of the blurred shapes of the darkburns, as, repelled by the stones, they began to rush away from the Melmet line.

And their movements told her where the stonemen were – for the rushing darkburns veered and spun again, away from the shadowed stand of trees to their right, and began their random zig-zag as they had before when caught between two armies. One hurtled straight towards her before swerving aside just as its heat threatened to become unpleasant.

She tried to ignore the careering darkburns and took aim with her bow at the trees beyond them, ready for the emerging stonemen. When the first line charged out there was a spray of arrows from along the ranks, which totally failed to slow the charge. Yaret released most of her arrows until the enemy drew too close, their war-shouts a cacophony of hatred and the rumble of their feet vibrating through the ground.

As in the last battle, she dropped her bow and snatched up her sword and shield. This was becoming all too familiar. Would there be no end to it, just attack after attack? She felt already sickened by the task before she cut down her first stoneman.

But again, as in the last battle, there was soon no time to think. There was barely time to plan her next thrust and slash. There was no time to register that her blade had cut off a stoneman's ear on its way through his shoulder; no time to wonder whose were the cries of agony around her – not stonemen's, she thought, for they were oblivious to pain – no time to prepare for the next charge, and just enough time to realise that this enemy army was much bigger than the last.

And better organised. Rather than running around without co-ordination, the stonemen came at the Melmet troops in concentrated waves, beating repeatedly against the ranks of

defending men. However many she and her companions killed, always there were more to take their place. It did not matter if individually the stonemen were unskilled fighters when their numbers were so great.

Meanwhile the scattered lobens were in disarray. A darkburn had caught them and the dreadful smell of burning flesh added to the stink, as the screams of anguish added to the noise.

However, most of the darkburns were still trapped between the two armies – and they were doing more damage to the enemy than to Melmet in their wild collisions with both sides, for the horde of stonemen was too thick and tightly-packed to easily let them through. Four or five darkburns ended up enclosed within their ranks. In the crush, whole squads of stonemen were engulfed in flames, and the Melmet troops took the advantage.

Once taken, they did not let it lapse. The stonemen's attack broke up and lost its power. The men at the back gave way; and at a shout of command they abruptly all retreated. A few Melmet horsemen gave chase, but not for very far. The last of the darkburns rushed away into the trees, where no-one felt inclined to follow.

Instead they stood in the mud, panting, and listening to the crash and crackle of the retreating army fade into the forest. Three lobens lay dead not far from Yaret's feet. Her own troop had escaped without major injury.

"We've got them on the run!" crowed Inthed, hoarsened with smoke.

"Unlikely. It's just a strategy. Someone's organising them," grunted Jerred. "Stonemen don't think for themselves."

"They must think," Morad objected. "They're not animals."

Jerred shook his head. "Close as you can get."

"Well, at least we might have some respite now," suggested Yaret, wiping the sweat and blood from her face with her sleeve. "With any luck they won't be able to regroup again until tomorrow."

Everyone agreed with that. As it turned out, everyone was wrong.

The stonemen attacked two hours later, at dusk. The army had marched a mere three miles before the gloom of nightfall halted them. While the weary and unwary soldiers were starting to unfurl their bedrolls, there was sudden pandemonium. The enemy had charged the camp.

This time they drove no darkburns; so there was no preliminary warning stink nor sense of fear. The attack was not large, falling on the far edge of the camp, but it was disproportionately devastating. In the shadows and confusion at least a dozen lobens and two dozen of the Baron's army died before the stonemen could be beaten back.

After that every troop and squadron set its own watch while the other members tried, in vain for the most part, to snatch some rest. Shortly before dawn, a second band of stonemen attempted a new raid. Although this time the watchmen gave the alarm and the Baron's men repelled the marauders without further losses, it meant the end of sleep.

As soon as possible the army was ordered to set out again, and the slow-moving column began to worm its way across the heavy ground. Yaret was always uneasily aware of the ranks of trees, too close, on either side. They seemed to smoke. She knew she should be glad of the intermittent drizzle, for it lessened the risk of fires, but it meant that everyone was cold and damp in spirits as well as in their clothing. Although her home-made woollen cloak was more resistant to the rain than most, it lay sodden and heavy on her shoulders.

The Baron had sent six scouts ahead to reconnoitre – of whom only four returned. As they galloped up, there was a brief halt while the headmen gathered to take counsel. According to Jerred, who attended, the scouts reported seeing a great stoneman army a few miles to the north. Of the Kelvhan force, there was no sign.

There had followed, Jerred said, some fierce dispute between Hreld and his own men. Jerred did not know what about – it was all in their northern babble, as he put it. Whatever its cause, the upshot was that the army was ordered to ride on west with all possible speed. At this news everybody groaned.

“Why? Where are we going?”

“Just west,” said Jerred. “Don’t know why. They might have some intelligence that they haven’t told us.”

“Intelligence? In that loben rabble?” muttered Hansod.

Yaret said nothing, but followed the others, spurring Helba into a trot. Soon the trot became a canter, until a number of horses stumbled on the unforgiving ground and they had to slow again. They weren’t progressing fast enough for the Baron; she saw him look back, gesticulating angrily. It’s all very well for him, she thought – riding Poda at the front before the ground got ploughed up by eight thousand hooves. Grimly she wondered how far they would be allowed to go before the next attack.

It came all too soon. They were skirting the dark border of a pine wood when the warning horns were sounded. Yaret, who had managed to retrieve only a dozen arrows from the previous battlefield, took up her place and nocked one to her bow, trying to shake off the dismay and hopelessness that flooded over her. She braced herself for the arrival of the darkburns.

But there were none. Her sense of weary hopelessness was entirely her own. There were only stonemen running towards them in a long line from the trees. Maybe the stonemen had decided that the darkburns were a liability – or maybe too many were escaping in the battles, and could not be retrieved.

Either way, it made for more straightforward fighting. Yaret shot her dozen arrows, and then hacked with her sword, and expected every second to be struck down; but she wasn’t. The stonemen were fewer than she had thought at first, and unlike the enemy army on the previous day they seemed to have no battle plan or even concept of defence.

Thus they were slain wholesale by the Baron’s soldiers before the remnants of the attacking force dissolved and scattered into the surrounding trees. Yaret was left with the strong impression that this onslaught – like the night-time raids – had been merely a distraction designed to keep the Melmet forces busy: to slow them down, and wear them out.

Two hours later, when the next similarly disorganised mob fell upon them and was similarly quelled, she was sure of it.

And then, two hours after the exhausted Melmet army had stopped for the night, yet another raid came in the still of dark: a sudden force of screaming stonemen charged right through the middle of the sleeping Gostard camp, hacking around them viciously.

Yaret, dozing at the edge of the group, had time to jump up and grab her sword before the stonemen reached her – but Novad was already lying on his bedroll with an axe buried in his head, killed before anyone had realised fully what was happening. Jerred avenged him furiously, leading the troop in slaughtering half the stonemen and driving the others away.

The attack lasted only a few minutes. Yet despite its brevity, it felt to Yaret like the worst so far. She had seen Novad die and had been unable to stop it. A quiet, middle-aged, dry-humoured man; a skilled potter, the father of three children. What use was his death to anyone?

Despite their weariness, not many of the Gostard men could lie down again to sleep after that. They sat up, huddled in their cloaks, with Novad's covered body in their midst. There was none of the accustomed banter. Not a word was spoken as they waited for the cold pale dawn.

The next attack came in the dull gloom before the dawn arrived. The bulk of the Melmet army had only just begun to stir when a company of stonemen poured out of the trees – this time targeting the Iobens, on the northern edge of the camp.

The Iobens did not know what to do. While some stood and fought, others fled, with stonemen in pursuit; and all the time more stonemen were emerging from the forest until the fighting spread all up and down the camp in wild confusion. It was a maze of shouts, of whistling swords and flying axes, of stone-studded heads yelling avid hate. Some of the stonemen seemed to hit each other in their frantic haste to strike.

Yaret had no arrows left to shoot and no opportunity to shoot them. The defence was all sword-work, bloody and chaotic. No formation could be held for long: it was every man for himself until the stonemen's lack of skill or strategy began to tell against them, and gradually the weary Melmet soldiers gained the upper hand.

By the time the last marauders turned and ran back to the trees Yaret could barely lift her blood-stained sword. Her leather shield was ripped to shreds. How many attacks was that? She had lost count. How many stonemen had she slain? She could not guess. She seemed to have been killing men for ever.

Around her, the victorious troops were too tired to even cheer. Uninjured men fell exhausted on the muddy ground amongst their slaughtered foes as if they too had decided to give up the ghost.

When Yaret tried to say Oveyen she could not do it. The words had gone. Kneeling on the blood-soaked ground she bowed her head and just thought a vague Oveyen instead. It wasn't enough: it was nothing. It was mere words in the air. There were too many dead – these battles were too much for an Oveyen. Her clothes were newly sodden with fresh blood.

"Here; drink." It was Morad, offering her a waterskin. She nodded exhaustedly and drank. Life. Still. But for how much longer?

"How are the others? Many hurt?" she asked eventually.

"Olked's badly injured, I'm afraid. Shaled's got a nasty gash all down his leg. Inthed's moaning about his shoulder, but he'll live. Mostly cuts and bruises otherwise. You? Your head's bleeding."

"I think that's just the cut from last time." She inspected herself for slashes that she might not have noticed. There was a cut on her shoulder and another on her shin but neither was big enough to be significant. "No, I'm all right," she said, getting painfully to her feet. She went over to take a look at Inthed, who sat not far away, clutching his arm and groaning with a steady, continuous rhythm.

"Dislocated," said Yaret. "Needs putting back in. I know how to do it."

"Don't touch it! Don't touch it!"

"I'm not going to touch it." Too tired to argue, she called Jerred over to do the job of putting the shoulder back into its socket under her instruction. It was something her grandmother had done for her twice, thanks to her habit of climbing. Then Yaret had done it in turn for Shuli, after the girl had fallen off the trapper's horse. Had that really only been four weeks ago? It felt like years. A distant time and place, unreachable from here.

Well, that was one more battle fought for Obandiro. If you could call it a battle. Another mess of blood and sweat and screams. How long until the next?

"Just keep your arm still," she told Inthed, who was still moaning, to Jerred's evident exasperation. "I'll make you a sling." The nearest dead stoneman lay two yards away, one of many. Cutting a long strip from his tunic with her knife, she fashioned a rough red sling to tie over Inthed's shirt and support his arm.

"It still hurts," he moaned. "Have you got any ethlon?"

"Ethlon? No." She looked at Jerred. "You?"

"We don't carry ethlon," Jerred said. "Perhaps we ought to."

"I suppose the stoneman might have some. They use some drug or other," said Yaret. "Athelid, it's called."

"Never heard of it."

"I'll check his clothes." Warily she returned to the stoneman's corpse and checked for any bags or pockets: but the only pocket she found was empty save for a few crumbs of biscuit. The man had no identifying marks or badges. He wore just four stones on his close-shaven head.

She stared at his face, already waxen now in death, and wondered about him. How old was he? Who had he died for? Who had sent him here to be felled so brutally and anonymously? She turned to search another corpse. The same. No pockets. No identifying badge. No name. Three stones.

But now a Melmet man approached the body, pliers at the ready, to prise the stones out of its head. Yaret turned away, and busied herself in searching for spent arrows. Few were to be found; she would have to resort to the home-made flint arrowheads in her pack. Around her, soldiers began ransacking fallen stonemen for their weapons, prompting her to search again, this time for shields. Although not many stonemen seemed to carry them, she eventually retrieved four from beneath the twisted bodies and took them to her troop.

Once the enemy corpses had been harvested for stones, and the wounded patched up roughly, and the Melmet and Ioben dead buried in a shallow grave – with brief but heartfelt words from the Baron – the army began to move slowly on. The worst casualties, including the unlucky Olked and Shaled, were sent back to Melmet in carts: she did not envy them that jolting journey.

Their own journey was bad enough. The sleep-deprived soldiers were allowed no respite, but rode or led their horses all day through the mud. Since several horses had been injured or had fled, there were now not enough for everyone, so where the ground permitted riding, the men took turns. Yaret's troop made sure she was allowed sole use of Helba: something she did not realise for a while. When she did, she was appreciative and grateful, because her leg was hurting.

Everyone in the procession was jumpy. Yet there were no more ambushes.

The stonemen are regrouping, she thought. It probably just means the next attack will be a big one. Where is the Kelvhan army? And where is the Baron taking us?

She had no idea where they were heading other than west and north. All this landscape looked the same: rough ground enclosed by trees, which she eyed nervously. But no stonemen ran out yelling from their cover.

"You all right?" That was Morad, who seemed to have taken on the role of her protector.

"I'm all right, thanks," she said wearily. "I just hope we'll be allowed to rest tonight without more fighting."

"We could all do with the sleep," he agreed. "Looks like we're stopping now, thank the stars."

All up the line, soldiers were throwing down their gear. The Gostard men followed suit, hastily unpacking bedrolls. Minutes later, some were falling into them without even having any food. A mistake, in her opinion.

"Make them eat," she said to Jerred.

"I mean to. Get up, Claben, don't lie down yet. Get your supplies out."

Unloading some of her own supplies from Helba's pack, Yaret added biscuit and dried fruit to the stale bread and tough salt meat being offered round the troop. Inthed was kicked out of his bedroll. The men ate in near-silence.

"Everyone had enough?" said Jerred after a while. "Now get some sleep. I'll take first watch."

Yaret rolled herself in her cloak on the damp ground, back to back with Morad for warmth. Despite the chilly damp no-one had even attempted to make a fire. She shivered and waited for sleep to take her: but now, when she needed it so badly, it held back. It tantalised her with brief snatches of slumber. Every time she felt herself fall deeper she was jerked to wakefulness by sounds.

They were only in her head. But so clear, so loud, so vivid.

The screams of burning children. Running through the ravaged streets, begging, crying for help. Shrieking in desperation for their parents who were burning in their houses. This was worse than the dreams of falling. She closed her eyes and saw the roaring walls of fire, the weeping children.

When she tried to say Oveyn again she could not. So she lay with her eyes open to keep the dreams at bay. She felt slashed open; torn apart. She should have been there when it happened, to defend them. She should be there to protect them now. Every child she had abandoned to come here wept in her head. Every Oveyn she tried to say accused her.

Accused her of what, though? She felt so muddled. Her mind was a mess as bad as any battlefield. She hated this killing: the shock of every blow. She loathed the sensation as her knife went through a stoneman's ribs or her sword hacked at a neck. The softness of the flesh. The grating on the bone. It made her feel unbalanced, furious, guilty, seasick.

There was no glory in it. Yet it was necessary: because she loved Obandiro, she had to fight and kill its enemies. Otherwise the stonemen would win, and would go back home and kill the children, brutally, without compunction.

No: she was doing the right thing. But not in the right way. What she accused herself of was of being unfit for the task. What was the right way to kill? Why couldn't she find it? What madness had brought her to think she could be any sort of soldier?

She felt no triumph or even satisfaction when a stoneman died. Instead she felt that lightning jolt of shock, and then a kind of grief, and guilt at grieving, and fury at the stonemen for causing this necessity. Everything was destruction. It made her angry, and it

made her want to cry. She was continually resisting both her anger and her grief, pushing them down firmly; but she knew she was unfit.

What was it she had said to Elket? Use your anger as a forge. So her anger ought to make her want to slaughter stonemen; to turn herself into an instrument of death, infallible and merciless. Instead she was just an exhausted bundle of flesh and bones and fear.

So far she'd just been lucky. She'd managed to kill the enemy before they managed to kill her.

And she couldn't shake off the insidious, unwelcome feeling that the stonemen hadn't managed to kill her first only because they were too clumsy, too untrained: too young.

Chapter 28

The forced march continued the next day. And now, at last, the country changed. This was much further west than Yaret had ever travelled, and when they emerged from a strip of woodland on top of a high knoll she was unprepared for the sight that lay before her. Ahead of them, the army marched on down the hill, for the Baron was relentless: but the Gostard troop all paused, like her, to gaze.

She saw a wide, bleak plain of dreary yellowed grass, flattened by the bitter wind that whipped at cloaks and drove long swirls of mist across the land. There were few trees, yet indications that many had stood here until lately; where they had been felled, the grouped trunks had the appearance of black mushrooms.

The plain was backed by foothills, patched with snow and heavy with a haze of untouched trees; and in the distance, like tall sentries, she glimpsed a range of mountains – snow-shrouded, yet not white but blue-grey, the unearthly hue of shadow. The hue of steel. Above them in the cold sky stood the pale disc of the moon.

A guard of snow, she thought. What were those lines in the Ulthared?

To fear the claws of snow. To seek the footprints of the moon. To meet the gaze of ice. Whatever that meant. Those mountains looked as remote and unattainable as the moon above them. Even as she watched, a veil of rain or snow was drawn across them like a curtain, shutting them from her sight.

She wondered how far the Baron intended to go across this vast waiting wilderness. But it was not empty of mankind. Someone had felled those trees, for a start; and several miles away, indistinct and misty, stood a dark rectangle.

“What’s that building?” whispered Bred.

Jerred shook his head. Nobody knew.

They rode on, following the army down to the plain below. Before they reached the hill’s foot, without warning the column ahead came to a sudden stop, horses stamping as they were abruptly halted.

“It’s those lobens,” declared Inthred with exasperation. “Holding us all up.”

Indeed, there seemed to be much vehement discussion and gesticulating at the front of the line. A group of lobens started to dismount from their horses.

“They don’t like where we’re going,” said Morad heavily.

“I don’t like where we’re going,” said Bred. “What are we doing here? There’s no cover or anything.”

“No cover for the enemy either,” pointed out Jerred sombrely.

With a jolt of realisation Yaret thought, So this is the battlefield – this empty, waiting plain. All the other fights were just preliminaries. The proper battle is to come; that’s why the Baron’s brought us here. But there are too few of us. Where are the Kelvhans? And where is the enemy?

Almost before she had framed that second question, she knew the answer to it. The stink, the fear... When she spun round in alarm she saw the steam rising from the trees behind them.

“They must have been following us all the time,” she said, dismayed.

“Tracking us,” said Jerred, “when we thought we were pursuing them. Dismount, everyone. Prepare your arms. Then let the horses go.”

The Melmet troops were already drawing up their ranks in response to the Baron’s harsh commands. The horses were allowed to canter off, to be regathered later. Jerred and his men swiftly took up their battle formation; even Inthed, left arm bound in its sling, hefted his sword in the other hand and assumed his place.

The enemy were on them within another minute. Yaret shot two arrows only – no time for more, for as the darkburns veered away the stonemen charged. That yelling. She wished they wouldn’t. Then they were on her, so close that she could smell their sweat and dirt, could see their eyes wide-pupilled, full of hate between the daubs of grey, could hear the snarls and shouts, could feel the terrifying breeze of axes flying; and once again she was slashing desperately with her sword, her right shoulder painful before she even started.

Somewhat to her surprise she felled three men with ease in swift succession: and could not stop herself from noting the number of stones on each head. The last had only two. How old was he?

Another stoneman at once threw himself at her, burying his axe in her newly acquired shield. She staggered backwards. No matter how old these stonemen were, all had the size and strength of full-grown adults, and were recklessly vicious in battle, not even noticing their own wounds. They were oblivious to pain. She took a second blow on her shield before stabbing her attacker in the stomach. Then she had to finish him off with a sword-blow to the neck, gritting her teeth at the feel of metal slicing through the bone.

Screams from the Iobens. A darkburn must have caught them. Dear stars, had no-one told them to harvest their own stones? The rising smoke, that smell of burning...

“Never again,” she cried aloud, “never again, I will never let you have them!” She was thinking not of the Iobens but of the children of Obandiro. So many dead. Obandiro was gone. Yet it would be avenged: and Yaret fought on furiously, forgetting the counting of the stones. They all deserved death. Every one of them. She did not care how old they were – she would kill them all.

She killed a number; yet still more stonemen charged on past her to redouble the attack further up the line. Each wave of the enemy as it broke and foundered on the Melmet swords was followed by another. Around her, her own troop were fighting valiantly although this onslaught was more prolonged than any yet. Poor Claben fell, a sword protruding from his neck.

Jerred slew the man who killed him. But there was no lessening of the attack. By now both Yaret’s arms were burning with fatigue. Her blood-lust had been replaced by grim resolution. She longed for some respite from the effort and necessity of killing; but there was never more than a few seconds’ pause. As she helped Bred to dispatch a yelling stonemen, she heard another yell behind her, and spun round.

It was Inthed. He was shouting, “Get off! What are you *doing*?”

But he wasn’t shouting at a stoneman. He was fending off a blow from the spear of a burly Ioben. Thrusting the man away, Inthed slashed out with his sword, and missed.

“What are you *doing*?” he yelled again.

The Ioben man began to shout in his turn. “I’ve had enough. You’re all liars and traitors and your Baron–” Inthed kicked him in the stomach, so that he fell over backwards.

“Dear stars,” said Jerred, as shocked as she had ever seen him. “They’re turning on us!”

It was so. Yaret realised that, all along the line, lobens had begun to fight against the Baron's men. She felt at first bewilderment, and then a surge of shame on their behalf. These were her own relatives, and they had joined the enemy...

But the enemy seemed as bewildered as she was. The next line of stonemen hesitated in mid-charge, as if uncertain whom they should attack. After a brief pause they attacked everyone anyway, indiscriminately, swinging their axes and clashing swords with all alike. Yaret fought off one before she had to whip round to defend herself against an loben with a knife. She managed to catch him in the groin with her sword so that he stumbled over, cursing her.

She did not want to kill him – probably a mere goatherd, and her countryman to boot. Almost family, now that Obandiro was gone. But maybe she ought to kill him before he could stab someone else. This was impossible.

Her head was spinning with dismay and her limbs were quivering with fatigue. As he began to rise, she slashed at his sword arm. Then she yelled to Morad, "Watch your back!" Morad swivelled, but too late: an enemy axe came hurtling through the air and caught his leg. Morad toppled over with a cry.

She could not reach him. Nor could Jerred, who was fighting off two enraged lobens.

It's mayhem, she thought. We're going to lose this one.

For now another line of stonemen was breaking out from the trees. There were too many. The Melmet army could never defeat them, not now that the lobens had turned on them as well.

So this was it. Her final battle. Here she would fall in service to Obandiro, and Obandiro would never know.

In her weariness Yaret let her sword point drop. It was the wrong moment; a large stoneman was running at her. She threw herself aside, sprawling on the muddy ground, so that he tripped over her legs. He went down heavily on top of her. Before he could recover, she had whipped out her knife and plunged it in between his shoulder blades.

I just stabbed a man in the back, she thought. She needed to get up, to help the others: but the dying stoneman was lying on her legs, like a dreadful memory of some other time, and she was trapped. The new line of the enemy was only yards away. She could not move.

So it ends, she thought, in blood and ignominy. Oh, Obandiro.

Something shot past her overhead with a loud whistling burr. Two of the charging stonemen staggered and then fell, and she could not work out why.

There was a second long whistle and burr, and two more of the enemy reeled back, collapsing against each other. In fact, they seemed to be somehow tied together.

A third missile whined swiftly overhead. Again she could not see it properly, for it moved too fast. Whatever it was caught three of the enemy this time – and now Yaret observed something that she had never seen until this moment: stonemen panicking.

The three men seemed to be tangled in something that was wrapped around their heads. One pulled at it, crying out in fear, and cried out again as his hands began to drip blood. None of their fellows went to their aid. Instead a number of them began to run away, stumbling over bodies in their haste to flee.

Yaret managed to shove the dead man off her legs, and struggled to her feet. Some of her comrades were already starting to chase the fleeing stonemen when she heard a voice behind her calling sharply.

“Wait!”

A fourth missile shot past her and another pair of stonemen fell, heads entangled, she could see now, in a cord or chain. At the sound of rapid galloping behind her, she turned: a single man was riding up, his saddle laden with looped chains, a spear in one hand, a long chain swinging in the other.

“Keep clear,” he shouted, and as he rode past her he began to swing the chain more rapidly and strongly, letting out a greater length with every rotation until it spun in a huge lethal arc around his head. She thought there were blades at the far end, each on its own length of chain, but moving so fast that she could not be sure.

With a whistle the flying blades shot out and hit a stoneman. The chains wrapped themselves in swift decreasing circles round his head. The rider wielding them pulled his weapon free with a twist of his arm; and the stoneman crumpled, his face and neck scarlet with multiple gashes.

Almost simultaneously the unknown rider stabbed the next stoneman in the eye with the spear in his left hand. The three entangled stonemen were dispatched with the same spear through their ribs even as the rider wrenched his chain from round their heads, taking half a man’s scalp with it.

Two whirls of the chain, and another pair of stonemen fell. And then the lone horseman proceeded to wreak havoc amongst the enemies within his reach: their swords and axes could not touch him before he slew them with his spear or flying blades.

All the stonemen nearby who could run were now doing so, heading for the cover of the trees. The rider wheeled his horse round to address the remnants of her troop, who were watching open-mouthed. He was dark and fierce and eager.

“Who’s in charge? Gather your men and join forces with the next squad. The enemy will stay back for a few minutes now. Not long. But Kelvha’s army is only a quarter-hour away. Hold fast till then.”

“Kelvha?” said Jerred.

“Ten thousand men. I came ahead.” The man grinned with a flash of teeth. Then he was gone, riding up the line on his rough-haired horse towards the Baron’s men, who were still fighting off Iobens as well as the foe. Yaret watched another pair of stonemen fall beneath the flying blades: at the sight of the lone rider, yet more turned tail.

Jerred, who was sitting on an Ioben, punched him several times in the face before getting to his feet.

“Do what the man said,” he shouted at his troop. “Join with Melmet.” He gestured at the neighbouring squad of Melmet men, who had also watched the stonemen’s retreat with astonishment and relief.

Yaret hurried over to check on Morad, who was trying to sit up, despite the deep wound in one leg.

“Hear that, Morad?” she said. “Ten thousand Kelvhan troops are on their way. We’ll move you further back, to where you’ll be safer till it’s over.”

Together with Bred she managed to carry Morad behind the new line that the men were forming with the nearby Melmet company. There they laid him gently down, and Yaret checked his wound. Deep but not dangerous, she judged, so long as the bleeding could be stopped.

“The stonemen are all beating a retreat,” said Bred, gazing round. “Thank the stars that man rode up when he did. Who do you think he was? A Kelvhan?”

“Not Kelvhan,” said Yaret. “Not enough adornment. Or the right sort of horse.” She ripped the sleeves from the nearest stoneman corpse and began to apply one as a dressing to the bleeding leg.

“Veron,” gasped Morad.

“Veron?” Her fingers stilled.

“Never seen him,” panted Morad. “But he fits.”

As she resumed her task of dressing Morad’s leg, Yaret thought about it. The horseman had not been particularly small, nor had he worn the wolfskin cloak of Rud’s description back at the Gostard Inn: he had been clad in black-stained leather armour. He had not looked much like the other Riders of the Vonn that she had met. None the less she had a feeling that Morad could well be right.

Whoever he was, he had saved them for the moment. Further up the line she could see Iobens surrendering to the Baron’s men. The darkburns had all rushed off across the plain or back into the trees; the stonemen had not reappeared. The Melmet army had several welcome minutes to prepare themselves for the next onslaught.

And once she had bandaged up Morad and was returning to the front, here, at last, the onslaught came. No darkburns; just a line of stonemen running out of the trees. She lifted her sword in weary resolution.

But no sooner had this new assault begun than it abruptly ended. For with a raucous cacophony of horns and a heavy drumbeat of swift hooves, another, vaster army swept down the hillside from the east, behind the stonemen.

The Gostard troop, abandoning their formation, huddled together to avoid being trampled – for hundreds of great horses ridden by knights clad in full plate armour were charging round and through and occasionally over any unwary Melmet soldiers. The ground shook with their hoofbeats until Yaret felt as if she were caught in the middle of a thunderstorm.

When the cavalry reached the nearest stonemen, they made short work of them with their glittering swords. All up the line she could see the same thing happening: there was nothing left for Jerred’s troop to do.

It was over quickly. The horsemen looked around for more foes to vanquish, and found none. Yaret felt almost like a vanquished foe herself, surrounded by these proudly stamping horses and their equally proud riders. So this was Kelvha, here at last...

As the Melmet soldiers slumped to the ground, battered and exhausted, the final Kelvhan troop of cavalry rode past them on to the battlefield.

The splendour of this group made Yaret look at it with wonder. In the centre rode a young man, who wore golden armour and an excited, happy air. Those with him formed a protective ring, holding spears out as if in warning to the weary Melmet soldiers not to get too close. The other Kelvhan riders halted, parting ranks, and saluted as the group made its ceremonial progress to the front.

And over all the heads she saw a gold and scarlet standard being planted, and flying in the breeze, as Kelvha claimed their victory.

Chapter 29

“Not much of an army, really, are they?” remarked the young prince to Huldarion in not quite enough of an undertone. Huldarion saw the Baron of Melmet draw back and look askance at his newly met ally.

The commanders of the victorious armies stood together on the higher ground, surveying their forces on the plain below. Only Ioben’s commander, Hreld, was absent: he lay in a tent nearby, having been badly injured by one of his own men, who had turned on him before being slain.

Some of the Ioben troops had remained loyal; but to Huldarion’s eyes they were clearly not trained soldiers. They looked ill-equipped and dispirited. And even the more disciplined Melmet troops appeared ragged when he compared them to the unspoilt magnificence of the Kelvhan cavalry.

“The Melmet forces are small in number, maybe, but valiant,” said Huldarion, wondering how much of a reproof was acceptable. None, probably.

Prince Faldron did not take the hint. “To me they seem to be little more than a rabble.”

Huldarion was exasperated. He knew that the High Prince of Kelvha was only parroting what his seniors said – he had heard the Arch-Lord Shargun express the same opinion barely ten minutes earlier – but why had his seniors not taught him diplomacy? The Baron might have little more than two thousand men at his command, but they were men who had already successfully fought several battles. That Huldarion himself had currently only three hundred Riders under him was not reassuring. Although the Riders of the Vonn had fought well – if briefly – they had naturally been both outnumbered and outshone by Kelvha’s splendour.

There was no doubt that Kelvha had saved the Melmet army from defeat. However, that was no reason for the Prince to show such contempt; especially when he himself had been protected from any heat of battle. He had been kept safely back until it was time to ride in past the enemy corpses and claim the final victory.

Huldarion judged that there was no malice in Prince Faldron; he was merely ignorant and thoughtless. In other respects he seemed a pleasant enough youth, if pliable. At least Faldron had woken up somewhat over the last two days, for on their first meeting he had struck Huldarion as passive to the point of apathy.

Presumably being away from Kelvha had a stimulative effect on the Prince. But for a twenty-year old, he seemed young; and for a man who would be High King within a year, he was granted remarkably little freedom. Arch-Lord Shargun, the head of his army, had so far made all the decisions and merely asked the prince for his agreement.

Although Shargun was evidently clever, he was also close-lipped and evasive. Huldarion would have preferred to deal with the blunt honesty of the Baron. Grusald was another man who lacked diplomacy but at least you knew where you stood with him.

Now the Baron strode away to talk to Veron, whom he clearly regarded with more awe than he did the Kelvhans. Huldarion appreciated this but could have wished the Baron did not make it quite so obvious. He observed to Prince Faldron and the Arch-Lord Shargun,

“You cannot expect the Baron’s troops to rival yours in either numbers or quality of training. I am sure his men are humbly grateful for your intervention.” To be humbly

grateful was expected of all Kelvha's minor allies, he knew well. He anticipated having to practise a little humble gratitude himself at some point.

But not yet. Veron had shown what a single Rider of the Vonn could do; and his other men had fought with efficiency and skill. Few stonemen had escaped.

The Arch-Lord Shargun was frowning at the motley army.

"They didn't appear that grateful to me," he grunted. "And what about those turncoats, eh? Ioben or whatever they call themselves. What do you think, your Highness? Do they deserve death or merely branding?"

"We could slice their hamstrings," suggested a young man standing just behind the Prince, "and watch them crawl away." Huldarion let his gaze alight briefly on the supercilious face, the dark eyebrows at odds with the long bleached-gold hair. He had noticed this man fight without regard for his own safety; it was a surprise to him how such reckless courage could be combined with personal vanity. Perhaps both were simply types of self-regard. It was not a comfortable thought.

The Prince stared down at the large huddle of Ioben men who were now being led towards them, surrounded by a guard of Melmet's archers.

"I don't know," he said. "Why did they turn against us, Shargun?"

"Because they're snivelling cowards. Look at that one there." Shargun pointed at one of the Iobens, a young man who had fallen to his knees on the grass and was sobbing and calling out plaintively in a language Huldarion did not know. He had a thorough grasp of the Kelvhan tongue but Ioben was beyond his ken. "Begging for mercy," said Shargun disdainfully.

They watched the sobbing man's companions try in vain to urge him to his feet. Then to Huldarion's surprise one of the archers guarding the group lowered his bow. Lying it on the ground, he walked up to the crying man, who was now on hands and knees. Squatting down beside him, the archer seemed to be questioning him. The other guards stood aside bewildered: when one remonstrated, the archer raised his hand as if asking him to wait.

Then the archer stood up and questioned the other captives more loudly in their own strange, breathy language. Two or three answered, their tone both vehement and mournful.

"Do you understand Ioben?" he murmured to Veron, who had walked over to stand with him and watch the scene.

"Some," replied Veron. "Interesting."

It was certainly bold, thought Huldarion. Behind him Baron Grusald was muttering angry imprecations. The archer was risking a severe reprimand, or worse; yet he continued to address the prisoners patiently, speaking in the unemphatic tones of a comrade, not a conqueror.

Then at last the archer switched to Standard, as he nodded towards the distressed man on his knees.

"Help him stand up. Have courage. I will go and speak to Kelvha." That too was bold, thought Huldarion with some misgivings.

The young Ioben was at last raised to his feet by a pair of his companions: he was still weeping but less noisily. Huldarion guessed that he was no more than a teenager, who had most likely never witnessed anything more violent than a fist-fight until now.

The archer walked up the slope to the assembled commanders. A slenderly-built man, he wore his brown hair braided on one side and tied back in the manner of these northern

archers. Few of them had so much as a cheek-guard, never mind any proper armour. This one bore a recent cut on his forehead, blood-soaked clothing, and a slight limp. He stopped before the group of commanders and bowed low to the Prince.

“Bowman,” said the Baron with barely controlled fury, “go back to your place.”

The archer dipped his head to the Baron and touched his forehead in respectful salute.

“Directly, sir,” he said. Then he turned to the Prince. “My lord, these Ioben captives are my distant kinsmen, and I understand their tongue.” He himself was speaking reasonably fluent Kelvhan. “They are a remote and lonely people who know little of the world. It seems that they have been misled. They tell me that they fight against Kelvha because they, they are being told that you are...” he paused, searching for a word, “in friendship with the stonemen, and that you control the dark burning creatures.”

“Utter nonsense,” said the Arch-Lord.

“So I tell them.” Although the archer’s command of Kelvhan was good, if rustic, he seemed to struggle with the past tense. “However, when they see the Baron and his soldiers use the stones to make the creatures run, they think this proves their fears are right. They also think that – please forgive me. I will not insult Kelvha by saying this in your tongue.”

He went on in Standard, speaking with a soft northern burr. “The Iobens have been misinformed that the Kelvhans are a cruel people who will – forgive me – throw their women into pits with darkburns and will impale their children on stakes for the crows to eat. I have told them that these are slanderous lies, and that Kelvha is a just and honourable people who will treat them with due mercy. And on their behalf I ask you for that mercy now.”

With that, the archer went down on one knee before the Prince, his head bowed in supplication.

“Why are we listening to a foreign foot-soldier?” demanded the man with the eyebrows. “A churl in rags?”

But the Arch-Lord leaned forward, and said sharply to the Baron, “You used the stones?”

“Of course we did – once we learnt, by pure chance, that they repelled the darkburns,” replied the Baron. He was glowering at the kneeling archer as if he would like to kick him down the hill.

“But who told the Iobens all these lies?” asked the Prince, sounding bewildered.

The archer raised his head. “They named someone called Adonil. I don’t know who they mean. I gather it is not one of their number. At least, he is not here.”

He never is, thought Huldarion, although he held his peace.

“Adonil,” repeated the Arch-Lord Shargun. He stroked his beard gravely.

“Should we forgive them, Shargun?” the Prince asked. “It seems their fault was ignorance. Should we show them mercy?”

“With such cowardly vermin it hardly matters,” said Shargun dismissively. “Do what you will, prince.” Huldarion was disgusted, and careful not to show it.

“I would still hamstring them,” said the man with the eyebrows. “And this upstart archer into the bargain.”

“But that is such a messy and unpleasant business, Dughin,” said the Prince a little plaintively. “That’s not how I want to start my command of this campaign.” Huldarion saw the Arch-Lord’s eyelids flicker as if in ill-concealed contempt.

"My lord, if you will but show these Iobens mercy, they will praise your name," said the archer, looking up at the young prince and speaking earnestly. "They will know Kelvha for the powerful and noble nation that it is, and will look to it for wise leadership."

"Do you know, I am inclined to forgive them," said the Prince. "Well, get up. You may tell them that I am merciful. There aren't many of them, after all. We'll strip them of their arms and horses, naturally, but then they may return to their homes and we expect them to give us no more trouble. Will that do, Shargun?"

His adviser shrugged. Huldarion felt relief. The archer stood up, somewhat clumsily, and said,

"Your name be praised, my lord."

"I'll speak to you later," said the Baron, his suppressed fury seemingly unabated.

"I am at your command, sir." The archer bowed again and turned away. Before he could descend the slope, Huldarion called him aside.

"Archer. Come over here." He moved a few yards away from the group, and the man followed; as did Veron. "Those Iobens," said Huldarion. "If they learn their error, would they fight for us, do you think?" He kept his voice down and his manner aloof, for he did not want the Kelvhans to hear him asking a foot-soldier for counsel.

However, the archer did not seem taken aback. Nor did he behave like a common foot-soldier when faced with a commander. Rather than staring formally into space, or flinching from his close view of Huldarion's scars, he gave Huldarion a long, curiously assessing look.

Huldarion, intrigued, assessed him in his turn. The cut on the man's forehead, like an extra eyebrow, gave him a quizzical air; but beneath the outward composure and heavily blood-stained clothing, Huldarion detected a grim and weary resignation.

"Some of them might fight for you," the archer said after a moment. "They do not lack courage, or they would not be here. But these Ioben men are herdsman and farmers for the most part, bewildered and already far from home. I think that the further from their homes they go, the less use they will be. That applies not only to the captives but to the Ioben troops in general."

"You do not rate them highly?"

"They are not trained for this," the archer said. He paused, considering. "I believe there are several hunters amongst them. They would be the most likely prospects."

"Hunters? Good," said Veron briskly. "How many speak Standard?"

"All will have a smattering of market Standard. They generally understand more than they can speak, but that's not always a lot. Less than you might expect."

"You're not from Ioben yourself," said Huldarion.

"No. From further east. I came to fight under Baron Grusald of the Broc." The archer compressed his lips as if unwilling to say more.

"I'm going to talk to the prisoners," said Veron. "Come and translate for me."

The archer bowed acquiescence. Huldarion accompanied them, conscious of the Kelvhan eyes upon the three of them as they walked down to the company of captive men, slowing to accommodate the archer's halting step. Well, let the Kelvhans think what they liked for once.

"Your right foot," he said. "Are you wounded?"

"An old injury." They paused in front of the downcast prisoners. "First I will give them the Kelvhan lord's message," said the archer.

"He's the Prince," said Huldarion. "Soon to be crowned High King of Kelvha."

"That young man?" A barely raised eyebrow betrayed the archer's surprise. "And the other... the older gentleman?"

"That was the Arch-Lord Marshal."

The archer nodded and turned to address the captives, who showed no happiness at the news of the Prince's mercy, unless relief and humiliation combined could be called happiness. Most of them turned to bow towards the watching Kelvhans. Some went down upon their knees and touched their foreheads to the ground. Good, thought Huldarion, as the distant Prince raised a hand in acceptance of their gratitude.

"You advised them to do that?" he asked the archer.

"Yes. But they are, of course, dejected, and still afraid."

"Tell them they need not be afraid if they fight alongside me," said Veron.

The archer gave him a curious look. "You can save them from being killed?"

"Of course not. But they won't be afraid."

"That is an interesting distinction," said the archer. "Who shall I say you are?"

"I am Veron."

Another measuring look. "I've heard you mentioned. And everyone who's mentioned you is frightened of you."

Veron grinned in seeming pleasure. "That's why they need to fight alongside me."

"I will tell them." The archer drew breath and spoke again in loben. At the name of Veron, a number of the men stirred and murmured until the archer answered them sharply, his previously soft-spoken manner turned to command.

"What is it?" said Veron.

"I have told them not to bow to you," the archer said, "not here. They seem to hold your name in awe."

"So they should," said Huldarion.

"You may tell them also," said Veron, "that my wife is the huntress. Well? What's the matter? Don't you know the loben word for huntress?" For the archer hesitated, taken aback for the first time.

"I know two words for huntress," he replied slowly. "One word is simply the feminine form of hunter. It can mean anyone. The other word is... different."

"Ah," said Veron. "Different how?"

The archer seemed to struggle to explain. "It doesn't exactly describe a person. And there is only one of them."

Veron nodded. "That's the word you want. Well? Why do you still hesitate?"

"Sir, forgive me. But it is a word that is – you might say – secret. Or forbidden. I'm not sure that I am permitted to speak it. And they may not understand it."

"They'll understand it. Speak it," said Veron. "You have her permission."

"I...? You..." The archer, now definitely disconcerted, tried and failed to frame a query.

"Are you afraid to say it?"

"Yes. Yes, I am." The archer licked his lips, and took two deep breaths before he again addressed the loben prisoners. Although Huldarion had heard of the huntress he had never connected her with Veron's wife. And he had never heard her name before. Yet he knew which was the forbidden word by the listeners' reaction.

Unsaryun. Nothing remarkable in that word. What was remarkable was the way certain of the Iobens froze, eyes widening, and stared first at the archer and then at Veron.

Two of them stepped forward. Then two more followed; and after a few seconds, several others.

“Good,” said Veron. “I’ll take those ones. Stay here in case I need you; we’ll go and speak to the rest of the Ioben troops. I’ll clear it with your Baron.”

“Very well.” But Huldarion noticed that the archer had been glancing up and around as if expecting some thunderbolt to leap from the sky. Although nothing of the sort occurred, when he bent to pick up his bow and arrows it was with much less composure than before.

“Your arrowhead. It’s stone,” remarked Veron, although he did not appear to have even looked at it.

“I had no recourse to a forge,” the archer said.

“You made it?”

“Yes.”

“You are a hunter?” said Veron.

“At need.”

Veron nodded. “All right. Well, Huldarion, you’d better go back and pacify your prince.”

Huldarion turned away; but not before registering the unmistakable start which the archer gave on hearing his name. There was a glance of greater shock and curiosity than his scars had previously induced. So the man had heard of him. Yet he had not thought his name was widely known; it certainly ought not to be, up here amongst these men.

Any more questions would have to wait. Still, something about the lame archer tugged at his consciousness as he left the group and walked back to the Prince.

“The prisoners’ gratitude to you is unbounded,” he told Faldron.

“I should hope so too,” said the Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun.

“I have been thinking, Lord Huldarion, that we owe gratitude to you and your men also, for your part in the battle,” said the Prince.

Huldarion felt sure that this was unprompted, since Shargun looked faintly aggrieved and for once said nothing. It was certainly unexpected; but a good sign.

He bowed. “Our part so far has been small. I hope it will be larger at the next affray.”

“Oh, yes! At the forts? That’s where we are going next, aren’t we, Shargun?”

“We hope to be there within two days. That’s if we can persuade this...” Shargun swept his arm across the scene before them – “this hotch-potch of a so-called army to march that fast and far.”

“They have already had some hard fighting,” said Huldarion.

“By their standards, no doubt,” said the man called Dughin. “Our standards are different. You are sure your men will be at the Outland forts, Huldarion?”

Lord Huldarion to you, he thought. But he said merely, “I have a company stationed there already. Their latest reports indicate no enemy movement yet. The greater part of my Riders are on their way now, speeding here from recent battle in the south. The onslaught there was fierce, but they put it down.”

“Ah, yes, the firedrakes.” The Arch-Lord Shargun sounded unimpressed. “I had reports. The stones should deal with those quite easily, should they not?” He glanced round at the Baron, who lingered within the borders of earshot. The Arch-Lord did not bother to lower his voice. “I wonder when he would have thought to tell us that he’d worked out that secret.”

The Arch-Lord spoke, Huldarion reflected, as if he himself had worked out the secret of the stones long ago; while in fact it seemed that everybody else had, apart from Kelvha. As usual, the Kelvhans would leave the hard work to others and claim the glory for themselves...

Patience, he told himself. Keep the peace. These are noble and courageous men; not all the Kelvhans are like Shargun. Without Kelvha we can do nothing. We need to make them feel they cannot do without us.

So he said smoothly, "No doubt the stones have been a valuable tool, and one whose use we should explore further. However, in the hands of fools or cowards they are worse than useless." He felt at once that Shargun would take these words to refer to the Melmet army, and added more loudly, "The Baron and his men have done extremely well with limited resources. But I hope my own men will add experience as well as strength."

"And how soon will they get to the Outland Forts?" Dughin asked.

"With luck, not long after we arrive ourselves: three days, perhaps."

And then he turned away, thinking, No more than three days, please, Thoronal. Be swift as the wind.

Because never mind Kelvha. We need you. Veron and I and the others, no matter how effective, cannot do this on our own. We need you there in time.

Chapter 30

“Hope he’s comfortable in that carriage,” said Veron.

“No doubt he is.” Huldarion glanced towards the enclosed carriage in which the Arch-Lord Marshal travelled. Only on the rougher ground did he descend from it to ride on horseback alongside the young Prince. Faldron rode well. But he ought to, with a string of well-trained horses at his disposal.

“Wouldn’t do for me,” said Veron. “Like to see where I’m going.”

Huldarion laughed. In battle he was occasionally afraid of Veron – or rather, afraid of what the man might do; for another spirit seemed to take him over. Otherwise he liked him, although they could hardly be said to be intimate. Certainly the intimacy did not extend to Veron imparting any more information about his wife. Huldarion was curious about what he had learnt two days ago when Veron addressed the hunters. Yet the one question he had subsequently asked, Veron did not so much close down as simply leave unanswered, as if it were irrelevant.

“Well, Veron, you should see the Watch Forts by tomorrow,” he said. “And I sincerely hope we’ll see Thoronal soon after that. How is your gang of hunters faring?”

“Good enough.” Veron had now acquired his own troop of about thirty men, mostly loben hunters of wolf and bear, maluf and snow bison; so they ought to know what they were about. “We’ve been discussing the best use of the stones,” he went on. “A series of well-positioned trenches is one solution, if there’s time to dig, but it has to be planned for the terrain.”

“All such plans may be useless if the stonemen get wind of them. They might not bother using the darkburns at all.”

“After bringing them all the way up here? They’ll use ’em,” said Veron confidently. “Just a question of how.”

“I’d give a lot to know that.”

“In Melmet’s last battles the stoneman force outweighed the number of the stones on Melmet’s side. The darkburns caused havoc in the middle. Yaret told me the darkburns didn’t want to go near the Melmet army, but eventually they had to push through it to get away. She said they zig-zagged at random until they finally burst through: didn’t come back. Of course the stonemen may have rounded those ones up by now.”

“Wait a minute,” said Huldarion, almost stopping his horse in its tracks. “Yaret? *She* said? Who is this?”

“My interpreter,” said Veron with some amusement, “the archer. Archeress: turned out to be female. You’ve heard of her. Fell over the cliff above the Thore and lost a foot, got rescued by Tiburé’s troop last year. Arguril told me the tale.”

“Yes, I remember it. Rothir found her at the bottom of the cliff, beside the river. That’s the same one?” It seemed staggeringly unlikely that she should be here.

“Only introduced herself properly this morning,” said Veron. “Worried about her sex being known, I think. But I’ll make sure there’s no trouble.”

The limp, thought Huldarion. Beardless. Quiet voice. Acted older than she looked. And she recognised my name: that should have set alarm bells ringing louder than they did. “Is the Baron aware he’s harbouring a woman in his ranks?”

"Haven't asked him."

"Don't," said Huldarion. "Whatever is she doing here?"

"Haven't asked that either."

They rode on in silence, Huldarion reflecting on the story of her fall down the precipice with an amputated foot. Extraordinary that she had survived.

No wonder his scars hadn't disconcerted her. Even Prince Faldron had difficulty looking in Huldarion's face – at their first meeting the wince had been obvious – but then the Prince had never suffered any injury himself. That might change if he was permitted to take part in the fighting. A big if, however.

"What do you think they'll do with Faldron in the next battle?" he asked Veron. "Will they keep him safe behind the lines again?"

"For the most part. Let him loose towards the end, with plenty of his own men around. Got to blood him some time."

"That's assuming that we'll win."

"We'll win."

"I like your confidence."

Veron swept his arm around. "Look at our numbers. And Shargun might ride in a padded carriage, but his men are hard enough."

"They are a strong force. Our numbers, though, concern me," said Huldarion. "Yes, combined we have a large, impressive army. But that's what worries me, you know. The stonemen must have foreseen this. We are doing exactly what they would expect."

"Might not have expected to be noticed, hiding out up in the forts."

"Maybe that was their original plan. But all their slash-and-burn across the north must mean they don't care if they're noticed. It sounds as if they were just testing Melmet's little army. I think they'll be expecting us."

"May not be expecting Kelvha. Stonemen don't plan much."

"But Adon does."

Another silence. Then Veron said,

"Adon won't be there."

"No. He's never where you think he might be, is he? Even Leor says he doesn't know where Adon is."

Veron shrugged. "Wonder how hard he's looked."

"You don't think much of Leor, do you?" said Huldarion.

"He's a good enough fighter. But he'd rather tame a wolf than kill it."

"And you wouldn't?"

"Depends on how much time you've got. But stonemen can't be tamed in any case."

"Or negotiated with," said Huldarion. "No, that seems clear. Look there." He pointed to the westward sky. Beyond a sea of firs, above the gathering evening mists, there rose a square grey sail: a sail made of stone. It was the first of the Watch Forts. They had already passed three such forts, also square and grey, but smaller by comparison; this one was immense even in its semi-ruined state.

Veron nodded, then raised his eyes to gaze across the Outlands, at the far distance which was now obscured in a hazy cloak of cloud.

"When will these fogs disperse, do you think?" Huldarion asked him.

"By tomorrow."

“Then we’ll see the Liath Mountains in the morning.”

“The Liath Mountains,” repeated Veron softly, with something almost like love.

At the first Watch Fort the army halted. The Kelvhan troops began to arrange their camp around the building, amongst the trees. Inside the fort, the abandoned, twig-strewn rooms were cleared to house the Prince and Arch-Lord and their entourage.

Huldarion joined them only briefly. He was busy moving through the Kelvhan army, assessing the troops and talking to the captains, his own fluent Kelvhan putting them at their ease. They were acquainted by now with his history and his experience of previous campaigns; he carefully mentioned a few far-flung battles to add to what they already knew. For he needed their acceptance more than the Arch-Lord Marshal’s, and he thought that he had it – or he would have it, after the next battle. Provided the rest of his men turned up.

And women, he reminded himself. Don’t forget the women just because the Kelvhans do. So when he went to see his own troops, he made a point of stopping to talk with Delgeb and Hilbré, the most senior women there, assuring them of his undiminished faith in them despite their temporary demotion.

“It is only for this time,” he said. They nodded, though resignedly.

“Don’t worry,” said Delgeb with a curling lip, “we’ll stay unobtrusive.”

Then he went to find the archer, who had been at the back of his mind while he spoke to the women of the Vonn. The Iobens were camped on the worst ground, the Kelvhans having appropriated all the best. He exchanged a few words with their new commander, Nold, who had taken over from the stricken Hreld: he seemed a practical and blessedly unimaginative man. It was gratifying to learn that many of the previous defectors had completed the long journey here.

Veron and his hunters sat a little apart, under the shadows of the pine trees, in the middle of a discussion about night stalking. Huldarion was interested to see the deference which the men showed to Veron, although he spoke to them as equals. They conversed in a strange mixture of Standard and Ioben; while he watched, the archer was needed to interpret only once.

He called her aside. As she saluted he decided that the femaleness was not obvious, yet it was there: the fine skin was camouflaged by the crooked nose as well as by the archer’s bloodstained outfit. A good disguise, but yes... He wondered how long it had taken Rothir to realise.

“Yaret,” he said. “I understand that you’re the woman from the north that Tiburé told me of: the travelling pedlar who found and tended Eled when he lay injured. For that, on behalf of all the Riders of the Vonn, I thank you.”

Her face lit up. “Yes, that’s me. And you’re Huldarion, the leader of the Vonn. But none of them told me that. I only know your name because I overheard it once or twice while they were talking together, that’s all.” He was mildly touched by her anxiety to absolve his Riders. “How is Eled, do you know?” she asked. “And Tiburé? How are they all?”

“Tiburé is in Kelvha. Eled, I understand, is still safe in Farwithiel and making steady if slow progress; Arguril’s with a small troop at the further Outland Forts, but they will join us in a day or two. The other three whom you met are at present on their way up here from the south, along with the main company of Riders.”

Although there was no more than the faint curve of a smile, the expression that leapt into her eyes was unmistakable. Pure joy. He was surprised, and moved. Well, they had saved her life.

"I'm glad they are unhurt," she said.

"Rothir was wounded at their battle in the south, I'm told, but nothing major." It was enough to cause a sudden intentness in her gaze, however; and he added, "It won't prevent him from riding here. I hope for them to meet us at the further Watch Forts late tomorrow evening."

"May I—" She hesitated. "May I ask to see them? Just to say hallo?"

"They will have little time to rest; but if you can find us around sunset, you may have a few moments to talk to them. I think that seeing you safe and well may do them good." It may do Rothir good, at least, he thought. And perhaps Maeneb. Not as cold as she appeared. And as for Parthenal... ah, who knew whom Parthenal cared about?

"It will do me good to see them too," she said, unable now to contain her smile. "I thank you."

"You are a long way from your home," he said, although he could not remember being told exactly where that home was.

"I have friends in Melmet."

"And how is your leg?"

"Better with these days of riding rather than travelling on foot. By the way, Baron Grusald of the Broc is mounted on Eled's horse. I had to give it him to win my place here."

"I thought it looked familiar. Did you pay a penalty for your insubordination?"

She smiled again. "He gave me double duty cleaning down the horses. That's fair enough."

"It is," said Huldarion. She saluted him before he walked away.

Next, the Kelvhan quarter-master. After complimenting him on the quality of his fare – not difficult, for the man had, after all, numerous cart-loads of provisions to work with – Huldarion had no compunction about using a little bribery to get some of it for his own troops: not just the ones who were already here, but the larger number who were on their way. He did not care for bribery but in this case it was expected. And for now he had to live by Kelvha's rules.

The next day dawned cool and yellow, the sunrise laying golden hands across the plain. As the army once again set out west he could not help but notice the new shoots poking through the wan coarse grass: tiny starry flowers were hidden in the moss. A minute insect jumped. Each little sign of life held his attention, seeming to leap into sharp focus. It was not a dead land.

Yet from a human point of view this was a sad and barren country, all but uninhabitable. He wondered what had happened to it; for everything that grew was stunted until the forest made its forbidding reappearance to the north. That heavy mass of trees appeared not green, but almost black: the Watch Forts in front of it were dull grey hulks, their outlines torn and broken.

And then the mist cleared and beyond and over everything he saw at last the Liath Mountains, their upper slopes unforested and clad in snow. For there the winter reigned in cold defiance of the spring elsewhere. The peaks shone, palely glittering against the eastern sun: a beacon and a warning that this remote, forbidding land was no place for men.

Chapter 31

At the biggest of the Watch Forts, they called another halt. Although the Kelvhan lords took up their residence within the fort, as Huldarion had expected, it was surrounded by a number of out-buildings and guard-houses – three of which he immediately appropriated for the use of the Vonn. The guard-houses were unheated and unfurnished, but sound enough, with several wind-proof chambers. There his friendly bribery of Kelvha's quarter-master paid off: he was able to oversee the bringing in of ample food, whilst firewood was stacked high beside the hearths.

Huldarion surveyed the results with satisfaction, reflecting that he wouldn't have made a bad quarter-master himself. But then what else was a king but a quarter-master on a giant scale?

And diplomat. And arbiter, and judge. And above all, a fatherly protector to his people. If only those people would appear and set his mind at rest...

But it was a further hour before Veron, who had ridden south to look, came galloping back to report that the line of Riders was finally making its way towards them. So Huldarion went out to watch the column appear on the horizon and steadily grow larger. Still a small number by Kelvhan standards. But everything by his. Gratitude and affection filled him with an unexpected weight of emotion.

When he rode out to meet them he saw that Thoronal, at the head, was looking tired and unusually sombre. Well, they'd had a long, relentless ride. Huldarion passed down the line of weary horses, greeting men and women by name, assuring them of fires and hot water and food waiting.

This is not parental love I feel, he thought; these are my brothers and sisters, these are true friends who have ridden hundreds of miles to do battle for me. His heart warmed to all of them, and for once he wished his face could show it. On this occasion it was hard on him to be expressionless. Instead he had to ensure his words and manner spoke his feelings.

As the Riders filed into camp, and were led into the guard-houses, expressing their surprise and pleasure at their warmth, Veron arrived with his huntsmen to lead away the tired horses.

"You'll join us for dinner?" said Huldarion.

"Later. I have an errand of my own," said Veron. Huldarion knew better than to enquire what it might be. Instead he asked,

"You don't need your interpreter, Yaret, do you?"

"No. Why?"

"Because I invited her to join the Riders for a short while at dinner. It should please some of them to see she has survived and thrived. They will have tales to exchange. What is it, Veron?" For Veron had stopped to stare at him with creased brows.

"Obandiro," he said. "Her hometown. You know what happened to it?"

"No. What?"

"Darkburned. Last autumn. I passed through it soon after. Didn't know its name then. Town just north of Byant: the place looked dead apart from fires and smoke. Completely gone."

"Dear stars in heaven," said Huldarion blankly.

“Yaret arrived from Farwithiel a fortnight later. Found her family dead. Everyone else, too, until she discovered four survivors, all children. A few more turned up after a bit. And some refugees. She left about two dozen there, I think, to ride here and represent Obandiro in battle.”

“Dear stars in heaven,” said Huldarion again, in increased dismay. “Two dozen? Out of how many?”

Veron shrugged. “Fifteen hundred?”

Huldarion stared out across the line of weary horses, seeing only the burning town. If Thield were burnt, and all his Riders lost – save four...

“Where did they winter?”

“In the cellars.” Veron glanced at him. “This is why we fight.”

“Yes.” But he wished he had known about it earlier. He had thought of Yaret’s presence as a gift for some of his Riders, a welcome reminder of past success. Of difficulties overcome. And what now?

He walked into the main guard-house where the Riders had distributed themselves through various chambers before washing and settling to their feast. Fires roared in every fireplace; but now their hearty crackle seemed to menace him.

A whole town darkburned. Gone up in flames. He had known that it had happened in many places, but now his imagination could not put it down. It had not been his land nor his people, but none the less he felt himself burning as he had so many years ago, all down his side, all down his scars. He had survived. So many who had not.

It was almost sunset when he walked outside again to catch Yaret as she trudged over to the guard-house. Her limp was more noticeable than it had been earlier. Even as he hailed her, he was still undecided.

She stopped before him. That gladness in her face.

“Welcome,” said Huldarion gravely. “I’ve just heard about Obandiro. I’m sorry.” She looked at him without speaking. “I don’t wish my riders to learn of it right now. They have had a hard battle and have another ahead of them, with little space for rest.”

“So I may not see them? But I will say nothing of Obandiro.”

He hesitated, aware that he ought to turn her away. It was unlike him to be so indecisive.

“They’ll find out anyway,” said Yaret.

“Yes. But not yet. Do you still wish to go in?”

She nodded.

“You may have a quarter-hour,” said Huldarion. Then he led her through the doorway, already feeling qualms.

In other circumstances he would have been entertained to see how the three Riders who knew Yaret did not at first recognise her in her archer’s garb and strange asymmetric hairstyle. As she limped over to the trestle table, it was Maeneb who suddenly exclaimed her name, and then Parthenal stood up from his camp stool, and Rothir just stared as if in disbelief – as if she had fallen from the moon in front of him. Huldarion sat down at the far end of the table, not with the pleasure he had anticipated, but with deep misgivings.

“Rothir, Maeneb, Parthenal,” said Yaret, whose own delight was evident. “I’m very glad to see you all so well.”

“If it isn’t a stray donkey,” said Parthenal, somewhat puzzlingly.

“What on earth are you doing here?” demanded Rothir.

“So are we glad to see you too,” said Maeneb, giving them both a glance of reproof.

“Indeed we are,” said Parthenal. “But what *are* you doing here, at this star-forsaken tail-end of the earth?”

Yaret laughed. “I’m here for the same reason as you are: to fight. I’m an archer with the Melmet army. Though not even the Baron actually calls it an army. I believe Kelvha call it a rabble. However, it is somewhat better than that.”

“But how did you get here?” and “You’re here on your own?” came from Parthenal and Rothir together.

“I got here on Poda. I’m afraid the Baron of Melmet is riding Poda now; he took a fancy to her, so I had to exchange her for a scruffy little thing called Helba. She’s all right, though. And my troop have looked after me well, don’t worry. They’re from Gostard and I knew most of them before.”

“No-one from Obandiro came with you?” queried Parthenal.

“They stayed to defend the town. Just in case.”

Rothir was still staring at her. If he was delighted to see Yaret, it didn’t show. He seemed less stunned now, and more suspicious. “How are your grandparents? And your friends back home? Are they all right?”

“They were fine last time I spoke to them. And you? Are you unhurt?”

“Unscathed, as you see,” said Rothir.

“Rothir got a nasty slash on the leg in battle,” said Parthenal, “defending us from stonemen in the south. A lone stand.” Huldarion noted glances down the table between other Riders, who were listening in with interest, apart from Thoronal who stared glumly at his plate. Something had gone on that he hadn’t yet been told about. “But he’s tough. I stitched it up for him and he hardly noticed. Skin like leather.”

“And a leg like patchwork, thanks to your stitching,” said Rothir.

“Well, I now have a leg like wood,” said Yaret. She picked up a spoon and hit her right shin with it, just above the boot. There was a small dull *clunk*. “They gave it to me in Farwithiel. It’s been very good; they carved it out of rootwood.”

“Your foot is rootwood from the Farwth?” asked Maeneb in some amazement. She was not alone in that, for all the other Riders in the room were now engrossed.

“I don’t know about that. I suppose it could be: it’s tough enough. In fact I think it might be indestructible. It hasn’t even got scratched yet. By the way, I left Eled being well cared for in Farwithiel. He seemed very settled there; I think the Wardens would be happy to adopt him permanently. Have you had word about him lately?”

“They say progress is gradual,” said Maeneb, “but he is continuing to improve, and is content.”

Yaret nodded. “He was always content there.”

“How long did you stay in Farwithiel?”

“Five or six weeks. I’d gladly have stayed longer. I hardly had time to explore a fraction of the place.”

“The Farwth let you?”

Yaret laughed. “Well, I couldn’t walk very far, after all, let alone climb any trees – much though I’d have loved to.”

As she began to recount her stay in Farwithiel, Huldarion gradually relaxed. While she seemed reticent about the Farwth itself, her description of the forest with its shifting pools

and brightly flitting birds was distant and serene enough to take all minds off the coming battle. He himself felt the trees as a shimmering appearance in the guard-house, although it was some years since he had visited Farwithiel. The whole table was listening intently as if feeling the tranquillity of the forest settle round them.

But Rothir was still staring at Yaret with a frown. When she paused he said abruptly, "Something's happened. You're different. What is it?"

Damn, thought Huldarion. He leant forward to give her a two-minute sign.

"She's thinner," said Parthenal.

"Army rations," said Yaret.

"That's not what I mean. What happened?" asked Rothir.

"Well," said Yaret slowly, "well, I suppose one thing that's different is that I killed my first stoneman. Some weeks ago on a trip up north, at close quarters. I didn't enjoy it." A couple of the listening Riders nodded. She shrugged. "Of course I've met a few more stonemen since, so I'm getting quite accustomed to that now."

Huldarion appreciated the understatement. He had heard about the many raids that Melmet had endured to get here, and was aware that few people ever got used to killing – certainly not in the space of one nightmarish week. So he was grateful that she kept her tone light when she went on,

"And I have the great advantage of being an archer; it means that I can claim the credit for everybody else's hits."

"Ah! We all know someone who does that," said Parthenal, glancing down the table.

"We have some very impressive figures amongst the Melmet archers, I can tell you. If you believe them all, we've already dispatched more than the entire stoneman army. Quite an achievement." There were chuckles as she got to her feet. "Well, I have to go now, and let you eat and sleep. Veron says you'll be riding off early in the morning. Our troops don't have much speed, but I expect we'll catch up with you at some point tomorrow."

"Veron?" asked Maeneb.

"He's got himself a group of huntsmen from Ioben. I've been acting as interpreter when needed, because our languages are similar."

Parthenal raised an eyebrow. "Veron needs an interpreter? That's news. He must like you."

"Are you riding with Veron tomorrow?" asked Rothir, still strangely severe.

"No. I'll be trailing in the rear with the Melmet rabble."

"Good," said Rothir. "Safer there."

"Really? Veron told his huntsmen that they might not be safe if they chose to fight with him, but they wouldn't be afraid. I don't feel afraid with him either."

"You probably should," said Rothir, but now, at last, he was smiling.

Then Yaret said a few words in her own language to each of the three, touching first Parthenal and then Rothir on the shoulder before returning her fist to her chest. Maeneb she saluted but did not touch. "I hold you in my heart," she said.

"As do we you," answered Parthenal.

"Indeed," said Maeneb. Rothir said nothing but echoed the gesture as if unconsciously, touching his clenched hand to his heart.

She left them and walked over to Huldarion, saluting him also, this time hand to forehead in the formal archers' style. Her gaze told him she had something else to say; so he stood up to see her to the door.

"Thank you," she said. "About that stoneman that I killed up north."

"What about him?"

"He'd got left behind in Erbulet, abandoned when the others all moved on. He'd been alone for several days, I think. He was banging his head against a wall because of the pain of the stones. He only had the two of them. He begged me for athelid – that's what they call the drug they use to quell the pain. When I had no athelid to give him he begged me to kill him. And he told me he was ten years old."

"He what?"

"Yes, I know. He looked full-grown, yet also young. It's true that he was crazed with pain and hunger. But something to keep in mind."

"Don't tell anyone else," said Huldarion instinctively. She bowed and left.

His relief had curdled to dismay. She had avoided giving bad news to the Riders only to lay this unwanted information on his shoulders. Ten years old? It was impossible. Ridiculous. It didn't bear thinking about. He did not want to keep any such thing in his mind if he could help it.

But it would have to be thought about, now that it was there.

Chapter 32

Maeneb picked her way across the swampy ground with distaste. It had dried out somewhat since she had been here late last year, but in many places the mud still sucked audibly at Shoba's hooves. The fragile flowers that adorned the yellowed grass had been trampled by thousands of rope-bound soles: for stonemen's trails covered the land, showing the direction of their marches over the previous days or weeks. All the trails led northwest, towards the foothills of the Liath Mountains. Only the peaks themselves, now clear of cloud and luminous with snow, looked untouched – indeed, untouchable.

Much else had been touched and worse. The tall trees that had stood here before winter, and for centuries before that, were now gone: large areas of pine and selver had been chopped down, evidently to refurbish the Outland Forts – although the nearest of those Forts, which had been inhabited over the winter, now stood cold and empty but for piles of rubbish. It was far to the west that the stonemen were now assembled.

So west was where the companies were riding. Maeneb, despite her relish of quiet places, found she did not like this despoiled and dismal landscape. The warmth of the guard-house last night already seemed a distant memory. Durba's comments didn't help her mood.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Durba called to Maeneb now, as they cantered across the wilderness in the midst of Parthenal's company of Riders. Maeneb did not bother to reply. She sensed that Durba was still happy. It was most disturbing, because nobody else was – although she felt a kind of fierce excitement in Parthenal, riding at the head of the line.

She had been pleased to be allocated to Parthenal's company instead of Thoronal's. Both men were once again named Captains; the other Captains included Rothir, Sashel, Uld and Ikelder – a young man who had apparently impressed Huldarion during the previous brief engagements up here. Sashel's bluff twin, Gordal, was in Parthenal's company, as second in command. She could not tell how much he minded. All twelve Captains were under the ultimate command of Huldarion himself.

Apart from Veron. He had a roving role with his group of hand-picked men, and chose his own route. His company had ridden off before dawn, to track the movements of the second stoneman army – the one which had attacked the Melmet forces. It was reported to be marching across the northlands on its way to support the stonemen already stationed in the western Forts. Huldarion was anxious to get there first and join battle, if possible, before the reinforcements could arrive.

The Kelvhans, on the other hand, seemed anxious to move fast and get the fighting out of the way simply so that they could go home to their comfortable houses and civilisation. The Kelvhan troops had looked askance at her, as an unseemly and no doubt inept female soldier; but probably for the same reason, had assumed that she would not understand them when they talked in their own language. From what she overheard, the Kelvhan troops seemed to think they faced an easy task. Maeneb hoped their confidence was justified.

"This is fast!" yelled Durba alongside her. "We're leaving Melmet behind!"

Maeneb looked across at the Kelvhan troops. They were indeed riding fast; slowly outstripping the Vonn, although their horses rattled with weapons and the men were weighed down by their armour – whether chain-mail or the flashier plate armour worn by

the High Prince and his lords. But their horses were big, strong beasts. Durba was right; behind them, the smaller steeds and weary men of Melmet were having trouble keeping up.

Somewhere back there was Yaret. It had been an unexpected pleasure to see her whole – or almost whole – and well. Maeneb felt a mild affection for her, as a practical and efficient person who did not try to touch her nor talk about emotions. However, Maeneb had sensed some deep disturbance in Yaret: some dark and churning region in her mind that had not been there previously. Something had certainly happened.

They had been riding for three hours now and had passed a further two forts – both empty – but the next fort, as they approached, was clearly not. Smoke rose from it and from its surroundings of dark swelling hills, which were blurred by trees and threaded here and there by thin black waterfalls. The glistening mountains stood aloof and lofty over all. The Riders halted.

Between them and the hills, the ground seethed with movement, like the writhing of ants around a rotten corpse. Thousands of stonemen. They were preparing for battle: for there was a line marching in from the forts still further west. Although most of the stonemen were on foot, there was at least one company of cavalry; that was unusual.

And behind them, she thought she could discern some carts. She reached out with her mind. While the darkburns, as ever, could not be felt, she could detect their presence – their many presences – by the clumps of fear in the stonemen round them. Despite their drugs the stonemen were not totally immune to the darkburn aura.

Apart from fear, though, what was there? Stonemen's minds seemed to be mostly cloud and shadow. Sometimes, like now, there was aggression, rage: yet all oddly unshaped. Formless. And at other times there would be merely blankness, a space waiting to be filled. Although she wondered about the drugs that they were fed, it did not incline her to feel pity for the stonemen. But then Maeneb knew that pity was something she was short of in general.

Huldarion, at the head of the Vonn, held up his arm to sign for caution and a slower pace. As they rode on they spread out more widely, each company to its allocated role, so that by the time the halt was again called on a drier stretch of ground they were already in formation. They stayed mounted, bows at the ready and swords to hand.

No trenches had been dug. There had been no time to send teams of man ahead: and even if it could have been done, Huldarion was doubtful of their efficacy. Instead each soldier carried at least two stones wrested from the heads of corpses, in the hope that this protection would prove good enough against the darkburns.

Apparently the Kelvhans did the same. Some of the Kelvhans also carried nets of fine metal wire with which they hoped to trap the darkburns: an untried device. For her part, although she now could see the smoking carts distinctly, Maeneb hoped they would stay closed. With any luck the darkburns would not be used at all.

She was to be disappointed. Durba, next to her, said, "Who's supposed to start?" at the same time as she realised that the stonemen had already started.

Only a few of them had begun to move: their horsemen, who were riding out in scattered pairs. But then the cages on the carts clanged open, the sound arriving at her ears a second or two after she had seen it.

The pairs of horsemen were driving darkburns. She saw the smoking blurs in the spaces between the riding stonemen, yet she could not tell how they were doing it until she realised

that there was a long chain stretched between each pair of riders. Clever, she thought: the horses aren't close enough to the darkburns to make them bolt, and they move fast...

Very fast. The chains had perhaps been treated in the same way as the stones, or had stones bound into their links, for the darkburns ran from them. As fast as horse could gallop, they raced, blurred and smoking, towards the waiting Vonn.

"Dismount, and shoot at the riders!" cried Huldarion. "Then ready with your swords!"

The horses were guided to the rear while Maeneb got to work with bow and arrow. It seemed only half a minute later when the darkburns rushed on them; she slung her bow over her shoulder and unsheathed her sword. With the chains close behind, the darkburns did not veer aside, but ran straight into the waiting ranks of Riders. Maeneb hoped they would rush through swiftly to escape the stones; but meanwhile the effect was much the same as every other encounter with darkburns that she had suffered.

Once again she was enveloped by that smell, felt that disabling terror, saw that familiar scrambling mayhem as people hacked desperately at the smouldering shapes and then turned to run before they began to burn. Maeneb helped Felba and Gordal to smash one darkburn to pieces, each of them leaping back at intervals. The stonemen who had not been shot from their horses were riding around at a short distance with their chains, although they did not join in the fight.

Smoke and steam obscured her vision. Yet she was aware that through the smoke on either side of her, Parthenal, Rigal and the others were doing much the same as she was: slash, run, slash, run. As she saw Parthenal shatter one darkburn and turn instantly to face another, she realised why the darkburns had not broken through the ranks of Vonn to flee the stones. Their keepers, in their pairs, were riding right around each group of fighting Vonn and enclosing them with lengths of chain.

She and five other Riders found themselves trapped in a chain circle with a darkburn. She shot at both stonemen in rapid succession until they slumped heavily from their horses; but the damage was already done. The darkburn could not escape – and neither could Gordal, on whom it leapt.

It seemed to wrap him in a shroud of smoke. He fell beneath it, screaming.

Pain filled Maeneb's head. The burning. It was unbearable. It paralysed her. But after a few seconds it faded, and she was able to join Parthenal and Rigal as they smote and slashed at the darkburn that embraced the fallen man.

They took it in turns, knowing all the time that it was too late. Long before the darkburn had been hacked to pieces, charred fragments of it scattered all around, it had done its work.

At least the pain had not lasted long, she told herself. Gordal had been conscious for no more than a dozen seconds. Now the body blazed up in a roar of orange flame and a billow of black smoke. Parthenal staggered backwards, coughing, and trying to disentangle himself from the chain that was draped across the ground.

"We should use this," said Maeneb. She wrenched one end of the chain from the wrist of a dead horseman. "Give me a hand," she called to Durba, who was staring at the blazing corpse of Gordal with her mouth open. "I said give me a hand!"

Durba held out a hand automatically and Maeneb tossed the end of the chain at her.

"Coil it up," she ordered, as she unwound the chain from Parthenal's feet and hunted for its other end.

“Stonemen,” wheezed Parthenal, half-choked with smoke, but pointing with his sword. A new line of stonemen was galloping towards them, with no darkburns this time – but with speed, their axes raised.

“Stonemen!” she yelled at Durba, who seemed half asleep. “Wake up! Hold that chain tight! Raise it up!”

She lifted her own end of the chain. Rigal, understanding what she meant, seized the other end from Durba’s passive hands and pulled it tight.

The first horsemen rode straight into it. Although the chain immediately flew out of Maeneb’s grasp, it had already made the stonemen’s horses stumble. One threw its rider and careered into another. Parthenal and Landel made short work of two more stonemen as they tried in vain to control their floundering steeds.

Maeneb parried a blow that was meant for Durba, and swiped two-handed with her sword at the stoneman who had struck it as he rode past. When he fell from his saddle she finished him off with a stab through the ribs. Then she had to pull her sword free and immediately spin round to face the next attacker.

“Get the chain!” yelled Parthenal. She grasped it, and the two of them tried the same trick again, pulling the chain high and tight – with a similar result. Although the chain was whipped out of her hand on impact, it was again enough to unbalance the enemy horses, while their riders were not skilful enough to keep them upright. Then everything was a confusion of flying axes and sweeping blades. Maeneb reverted to her long knife, her preferred weapon at close quarters; for it felt like an extension of her body, which her sword never did.

She had no compassion for the stonemen that she stabbed. They felt only hate for her, after all. So she tried to shut out all intrusive feelings as time thickened into a mess of blood and clashing swords and wordless cries. She had no idea how anyone beyond her group was faring, and no chance to look.

But eventually a change in the nature of the shouts drew her gaze from the man she had just killed. Kelvha were charging. Several hundred horsemen, hooves thundering and standards flying, were galloping past. She felt the ground shake.

The charge was decisive and made her wonder why it hadn’t happened earlier. The few remaining stonemen cavalry were soon killed or put to flight. The mass of enemy foot-soldiers was still half a mile or so away; but now it halted its advance as the Kelvhans continued their thunderous charge. Then the stonemen turned and began a swift retreat.

“Thank the stars,” said Maeneb, as she leant over to rest while she had the chance, gasping with her hands on her knees. She was aware that she had a cut through her leather jerkin. She felt underneath it: no blood. Hardly any, anyway. “Exciting enough for you?” she asked Durba who stood nearby. The girl looked half-stunned.

“Have we won?” said Durba blankly.

“No,” said Maeneb. “Tactical retreat at best. What’s happening, Parthenal?” With his greater height, he gazed over the heads of the others.

“Kelvha’s still in hot pursuit. Ah, now they’ve had to stop. There’s a line of darkburns, tethered, I think; at least, the Kelvhan horses can’t get past them. It looks as if the Kelvhan charge is halting. Yes, they’re coming back. Well, they’ve given us a break at least. But what took them so long?”

“A break?” said Durba.

“An hour, maybe two if we’re lucky, while the stonemen regroup. Their reinforcements must be arriving soon. Rigal, see to the casualties. There’s Huldarion, thank the stars.” Parthenal strode away to talk to his commander.

Maeneb helped Rigal organise the moving of the injured; thankfully there were not too many, and none were too badly burnt. Despite her own distaste for flesh and skin she could assess them quickly – it was easy for her to tell how much pain each casualty was in – and with quick decision told others what was needed.

The injured dealt with, she turned round to attend to Gordal’s corpse. It still lay smoking on the ground, while Durba was standing motionless nearby, her sword limp in her hand.

“Help me move Gordal,” she said impatiently.

Durba half shook her head. “There’s nothing left to move.”

Maeneb searched for Durba’s feelings and found a blank. Dear stars, the woman’s made of stone, she thought. Witless as a stoneman, without the excuse of a head full of sharpened rocks and unknown drugs.

“Help me move Gordal,” she said again, between clenched teeth. When Durba still did not move, she instead beckoned Landel, who silently aided her in shovelling the smoking remains onto a pair of shields and carrying them away from the main field of battle. The stretchers were needed for the injured, not the dead; and Gordal’s body – if the sad remnant could be called that – would have burnt through a stretcher in any case. She saw Sashel in the distance and wondered if he had yet heard about his twin.

There was little on the shields to say, *This once was Gordal*. Maeneb stood by the pitiful remains and muttered a prayer of some sort, because something was needed; but she had to improvise the words and she knew they were inadequate. She thought of Yaret murmuring her Oveyn. She could have done with that just now.

Then she charged Landel with guarding Gordal’s body, and returned to the battlefield to hunt spent arrows and collect the stonemen’s chains. They might have a use. When she found Durba, the girl was just standing on the field and staring into space, doing nothing, thinking nothing. But at least she wasn’t happy any more.

Chapter 33

"You're hurt," said Parthenal.

"Not badly." Huldarion removed the cloth from his left arm and checked it. "It looks worse than it is. Come to the tent with me, and you can stitch it up while we talk."

"You want me to stitch it?"

"Rothir says you do a good neat job. And I need to speak to you and the other captains without delay. Where's Sashel? He's not wounded, is he?"

"He's safe. I saw him with his company over there. He doesn't know yet... Gordal died."

"Ah." Huldarion let out a brief exhalation of regret. "How?"

"Darkburn."

"Any others in your company lost?"

Parthenal shook his head. "All standing. But not all unscathed. Let me leave you for a moment and talk to Rigal."

He went to check the number of casualties with Rigal, his second in command now that Gordal was gone. But he knew that Maeneb would see that everything necessary was done in any case. Really she should have been his second, if not a captain on her own account.

Returning, he accompanied Huldarion to the tent. It had been hastily thrown up and was really no more than a long canvas awning. At one end medics were assessing the injured and handing out bandages. At the other end, the captains gathered – all except Sashel, who had now heard the news and knelt outside with head bowed by his brother. Inside, the captains also bowed their heads to Gordal and the other fallen soldiers for a moment.

As they raised their heads again Huldarion held out his arm for stitching. "Make it quick, Parthenal. It doesn't need to be neat. That arm's hardly beautiful in any case." The gash ran through the scar tissue on his forearm; the tightness of the skin there pulled it open.

Parthenal compressed his lips as he dipped the fine curved needle and thread in spirit, and after mopping away the blood, gently wiped the gash with spirit too. Huldarion did not flinch.

"Don't worry, there's little feeling in that area," he said; probably untruthfully. Then, as Parthenal bent to his task, Huldarion addressed the other captains. "Kelvha will want to lead the next attack on the stonemen. That's already been made clear."

"Why didn't they ride out to help us sooner?" queried Uld.

"Testing us, I imagine."

"So they'll join in now that we've got rid of all the darkburns for them," grunted Solon.

"I don't think we've done that," said Huldarion. "I have no doubt that there will be more darkburns waiting for us; though I don't think the Kelvhans will bother with those metal nets of theirs again. They just melted in the heat, apparently."

"On the other hand," said Parthenal, "perhaps the stonemen will also think twice about using that trick with the chains again."

"How did you fare with those?"

Parthenal described how Maeneb had used the chain against the stonemen. It turned out that Ikelder had made a similar use of one, while Rothir had somehow managed to wrap his darkburn and both its stoneman riders up in their own chain.

"Wouldn't want to try that again, though," he said. "The darkburn just happened to run the right way. We were lucky to get away with it."

Huldarion nodded. "It may deter the enemy from using chains next time," he said. "But these stonemen are proving more adaptable than previous ones that we've encountered."

"Maybe they're learning," suggested Ikelder.

"Then we should be too. I need a plan to put before the Kelvhan Arch-Lord."

"Shargun? He won't do any fighting," said Parthenal. "He'll sit in his carriage and issue orders."

"Then we need to make sure they are orders that will work for us. Yes? What is it?"

Somebody had just entered the tent: Parthenal glanced up and saw an Ioben man in ripped fur clothing, with a bow slung over his shoulder.

The Ioben bowed and said in rough Standard, "A message from Veron. The big army of new stonemen is nearly at the fort number fifteen." He held up fingers to make sure they understood. "There almost now. Veron says three thousand extra stonemen. Hundred darkburns."

"A hundred," said Huldarion; not in shock, thought Parthenal, but as if he were simply weighing up the number. Yet Parthenal himself was shocked. A hundred?

"Where is Veron now?" asked Huldarion.

"Two, three miles from fort number fifteen. Out of sight. Veron says he will get more helpers from the north to fight with him. Then will come down to hit the stonemen at fort number fifteen." Again he held up his hands to emphasise the number.

"Helpers? What do you mean?" asked Solon.

"I don't know. Veron knows. Veron has also the wizard, Leor: Lioli? The red hair." The man drew his hands dramatically down his own shaggy locks to demonstrate. He was enjoying this theatre, thought Parthenal. "Leori will help."

"How?"

"Veron says, look to the north. Not tonight, but tomorrow afternoon, under the moon." He pointed to the sky.

"And what will we see?" asked Thoronal, who had been unusually quiet until then.

"Helpers," said the man. He grinned. "That's all Veron says. Any message? I have another errand now."

"No message, except that all goes so far much as expected."

The man nodded by way of a salute, and left the tent.

"Helpers?" repeated Solon. "Just helpers? That's not helpful at all."

"Can we trust him?" asked Ikelder.

"Who: the messenger, or Veron?" said Rothir.

"Well... both."

"We can trust Veron," said Huldarion. "If he says he'll come up with something, then he will."

"The question is, what?" said Parthenal, looking up from his stitching.

"Is that done now?"

"Almost. Keep still while I put a dressing on it."

Parthenal knotted and cut the thread carefully. As he placed a star-moss dressing on the tight-stitched skin, and began to apply a bandage, he felt more moved by pity for this injury than any of the much worse ones being cared for at the far end of the tent. Those others

barely stirred him. But in the midst of battle, it seemed both strange and wonderful to be so close to Huldarion: to touch his arm in almost a caress. He was careful to make little of it, and did not allow his hands to linger.

Meanwhile Uld asked the group, "Does anybody know what Veron may have meant by helpers? Because I am aware of no settlement of any size within fifty miles."

"Further than that," said Rothir, "if you mean of size enough to supply a battalion."

"I doubt if Veron means a town at all," replied Huldarion.

Parthenal finished tying the bandage and neatened the ends. "There. You're done. But then what did Veron mean?"

"I think I may have some idea," said Huldarion slowly. "But I have no certainty about it. We'll just have to wait and see what happens."

"And what might happen?" he asked.

Huldarion looked at him, unreadable. "Like I said, we'll wait and see. But that's tomorrow. We need to hold out until then. The fighting may not resume tonight, but it surely will at dawn, or even earlier. So, meanwhile: our plan?"

"If Kelvha wants to lead the charge," said Rothir, "we ought at least to guard their flanks. We should set there all the archers that we have. I notice the Kelvhans don't use their bows half as much as they might."

"Then we will. Make sure that every archer is supplied with arrows. Parthenal?"

"We should advise the Kelvhans to immediately cut down any horsemen carrying chains. I don't believe the stonemen will abandon that tactic all at once – especially if Veron is right, and they still have a hundred darkburns to use up."

"Stakes?" Ikelder said, a little hesitantly. "If we have time to set a row of long stakes in the ground, they will catch any chains held out between the enemy horses. Hinder them at least."

Huldarion nodded. "Good."

"Some of the Kelvhans carry lances," Ikelder went on, encouraged. "They're unwieldy, but against an opposing cavalry lances may have a use – if the Kelvhans can use them properly. Many of those stonemen didn't look too secure on horseback."

"I observed that also," said Huldarion. "Kelvha's lancers should be skilled enough."

"Will Kelvha want to ride out to the enemy, or wait for them to come?" asked Solon.

"They'll ride out. I'll suggest to them we make for the fifteenth fort as soon as possible, since that is where the enemy are mustering, according to Veron. We should have time to get there before battle resumes: certainly before tomorrow morning. And then it will be with us on the flanks, Melmet bringing up the rear. We'll use the Baron's archers to reinforce our own."

At this Rothir stirred. "Over by the fifteenth fort the ground will be swampier than here. It shouldn't be too soft for the foremost horses, but those at the back may struggle. I'd suggest Melmet ride out initially, but be prepared to go on foot as soon as their horses start to get bogged down. Because they will. And if Shargun's thinking of his carriage, he can forget it."

Huldarion smiled. "I'll tell him that," he said, "though perhaps not in those words. Thoronal?"

"I have nothing to add," said Thoronal heavily. And he took no part in the brief debate that followed. At the end he bowed and walked out with the rest, having said no more.

“Parthenal,” said Huldarion, motioning him back. “Stay a moment.”

He stopped. Once the two men were alone, Huldarion asked,

“What’s wrong with Thoronal? I thought I knew him well enough, but you’re his cousin too. You might understand this glumness of his better than I do. Is it simply that he found himself worsted by the firedrake in the south? I thought him more resilient than that.”

“He’s resilient as long as he believes he’s in the right,” said Parthenal. “He finds it hard to admit to a mistake.”

“Don’t we all? But he admitted his mistake to me as we rode over here,” said Huldarion, “and I told him that it didn’t matter. We learn, and we move on.”

“Thoronal is not an adaptable man. He finds change difficult – especially changing his ideas about himself. He’s proud.”

“Again, aren’t we all? You’re proud, yet you accept rebuke for your mistakes.”

“Do I?” Parthenal raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure that I make any.”

Huldarion laughed, and clapped him on the shoulder. Then he winced.

“I thought it didn’t hurt?” said Parthenal.

“I don’t mind telling you, since you’re a medic, of a sort. I must admit, mobility is a problem. Not just that arm; the whole side. I do my exercises but it’s not the same as battle.”

“So it hurts?”

“Yes.”

“Take ethlon.”

“No. Nor will I take belvane, in case it dulls my judgement.”

“Pain will dull your judgement,” Parthenal pointed out.

“Maybe; but I know how much. That’s the difference.”

Parthenal shook his head. “Then just keep using the ointment. You still do?”

“When there’s time.”

“Make time.”

“Easy for you to say.”

I would apply it myself, thought Parthenal, gladly, how gladly. The idea made him tingle. And it was absurd. Why can’t I stop thinking this way, even in the most inappropriate moments? Why can’t I stop myself from wanting him when I know that it’s impossible? And when he’s stern it’s even worse. I could fall on my knees before him... Oh, no, no, stop it.

“One more thing,” said Huldarion, and his tone instantly sobered Parthenal.

“What is it?”

“Sashel. Should he remain a captain?”

“It would be cruel to take it from him now. But...”

Huldarion nodded. “Yes. We’ll go and talk to him,” he said. “Kelvha can wait a little longer.” He clapped Parthenal on the shoulder once again before walking to the doorway. And Parthenal, in a flood of shame, turned his mind from men’s living, breathing bodies to that black and withered corpse outside.

Chapter 34

Helba was stumbling badly by the time Veron and his men were in sight. Not surprisingly, for it had taken her three hours' rough riding from the camp to get here.

And it wasn't just the horse that was suffering: Yaret was hurting too, her muscles sore with effort, while the roughly bandaged wounds on her right shoulder and left shin meant that every movement stung her painfully. But at least those wounds had not been added to – for there had been more marching than fighting for the Melmet troops that day. While the Vonn had borne the brunt of the attack, the Baron's forces had lurked towards the rear, with a mixture of relief and restlessness.

Yaret's own relief at the army's success had been not least on the Riders' behalf. Seeing them again had been such a great and unexpected pleasure that she did not know what to do with it. She felt that after the disaster of Obandiro and the horror of the battles, such happiness ought to be forbidden her. Guilt accompanied her gladness.

Yet her heart was full: and although she held her joy there as a bulwark against her losses, it immediately brought with it new fear of further loss. So she had felt reprieved when she had scanned the battlefield and glimpsed the distant Captains of the Vonn emerging from a tent.

Alongside her Inthed had also been scanning the field, with some envy.

"They're very fine, aren't they, those Kelvhans?" he said jealously. "Done up to the collar in bronze and gilt."

"And they fight just as well as they look," retorted Jerred. "Which is exactly what you do, too, Inthed."

Inthed had taken some time to think about this, and had just started to complain when the loben huntsman rode up, shaggy and imperious. He had introduced himself as Naduk and demanded in broken Standard that the interpreter Yaret should be allowed to accompany him back to Veron in the hills. Jerred had been inclined to refuse, until he was told that the Baron had awarded Veron the use of any men he wanted.

"Women too?" said Jerred. "What does Veron want with her?"

At which Inthed had sniggered. Morad and the huntsman had both given him a look.

"Don't be more of a fool than you can help," said Jerred to him; and to the huntsman, "Well, all right. But you'd better take care of her. One of my best archers."

Which was nice of him if probably not true; and the laconic Naduk still didn't explain what she was wanted for, even as she rode Helba after him towards the northern hills.

"If I'm needed as an interpreter," she said, "why didn't Veron ask to take me with him earlier?"

The huntsman shrugged. "We don't need an interpreter so much. He talks a fair bit of loben and we talk a bit of Standard."

"So what am I coming along for?"

Naduk shrugged again, extravagantly. "I only know that you're necessary to his plans."

"And what are his plans?"

Yaret spoke in loben, so she knew the hunter understood her; but he gave no answer. Perhaps he couldn't hear. His horse was moving at pace even once they reached the higher

ground, which was speckled with thin snow. No stonemen were anywhere in sight: Naduk had skirted the battlefield by a distance, and they were slowly climbing.

And now, at last, after three weary hours, there was Veron with his men, greeting her with the merest of nods. The group was sheltering in a shallow cave beneath some overhanging rocks, while horses grazed amongst the shrubby trees.

Although the landscape here was bleak and wintry, the views from this hillside were long; another of the Outland Forts was visible only a couple of miles away. Down by it she glimpsed a lengthy procession of men and carts snaking its way from the west, the black and smoking line incongruous against the rosy drifts of clouds that presaged sunset. Behind her the mountains' trackless scarps were tinted pink. It gave them the appearance of a warmth which was totally lacking in the chilly evening wind. But the cave where the hunters sat was dry and sheltered.

"A good place to spend the night, this," she commented, for it offered better cover than her comrades by the battlefield were likely to enjoy. Last night they had shivered in the open air.

"We won't be staying here tonight," Veron replied. "We'll be travelling. You've got half an hour to eat and rest your horse." He offered her a lump of meat on a skewer from the small fire.

Nothing about resting *her*, she noted wryly as she took the skewer. But Helba probably needed it more. "Where are we going?"

"North."

"And you want me to interpret?"

"Not with these men. Perhaps with someone else."

"An Ioben?"

Veron appeared not to have heard her. As she looked around she noticed, for the first time, the stranger in the cave behind her. Why hadn't she seen him as soon as she walked in? He was noticeable enough, with his orange hair glinting in the firelight: hair almost as bright as the flames, apart from two long white streaks, one down either side.

And he wasn't a complete stranger.

"Great-uncle," she said. "How are you?"

He stared at her, his old-young face creasing into a doubtful smile. "Have we met?"

"Last autumn, near the Coban hills. Our paths crossed and I gave you supper. As soon as I mentioned I was from Obandiro, you panicked and ran off."

"Ah... Yes, I remember that. But I don't think I ran. Did I?"

Veron had turned to gaze at them with interest.

"Leor? Your great-uncle?" he said.

"It's a figure of speech. This is Leor? The wizard Lioli?"

The red-haired man stood up and bowed, as far as he could under the cave's low roof. He was very tall.

"I answer to both those names."

"My name is Yaret."

"I know that now," he said. "I wish I'd known it then. I was friendly with your grandparents when you were small."

She digested this. It should have surprised her but amidst all else that had happened – and was still happening – it seemed of no great moment. "I don't remember you."

"You wouldn't," he said, his smile a little sad. "You were very young. When I last saw you, your father was still alive."

"You knew my father?"

"Not so well as your grandfather."

"So when we met last autumn, did you know my grandparents had died?"

"I feared it."

"You ran away – hurried away, at any rate – when you learnt I was going to Obandiro, because you knew what had happened there," she said accusingly.

"Yes. But I could hardly tell you. I tried to warn you, I think."

"Did you? Maybe you did... After a fashion." It was not fair to blame him for Obandiro's destruction. But he could have given her a clearer warning.

Yet what difference would it have made, in the long run? With a clear warning she might not have gone back home at all, or not until much later; she might never have found the four children hiding in the cellars...

So she sighed, and said, "Well, what are you doing here now, Leor or Lioli?"

"I came here with the Vonn."

"He turns up all over the place, usually when least expected," Veron added, standing up. "We're going in ten minutes."

"Where to?"

But he had already left the cave. When she repeated her question, the other hunters answered with dismissive shrugs; they were starting to pack up their gear.

As they loaded their horses the men had an air of purpose and contained excitement. Most of them carried on their saddles long coils of rope with bits of fabric attached to them at intervals. These puzzled Yaret, but the men would not explain what they were for.

"We're going hunting," said one at last. "Wolves, I'm told."

Yaret looked at this man closely, for he was the youngest of three hunters that seemed different to the rest. They spoke only in Standard, and lacked the furs and unkempt beards of the others. They also lacked the excitement; their appearance was one of grim weariness. Something in this man's face reminded her of Charo, the first time she had seen him, the red-rimmed eyes and set line of the mouth making him look older than he was.

"You're not a hunter," she said to him.

"Not by profession, no. I have hunted. But I was chiefly a farmer, before."

She heard the desolation in his voice, and knew even as she asked. "You mean before the stonemen?"

"They destroyed my village, and that of my two friends." He gestured to the men beside him.

"Ah. Mine too. I'm sorry. Where was that?"

"East of Ioben." His voice was flat and drained.

"And were you three the only ones...?"

He shook his head. "We were not the only survivors. That was thanks to Veron's people. The stonemen took a dozen of us captive: it was one of Veron's kinsmen who freed us."

"The stonemen took you captive? But I thought they usually..." Her voice tailed away rather than say what the stonemen did.

"They wanted us to pull the carts," he said, again with such utter desolation in his voice that she knew she could not ask for any details of what that had been like. But after a

moment he added, "When we were freed, we ran away, back to our village which was now no village. There the hunters of Ioben found us and gave us food and shelter. So when they went to fight, we went too. And now that I have seen Veron, I will fight with him and for the people we have lost."

"I do the same," said Yaret. "It's not much but it's all that I can do." Amidst the hubbub of the tramping horses they were both silent.

Then he said, "I'm Zan. The rest of my name doesn't matter any more, since I have no family left to give it meaning."

"All we have now is revenge," said one of his companions. "We want to hunt the stonemen down. And these men tell us that Veron is the best hunter on this side of the world."

This was said within earshot of Veron, who was coiling up a length of beribboned rope at the entrance to the cave. Rather than modestly shrugging disavowal, he nodded, and said,

"So I am. Bar one."

"Bar one? Which one?" she asked. He gave no answer. "And today you're killing wolves?"

"Hunting, not killing," said Veron. "A true huntsman does not kill without good reason. And then it should be clean and quick."

"But if you're not killing them, what are you hunting them for?"

He slung the coiled rope over his shoulder and looked towards the west. "Time to go. The sun is fully set."

A long pale glimmer lingered all along the western sky; the snowy peaks had turned from pink to icy blue. A full moon was rising, so that when the group rode off, it was clear enough for them to see their way even after the last gleam of the sunset faded.

They rode through mud and old snow that crunched beneath the horses' hooves and set a faint metallic tang in the night air. On this more level ground Helba recovered her sure-footedness. Soon they came to a forest, a mix of giant conifers and leafless greythorn, less dense and tangled than the forest round the Darkburn; yet no less forbidding, despite the open glades and narrow paths that wound between the trees. Perhaps it was the growing moonlight that made it seem so alien.

Veron led the way along myriad snow-spattered paths, halting only on occasion to consult the other huntsmen about their route. They spoke in low, quick voices in a mixture of Standard and Ioben, and the only interpreting she needed to do was to Zan and his two friends. When there was nothing to interpret she asked Zan more about their rescue from the stonemen; and in turn told them a little of Obandiro. These men understood.

But the others were absorbed in their hunt – if hunt it was. Beneath the sailing moon Veron's face was alight. He did not seem to feel the increasing cold; none of the huntsmen did. Although Yaret had thought that she was hardened to the winter, in this freezing air she was soon shivering.

To her surprise she felt a cloak being thrown around her shoulders. She turned and saw Leor, who had ridden up alongside her on a lanky horse.

"You'll need that tonight," he told her.

"Thank you."

"I'm truly sorry about Obandiro," he said gravely.

"Yes. Let's not talk about that any more just now. Why is Veron hunting wolves?"

"Not only wolves," said Leor. "If this works."

“If what works?”

Another shrug. He was as bad as Veron. The huntsmen were moving faster now, plunging through the forest along one of the tracks where little snow had penetrated. Although the light in here was low their horses seemed to have no trouble following the path. She rode after them and trusted that she would not crash into a sudden unseen tree.

Leor puzzled her. She should have noticed him in that cave. Was she really so unobservant? Or had wizardry masked him? But Rud said Leor had forsworn his magic...

Could he really be the same Leor, or Lioli, that Rud the innkeeper had told her about – and that the bard Madeo had sung about, so many hundred years ago? The questions began to pile up. She doubted if he'd answer most of them.

Next time they stopped for Veron to confer with his men, she tried her first question on Leor.

“Do you know Rud, the taverner at the Gostard Inn?”

“I do, although I haven't been there for a while. A good solid man – in more senses than one.”

“He does a fine cheese pie,” said Yaret wistfully. “And did you know Madeo, the traveller and bard?” That was quite a leap from the Gostard Inn. She'd hoped to surprise Leor into an unguarded answer.

He certainly looked surprised: shocked, even. “Madeo?”

“Yes. Is it a hard question?”

“I did know Madeo once, very long ago.”

“Well, it would hardly be recent. And the Farwth, of course. I believe you know it also? – and the Wardens of Farwithiel.” For that story had come back to her while she was riding: how Leor had lengthened the Wardens' lives to several times the span of normal men and women, with unforeseen effects. Effects that should have been foreseen.

“You sound disapproving,” he remarked.

She almost said, “I beg your pardon.” But why did a wizard need her pardon? Whether she approved of him or not was surely nothing to him.

So she replied coolly, “One of the Wardens told me why their children die before them.”

A pause. “That was also a long time ago. You must know that I have forsworn all magic now.”

“Have you? I didn't see you as I came into the cave.”

“Most magic. That was a mere shielding. It hardly counts.”

Yaret laughed, and the grizzled oldest huntsman, Edrik, turned to shush her.

“Silence from now on,” said Veron.

They rode for a further mile in near-silence, the horses' hooves making no more sound than a soft pad-padding on the thick layer of pine needles underfoot. And then they heard a wolf howl. The cry curled through the trees, a long, mournful warning.

Veron held up his hand. Lifting his head, he howled himself, in what sounded to Yaret like a perfect imitation of the wolf.

More wolves answered, from a distance that she found hard to judge. A mile? Half? Two? At a nod from Veron, Edrik and a second huntsman added to the howled reply. A dialogue of wolves, thought Yaret, the skin down her back tingling with instinctive apprehension.

Veron gesticulated without speaking, and half the men set off along the track ahead towards the origin of the howls. Veron himself plunged into the deep forest on their right and beckoned the remaining men to follow him.

He must have the eyesight of a cat, thought Yaret, for in here she could hardly see a thing. Helba still walked on calmly, however, and after a while the trees thinned again so that the moon shone like a sudden lamp above them.

Now she rode through a confusion of black shadows and ribbons of snow that striped her surroundings in a dizzying maze. It was hard to make out what was tree and what was merely shadow. She stuck as close as she could to Veron.

But after a few minutes he pointed to her and Leor and then to the ground, indicating that they should stay here with Naduk and the others. He and Edrik moved silently into the labyrinth and were instantly gone; except that she heard more howls from time to time, and could not tell which might be wolf and which were human.

A bird called out, sharp and alarmed. No, that must have been a signal – nothing was as it seemed – for Naduk at once set off without a word, with the other huntsmen in pursuit. She urged Helba to a canter to follow them. It meant riding faster than she wanted to in the near-darkness, but she was afraid of losing them.

Behind her, she heard the husky breath of Leor's horse, bringing up the rear. They might have been travelling through another world, one that appeared only at night: a world made of bewildering patterns of moonlight and strange clear calls between the listening trees.

And now there was the growing sound of rushing water. Emerging from the treeline, Yaret found herself looking down at a broad stream, its waters flashing black and white with splintered moons. On the far bank, low, dark shapes were running, racing downhill. It took her a moment to realise they were wolves.

Galloping behind the wolves was a man on horseback, who swung a coil of rope in one hand. Without slowing he threw one end of the rope across the water where it fell stretched like a dead snake. Naduk hastened to pick it up, and tied the end to his own coil of rope. Then he rode on downstream, uncoiling it behind him.

She followed with the others. There were more men in the distance on the far side of the stream, and between them was a surging ripple of shadows: a pack of wolves was being herded on the riverbank. No, not one pack, for there were far too many of them – and she realised with a thudding of her heart that this was a most unnatural crowd of wolves, for the dim shapes underneath the trees seemed endless.

The ones nearest to the stream began to run with increasing speed towards some heap or huddle on the ground, before they leapt on it. She heard the sound of snarling. Her heart thumped harder. What had they caught?

"Goats," murmured Naduk next to her. "Killed yesterday."

The dead goats and a huge circle of flagged rope would, he told her, keep the wolves in place there through the day to come. Yaret was dubious of this, unless wizardry also were to be involved; but she had to assume that the huntsmen knew their business. Now Naduk spurred his horse on, and they all rode further down the hill, to her relief, keeping downwind of the wolves across the water.

And some time later there were Edrik and Veron again, appearing so suddenly out of nowhere that she wondered if she had momentarily slept in the saddle without realising it.

“So far, so good. All huntsmen now to come with me. Not you two: you stay here with Edrik,” Veron commanded.

An instant later all the hunters except Edrik had slipped into the concealing maze of shadows once again. Edrik gestured to Yaret and Leor to dismount. They sat down on the cold rocky ground beneath the shelter of an oak that still held on to clusters of brown leaves.

“Where have they gone?” she whispered.

“Ssh. Wait. Sleep if you can. They’ve gone for bear,” muttered Edrik.

Sleep? There seemed little chance of that, although Leor lay down wrapped in his cloak and soon seemed to be gently snoring. After the strenuous efforts and broken nights of the last week Yaret was all too aware of her fatigue; yet the same events that had exhausted her also kept her wakeful. Curled up in her cloak, she waited for her mind to still. Even when she pushed away the thoughts of stonemen, her imagination was busy with wolves and bear and vivid with striped moonlight. She remembered the bear that she’d come across in the woodland near Obandiro. And how the children had saved her from it. Her heart began to ache.

She did not fall asleep till dawn was starting to glow dimly in the eastern sky, like a lamp behind layer upon layer of blue. She watched it through half-opened eyelids; and then she woke up to find that it was full morning, and that she was alone.

Chapter 35

Yaret scrambled to her feet. The sun must have risen half an hour ago at least. Where had the other two gone?

Maybe just to answer calls of nature. And nature was calling her, so she walked over to the nearest trees, which were not so very far away and much less threatening in the dazzle of snowy daylight than they had been in the dark. But when she returned to her rock there was no sign of Edrik or Leor or their horses, although Helba grazed unconcerned nearby. Yaret took the waterskin from her saddlebag and drank, before walking over to the stream to refill it. The patchy snow was thin and the stream ran readily, unhindered by ice.

She bent down to the water; and yards away, across the stream, a wolf looked back.

She froze. The wolf had been drinking, camouflaged against the earthen bank. Yet even so, she should have noticed it. She needed to wake up.

But she told herself not to be too alarmed, for a single wolf was more likely to run away than to attack. And this wolf seemed as surprised and wary as she was. The stream was narrow enough for it to leap in a couple of bounds; but it simply stared at her with amber eyes, not moving.

With a slight shift of her elbow she checked for her knife; yes, still there at her belt. Slowly she withdrew the full waterskin from the stream. The hunters' flagged rope lay along the bank at her feet. She'd stretched her hand over it to reach the water, but was now fully behind it.

Still crouching, she moved back a little further, her hand on her knife-hilt. Slowly the wolf also withdrew one step, then two. They watched each other as if memorising every move.

"Wolf," she softly in Loben, "I mean you no harm." Which was a ridiculous thing to say. No harm? She didn't know what Veron intended for this wolf. But he wasn't hunting them to make pets of them.

Gradually straightening up, she walked backwards to the rock, feeling the way with her feet, watching the wolf, it watching her. Helba did not seem to have even noticed its presence, which was odd, or maybe the horse was just unusually phlegmatic. Yaret quickly picked up her bow and slung the quiver across her shoulder, just in case. The wolf was still there, unmoving.

What was more worrying, two more wolves came down out of the bushes to join it at the bank. They crouched together at the water's edge but did not drink. Instead they stared at her.

"You've got goats," she said; "don't look at me." She could not help but remember that night on the Darkburn loft, so clear and yet so long ago, hearing the wolves howl. That made her think of Rothir. She wished he was here with her.

Or Parthenal, or any of them. But she was alone. She drew her bow. The wolves watched.

If they leapt across the water, she would have to shoot one. Couldn't shoot three in time to stop them getting to her. She didn't want to shoot any of them unless she had to. As Veron had said, killing should always have a reason.

On raising the bow, she saw them stiffen. These wolves knew bows. So perhaps just the twang and hiss of a shot might be enough to send them running. She took careful aim at an old tree some distance from the stream; a canker half way up the trunk was a natural target.

Only a dozen yards – an easy shot. She hit it squarely in the centre, and as she swiftly nocked a second arrow to her bow, looked back at the watching wolves.

One by one they slunk away into the bushes. Congratulating herself, Yaret walked over to the tree and tugged the arrow from its trunk.

But a moment later, as she turned around, she realised that she'd been mistaken. They had not slunk from her at all.

For there was another watcher – a much larger and more fearsome one. It was crouching on the rock that she had sat on earlier, its eyes fixed on her. Unblinking eyes like ice. Pale blue, splinters of exploding starlight. Her heart thumped.

A big cat. Not a lion; though it was as big as one, no, bigger, heavier – but it was white, its thick fur dappled here and there with small black dabs, like the surrounding snow across the rocky ground.

It was only a dozen yards away. An easy shot... She felt the arrow ready at her bowstring. The big cat moved, as smooth as oil; first one powerful fore-leg, then one hind-leg, with slow deliberate strength. It was gathering for a spring. Yaret held still.

Snow leopard. First she'd ever seen. Had no idea they were so big. Should it be that big? How long would it take to reach her? Perhaps two seconds, perhaps one. It was all power, formidable, held in, pent up. Those eyes transfixed her. The words of the Ulthared passed across her mind: *to fear the claws of snow, to meet the gaze of ice...*

She could not tell what the great cat might do. Still they stared at each other, she with the bow half-drawn, it with one foot half-lifted.

It was out of its territory here, she thought. Must have come down from the mountains. Maybe the howls of hunting wolves had drawn it, or the smell of goat. Not fair to shoot it unless it tried to kill her. Kill nothing without a reason.

But if she waited it would be too late. Shoot it or run. No, don't run.

Still she did not move. Neither did the leopard. Its eyes held her.

Behind her was a sudden flurry of alarm; a bird clapped wings and shrilled a warning. She could not help half-turning. Then, in panic, she swung back, fully expecting to see the leopard covering the ground towards her, leaping at her, muscles rippling–

It was gone. No sign of where. She stood and stared at the empty rock it had been crouching on. Its sudden absence hurt. So strange. Such fierce beauty, such curbed power... A little way behind her she heard Leor's voice. He and all the others were riding up the hill.

"Are you all right?" said Leor as he came up to her. He looked at the half-drawn bow in her hands.

"Yes. There were wolves on the far bank of the stream. They've gone now."

"They won't cross that rope," said Veron. "We thought we'd let you sleep a little longer."

"Thank you." Her voice felt odd and she tried to make it sound normal. "Did you have success in your hunting?"

He nodded. "Enough. You sure you're all right?"

She opened her mouth to tell him. But what would Veron do if he knew there was a leopard here? Decide to hunt it down? Use it for his unknown purposes?

His gaze on her was intent and interested. And it occurred to her that he must have realised there was a snow leopard in the area. As a master huntsman, how could he not? He just didn't know if she had seen it. So what did that mean?

"I'm all right," she said.

“Then let’s get moving.”

She went to fetch Helba, who had withdrawn to the edge of the trees, but had not bolted. Although Yaret stared hard, she glimpsed no hint of white fur amidst the upright ranks of tree-trunks. She looked for paw-prints in the snow, and saw none. But then she was no tracker.

Veron was watching her; so she mounted Helba without comment. They all rode up the hill again, and through the trees in single file. Within the woods was silence, yet every time they stopped she thought she heard a distant sound; or rather, a conglomeration of sounds, in a faint rumbling clamour.

“That’s the battle,” murmured Leor. “It started again a little while ago.”

“We can do nothing until early evening,” said Veron.

She wondered why not, but suspected that were she to ask, again she’d get no answer. Down on the battle plain was where she ought to be, alongside her comrades. She bit her lip and wondered if Jerred and Morad were in the thick of the fighting yet, and how Poda was faring underneath the Baron; and how Rothir and Parthenal and Maeneb did.

And that still, calm man, Huldarion, for whom they risked their lives. That man so shackled by his burns, with such deep consideration in his gaze, as if he weighed a hundred possibilities in every thought.

Veron, too, did this for Huldarion – whatever it was that he was doing. Which seemed to be, bizarrely, stalking bear. He and his men melted away at intervals and reappeared without warning; and all that she could gather was that five bears had now been collected.

“Collected?” she asked Leor. “What does that mean? What are they for?”

“They’re for the battle.”

“You can’t make bears fight,” Yaret protested. “Against stonemen and darkburns? That would be cruelty. They’d get slaughtered.”

“Darkburns don’t seem to attack animals,” said Leor. “Only humans.”

“That’s not the point. What about the stonemen? They’re not going to have any compunction about slaughtering animals, are they? And why am I here at all? I should be down there in the battle. So should you, for that matter.”

“Time to eat,” said Leor, for the huntsmen had done their reappearing trick again.

By now the group had reached an area where the forest thinned, breaking up into many glades. They had descended below the snowline, and in one of these glades they sat on the grass and handed out some food.

Yaret had to force her bread down. She knew she ought to eat, but with the distant noise of battle coming and going on the wind she once again felt desperately anxious about her friends down on the field. If Veron did nothing before evening, it might all be too late.

Everything had been too late. She had arrived at Obandiro too late. She saw the bear too late. Today she’d woken up too late...

But then she reflected that none of the outcomes would have been better if she’d been too early. So she made herself wait patiently. She needed patience; for after they had eaten, Veron announced his intention of sleeping for an hour or two, along with all his men.

“Can I walk around?” asked Yaret.

“Don’t go far. Stay within earshot,” said Veron, settling down on a patch of dry ground. He put his hands behind his head as if he were merely basking in the sun after a picnic, not readying himself for battle.

"I'll keep you company," said Leor to Yaret. "I can't sleep in the daylight."

"Keep her close," said Veron, and shut his eyes.

Yaret had no intention of going far when there were so many wolves around – to say nothing of the giant cat. But by walking a mere hundred yards to a gap in the trees, she came to a lip of rock that jutted out of the hillside, overlooking the plain.

Her limbs seemed to lock up as she approached the edge with its sheer drop. Even though it was nothing like the drop down from the cliffs above the Thore, it made the back of her thighs burn and tingle with sudden apprehension, so she paused and sat down on the stone. From there she could gaze south and see some part of the battle that was raging two or three miles away.

It was hard to make out what was happening. Those thin lines must be the stonemen, and the groups on horseback were surely Kelvhan cavalry; now and then there was a sharp glint from them as armour caught the sun. But the scene was much obscured by patchy smoke, and only a jumbled noise came to her ears.

None the less she watched for a long while, trying to work out which side had the better of it in the section of the battlefield that she could see. Sometimes the stonemen seemed to surge forward; and then the Kelvhans pushed back. It was inconclusive. A mess, she thought, like every battle she had seen so far.

Leor sat silent next to her, also looking down between the trees.

"What happens if we win?" she said at last. "Will that be the defeat of the stonemen?"

"It will be a defeat, although probably not the last. After we have won we'll march to see how General Istard is faring west of Kelvha, and to help him defeat the stonemen there if need be."

"And then?"

"Then Kelvha will certainly go home as soon as they can. The Vonn will hope to be invited into Kelvha City as valued allies. If they can win Kelvha over, they wish for their help in regaining Caervonn. That will probably involve more battles with the stonemen."

She stared. Chaos. But maybe somebody down there knew what was going on.

"Who is responsible for all this, Leor? Who is the stonemen's leader?"

There was a reluctant pause before he answered. "He is called Adon."

"Is that the same as Adonil?"

"Yes. The stonemen seem to worship him almost as a god. But he's not a god, nor a stoneman. He's a wizard."

At that she turned to look at him. "Like you? Rud said he was your brother."

"He's not. He's nothing like me."

"How many wizards are there? You're the only one I've ever heard of with any certainty. Surely you and Adon must be kin."

"We are not kin. Never say that." Leor seemed to be angry.

"Nevertheless, if wizards meddle in the affairs of men—"

"I have given up meddling," he said vehemently. "Do not accuse me of meddling."

"But if one wizard meddles in the affairs of men," said Yaret more carefully, "perhaps another wizard, kin or not, ought to try and stop him."

"That is what I'm trying to do."

"Without meddling?"

"You can't have it both ways. I will help Veron in this plan of his. Beyond that, I will not use wizardry to interfere."

"What is Adon like?" she asked.

Leor paused again. When he answered he sounded both wistful and bitter. "He was wonderful, once."

"Is it age that's made him cruel, then?"

"He has made himself cruel. Age has nothing to do with it."

"There must be a reason why he chooses to be cruel."

"You'd think so. But I don't know what it is. I don't want to talk about Adon," he said.

"Will you tell me about Obandiro instead? I'll understand if you don't want to."

If the destruction of Obandiro made more pleasant listening than Adon's doings, thought Yaret, then Adon must be very bad news indeed.

All the same she began to tell him her story, from the discovery of the four children and the digging out of the first cellars, to the small village she had left in the process of remaking itself. She realised that it afforded her relief to talk about it, in more detail than she had to Zan: to share the tale, not skirt around it.

"You're fond of Dil," he said when she had finished.

"Yes. I'm fond of all the children. But Dil's the youngest, or rather he was for a long time."

"I never had children," said Leor.

She thought she heard a note of sadness, and almost answered, "Well, it's never too late," before she caught herself up and decided that it probably was. In any case, whom could a wizard marry? A woman whom he would have to witness dying centuries before he did himself? It occurred to her that the Wardens were not the only ones to suffer from their extended lives. Perhaps Leor grew lonely.

She knew what *that* felt like. "I'm sorry I was sharp with you before," she said.

"It was understandable." He stood up, startlingly tall, and offered her a hand to pull her to her feet. Below them the battle continued its inconclusive mayhem. They walked back to the sleepers, who were now being shaken into wakefulness by Veron.

"The moon will soon be rising," Veron told them. He seemed fiercely happy. "And then our work will start in earnest."

Chapter 36

He wished he hadn't said that, about having no children. It was far too personal. What must she think?

But age had not brought wisdom, Leor reflected yet again. Over and over he made mistakes. Over and over he vowed to learn from them, and failed.

Yet he did not always fail, he told himself as he climbed onto his rangy horse. Bryddesda was as thin and unappealing as Leor thought he was himself, but luckily the horse was also just as tough. Now they rode uphill once more. Soon his chance to fail would come again; but his scheme would not fall short this time. Only a few of them did. It was just that they were the ones that he remembered.

Leor tried to think of some successes. The collapsing house that he'd shored up: he'd saved three lives. The drowning man he'd rescued, holding back the river until he could scramble out. Quite a feat. The man had been blind drunk, but that was beside the point. The well he'd caused to appear during the drought in Outer Kelvha. That was worthwhile, surely?

The stonemen he had slaughtered near that village in the north-west. There were too many of them to fight, so he'd used lightning – just a minor redirection of a single bolt that had been lurking in the clouds. He'd saved a few lives there, although the villagers would never realise it. But the lightning had set a hay-rick on fire as effectively as any darkburn, and destroyed their winter fodder. So: success, or failure?

Sometimes it was finely balanced. He trusted that this time it would come down on the side of success. All that was required was a simple shrouding spell – one he found himself still using frequently, despite his vow to forswear wizardry, because it was so useful. So innocuous a charm hardly counted as wizardry in any case. It hurt nobody. It merely made him inconspicuous until he wanted to be seen.

This time, it would make others inconspicuous as well as himself. He was confident enough that it would work.

And Veron's hunt had been efficient. Leor was less sure of the efficacy of the rest of Veron's plan. In particular he was worried about Yaret's role in it. Not safe. She could even die, if this went wrong.

But Veron had refused to give her any warning.

"She'll be all right," he'd said, although what he based his faith on, Leor did not know. He understood Veron even less than he did most people. The longer he lived, the more complicated people seemed to get. So little time he had to know and understand these mortal men and women before they grew distressingly old and died, and then he had to start again.

Thuli, now: Yaret's grandmother. He'd fallen for her somewhat – why, he was not certain, for it was not physical attraction particularly, but rather a sense of mysterious affinity, perhaps caused by the red hair echoing his own, or else her love of ancient lore – but in any case she was married to his old friend Ilo, and showed little interest in Leor, so he held his peace. That last time he laid eyes on Thuli she had aged immeasurably. She had lost her daughter-in-law and baby grandson in that time, it was true, and was bringing up the infant Yaret; but her lined face and brisk dismissiveness seemed to him to be inordinately

premature. Meanwhile Leor himself seemed to grow younger and younger, not in looks to be sure, but in uncertainty and ignorance.

As they rode over the hill and round the back of it he glanced at Yaret. Not as pretty as Thuli had been. But calmer.

"Don't let her know," Veron had told him. Leor remembered how, on their first meeting, he'd wondered whether to warn her of what lay ahead: that she was soon to come upon the smoking ruins of Obandiro. In the end, according to Yaret, he'd run away.

What could he warn her of right now, in any case? This idea of Veron's lay outside his realm. And all the time, the distant rumble of the battle reminded him why it was deemed necessary.

Now, hidden from the battlefield by rising hills, they were once again hemmed in by tall austere trees that leaned menacingly over them on either side. The light was fading although it was still at least an hour to sunset. Yaret was looking around warily.

"All right?" said Veron. "Not far now." She nodded and said nothing.

A hundred yards further on, Veron paused. He breathed in deeply, looking at the sky.

"The moon is risen," he said. Leor turned: no moon was yet visible above the trees, but a pale luminescence glowed in the eastern sky. At a nod from Veron the greater part of the huntsmen slipped away, disappearing into the woods. The remainder took up position behind Yaret. Leor thought it looked suspiciously as if it were to stop her from escaping.

They rode on a little further until they came out on an open hillside ringed by ranks of trees. Here they all dismounted. The noise of battle was clearer; Leor wondered who had the best of it. He could be down there, wielding bolts of lightning... and no doubt hitting the wrong people. Lightning was a dangerous weapon.

Magic was a dangerous weapon. So what was this, that Veron was about to use? Or to ask to use, at least? It was not wizardry. Leor did not know what he should call it. It was beyond his power or knowledge.

The daylight was fading fast: too fast, far too speedily. This was not a natural sunset. Now the moon was visible above the treetops, its light falling like a silver veil across the hill, its strange heavy paleness percolating through the air. As if we were underwater, thought Leor. We are underlight. He was seldom afraid of anything except himself; but he was afraid now.

From the line of trees across the hill a dark mass was emerging: the wolves. There were surely numerous packs joined into one, he thought, so many of the animals were there, wild and keen and hungry, held in only by the flagged rope and perhaps by some other force that he could not detect.

To their right, there was a crash: and a bear blundered out of the trees, rearing up onto its hind feet before dropping heavily back onto all fours. Behind it were the bulky shapes of more. Five bears, all shambling down the slope towards the wolves.

These animals would never gather in such numbers or so close to one another, Leor knew, were there not something to hold them here. And when a movement of the moonlight made him look up the hill, he knew what that something was.

"Ah," he said, and looked down again; as did all the men except Veron, who gazed and gazed, his face alight. And when Leor glanced up momentarily he saw that Yaret too was gazing.

"Go and talk to her," Veron said to Yaret. "She prefers women. Especially women hunters. She will hear you. Take your bow."

“What shall I say?” Yaret murmured.

“Ask for her help. She already knows what’s needed. But we have to ask. We have to petition her.”

As Yaret slowly picked up her bow, Leor risked another glimpse at the shape that stood high on the hill.

It was made of moonlight, but it looked like a woman. Perhaps it was a woman, at times. Tall and strong, graceful and upright, her silver drapery falling softly round her spear and bow, she might have been a silver statue – but a moving one. Her hair was braided on one side like a northern archer’s. It too shone silver, although not with age.

Yet she was older than he was himself, by far. Leor could not look for any longer. The huntsman next to him had covered his face with his hand.

Instead he turned to look at Yaret, who was walking up the hill towards the woman. She couldn’t know what the woman was. *Oh, beware*, he thought *beware*, every instinct raising the alarm although he wasn’t sure exactly what she needed to beware of.

Yaret did not seem to show any wariness at all. As she walked she gazed unfalteringly at the silver shape, before she stopped a mere three yards away. *Too close*, he said in silent agony, *too close, step back!*

Then a wisp of cloud made the moonlight shift: the ground beneath him seemed to tilt – and the silver shape abruptly shifted too.

In an instant it had changed to something long and sleek, a creature of tremendous power and beauty: a sinuous great cat, a fatal huntress, poised to spring. This was the point when Yaret ought to turn and run. Leor willed her to. He had stopped breathing. But if she ran now, would the huge white leopard chase her down? One leap, and she’d be dead.

Yaret did not run. She gazed long and steadily into the cat’s eyes. How could she bear that? Then she went down on one knee, and laid her bow upon the ground.

“Unsaryun,” she said in a clear unfaltering voice. “I ask you for your help.”

And then, to Leor’s surprise, she continued speaking in Bandiran, a tongue he had once learnt, long ago, so long. Even more to his surprise, he knew the words she spoke.

“Mother of the hunter, child of the moon, protector of the hunted, who knows of birth and death and all between, have mercy on your followers. I dedicate my bow and arrow to your service, to kill nothing without cause, to say Oveyn for every thing I kill. For the day will come when death shall hunt me also.”

She looked at the snow leopard, whose eyes were on a level with her own.

“I beg you to protect these prey tonight. Make them invincible underneath this moon. Give them vengeance on the enemies who now despoil and burn their homes. While the moon burns white, allow them use of your own power. This I ask on behalf of your loyal huntsmen here, and for myself, as hunter. Unsaryun.”

She bent her head. The leopard took three slow, rolling paces towards her, until its head was almost touching hers.

And then the moonlight shifted, and it was a woman again – or something like a woman.

“It is granted,” she said. Or someone said. The voice was silver. Leor could not tell from whence it came.

Yaret stood up, and with her head down, backed away, feeling with her feet behind her. As she got close to Leor she stumbled and he had to catch her. She sat down heavily on the ground.

Veron was approaching the woman now, his face alive with joy; almost with ecstasy. What has the man married? thought Leor. As the two met beneath the moon, again he could not look. The other huntsmen stood around, all with heads bowed.

He turned to Yaret, who sat clutching the grass with both her hands. She seemed dazed. "Are you all right?" After a moment, she nodded.

Veron and his wife began to walk down the hill, side by side, made into living marble by the full moon's luminous intensity. The huntress was the taller by a head.

Yaret got slowly to her feet again and bowed along with all the huntsmen. Some fell to their knees as Veron and the huntress walked in silence past them, down towards the animals. The massed wolves drew apart for them. The bears dropped their heads submissively and began to pad behind them. The wolves followed; and the huntsmen rose and followed the wolves, some leading the horses at the back.

"We need to go as well," said Leor. "My part comes soon."

But Yaret stopped. A group of lions was emerging from the surrounding woods: thin, tough beasts of the mountains, very different to the great cat they had just seen.

"Lions," she muttered. "I'm not keen on lions."

"You're safe from them today," said Leor. "Just stay close beside me."

She began to walk alongside him behind the mass of animals, into the band of trees. Once in there, the moon was hidden, yet Leor could feel its cold power beating down on him.

"I think that worked," he said; which was something of an understatement. "I recognised most of what you said – the first part, but then you added your own plea, did you not?"

Her head jerked round to look at him. "You recognised it?" she said, startled – indeed, almost afraid, as she had not been before the huntress. "You shouldn't have known any of it. It's secret – Ulthared. What's more, it's women's Ulthared."

"No, it's not," said Leor. "It's by Madeo."

She stared at him. "What are you saying? That Madeo wrote the Ulthared?"

He shrugged. Another mistake made. He should have kept his mouth shut.

"You didn't seem surprised at her," he said after a while.

"I knew who she was. Even without the eyes."

"The eyes?"

"As blue as ice," said Yaret softly. "It is said in our lore that she was born from the moon and came to earth to hunt. That in every generation she takes the greatest huntsman for her partner."

"Every generation? Don't tell Veron that."

"I should think he knows."

They had now crossed the strip of woodland and emerged on the far side. Here they paused to look down, where there was a clear view of the nearest fort and the wide plain beyond. Leor realised that the light here was quite different: the moon was almost unnoticeable, for the low sun drowned the scene in red.

Fitting, he thought grimly. The battle plain seethed with carts, men, horses, a frantic piecemeal stormy lake of warfare half-submerged in smoke. It looked as though Kelvha had been pushed back by some distance, although the army was still fighting strongly; but fighting in defence and not attack. The enemy seemed to be using some sort of giant catapult but he could not tell what missile it might hurl.

Behind the fort and closer to him, he could see another company of stonemen arming themselves, ready to enter the field. None of them looked backwards to observe the silver figure standing tall and upright on the hill. Perhaps she was invisible to them all.

But under the cover of the trees the animals were clearly visible. Could a horde of wolves and bears and cats really offer anything against this force? Well, whatever happened, Leor thought, he was committed. He would do his part.

Veron looked round at him and nodded. Leor began to think his spell. There was no need to speak it aloud. Cloaking came easily to him – too easily, perhaps. It made it too straightforward for him to hide.

But now he was cloaking a huge four-legged battalion which would do the will of the huntress. It took a little longer: he could tell it had worked when the huntsmen drew a long collective breath.

“Where are they?” whispered Yaret. “Are they still there? All I can see are haze and shadows.”

He nodded. To himself, the animals were still obvious enough.

“Now,” said the huntress – he hardly liked to even think her name, because its power was so strong, a cold fierce light inside his head. At her command, the animals streamed forward.

They are possessed by her spirit, he thought, or liberated from their nature by it. Wolves and lions would never run together otherwise. And bringing up the rear, the lumbering bears.

They raced downhill towards the battlefield, and Leor and the huntsmen hastened after them. Leor held fast to the shielding spell, and prayed that it would hold: and that this swift fierce army of the wild would not prove to be too few, too weak, too late.

Chapter 37

Maeneb knew that they were losing, and it made her angry.

She blamed the Kelvhans. They'd gone in too early, charging at the enemy on their prancing over-decorated horses, which had promptly panicked at the first rush of darkburns and had thrown several of their riders – then trampling on them for good measure.

The premature charge had not allowed enough time for stakes to be set, as Ikelder had suggested: a good suggestion that had worked where a single meagre row had been put hurriedly in place. The stakes had caught the stonemen's chains with such unexpected impact that they'd been pulled right off their horses and were easily dispatched. But elsewhere the pairs of stonemen rode in herding darkburns with impunity.

Kelvha had been pushed back; had regrouped; and had charged again. Maeneb knew it wasn't fair to blame the troops, who were both skilled and determined. She blamed the Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun, because he did not learn.

Whereas the stonemen did. It surprised her because on previous encounters they had stuck rigidly to one strategy: attack. But now they used new tactics – pretending to turn tail and run, so luring the Kelvhan cavalry onto boggy ground. The stonemen, they discovered, had already laid down planks to enable their escape on foot; but the pursuing horses floundered, lurched and fell. Maeneb felt more pity for the horses than the Kelvhans, who surely should have foreseen this, and certainly shouldn't have been caught out after the first time it happened. But orders once given seemed to be followed blindly.

Perhaps the Arch-Lord Shargun had such force of numbers that, like the stonemen, he didn't worry about casualties. When Kelvha were pushed back a second time, Shargun had rejected outright the suggestions of the Vonn – and of some of his own captains – that they should forgo the cavalry and advance with archers and foot-soldiers. He seemed to think that the only worthy wars were fought on horseback. Parthenal returned from the meeting of captains tight-lipped and icy with suppressed rage.

"What a puffed-up bag of wind," he expostulated. "Thinks he's inherited genius along with his titles. He's got staff with ten times more brains, but will he listen to them?"

"I'm guessing not," said Maeneb.

There was no time for a third charge in any case before the stonemen came up with another novel tactic. From the far forts they dragged out great wheeled catapults, with which they fired bundles of burning pitch and straw across the battlefield. These were distracting but not especially disruptive.

However, they paved the way for more deadly missiles: when a darkburn came hurtling over their heads the pandemonium was immediate. Nobody had been prepared for this. As a second one shot overhead, wrapped in red-hot chains, Maeneb did not know whether to laugh or wail. Although the darkburn shattered on hitting the ground, the burning pieces flew through the nearest troops with devastating effect. Throughout the ranks the same was happening as more darkburns plunged down from the sky.

And now she was dealing with the aftermath, half-stunned with shouts and screaming horses and the clash of iron, and assailed even more by the fear and hate and anger emanating from all sides, all minds, as she fought the new oncoming wave of stonemen. She

had run out of arrows long ago. During one of the brief lulls she and a few others had managed to purloin chain mail vests from some of the Kelvhan dead, to replace their own slashed and battered leather armour. The metal was effective but it was hot and heavy, and she was quickly wearying.

Her feet stuck to the ground, for the field had turned to mud. Dead and injured horses were a constant hindrance. None the less, her company under Parthenal's command was making headway, as were the companies of Rothir and Ikelder to the left and right. The stonemen seemed to concentrate their forces on the Kelvhan cavalry, who were now riding out yet again.

It caused Parthenal to groan. "Has the man no sense?"

"Who's that in the middle of them?" Maeneb asked.

He stared over at the group of horsemen. "Oh, no. What the stars can they be thinking of? That's the Prince!"

Maeneb stared too, in disbelief. But it was so. The High Prince was riding out with the latest company of Kelvhans – not at their head, it was true, but still exposed unnecessarily, when the battle was at its height and the Kelvhans were getting the worst of it.

She could not imagine why Shargun had allowed this. Prince Faldron was reportedly a brave and eager boy, but a mere boy none the less: untested and unproven. And he was the heir to the entire kingdom of Kelvha.

"They must be mad," she said to Parthenal.

"Well, we can't help him," he answered, raising his sword in preparation for the next stoneman wave. "Just do what we can here – and pray."

Pray? To whom? What god of war might she call on, to make things worse than they already were? In any case Maeneb believed in no gods. She believed in something, maybe, but not in proud supernatural beings that might reluctantly be bribed by prayers to take sides in a battle.

All this she thought, as she slew a stoneman running headlong at her. Then she dodged a stray axe which flew past her to thud into the ground, before she picked it up and hurled it at a second stonemen. A lucky shot: it hit him in the face. She was aware of Rigal engaged in grunting axe-work next to her, and Durba nearby, hesitant and slow.

"Look out!" she shouted, and threw her sword like a spear at the stoneman that was about to bring his axe down on top of Durba's head. The man fell backwards with a cry of surprise. Durba turned in dazed bewilderment as Maeneb strode up to retrieve her sword and finish the stoneman off with a blow between the ribs.

"Wake up," Maeneb shouted at the younger woman, exasperated. "I can't take care of you."

Durba made no answer. She held her sword unsteadily in both her hands as if unsure of what to do with it. Had she been stunned? Although she was smeared with blood Maeneb could see no wounds upon her head.

Fortunately there was now another lull in the immediate assault: for the stonemen were hurrying away to add their numbers to the attack on Kelvha. Around the Prince, the Kelvhan horsemen struck out again and again, swords flashing orange as fire in the late sun; but the horde of the surrounding foe became no smaller. Rather it increased in size.

She realised that the Kelvhans were trying to retreat – but now they were cut off by stonemen. The Prince was in dire peril.

“We need to go to their aid!” she yelled to Parthenal, although she knew that there was little they could do.

But at the same time she realised that others of the Vonn were already racing to the Prince’s rescue. Huldarion and Thoronal and perhaps some thirty of the Riders came charging at a run, attacking the stonemen at the rear.

She glimpsed Huldarion’s face, set and hard, as he laid about him mercilessly with his sword. The Prince, still waving his own sword less effectively, looked just as eager as before. He seemed quite unaware of any danger – either his own, or that of the men who now surrounded him in his defence.

That was all that she had time to see before she had to turn round swiftly to attend to the defence of her own company, for a dozen stonemen were pounding heavily towards them. Durba just stood there. She was worse than useless. What was wrong with the girl?

Maeneb battled with the stoneman who led this latest charge – a big, heavily-scarred man with at least ten stones in his head: a leader, she thought, as she parried the blow from his sword and tried to get in her own. He was a more skilful fighter than most, and she was desperately tired. As their blades clashed she gritted her teeth in the effort to ward him off.

Rigal came to her aid, his sword slicing through the man’s thick neck. Maeneb stepped back with a sigh of relief – which turned in the same breath to a groan.

For now she saw yet more troops marching out from behind the fifteenth fort, emerging from obscuring clouds of smoke. Reinforcements. Hundreds of them; thousands.

“Oh, no,” murmured Rigal, echoing her dismay.

Too many. Far too many. She leant exhausted on her sword. These troops must have been deliberately held back until now, to have all the more effect when Kelvha and the Vonn were weakened with fatigue and casualties. Now they flowed out from behind the fort – a river of stonemen, running fast with axes held aloft.

“Back! Get those injured men away, and re-group!” shouted Parthenal. A little distance away, Rothir was urging his own company to do the same. But everyone was weary and few were unhurt. Maeneb herself was trying to ignore a gash on her shoulder as well as aching muscles that screamed for rest. She scrabbled in the mud and blood for spent arrows, finding only three.

“Back into the line! We’ll show them what we’re made of!” roared Parthenal. Yet for a man who seldom displayed any weariness, his near-exhaustion was all too obvious now. The strain showed in his face and in his voice.

All the companies of the Vonn regrouped, while Huldarion and Thoronal with their men still fought off the enemy that clustered round the Kelvhan Prince. The fighting there was bitter, yet they seemed to be holding their own – so far. But that would not last once the reinforcements reached the stonemen. Nobody could hold out. Every company was too diminished by wounds and too spent in strength.

Maeneb knew that the next attack would be the last. The Vonn could not survive much longer. Kelvha had failed them, with their blind insistence on their cavalry. All around her she felt despair spread amongst her fellows; but also an implacable resolve. The Vonn would not die lightly, nor would they see their friends die without defending them to the utmost.

She herself was angry more than anything. Gripping her sword, she surveyed the ranks of the new stoneman army with furious determination. The air seemed to darken as if in anticipation of the Riders’ coming fate. Maeneb thought she even noticed stars glittering

around a luminous moon, but had no time to pay attention to the sky. She was glowering at the advancing enemy.

Then she exclaimed aloud.

“What on earth is that?”

Nobody replied. They too were staring in exhausted puzzlement. The enemy army seemed to have broken apart at the back – dividing into two halves as if cleaved apart by some huge invisible sword. Men ran from either side. But she could not see anything in the middle.

Until suddenly she could. Where before there had been only smoke, now there was a dark surging mass cutting its way through the enemy ranks. But it was not a human army. She saw to her amazement that it was a sea of creatures, running low and swiftly, flooding across the battlefield and calling as they ran. Howl after howl curled up into the darkening sky. Her blood chilled.

“What the stars?” breathed Rigal. “Are those...?”

“Wolves,” said Maeneb.

“Wolves? But how?”

“Veron.”

For there he was, galloping in the midst of the great wolf-pack, standing on the stirrups to whirl his bladed chain around his head. As he reached the front of the stoneman army the blades flew out and struck several of the enemy. They staggered and fell; an instant later the wolves were tearing at their limbs.

At this sight, more stonemen tried to flee in panic. Others, unable to escape, attempted to defend themselves against the onslaught of ravenously snapping wolves.

What is this? thought Maeneb. Surely this is not just Veron? Wolves do not behave this way. And nor do stonemen.

For the stonemen who remained in their positions seemed to stumble oddly, as if blinded by some light she could not see. Many of them dropped their swords and axes, while those who held on to them lowered them uncertainly.

The mass of wolves drew closer. When a stray one hurled itself at Maeneb she hit it on the nose with her shield, at which it yelped and swerved back to its fellows. That at least was relatively normal. But nothing else was normal about the scene that lay before her.

Despite the wavering of the stonemen, their army was still far greater in number than the wolves. While the stonemen in the centre had become weak and ineffectual, those furthest from the animals regathered their wits speedily and once more flung themselves upon the Vonn. No sooner had Parthenal shouted a warning than Maeneb found herself again fighting desperately: and now she had to defend not just herself, but also Durba, who was hesitant and unresponsive.

Could the wolves sway the battle? Maeneb feared not, for the enemy onslaught was still fierce. She turned from slitting a stoneman’s throat with her long knife to find Yaret standing next to her, shooting off arrows, although she had not even noticed her arrive.

“Where did you come from?” she yelled through the hubbub of shouts and howls.

“With Veron,” Yaret yelled back, releasing another arrow. A stoneman fell; but too many more still rushed in from either side.

“It’s not enough!” cried Maeneb in frustration. As she spoke, an axe-man charged at Durba. Why was the girl so slow? Maeneb threw herself at the attacker, and lost both her

balance and her knife. A heavy blow of the axe upon her shield sent her stumbling to her knees.

An instant later the stoneman fell with Yaret's sword between his ribs. But before Maeneb could get to her feet, a second stoneman hurled his axe at her.

The spinning axe hit her full in the chest with a heavy thump. Her borrowed chain-mail saved her life; but she was thrown onto her back, totally winded, unable for the moment to move. She was helplessly aware of a large stoneman bearing down on her, his eyes glaring, sword upraised. She could not even lift an arm in answer as she waited for the final blow.

A second later he fell on top of her, pinning her to the ground, and lay completely still. Then, over the dead man's shoulder, Maeneb saw a woman.

A woman? No. Too tall. Too strange, too silver, with her braided silver hair and robes like carven moonlight. She bore a silver spear which she was withdrawing from the dead man's back, although it seemed to leave no blood. Upon her back, a quiver; in her other hand, a bow, also silver in the moonlight that seemed now to flood the plain.

What had happened to the sun? The woman's face was like marble, both fierce and serene. Those eyes...

Maeneb had to close her own. Trying to catch her breath, she blindly pulled herself free of the dead stoneman's weight. As she staggered to her feet she was gasping raggedly not just for air, but also with huge fear and apprehension. What was this? What was *she*?

For the woman's mind was like nothing that Maeneb had ever felt before; not even the Farwth. It was pure light, silver-white and piercing. Its power made her so conscious of her weakness that she almost fell again.

Stonemen seemed to collapse at the mere touch of the woman's spear. When she thrust it at one bemused attacker it was with a smooth, effortless movement: and even as the man toppled, the spear was back in the woman's hand, shimmering. As if a moonbeam had momentarily solidified, thought Maeneb, and had turned to steel before once more becoming moonlight.

A group of a dozen stonemen charged in a chaotic rush, shielding their faces while brandishing their axes – so many of them that despite their disarray Maeneb was sure the woman must be overwhelmed. Snatching up her knife, she stumbled over to assist; but Yaret had already leapt to the strange woman's defence, and was yelling furiously as she swung her sword two-handed. Maeneb was reminded of Parthenal: that characteristic sway and twist as the sword slashed across the foremost stoneman's shoulder.

"Don't you dare!" Yaret shouted, and one man fell beneath her blow. A second blundered forward with his axe upraised, but before he could use it, the woman's spear alighted on his neck. It left no mark of blood. It did not even pierce the skin. Yet Maeneb both saw and felt the man die at the instant that it touched him.

Yaret was still laying about her frantically; so Maeneb threw herself into the affray, stabbing one man and immediately clashing swords with a second. He fought back hard, snarling like an animal beneath his dozen stones.

The silver spear reached over her to touch him on the shoulder. The man went limp and fell down at her feet. As the spear withdrew it brushed against her hair. She felt her skin both freeze and tingle: like an icicle, like freezing flame, a cold burning caress.

She risked a swift glance at the woman's face. It seemed to be smiling. Maeneb could not look for long enough to tell.

“You need not defend me,” the woman said. Or did she say it? The words shone white in Maeneb’s mind. Then she had to spin round, swiping her knife at the next stoneman; clumsier than the last, he dropped his sword and she kicked him in the stomach before swiping her knife again, this time across his throat.

Yet more of the enemy were still coming. Too many more. Was there no end to them? She felt exhaustion hit her, more debilitating than any wound.

At that moment, even as she slumped in tiredness, the hairs stood up on her head. The light had shifted sideways: the world seemed to tilt a little. Maeneb became aware from the appalled faces of the stonemen that, behind her back, something had changed.

She did not dare to drop her guard to turn and look. But she heard a long, vibrating growl, as deep and resonant as if it came out of the very earth.

The stonemen yelled. Some were screaming in sudden terror. Then they scattered and a long white creature leapt past Maeneb.

She stood open-mouthed. What was this? No leopard could ever grow to this size, surely? So big, so powerful...

Maeneb could not move. She could only watch as the silver leopard hunted down the stonemen. Its long claws tore the screams from their bodies: curved scimitars of teeth ripped out their throats. It was pitiless. Yet it was beautiful – all sinuous muscle and silky force. How could there be such beauty in such killing?

Beside her Yaret stood gasping with fatigue and perhaps with shock. There was no further need to fight; there was nothing left for them to do. The stonemen were all running now – but the leopard ran faster. Always faster. Its acceleration was extraordinary as it stretched out its rippling body: and its agile leap was always glorious and always deadly.

Was this a dream? Maeneb realised that the sun had disappeared and the world had turned to moonlight. There was Leor, in the middle of the fray, spearing stonemen as if they were fish in a silver sea. Beyond him, still more dream-like, a line of bears was rearing up, startlingly tall, to fall with all their weight upon the fleeing stonemen; and to one side, a pair of lions prowled, speeding to bring down any that escaped.

And always, in the midst, the silver leopard. It was bigger than the lions by far. She saw one lion draw too close to it and flinch aside, its head down, fawning. The leopard seized another stoneman by the neck and flung him away as if he were made out of straw.

Within minutes it was clear that the fight was over. The enemy were in full retreat and being rapidly hunted down. When Maeneb strained to see the great white leopard in pursuit, it was hidden from her sight.

Its disappearance filled her, oddly, with a kind of grief. Again she felt the touch of that long silver spear, moonlight made solid: a cold, acknowledging caress.

“Who was that?” she tried to call to Leor. It came out as a croak. The wizard shook his head and made no answer. Instead he dropped his sword on to the ground and stared at it.

“That was the huntress,” said Yaret. She was breathless, on her knees.

So was Rigal: he looked completely spent. And all around her, Maeneb saw the other Riders cast their weapons, and sometimes their bloodied bodies, to the ground. She felt herself staggering with the knowledge that the battle was over. It was done.

Parthenal threw no weapons down. Instead he strode over to the nearest group of Kelvhans. He seemed to be trying to persuade them to take advantage of the moment and pursue the stonemen in a final rout.

Maeneb was not sure that any such final charge was needed. The commotion of animals and stonemen was moving further and further back; few of the enemy had escaped. The battle plain was piled with their wrecked bodies.

Although she knew she ought to help the wounded, she seemed immobilised with more than mere exhaustion. While she stood there, trying to gather her strength, a nearby Kelvhan soldier walked over to her, grabbed her by the upper arms and kissed her.

When he let her go she stood and stared at him, frozen in indignant shock. He grinned down at her. Could she knife him? He was an ally, supposedly. She tried to frame her anger into words, while slowly realising that she must not offend him.

"Victory is ours," the Kelvhan said triumphantly. She said nothing. All she could do was stare her revulsion of being kissed. The pressing of his teeth against her – what was meant to be pleasant about that? Didn't he know she was a soldier too? Like Durba and Yaret and all the others?

But I am the most obviously female person on this patch of battleground, she thought furiously. I am his spoils of war.

"So what was that with the wolves and the white lion?" the Kelvhan asked. "Was that witchery?" And now his voice held a note of contempt. Taken aback, Maeneb still did not speak.

A deep male voice spoke for her. "Say rather wizardry." It was Leor, straightening up to look the Kelvhan in the eye with proud severity.

"Ah... wizardry! Of course." The Kelvhan nodded, with more respect.

Wise man, Leor, she thought bitterly. To Kelvha, the female art of witchery was to be despised, while wizardry was male and therefore acceptable.

And Leor looked every inch the wizard. His red hair blazed suddenly in the setting sun; and she realised that the moon had lost its sway. Now it was its usual self – a mere, pale, unobtrusive disc, while the scarlet sun rolled and roared on the horizon.

The soldier kissed his hand to her with a flourish before he strolled away. He ignored both Yaret and Durba who stood nearby. Maeneb wished that she herself were not, as people had informed her, pretty. It was nothing but a handicap. A liability.

At that moment Durba began to fall.

"Look out!" said Yaret. She caught Durba as the girl's legs buckled underneath her. Durba did not speak, but she was shivering; shaking visibly all over.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Maeneb sharply.

Durba did not answer. She merely shook. Maeneb could see no blood on her beyond the usual scrapes and cuts of battle; the borrowed chain-mail looked to have done its job.

"Durba! Where are you hurt? Speak up!"

"She's in shock," said Yaret. "We'd better take her to the rear and sit her down, get her checked over. Then I ought to go back to my own company."

Maeneb was unwilling. Quite apart from her dislike of touching other people, there were plenty of stricken soldiers who needed her assistance more than Durba did. But the girl seemed incapable of walking, so she helped Yaret support her through the weary troops to the back of the field.

There they found the area designated for the wounded, who were being laid down for immediate treatment, or placed in carts to be carried back to the forts. They sat Durba on the muddy ground. She was still shaking.

“Be nice to her,” said Yaret, and she left.

Maeneb had no idea what to say to Durba. She felt for the girl’s mind, and found it all confusion, as chaotic as the battlefield. Her thoughts – such as they were – seemed to be spattered with blood and flashing blades and moonlight.

“Well, that’s battle,” Maeneb said at last. “What did you expect? But cheer up. We won.”

Chapter 38

Rothir felt no joy at the victory. Relief, certainly; or he expected that he would feel relief, at some point, later on. But as yet, there was no happiness.

He and Theol, his second in command, looked at each other without speaking. Theol's wry half-smile and shake of the head said it all. Not much to be happy about. They had lost three of his company: two men, one woman, and many more were wounded. Rothir himself had a few knocks and cuts, but nothing that he considered major.

"Other companies have done worse," said Theol. A level-headed man in his forties, he often understood what Rothir was thinking without him needing to say.

"I know." It wasn't any comfort.

"We couldn't have avoided some losses. We did as well as possible, in the circumstances." Theol never criticised Rothir's decisions despite the age gap: a quizzical head-tilt was the furthest that it ever went. But he was a man of long experience and that comment, from him, was worth something.

Rothir nodded. Were the battle to be fought again – which stars above forbid – there was nothing he would do differently. The outcome would always have brought grief.

After wiping his sword on the grass, he sheathed it carefully at last. It had survived undamaged. I forged it better than I knew, he thought, with only the dullest sense of satisfaction.

"All right. We need to get the company organised and moving back to the Watch Forts before nightfall," he said. The wounded were already being ferried towards the back of the field where the carts were waiting.

"Night is slow to fall this far up north," Theol remarked. "And the light's misleading. Where was the sun hiding before? It's much brighter now than it was earlier."

"True." He glanced up at the sky. The light had been playing tricks towards the end of the battle; he could not account for it, but he had not had any time to think about the weather. Maybe it was down to Leor. It had been strange.

But that whole conclusion to the conflict had been strange. The ethereal moonlit period when wolves and lions over-ran the field seemed almost dreamlike, now that the setting sun was hurling its thick red cloak across the battle plain.

The wolves must have been the helpers that Veron had promised; they'd certainly helped to sow confusion in the stonemen's ranks. When Rothir had noticed the tall woman at some distance on the battlefield, he'd wondered who she was. But then a series of assaults had taken all his attention, until he realised that the enemy ranks had disintegrated and the stonemen were being chased back to the fifteenth fort.

By that time there had not been many left to chase. He thought he'd seen a great white cat leap after the last few stonemen as they ran for the hills, a phenomenon of speed and terrible grace; but that might have been a trick of the strange light. Glancing up in puzzlement at the retiring moon, he wondered how Veron had done it. But he was too weary to feel much real curiosity.

As he helped to convey the wounded Riders to the rear he noted with dull gratitude that nearly all the captains had survived relatively unhurt. Sashel had come off worst, with a bad blow to the head: apparently he had gone berserk at the final attack of the stonemen, and

had rushed straight at them – “as if he didn’t care if he lived or died,” said one of his company.

Rothir nodded, unsurprised. He felt beyond surprise at the moment. Everything in battle was dreadful and none of it was cause for wonder. Not even the appearance of the wolves had surprised him. He had immediately guessed that Veron was responsible, and was just exasperated that it had taken him so long.

Which was unfair, he knew. While he was lifting a wounded soldier into one of the carts, he saw Veron close by with his band of huntsmen. As Rothir walked over to them, Veron was smiling; he clapped his hand on Rothir’s shoulder, a most unusual gesture of familiarity for him. Now there was a happy man, thought Rothir; ecstatic, even, consumed by some inexplicable delight.

“Well, you did it,” he said flatly.

“*She* did it,” Veron answered.

“She...?”

“My wife. The huntress.”

Rothir thought of the tall silver woman striding through the battlefield, and wondered. The moonlight shone from Veron’s eyes as it did not shine elsewhere.

“I’m going back to her now,” Veron said, exultant. He whistled to his horse, which came trotting up; but he paused before he mounted. “Your protégé did well,” he added. “Yaret. Better than I had hoped. She seemed to know her.”

“Yaret’s not my protégé,” said Rothir, totally bemused. “Who seemed to know who? And she did well at what? I didn’t even know that she was with you.”

“She had to petition my wife. It can be fatal,” said Veron. He swung himself up into the saddle. “But she knew the words without being told and she was unafraid.”

“But what was—” Too late. Veron was already riding away.

One of the huntsmen turned to him. Rothir recognised him as Naduk, who had come to the captains’ council.

“It was amazing when she changed,” Naduk told him, with something of the same exultancy that had shone from Veron’s face. “I thought she’d run. Or get her head bit off.”

“Who? What do you mean?”

The huntsman merely grinned and shook his head. “The best day of my life,” he said. “I never thought I’d see her.” He strode off to the carts.

Rothir gathered that by that last *her* Naduk did not mean Yaret. The best day of his life? What an extraordinary way to feel. For him, it was very far from that. It was victory, for now, but that was all.

But he was at last conscious of some small cause for relief, because it seemed Yaret was safe. He’d assumed that she was at the back of the army; if he’d known she’d been in the thick of it with Veron it would have added to the burden of his cares.

Her unexpected appearance at the Watch Fort had given him a shock. No other word for it. An odd mixture of gladness and annoyance – even anger, because there was no need for Yaret to have travelled so far west into such danger. It was quite unnecessary. Yet he was also conscious of a rising joy; because... Well. Of course to see any friend at that time must bring joy. But seeing Yaret had also brought him a new fear: he worried about her to a slightly perplexing degree. It must arise from having saved her life. And from having left her with that ugly stump; he felt responsible for that, in part at least.

But for the moment she was evidently safe. And there was more cause for relief when he saw Huldarion upright and uninjured, directing the exodus of wounded soldiers. Beside Huldarion stood a pair of Kelvhan nobles – not the Prince or Arch-Lord Shargun, thankfully, but two of the senior captains: in Rothir’s opinion, capable enough men who had commanded their troops well.

He walked over, saluted Huldarion, and bowed to the Kelvhans, although both his sense of justice and his back complained.

“I trust Prince Faldron is unhurt?” he said.

“Entirely, I thank you,” answered one of the Kelvhans. “He is unscathed, partly due to the prompt actions of Lord Huldarion and his men.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“He is a valiant youth,” said Huldarion.

“Impressively brave-hearted,” said Rothir, although he had cursed the Prince for a heedless fool when he first realised he had ridden out into the battle. Cost men their lives. The Arch-Lord Shargun ought to have known better. But he said the needful thing. “His courage was remarkable.”

Huldarion didn’t look particularly happy either, he noted, even allowing for the scars. He looked grim. Nobody was looking happy except Veron and his men – and these Kelvhan captains.

“The wizard Leor,” said one of them to Huldarion. “A friend of yours?”

“The friendship is long-standing,” said Huldarion.

“A crude form of wizardry, that enchantment of the animals,” commented the other captain. “Yet effective in its crudeness. Without it the Vonn must surely have foundered; and even Kelvha might have struggled to prevail.”

“Indeed,” said Huldarion evenly. Rothir, as he bowed again and walked away, could not find the energy to feel indignant. He felt drained. But he ignored his tiredness and checked the carts holding his injured Riders, making sure that all were as comfortable as possible. Then he supervised the orderly return of the uninjured, encouraging them to ride back to the nearest Watch Forts before night fell.

He was the last of his company to leave the battlefield. As he swung himself up onto Narba, he looked back at the scene. The sun had set, pulling its bloodied rags of clouds down with it. The last pink glow had faded and the moon was taking precedence once more: it sailed high above the plain, which was littered with the slumped and twisted bodies of the stonemen. He doubted if any of their fellows would come to claim them. A few Kelvhan troops were busy harvesting their stones: after that, they would be left here for the crows and buzzards.

Somewhere a lonely wolf howled. A reminder of the turning of the battle’s tide. We won, Rothir told himself, we won. He felt no triumph; maybe that also would come later. Right now, there was too much to attend to. The familiar grim aftermath of battle. Oh, I have had enough of war, he thought, and shoved the thought aside.

After the ride back to the nearest Watch Forts, he found that the largest building, which had been designated for use as an infirmary, was already almost full. The wounded were being tended on crude trestles, or crammed together on the floor, in tight rows all down the pooled lamplight of the long hall. However, he managed to find places for the most severely

injured of his people, and then seized hold of medics – Kelvhan or Vonn, he didn't care – and ordered them to attend to each.

Leor was already in the infirmary fort, doctoring the Melmet troops, his orange hair a beacon moving between the crowded beds. Parthenal, too, was there, tending some of his own company; he raised a brief hand in acknowledgement to Rothir before starting to clean and stitch a gash in Hevral's side. Although Parthenal rolled his eyes slightly at Hevral's agonised groans, his hands were deft and gentle. This caring aspect of his friend was seldom evident to Rothir, and he knew he ought to find it touching. But neither Parthenal's gentleness nor Hevral's pain seemed to affect him. Emotion was better kept for later, he decided. He wanted a clear mind, no, an empty mind, just now.

Seeing Sashel sitting in a corner with a mountain of bandage on his head, he sat down with him for a few moments to say encouraging things. How bravely he had fought, how proud his brother Gordal would have been. Sashel nodded with his eyes closed, his bruised face pulled tight. It was hard to think of the right things to say. The crying from the far end of the great hall was not helping. There was a constant low hubbub of murmurs and groans of pain, but this was different: someone was sobbing, almost shrieking in distress.

Eventually he got up and walked over to see if he could quiet the man. It was an Ioben – not one of Veron's hardened huntsmen, but a young man, very young; one of those who had at first rebelled, and then had been persuaded to fight alongside Melmet.

And had fought his last, Rothir could see at once. His abdomen had been ripped open. It was beyond any needlework to mend that dreadful overflowing of his innards. The attendant was trying to hold the wound closed while he changed the dressings, which were soaked with blood. The boy lay in a growing pool of red, crying and calling over and over for his mother.

"She's here," said his attendant. "She's here."

He realised that the attendant was Yaret. While she applied the clean, useless dressings, she spoke quietly to the boy in his own tongue. Her words were calm and almost steady despite the tears that trickled down her grimy cheeks.

"Muma! Muma!" How recognisable it was in all languages, thought Rothir. Yaret took the hands that were trying to rip off the new dressings and held them, still talking softly. Almost singing to him.

The boy grew quiet at last. "Muma," he said once more, and that was all.

After a moment she released his hands. Then she covered his face with his blood-stained cloak and got awkwardly to her feet. She was trying to say something, still in her own language, but choked on the words; her face was twisting up.

He found it scarcely bearable. It was not needed. He walked across to her.

"Crying doesn't help," he said.

Yaret looked up and stared at him through a film of tears. "What?"

"You feel too much. It's not useful."

For a moment she did not speak. Then she answered, "It's not useful? Tell me, then, when should I feel? Should I wait until a hundred men have died, or a thousand, or ten thousand? When should I feel anything, if not for a boy who has just died far from home and calling for his mother?" Her voice was not loud, but it was hoarse and biting.

"It doesn't help."

Her mouth worked before she could speak again. "If you feel none of this," she said, "if you make yourself feel nothing, the time will come when you *can* feel nothing. You'll want to feel and there will be nothing there."

With that she picked up the bundle of bloody dressings, turned her back on him and walked away down the full length of the hall to where a row of tubs stood at the far end. When she reached them she dropped the cloths into one tub and began to wash her hands in another.

Rothir leant against the wall next to the dead boy. After a few minutes two men came and carried the limp body away. A third mopped the floor, without speaking.

He knew that he was right; to feel too much just now was dangerous. There would be no end of it. It would send you crazed and yelling, like Sashel, rushing to seek your death. It would stop you from doing what you needed to.

So feel nothing. But he felt something. He did not know what it was. It caught his throat in an implacable grip and closed it tight. At his sister Olbeth's he had suffered some sort of winter of the soul: he thought that it had passed. But here it was again, and it was worse.

A deeper, fiercer, hungrier winter. So much death. So much had been lost. His three dead Riders stood at a distance with bowed heads, both visible and not visible. He did not look too closely at them. If he let sorrow for them surface, it would pull him down and drown him.

But Yaret was also right. He ought to feel some sorrow. He ought to feel more grief for Gordal, that loud, cheerful, uncomplicated man, and for the others who had died. Yet when he looked inside himself for grief, he found none there.

So what was he feeling? It was pain. The sense of something lost. What was that? Was that his sorrow?

Yaret had dried her hands and was walking across the far end of the hall. Her limp was obvious. She picked up another bundle of clean cloths from a pile and walked round the edge of the hall past all the crowded beds. She was coming back towards him. It seemed to take forever. He braced himself for what she might say next, because he knew he could not answer.

She stopped in front of him with her cloths folded under one arm. Then she put her right thumb to her forehead, dipping her head in the archer's salute.

"I apologise. I ought not to have said that. I spoke from my distress. You were right, Rothir. I know that it is not useful to feel too much. It means you cannot act as you should."

She looked him in the eyes, and her own were anxious. But her manner was formal, as befitted a junior soldier addressing a captain. He became aware that other eyes were on them, some of them Kelvhan, and realised that the apology was necessary.

"I do not wish to lose your friendship over this," she said. "It is very valuable to me. I beg your pardon." He said nothing. After a few seconds she saluted him again, and walked away.

Rothir still leant against the wall unmoving until the pain in his throat eased a little. So much was lost; and yet perhaps some things were not lost altogether.

He saw Parthenal looking over at him but did not want to talk. So he went back outside.

Chapter 39

He returned to the remainder of his company, who were setting up their camp in a dry hollow a short distance away. Rothir at once began to help Theol in managing the bivouac, for there were many things to organise. He made sure the Riders had sufficient fuel for their fires, and blankets for the night: a few had lost their horses and their gear. So he took two men to search for them amongst the Kelvhan horses, with some success, and spoke to the Kelvhan quartermaster about extra food. Huldarion must have primed the quartermaster because it was instantly forthcoming. But only half his mind was on all this.

After leaving the Riders with their fires and food he went with Theol to the compact fort where Huldarion was quartered with his captains and their seconds. Normally they would have stayed each with their own companies, but Huldarion said that such an arrangement would seem strange to Kelvha, and that right now they needed to do everything to make themselves acceptable. So that meant sleeping in the fort while their soldiers stayed outside.

Rothir did not care for this; he would rather have remained with his weary soldiers in their hollow. Nevertheless he had to admit to himself that the shelter was most welcome, even though there were neither chairs nor tables, only a few stools; the trestles were all in use in the infirmary. They would be sleeping on the earthen floor which still held the remains of ancient layers of rushes, too fragile to add more than a modicum of comfort. There was a feeble fire on which a cauldron sat and simmered. So not that much better off than the men and women outdoors, after all, merely warmer.

However, Huldarion was right about the Kelvhans. Rothir had only just arrived when the Kelvhan Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun and his two chief commanders came in to exchange courteous words – or, in the Arch-Lord's case, what passed for courteous.

"You did not bring your beds?" the Arch-Lord said in a surprise that was surely pretended. He must know perfectly well that the Vonn had not come accompanied by carriages containing folding beds and mattresses and rugs and little luxuries, as had the Kelvhans.

"We travel light," said Huldarion calmly.

"Jeveran would approve of this," said one of the Kelvhan commanders to the other, who laughed; but Shargun looked at them askance.

"Jeveran has low-born tastes," he said quellingly. The Kelvhan speaker bowed acquiescence.

"I expect my Lord Huldarion has quartered in still worse places during his campaigns," said the second commander – a man called Rhadlun, if Rothir's memory was correct – with a better attempt at diplomacy than his Marshal had managed. All the same Rothir sensed that both the Kelvhan captains were inclined to wrinkle their noses at the austerity of their surroundings. Clearly, to have been sitting outside around a campfire would have marked the Riders down as little more than tribesmen.

Rothir wondered that the two commanders, whose judgement in battle had seemed astute, should place such store by outward show. Its importance filtered all the way down through the Kelvhans' ranks, as demonstrated by the varied levels of adornment on their gear; yet surely, he thought, it must be a drag on their efficiency.

Once the Kelvhans had departed to their more comfortable quarters, he listened to the other Riders talk, without wishing to join in. He did not want to think about the battle.

None the less he had to hear the Kelvhan strategy being dissected, and the Kelvhan commanders broadly approved. Shargun was generally disliked, while the High Prince of Kelvha was spoken of with sympathetic censure.

"Brave, but foolish. You'd think Shargun would have kept him off the field," said Theol.

"He probably tried. I expect Faldron's wishes are not easily gainsaid," remarked Huldarion.

"The Prince didn't seem all that strong-willed to me," said Uld.

"Nor to me, at first; but I've noticed a marked change in him since he left Kelvha. He seems to have woken up."

"Activity must suit him," said Solon. "Lucky for him he was uninjured."

"Lucky for all of us," Huldarion replied. "It could have been calamitous had the Prince died in this battle. Kelvha would be in uproar; there would have been little chance of an alliance with them after that – not for a long while, at any rate."

"Shargun's too rigid in his strategy," commented Uld. "Even the Baron of Melmet thinks faster on his feet, for all that he's a curmudgeonly old man."

"I don't think that helped Melmet much, though, once they were in the thick of it," said Ikelder. "They suffered some severe losses."

Huldarion nodded. "The lack of experience told against the Baron's men. And they were already tired."

Parthenal looked over at Rothir. "I noticed Yaret tore you off a strip over that dead loben boy in the infirmary. You looked as grim as an executioner. Whatever did she say?"

Rothir merely raised a hand and put it down to signify *nothing of importance*.

"I suppose she was upset," said Parthenal. "After all, he was her kinsman; even if a very distant one. And she's not used to such violence and death, not until these last few days at least. It must be very different to what she's always known."

At that, Huldarion looked over at him sombrely. "On the contrary, Parthenal. Yaret is well acquainted with death. She lived with it all winter. I asked her not to tell you when she first came to the forts. But I think you ought to know before you next encounter her."

"Know what?"

"Her town, Obandiro, was destroyed. It was obliterated by darkburns shortly before she arrived home from Farwithiel."

"What?" said Rothir.

"Veron witnessed the devastation there soon after the stonemen left; and so did Leor. They thought there was no-one left alive. As it happened, they were wrong. When Yaret turned up she found four children hiding in the cellars."

"Four children?" said Theol, his normally placid face aghast.

"Dear stars. How on earth did they manage?" asked Uld. "Did the neighbouring towns take them in?"

"What towns? Veron said there was nowhere near that hadn't been burnt out," replied Huldarion. "They spent the winter living in the cellars, surrounded by the dead."

"But how did they survive? What did they live on?" asked Ikelder in dismay.

Huldarion shrugged. "Whatever they could find, I think. A few other survivors did turn up eventually. I believe there were about two dozen in the end."

"But what–"

"I don't know any details," said Huldarion. "You'll have to ask her – if you must. But don't be surprised if she doesn't want to answer. Where are you going, Rothir?"

"I've got something still to do," he said. He stood up and went out.

The moon had retreated behind the clouds. The many fires dotting the darkness spoke to his memory: the reek of smoke, the burnt farmhouses, the ruined hamlets. The slaughtered village, and the captives he had tried to save. But never a whole town... Four children living in the cellars, surrounded by the dead.

The Melmet camp was a quarter-mile away, beneath a stand of old pine trees which whistled and wailed mournfully. There he spoke to a man called Jerred, who wasn't sure where Yaret was.

"She went to the infirmary some hours ago with our injured men," Jerred told him. "She didn't come back. Maybe she's gone off again with Veron."

"Unlikely," said Rothir. "What did she tell you about Obandiro?"

Jerred wrinkled his brow. "That's her home town over east, isn't it?"

"Was."

"What do you mean, was?"

So she hadn't told them either. He nodded and returned to the infirmary fort.

He couldn't see her in the great hall. It was much quieter now than it had been earlier, though no less crowded; many of the patients were asleep, as were some of the attendants. He noticed Leor bending over a moaning man: a few seconds later, the moaning stopped and the man was still. Not dead but sleeping soundly. Well, if that was wizardry, at least it was benign.

Walking around the crowded beds in the dim lamplight, Rothir found Sashel also in deep sleep. He stood over him for a while, aware that he had always liked Sashel better than his twin, as the less brash and more thoughtful of the two. It seemed like a thing he should not admit even to himself. He tried to imagine what Sashel must feel now. It was not easy; nor pleasant. Despair at Gordal's death. Rage. Guilt. He understood that. Loneliness. Yes, that too.

He laid his hand lightly on Sashel's brow for a brief moment. Then he sighed and walked over to the supervisor nodding in his chair.

"The lame archer who was here before, helping out?"

"The peg-leg?" The supervisor peered around, bleary eyed. "He was here ten minutes ago. Don't know where he's gone."

Leor was walking over to them, like a tall candle topped with a flame, bright in the faded lamplight. He beckoned Rothir aside and spoke quietly so as not to disturb the sleeping patients.

"You want Yaret? She's been helping here all evening. Last time I saw her she was handing out water; so you could try the well. It's out the back. And, Rothir..."

"What?"

"Just don't be harsh on her. I saw you were angry with each other. But she's had a long day and a lot going on, what with Veron and the other one."

"What other one?"

"The huntress. Yaret was in the middle of all that. See if you can persuade her to go away and get some sleep."

Rothir studied the wizard, who looked unusually stooped and heavy-eyed.

"It's been a long day for you too," he told Leor. "You should go away and get some sleep as well."

"In a while, maybe."

"When you need food and rest, come and find us in the third fort."

Leor nodded and walked away to check another patient. Rothir went outside to seek the well. It was not hard to find. But there was no-one there: just a stack of empty buckets in the semi-darkness and a jumbled heap of firewood piled against the wall.

And somewhere in the background, a muffled, momentary sob.

Rothir took two more steps and halted, letting his eyes accustom themselves to the gloom. Whoever it was had gone quiet at his step. But in the shadows beyond the piled firewood he could just glimpse someone sitting huddled on the ground with their knees drawn up under their chin. He went over to see who it was.

Yaret. Whom he had never seen weep until today, and had thought it was a weakness in her. When he sat down on the stone floor in the shadows next to her he felt her stiffen. Her head turned slightly to see who he was. He could barely make out her face although he could visualise it, streaked with those entirely justified tears. He expected her to snap, lash out at him, to tell him cuttingly to go away. But she did not.

So he put an arm around her shoulders and felt the sobs he could not hear, still convulsing through her body, which was held as tight as wire.

"I know," he said. "I know. The young and old, all calling for their mothers. It's." He found he had no words for it and had to stop.

But slowly he felt the tightness in her loosen; the unvoiced sobbing eased, turning at last to a long shivering sigh. She leaned against him in the darkness.

They sat in silence in the dark until Yaret said huskily, "You found me."

"I will—"

He stopped a second time. What a stupid thing he'd been about to say. Meaningless. She sighed again and after a moment let her head fall sideways to rest upon his shoulder. Her hair was against his cheek: she smelt of mud and smoke.

As he felt her gradually relax, relief came washing over him at last. The tautness of his own mind was allowed to slacken. After all the bloody chaos of the day there was a kind of peace here together in this gloom with the cold stone underneath them. He let it grow within the shadows, hearing Yaret's breathing. Despite his knowledge of the dead and wounded, despite the grievous losses from his people, yet much was saved, and he knew that he was grateful.

They sat there for a while longer, neither moving, until something occurred to him.

"When did you last have anything to eat?"

"I don't know. This morning?"

"Come." Rothir stood up and gave her his hand to pull her to her feet. They were both stiff and slow. Then he led her stumbling over the dark ground between the dotted campfires, past groups of soldiers dozing or talking in low voices.

By the time he reached the third fort he had decided that if Huldarion did not let her enter he would simply argue that she should take his own place. He could sleep outside. From the doorway he saw the banked fire blazing strongly in the hearth, with the stew-pot steaming over it; Huldarion glanced up at him and beckoned. So he pushed Yaret into the

room and made her sit down amongst the others, who were already eating. Parthenal took one look and handed each of them a bowl of stew.

It was mostly beans and roots with only a few shreds of some stringy fowl, but that didn't matter. Rothir ate with an eye on Yaret. She just sat cross-legged with the bowl in her hands for a while, but once she began to eat, she devoured the stew and oat-bread hungrily.

She was definitely thinner than she used to be. He wondered what she'd been eating through the winter, in those cold cellars; but now was not the time to ask. When the bowl was empty she put it down with a long sigh.

"Better?" asked Thoronal.

She nodded. "Thank you."

"You've had a hard day, I expect," said Thoronal. Rothir realised that he was trying to be kind. He wasn't very good at it. Not enough practice.

But then how good was he himself? What had he actually said to comfort her? Nothing. Some nonsense about the dead being old and young.

I will always find you. At least he hadn't said *that*. What a ridiculous remark it would have been. It wasn't as if Yaret was even of the Vonn. Once this campaign was over she'd be going back home, doubtless, to those cellars. Home? Back, anyway.

The other Riders resumed their quiet talk, but now mostly in Standard, not Vonnish. Rothir recognised this as an act of kindness in them too. They were not obtrusive in the curious glances that they cast her way. By now, all knew the story of her lost foot, although it was Parthenal who had told it, not Rothir himself. He still found the memory of her disappearance down the cliff-face too painful to recall. The overwhelming emptiness of seeing her vanish from his sight... As if it were the end of everything. His own internal darkburn.

But it shouldn't be such a dreadful memory, because he'd found her. He had not failed, not altogether. Not failing, not letting people down, mattered to him more than anything. Parthenal never seemed to worry about failure the way he did; but then Parthenal seldom failed at anything he put his mind to. Or perhaps he did not put his mind to things that he might fail at. No, that was not fair. Parthenal simply assumed that he would not fail in any task.

Now Parthenal refilled Yaret's bowl of stew without being asked. It was not until she'd emptied it a second time that Huldarion asked the question that all the Riders probably wanted to.

"How did it go with Veron? Can you tell us what exactly happened?"

"Well... It started when one of his huntsmen came to fetch me from the Melmet camp." Slowly and haltingly at first, Yaret started to describe the day's events.

Gradually the words gathered pace and fluency. As Rothir listened, he felt himself to be in the close dark forest, hearing the wolves' howl, seeing the huntsmen melt into the trees; he saw the snow leopard crouching on the stone, poised to spring as it watched him with ice-blue eyes. The Riders did not interrupt.

Yet when it came to the petition of the huntress Yaret slowed again, and picked her words with greater care and hesitancy. There were evidently things she would or could not say.

None the less Rothir now understood what Veron had meant. *It can be fatal*. His hand clenched on his knee. If it had been fatal, he would not have been able to forgive Veron. He reminded himself that all was well, and made his fist unclench.

"But who exactly is the huntress?" asked Ikelder.

Yaret spread her hands. "She is... Ulthared. Which means something hidden: something sacred, secret. Exceptionally so. All that I can tell you is that she seems made of Ulthared – as if it made her; or maybe she made it. Our lore says she is the daughter of the moon but what exactly that means I don't know. I don't have sufficient understanding."

"You recognised her," said Rothir.

"Yes. Although I didn't realise she would take that shape. The Ulthared only says she can transform at will; it doesn't specify what into."

"But is she human?"

"When she wants to be."

"But... Veron... How can..." Ikelder was embarrassed.

"I think I would say that Veron worships her," said Yaret.

"So is she... a goddess?"

"Some would call her so."

"You seem to know more about Veron's wife than we all do," commented Solon drily. He looked at Huldarion, who shrugged.

"A king ought to know his subjects," he said, "but I admit I hardly know Veron. Although his father was a Rider, Veron lived far in the north with his mother's remote clan till he was twelve. When I first met him he was already an accomplished wolf-hunter. As for his wife... He told me only that they came upon each other while he was out hunting. No more. This is the first time that any of us has seen her."

"You are honoured," said Yaret. "The huntress obeys no will but her own." After a moment's thought she added, "In Ioben she is for the huntsmen. In Obandiro she is also for the women. I can't explain that difference, apart from the connection with the moon."

In Obandiro she is. Not was. Rothir noted that, as surely did they all. Nobody commented on it.

"When we move south, would she come to our aid again, do you think?" enquired Uld.

"You'd have to ask Veron," she said, "but personally, I think it is unlikely. When I said that you are honoured, I meant it. That was no light thing she did. I think that also she is a being of the north, where she is believed in, and that if she moves south her power will diminish."

"Does she need to be believed in to be effective?" asked Uld.

Yaret smiled at him, a little sadly.

"Who doesn't?" she said. "But talking of moving south: I gather that although the Baron will return to Melmet now, the huntsmen want to stay with Veron. They seem to have developed a great fealty to him even in so short a time, as the partner of the huntress as well as in his own right. They're saying they will follow him wherever he wishes, to see the job done properly, as they put it. But I don't know what that may involve."

"The job is, I hope, almost done properly now," Huldarion answered. "Dispatches say that General Istard has been successful to the west of Kelvha, where the enemy were few in number. We shall march there next to make sure of that success, but probably with only a small part of the Kelvhan army. The rest of the Kelvhans will go home."

"But even if the stonemen are defeated there, that will not be the end of them?"

"No. I hope it is the end of them in the north. Their stronghold is in the south, along the Darkburn. But they have sent so many of their men up here that their forces in the south

will be much depleted, and I think we shall have several weeks or even months of peace before any more attacks.”

“By which time we shall be still firmer and closer allies with Kelvha,” added Thoronal. Unwisely: it earned him a look from Huldarion that made him stare at the floor.

“And you?” Huldarion addressed Yaret with careful courtesy. “Will you now go back to Obandiro?”

She took a moment to answer. “I’m not sure. If Veron permits me to stay with the huntsmen, I admit I too would like to see the job done properly before I return home. I’d like to be able to tell them that there is no stoneman threat left for them to fear. I don’t know how feasible that is.”

“It is feasible,” said Huldarion, “if not straightforward. With Kelvha’s help – and our other allies – I believe it can be done.”

“Your other allies? They can’t be numerous, though, can they?”

“But you never know who will make the difference,” said Huldarion. “Melmet made a difference. And the Ioben huntsmen also, though they are few.”

“True. They’re not all Iobens, though. There are three of them who follow Veron not because he’s a hunter but because he’s of the Vonn. Their village got burnt out,” said Yaret sombrely. “Most of the people were massacred, but a dozen of the younger men were taken prisoner to pull the darkburn carts. One of them was called Zan. He was shackled to another man called Arguril – yes, that Arguril – who told him he was of the Vonn.”

“He shouldn’t have admitted that,” said Thoronal.

“Shouldn’t he? He probably thought it didn’t matter because they’d all be dead soon anyway. But they were rescued. Another Rider turned up: he somehow set a darkburn loose and galloped off with Arguril, and managed to allow several of the others to unlock their shackles and get free. It sounds like quite a feat.”

“That was Rothir,” said Parthenal.

“Was it?” Yaret turned to give Rothir an appraising look. “Zan speaks of you as someone almost godlike,” she remarked.

“Hah! That’s because he doesn’t know him,” said Parthenal, amused.

“You did all that?”

Rothir shook his head. “It wasn’t enough. I had to leave behind too many captives, at the mercy of a darkburn.”

“Zan told me that eleven men were freed.”

“Well,” he said, “that’s more than I had thought. But still not enough.”

“Can I tell Zan? He’ll probably rush straight over to throw himself at your feet and swear eternal allegiance. Don’t smile; I’m serious. He and his kinsmen feel themselves beholden to you – and to the Vonn. They have vowed to keep fighting for vengeance.”

“And you?” asked Theol. “You fight for vengeance also?”

“I fight to stop it happening again... but yes, for vengeance too, on behalf of all Obandiro. There is no-one else who can.” Yaret traced a circle on the ground with one finger. “They are mostly children. But it’s not as if they need me there – not now. Enough people had turned up by the time I left. I don’t think I’ll be missed. Maybe Dil... but he has the donkeys.”

Huldarion said gently, “Some time I would like to hear more of the children you left behind, if there is an opportunity.” Rothir looked over at his chief and wondered in which direction his thoughts were now turning. War had been his craft till now, not children.

But it was for children, known or unknown, that they all did this. For whom they fought. He remembered Olbeth's baby; that warm weight in his arms, the milky dribble down his shoulder. More responsibility. But such an unfamiliar soft feeling.

After a brief discussion about what the morning might bring, the Riders blew out all the lamps but one and began to settle down to sleep. Although the floor of broken reeds was somewhat scratchy Rothir was too tired to care. The sound of Theol's snoring was soon joined by Thoronal's rasp.

Parthenal rolled close up behind Rothir for extra warmth as he so often did out in the wild: his was a comfortable, familiar presence. Yaret, lying curled on Rothir's other side, seemed to be asleep almost immediately. She must have been exhausted. Well, they all were. Only Huldarion still sat up, on one of the low stools, gazing at the glowing embers of the fire, evidently thinking.

A king ought to know his subjects. Another remark that surely had been noted if not commented upon. Huldarion never normally referred to himself as King. But the time was coming when that title might be justly claimed: King not just of the itinerant Riders, but of Caervonn.

I hope it won't change him, Rothir thought. I hope he won't forget what it is to be a Rider. Right now he's just one of those around me: my kin, my family. All here, except those few who stand around the walls in spirit, whose bodies lie outside. Tomorrow we will mourn them. Today's job is done. My kin are safely sleeping. There, that's relief, at last. He closed his eyes.

Chapter 40

Although Huldarion was bone-weary in body, the pain was firing up all along his left-hand side after his exertions in the fight. He knew that it would not allow him to sleep for a while yet. In any case his mind was over-active: so he put it to work reviewing the long day's events, setting them in order in his mind, labelling and sorting.

His own men and women first. All evening, even through the conversations, his thoughts had kept returning to the dead. The Riders had already said words of respect and thanks but of course that was not enough, nothing was ever enough, and now he listed the names again in silence – that silence wherein the dead eternally endured – and wondered if any would be added to their number from the injured. No more, he hoped. Next he travelled mentally around the infirmary, assessing who might require transport in the carts.

His thoughts paused on Sashel, the youngest of his captains. Sashel would mend – but asking him to keep his captaincy after his brother's death might have been a mistake. On the other hand, would making him step down not have been seen as a humiliation?

No easy answer. Should have foreseen his sudden impetuous rage: Gordal had been like that. Don't dwell on Gordal's death. He himself could put that picture of the crumbling corpse aside at will. Sashel would not be able to: perhaps not ever. But he was young.

But then so was Ikelder. He'd done well, surpassing expectations. For a man so awkward – moved as if none of his limbs quite fitted – he was anything but awkward on the field. Strong fighter. Kept his head, and directed his company wisely, without panic. A good second, too, in Dorac: that could be a man worth considering for captain himself, if Thoronal...?

But no, he couldn't demote Thoronal. He was too senior and his cousin besides. That counted for something even with the Vonn. Not to Kelvhan levels, but still. And Thoronal's loss of confidence would be temporary, surely; it was unusual for him.

Perhaps he needed another first counsellor, though, while Thoronal recovered his sense of self-worth. Indeed, he hoped he would soon need half a dozen counsellors – men suited to accompany him into Kelvha Castle, were he to win an invitation as he hoped: men he could trust, but who would also look and act the part. No women, naturally. But they were probably getting used to that.

Now he began to run through candidates in his mind. Solon? Probably, although he was inclined to cynicism. Uld? A thoughtful man, perhaps too reticent. Crade? Over-cautious. Huldarion knew that he himself was already circumspect: he didn't need an over-cautious counsellor.

Veron... No, not inside the castle. Veron was a man apart. Huldarion had been aware that not once in her account had Yaret spoken of the huntress by her name. The name still echoed in his mind. Unsaryun: he thought it but would never say it. That circumspection. You never knew what might happen. But no. Not Veron.

Parthenal? Unequalled on the battlefield, but off it had perhaps too little caution, too much confidence. He looked over at Parthenal, stretched out on the floor. Always restless in his sleep, he had flung an arm over Rothir. With his proclivities... unacceptable in Kelvha. Parthenal would have to restrain himself for a while. Might be safer to keep him in the background.

Rothir. Deep. He'd known the man most of his life – would trust him with his life – but hard to work him out sometimes. Tough as steel when needed, resolute even to the point of defiance, but had a conscience, thankfully; a good tactician, but not a strategist, not a planner for the long-term.

While he gazed at Rothir with affection, Yaret half sat up and with her eyes still closed unloosed some strapping round her leg. There was a faint thunk as her boot fell off, the false foot still inside it. As she lay back down again to sleep he thought, Well. That was disconcerting.

So what was going on between Rothir and Yaret – if anything? Rothir probably didn't know himself. He'd rescued her, of course, that made a bond. And a difficulty. If you'd saved someone's life they had a lot to live up to. Made it hard to see them clearly.

Maybe it was no more than gratitude and friendship on Yaret's side. And Rothir's sense of responsibility was always strong – like his sister Olbeth. No, don't go there.

Yet I must go there, he thought. Soon I must think of some woman, if I am to progress in Kelvha. Women are their chief diplomatic currency after military might. Not likely there'll be any Olbeth waiting for me in the castle, though.... Just hope for a woman I can live with, who can live with me. Even that might be too optimistic. Need to talk to Tiburé about it.

But that was some way off. There was still fighting to be done; though none as fierce, he hoped, as what they'd just gone through. Now that the Outland Forts had been reclaimed, there were the western borderlands to reinforce. Shargun to be propitiated. The Prince to be befriended.

All that to think about. He made himself put much of it aside except the coming journey to the borderlands: calculating how many sound horses they still had, how long it would take. Yet just before he slept, it was Olbeth's face he saw.

In the morning there was a more general stock-taking. The reports from the western borderlands continued to be good; General Istard had successfully destroyed the stonemen's stronghold there. Huldarion walked over to the second fort where the Kelvhan Prince sat breakfasting with Shargun at an ornate travelling table, picking at a plate of elegant sweetmeats, while his commanders were standing in attendance. Did the Kelvhans bring a pastry-cook with them? Huldarion wondered, both amused and faintly appalled.

He was not invited to sit down and join them. But that will change, he thought; for I will see to it: and then he volunteered the services of the Vonn to go west and help clear up after General Istard. His offer was accepted. One of the Kelvhan commanders would also go, with a small troop of cavalry. There was no rush, however, so they would use this day to organise matters: not least the burial of the dead.

Prince Faldron and the Arch-Lord Shargun were to return the following day to Kelvha – much to the Prince's disgust. But the Arch-Lord argued persuasively for his return.

"I don't see why. I'd rather stay and be part of the campaign," said Faldron. "I don't often get the chance to do any real fighting. I have to learn it somehow. It's quite different to a tournament."

To Faldron this was still little more than a game, thought Huldarion; and yet he considered that the young Prince had a point. The western borderlands would be a far safer place to blood him in battle than the one they had just gone through. There, Faldron could track down and kill a stray stoneman or two with minimum risk.

Huldarion became aware that, like the Kelvhans, he was thinking of the stonemen as little more than wooden soldiers: mere targets for military practice. It bothered him, even if the stonemen's own commanders regarded them in the same way. They were profligate with their men, and made no attempt to reclaim the bodies – only the stones. Those seemed more important than the heads that bore them. He had not forgotten what Yaret had told him about the lonely stoneman she had killed. Only ten... His dislike of the idea was not a reason to ignore it.

But Shargun was still speaking to the Prince.

"You must think of your people, Highness, who wish most earnestly to see you safely back in Kelvha. They fret for you every day that you are absent," said the Arch-Lord smoothly.

The Prince pouted a little. But he gave in to Shargun; which made Huldarion wonder why the Arch-Lord had not put his foot down earlier, to stop Faldron charging into battle?

He could not read the situation. Possibly the Prince was not all that sorry to return to his home comforts, and Shargun seemed genuinely anxious that he should withdraw. Perhaps the near-disaster of the Prince's riding out to fight had made him wary. Huldarion put in an appreciative word about Faldron's gallantry, and was rewarded by an invitation to the castle hunt.

"When you come to Kelvha," said the Prince – that *when* was a reassuring thing to hear -- "when you come to Kelvha, you will see our hunting forest, far more attractive and well-filled than this one." As if the battlefield were merely a hunting forest too, scaled up, with human prey. And insufficiently attractive for the Prince's liking. Huldarion bowed and smiled his thanks.

No, he would not be sorry to see Faldron and Shargun and their entourage depart. They were to take a portion of their dead – the high-born – back to Kelvha with them, for burial in their homeland. Their common soldiers had already been interred with meagre ceremony in a hastily dug grave behind the forts. Huldarion, who had not even been aware of this until they now mentioned it in passing, did not approve of such casual disposal of the slain.

By contrast, the Vonn's dead, along with Melmet's, would be laid to rest with full honours near the bleak battlefield where they had fallen. After the meeting dispersed he made his way first to the low mound that hid the Kelvhan corpses, and stood at its foot to give his murmured thanks regardless of what any watching Kelvhans might make of this behaviour. These had not been his people, yet he honoured them.

Next, heavy-hearted, he walked away from the camp to check the progress of the digging of the Vonn's mass grave. Although the plain was despoiled by the trampling of countless feet, and the stonemen had felled so many of the trees, he thought the land would recover its wildness in due time – once it was left alone. Lonely it would certainly be. Are the dead lonely, he wondered, or are they anywhere? In any case, the untouchable shining glory of the Liath Mountains would be a fitting backdrop for them.

Next there was the management of the carrying of casualties back to Thield. That tented city would soon move and be re-established, he hoped, within the bounds of eastern Kelvha. He went to consult with the medics and to check the status of the carts.

While he was there, the Baron of the Broc came marching over to him with one of his attendants.

"Huldarion. How do."

He did not mind this abrupt form of address from the Baron; for he sensed that Grusald would have been more formal with someone he liked less.

"I do well," he said. "And you?"

"Getting ready to leave," said Grusald. "However, some of the men under my command wish to continue on with you rather than return to Melmet."

"The hunters?"

The Baron bowed. "Those and a few others."

"All help is welcome, especially from Melmet," he replied.

"I myself have some regrets in riding back to Melmet," said the Baron, "not least in leaving you. But our affairs there call us, and our casualties do not permit of us continuing." Huldarion knew that the Baron had no love for Kelvha; so this admission of regret must be meant as a compliment to the Vonn.

He bowed in his turn. "Your support has been greatly valued. The courage and discipline of your men is most impressive; and I say that not to flatter, but because it is true."

"I think we fought our corner," said the Baron with a grim smile. "We've rid this part of the country of the plague of stonemen, at least. By the way; we've got two of them held prisoner. Are you interested?"

"Stonemen?"

The Baron nodded. "The only two that we could take alive. At the first sign of being captured, they'll generally kill themselves. These two were disarmed first. Not that it stops them from trying anyway. They were beating their heads against the trees until we tethered them away from any means of doing themselves harm."

"Where are they?"

"On the other side of our camp. We kept them away from the Kelvhans. I thought we might get something useful out of them; but it's my opinion they don't know anything useful. Almost feel sorry for the poor devils."

"Why?"

The Baron shook his head. "Since last night, they seem to have been going mad with pain. Clutching at their heads... Come and see them, if you like. We'll have to put them out of their misery before we leave – unless you want them? Don't like killing a prisoner unnecessarily. One thing in battle, quite another when they're tied."

"I understand that," said Huldarion. "Yes. I'd like to see them." After a moment's thought he called Solon to accompany him to the far side of the Melmet camp.

Poor devils, indeed, he thought, on seeing the two stonemen, each tethered separately to stakes driven deep into the earth. On their short halters one walked, one crawled, unceasingly, as if they could not bear to be still. Their heads were marked with bruises, and long trickles of blood were running from the stones. They'd been given bread and water which lay within their reach, untouched.

Huldarion understood pain well. He understood his own, at least, from long acquaintance: he knew how it waxed and waned, what helped, what didn't. Distraction was, for him, important. These men had no distraction from their pain. And while his own face was afflicted, he considered himself lucky that his head was not. Those stones... Even his partial knowledge of what they must be suffering turned him nauseous.

He tried to speak to each stoneman in turn, while the Baron and his men looked on in a mixture of pity and disgust. The stoneman on his knees either could not or would not

answer any question except in moans. The other did not cease his restless pacing, but he did speak.

His name was Kostor. He would not say his commander's name, nor the names of any of his superiors. He did not know their plans, he said.

"I just follow orders. March here, march there. Now fight." He spoke guttural Standard.

"The fighting is over," Huldarion told him. "You have nothing to lose by speaking."

"I have nothing to say." He turned to walk the few paces that were possible for him before he had to turn again.

"Do you know the name of Adonil? Adon?"

At that, the stoneman stopped moving. A few seconds later, without a word, he resumed his prowling.

"Is there anything we can get for you?" asked Huldarion.

"Give me athelid. Or a knife. Or both. Give me a knife, for stars' sake." The man put his hands to his head but did not halt his pacing.

"I have no athelid. How often do you need to take it?"

"I need it hours ago," the man said in a low growl. "Or I need a knife. Just give me a knife. My head is... It's going to get worse. Give me a knife."

Huldarion realised that the stoneman was barely holding himself within control. He did not like to imagine the increasing undrugged pain of the stones. Seven of them were drilled into the stoneman's head. He thought of something else to ask.

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen. How old are you, scarface?"

Despite Yaret's warning, he was taken aback. "Fifteen? You don't look fifteen. You look thirty."

"We grow fast," said the man with a fierce grimace, turning round to walk the other way.

"When did you get your first stone?"

"Ten. Ten is manhood."

"Ten is boyhood," said Solon.

The stoneman grinned a dreadful grin. "Not for us. We have no boyhood. We are men from the start, not like you... you... *animals*. You are too low to ever become men." And then he stopped again, dropped his head into his hands and gripped it as if he would like to tear the stones out. He was starting to tremble.

"How old is your companion?" asked Huldarion. He pointed to the stoneman on his knees, who still crawled on the ground with a low continuous moaning.

"How would I know? How many stones has he got?"

"Four."

"So he'll be twelve or thirteen. I've answered you, toadface. Now give me a knife."

Huldarion took from his pocket the small packet of belvane he had brought with him. Tiburé had assured him that the painkiller from Farwithiel was harmless; none the less he had used it only once or twice, wary of addiction. It seemed effective if not as powerful as ethlon.

Now he poured a full dose of the powder onto a paper and pushed it over to the stoneman.

"What's that?"

"It will help with the pain."

"Poison me more like," the stoneman said. All the same he reached out a trembling hand and grasped the paper, tipping the powder down his throat.

"You see what I mean," said the Baron, who was standing behind Huldarion. "They must be going crazy. Fifteen! His head's turned."

"Possibly." He gazed at the stoneman. "Kostor. How often do you take your athelid?"

"Dawn and nightfall. Can't you give me some? This stuff isn't working."

"You need to allow it a few minutes," said Huldarion. "What is in athelid? Its ingredients?"

"How should I know? I just swallow it."

"How long have you taken it for?"

"Since I reached manhood. Only men can take it. You couldn't. It would kill you." Kostor almost spat the words.

"Who gives it to you?"

"Our commanders."

"I'm guessing it is not a powder. Is it a liquid?"

"It's a paste. A white paste. It comes in jars." The man walked towards Huldarion and strained on his rope, as close as he could get to him. He was trembling all over. "Can you find some? Can you get me some? This stuff doesn't work. It's rubbish."

"Where do your commanders keep the athelid?"

"I don't know. How should I know? They have boxes of it on the carts. Always guarded. So that you can't get hold of it. It's only for us. Find me some." His voice had risen. "I bet you've got some. Why don't you give me it, you mangy dog?"

Huldarion walked away and left him pulling on his rope and shouting.

"Solon," he said quietly, "Go and find Parthenal, or ask at the infirmary. Get some ethlon, and bring it back here."

Solon strode away. The stoneman kept shouting. One of the Baron's men moved forward with a stick, but Huldarion shook his head.

"Leave him. He won't notice even if you beat him. He's in enough pain. Clearly what I gave him isn't strong enough. The consequences of the stones must be extreme."

The Baron chewed his moustache. "Or he's so used to this athelid he talks of that nothing else has any effect."

"That is possible." Huldarion remembered those dreadful months after the fire... Long afterwards, his body was still burning, burning unstoppably all down one side. He had been given ethlon, but after a while he felt he needed more, and had been denied it. He knew what it was like to beg for relief. But he had never begged for a knife to end it.

Solon soon came hurrying back with a small bottle. "Ethlon. Parthenal says we don't have much left, so administer it sparingly. Only a few drops."

"I know." But he had to enlist the Baron's men to hold Kostor still while he let those few drops fall into his mouth: the stoneman wrestled as though he would have seized the whole bottle from his hand and drained it.

As Huldarion stepped back Kostor sat down heavily, for the first time, and closed his eyes. He let out a long sigh.

"Does that do the same job as athelid?"

Slowly the eyes reopened. "Don't talk to me, you piece of northern cow-dung: you runt of a pig's litter. Go back to your mud where you belong."

"What is your commander's name?"

In answer the man spat at him.

"I can't say that it improves him," said the Baron, as Huldarion withdrew beyond spitting distance.

"No. A wasted effort, I think." He addressed Kostor again. "I gave you ethlon. What can you tell me about Adon? Adonil? Where is he?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't tell you, you wipings off a goat's arse..." The man launched into a stream of curses. Huldarion listened patiently. When there was a pause, he asked,

"How old are you?"

"I told you, I'm fifteen. Are you deaf as well as stupid?"

"Ethlon doesn't normally make people angry," said Solon with aloof distaste.

"No," agreed Huldarion. "This is probably just his normal state. He's been well indoctrinated against us."

"Against everybody, if you ask me," said the Baron. The stoneman was now tugging with renewed vigour and many expletives at the stake that held him down.

Huldarion decided on one more attempt. "What could we do that would persuade you to help us?"

"Nothing, you northern scum. Crawl back to your scummy hole."

He nodded and turned away. "Let's try the other one."

"No point wasting any more ethlon," objected Solon. "And that one's a junior. Fewer stones. He won't know anything in any case."

"None the less." This prisoner was more passive, or more far gone. It needed only one man to hold him while Huldarion administered the drops into his mouth.

At first the stoneman still crouched on the ground. Then he straightened up and looked around, with dawning bewilderment in his eyes as if he had just woken.

"What's your name?" asked Huldarion.

"Don't tell him! Don't tell him anything!" yelled Kostor. That was rich, thought Huldarion. The younger stoneman merely blinked at him.

"How old are you?"

The man looked down again, at his hands. He spread them out. Ten, thought Huldarion. The man raised both thumbs. And two.

"You're twelve?"

The man said nothing. He lay down on the ground as if he wanted to sleep.

"Will you talk to me?"

He closed his eyes again.

So what do I do with this one? thought Huldarion. What do I do with either of them? The ethlon will give them a few hours free of pain. It won't give me anything.

He looked at the Baron, who shrugged and asked, "You want them?"

"I don't see what use they will be. You may as well kill the noisy one."

"I'll have it done," the Baron said. "And this one?"

Huldarion hesitated. Twelve. But what was the point in keeping him alive? They couldn't keep feeding him ethlon twice a day. He'd be better off dying now, while he was free of pain.

"Leave him for the moment."

"Crazy, aren't they?" said Solon.

“Or they don’t understand how years work,” said the Baron. “Probably have no idea how old they really are.”

“You’re right,” Huldarion said. “I’ll talk to you again before you leave.” He saluted the old man courteously and strode away.

The two stonemen looked like grown men in size and strength. Yet the quiet one had a quality to his skin – a fineness... But how could it be believed that he was twelve?

And his companion fifteen, a belligerent teenager. A teenager who had been reared to fight and hate his enemy, and nothing else. Possibly years were counted differently in stoneman culture. Except that there was no culture in his experience that didn’t measure years in exactly the same way.

“Solon?” he murmured to his companion. “Don’t mention this to any of the others. Not yet. It may simply be a misunderstanding or a hoax. So say nothing, until we can learn more.”

Chapter 41

There was now a new addition to his mental list of tasks. After a little thought he dismissed Solon, summoned Delgeb and Maeneb, and gave the two women the errand.

It was to ride out to the far forts where the stonemen had been quartered, and which, to the best of their knowledge, were now abandoned. Huldarion explained what he wanted them to search for: jars of a white paste, once stored in boxes.

"It's athelid," he said. "The substance that the stonemen drug themselves with. I want to know what's in it."

"You're hoping they've left some behind?"

"It's a long shot. Don't put yourselves in danger. I'm hoping Maeneb will be able to detect any stoneman presence. If you do, then come away."

"We can deal with the odd few of them," said Delgeb. "If there's any greater number, we'll withdraw. Can we take a third person? Shebel has a good knowledge of herbalism."

This was agreed; and the three female Riders soon cantered away. It would be several hours before they returned. Meanwhile, Huldarion went to check the horses. Most were unhurt: their numbers tallied closely with the figures he had calculated last night. It was pleasing.

He noticed a couple of other horses there which did not belong to the Riders. They were fine Kelvhan steeds, from which the gilded saddles and trappings were being stripped by a Kelvhan stableman.

"What's wrong with those?"

"Nothing, sir," said the stableman, pausing in his work, "save that their riders died atop 'em. It's bad luck. We can maybe sell them on back home in Kelvha, but nobody here will want to ride them now."

"So who do they belong to?"

"The families. But I have authority to sell them."

"Good. Walk them up and down for me. If they're sound I'll take them off your hands," Huldarion said. The man obeyed. He seemed to hold Huldarion in some awe, for he accepted the price offered – low but not unreasonable – and was even persuaded to throw in one of the gilded saddles without quibbling.

The quiet grey would do for Sashel, who had lost his steed, Huldarion decided. The larger and more impressive black horse, with its embossed and decorated saddle, he planned to offer to the Baron in exchange for Poda. He arranged to collect it later on.

Then it was time to walk over to the quarter-master for yet more negotiations about provisioning; he had the numbers ready in his head. His marshal of resources, Vaneb, had stayed behind in Thield since she was pregnant. Huldarion supposed that he should have appointed another, yet he did not dislike the task himself.

That reminded him of his next task: to visit the young Prince. So he summoned Thoronal, and together they paid a call to Prince Faldron's quarters. They found him sulky and restless, wandering aimlessly around the fort with Shargun in tow while his quantities of baggage were being packed up.

"Your Highness," said Huldarion with a bow, "We are loth to leave you with no more than a brief farewell."

The prince brightened. He waved a servant over: spiced drinks were served, and this time Huldarion was invited to sit down. Shargun raised an eyebrow, but Huldarion did not care. He and Thoronal sat on the thickly padded couch which had been carried all this way in Kelvha's carts.

Although four soldiers stood guard behind them, Faldron spoke as eagerly as if they were not there. He wanted to talk about the battle, but Huldarion diplomatically gave the conversation a more general turn. It ranged from military tactics to horsemanship and weaponry, in all of which Faldron had obviously been well schooled.

"I wish I could have played a greater part in the battle yesterday," he remarked wistfully.

"That chance will no doubt come," Huldarion said.

"Yes. Once I am High King I will be able to go on the field when I choose."

Huldarion trusted that the Prince would not start a war to give himself the opportunity. He said, smiling, "The strongest king is he who listens to his counsellors." This was a sop to Shargun, who sat in silent watchfulness. And the four impassive guards against the wall were no doubt taking in every word to report back to their fellow-soldiers.

The Prince said, "I would have thought the strongest king is he who is not afraid to act."

"That is true," said Huldarion. "The problem can sometimes be how to act in the right way – and that is best decided with the aid of counsellors."

"I don't always care for the advice of my counsellors." Although this was said without any glance at Shargun, Huldarion immediately sensed a pitfall.

"I think the first task of a king must always be to acquire wisdom," he said. "When you return to Kelvha, what will be the first thing you wish to do?"

"Oh! Go hunting. See my falcons. Kiss a few maids," said the Prince.

Huldarion laughed. "So acquiring wisdom will wait a little longer?"

"There will be time enough for all that weighty stuff," said Faldron. His wish to kick against the traces was understandable, thought Huldarion, especially if he had been kept trammelled in the castle with his tutors. But it did not bode well for Kelvha.

On the other hand, if his counsellors were anything like Shargun they would stay as close as leeches even once he was High King. After a few more courteous words, Huldarion rose to take his leave.

"You will come to Kelvha, won't you?" said the Prince.

"That would certainly be my wish," he said, "once victory in this part of your realm is accomplished. But the matter is in your hands. I have no desire to force an invitation."

"Of course you will come," said Faldron.

Huldarion bowed. "I possess few treasures," he said, "but the friendship of Kelvha would be amongst the greatest I could own. Of the few I do possess, let me give you this parting gift as a token of goodwill and gratitude."

He produced a badge which had belonged to his father. It was a wrench to give it away – he had so little in the way of heirlooms; but it was necessary.

"That is a handsome thing," the Prince said appreciatively, studying the jet and gold-work. He offered no gift in exchange. Huldarion had not expected that he would.

On his way out he stopped and looked at one of the guards.

"I saw you fell two stonemen with one stroke," he said. It had been a phenomenal stroke. He said nothing more, for it would not do to praise the man more than his master; but at least the soldier knew he had been recognised. That too would get back, that Huldarion

noticed the men as well as their leaders. He left the fort with a reasonable degree of satisfaction.

"I hope I did what was required," said Thoronal, when they were a safe distance away.

"You did exactly what was required: you looked noble and grave, and gave the Prince's views your careful attention. And just the right amount of flattery. I think what he wants more than anything is to be taken seriously."

"That will certainly happen when he becomes High King."

"And he could so easily have become a corpse, like those ones over there." Out on the plain the covered bodies were being laid out in sad rows, in readiness for burial. "He owes us his life," said Huldarion.

"Do you think he knows? Did he even realise his danger – or does he think he escaped through his own wonderful skills in battle?"

Huldarion considered. "He must know. He's not a fool. But he can't admit it. And we must never mention it."

The series of burials was the next task to be gone through; and while the most important, it was also the least pleasant. It had been at the back of his mind all day.

Melmet held their ceremonies first, out on the muddy field where the long pits had been dug. All the Riders of the Vonn who were fit enough to attend did so; and Veron appeared from somewhere to join the group of Iobens. Huldarion noted that Yaret also stood beside them. He was saddened that only one Kelvhan commander, Rhadlun, turned up at the graveside with a token handful of his men.

The many Melmet casualties were placed into a common grave and songs sung over them, the soldiers' untrained voices ringing out clear and heartfelt in remarkable harmony through the cold still air. Although Huldarion could not make out all the words, the underlying emotion was plain. As he stood opposite the Baron with the grave between them, he saw the old man weep. So many dead. But not for nothing.

After the Baron's hoarse address he himself said a few words about their loyal gallantry, which he honoured and which would not be forgotten. Then Rhadlun spoke of the honour of fighting alongside Kelvha – as if the privilege were all Melmet's. Huldarion respected Rhadlun's abilities, but this annoyed him.

Thankfully the Kelvhan commander deemed it unnecessary to add any of his own words to the Ioben burials. These were fewer, and there was no singing. Veron stepped forward to say a few terse words about how these men would soon be riding over the great fields spread between the stars. A surprisingly poetic concept from Veron's mouth; Huldarion had seldom seen the man so serious. One of the huntsmen uttered what sounded like a prayer in his own language, during which they were all very still. Then Yaret said another, which seemed to be a variation on the first, and during which they were, if possible, even stiller. At the end the silence felt as if it stretched across to the horizon.

Finally the first spadeful of earth was thrown in, breaking the spell; and as more spadefuls followed, and men began to turn away, he lingered, watching. There should be more than this to a life. More than a few words and a bowed head. But what more could you do?

The crowd was moving to the next line of newly-dug graves, and as he walked across he braced himself, for next came the burial of his own people. Twenty-seven men and twelve women. It could have been so many more; yet thirty-nine was bad enough.

As he stood by the graveside with his captains, for once he felt the need to neither feign nor to disguise emotion. If it hardly showed in his face, he knew it sounded in his voice. He spoke of each of the dead Riders by their name: their qualities, their deeds; and found it amongst the most difficult things that he had ever done. It was a battle with himself.

Afterwards while the Riders sang the Vonndal – so sad, so slow – he did not even try to mime. He had to keep his mouth clenched shut. This was terrible. He had put this grief away from him all night and day and now it leapt out like a darkburn from its cage, nearly destroying him.

Don't think of the darkburns, he commanded himself. Think of your other Riders, the ones who are still alive and suffering too. After the song, as the soil was tumbled in, he saw that Parthenal wept. Ikelder also, furtively. Even that dry man Uld wiped his cheek. Rothir, a few yards away, did not weep but looked as clenched as Huldarion was himself.

Yaret had walked over to stand beside the Riders, although to the best of his knowledge she knew none of those who had died. She glanced up at Rothir.

"Don't worry," he heard Rothir say. "I feel this."

"I know," she answered.

Huldarion was not sure what was meant. But afterwards when he stepped over to embrace Rothir, he felt it was some relief to both of them. Then he went to embrace Thoronal, and Parthenal, although perhaps – but forget that, no matter now – and then Solon, and would have embraced Veron had not the man looked so alarmed and backed away. That almost made Huldarion laugh despite his agony of mind. There were twelve widows he would have to talk to eventually. Three widowers. Several children.

Gradually the crowd trickled back towards the forts. He was the last to leave, and followed the others sombrely, musing about children. Although he did not particularly wish to, he walked alone over to the Melmet camp to have another look at the captive stonemen.

The older one had gone; there was nothing but a bloodstain on the ground where he had been. The younger one was curled up on the grass. At least he had eaten the food provided for him. His eyes were open.

With a nod to the guard, Huldarion approached and squatted down near the stoneman to address him.

"How do you feel?"

The man – boy? – gazed at him sideways, from the ground.

"What is your name? I am Huldarion."

"Girik," said the stoneman. He did not move. He sounded lost and dazed.

"Tell me about yourself, Girik."

"What do you mean?"

"Where were you born?"

"I don't know."

"Where were you brought up? Who did you live with?"

"I lived with the others, in the dormitory."

"Where was that?"

"It was by the sea," said Girik. "It was the place of terns. There were lots of them."

"Did you like being by the sea?"

The lost eyes looked into some far remembered distance.

"I liked... the sound of it. Sometimes it roared like a lion and sometimes it just breathed like a..."

"Like a sleeper," said Huldarion.

"Yes. When it was asleep they let us go swimming. I saw a dolphin. It came right up to me."

"I have never seen a dolphin that close up."

"It was big. It swam with me. I was good as swimming." He still lay with his head upon the ground, staring at some remembered ocean.

"What about your parents? Your mother?"

"I don't remember. She was... tall... I think."

Huldarion swallowed. "And when did you get your first stone?"

"Two years ago. You have to be ten."

"Ten summers?"

"Ten years," said the boy. "You get two the first year, and one or two the next year. I still have one to go this year. I won't get it now, will I?" and to Huldarion's dismay, a tear ran down his adult, yet unbearded cheek.

"Do they hurt you?"

"Yes, a bit, when they go in. But they give you athelid. You have to have the stones to be a man. Only real true men have them." He stared at Huldarion now from the ground. "So you're not. What happened to your face?"

"A darkburn," said Huldarion.

"That's why you need the stones. They give you power. So the darkburns can't hurt you."

"But the stones hurt you."

"Only when you don't get the athelid in time."

"Do yours hurt you now?"

"Not now. But I'm tired. Can I have some more tonight?"

He took a deep breath. "If you will tell me what you know of your commanders, and of Adon, or Adonil."

"I won't tell you any of that."

Huldarion nodded and stood up. "Very well. I'll come back later." He turned to the man who stood guard nearby. "See that he has food and water. I'll return."

Then he left. He would have to wait until the stones began to hurt again before his next attempt. He was not looking forward to it.

Meanwhile he went to visit his Riders who were still in the infirmary. Leor was there, sitting by the side of a young female Rider. He went through his memory and retrieved her name before he walked up to them.

"Durba," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"I... I..."

He waited. She stammered.

"She's having difficulty in speaking," said Leor. "And she hasn't slept since yesterday."

He noticed that Durba was shaking slightly, especially her hands. "I expect you must be very tired," he said, "but that too much has been going on to allow you to sleep."

Then he motioned Leor aside. "Head injury?"

"No injury at all," said Leor, "except to her sense of how things ought to be. Maeneb said she seemed to find the battle exciting at first. Then all at once it became real."

"Battle shock," said Huldarion. He had seen it before and knew of no cure for it other than time; and peace. "She had better go back to Thield with the other injured."

"She refuses."

"Does she? How, if she can't talk?" He was sharp.

"You try," said Leor. He looked worn out.

"I will." He returned to Durba's side and told her his decision. "You need to go back home to Thield with the wounded. There is no shame in it."

She shook her head vehemently. "U... u... u..."

"But there you can rest and recover."

"U... u...u..." Now her hands were shaking badly too.

"Well, well," said Huldarion, at a loss for once. "Try and sleep, and then we'll see." He looked at Leor. "What about you? Have you slept?"

"A little," said Leor. It was probably a lie.

"Then you must. Go and eat and then find somewhere to lie down, and rest." He wished he could make his word his command. No sooner said than instantly obeyed. But if a wizard couldn't put himself to sleep, what hope had he?

Leaving them, he crossed the hall to visit Sashel, and to tell him about the burials. He described the ceremony and promised that later he would walk down with him to see Gordal's grave. Sashel nodded. His face was very pale but he said the dizziness had almost passed. He would be ready to ride out with them on the following day.

Privately Huldarion thought he would be better travelling in one of the provision carts. However, he said merely,

"I have a new horse for you, Sashel; it's Kelvhan, a good-looking grey mare. I don't know what it will be like to ride, though. I thought I'd seat Veron on it to try it out, while you stay with the carts at first. Veron seems to enjoy wayward horses; and nobody will mind if he gets thrown." There was the ghost of an answering smile.

Then he went to fetch the other Kelvhan horse, the showy black one. After satisfying himself that both it and its tack were gleaming he led it over to the Melmet camp and offered it formally to the Baron. The gift went down well; the Baron's eyes gleamed more brightly than the golden fastenings on the saddle, and Huldarion returned to his own camp leading a weary Poda.

On the way he saw three riders galloping towards him over the plain, and waited for them to arrive.

It was Delgeb and her two companions. They drew up and reigned in their horses. Delgeb reported seeing few signs of life at the farthest forts, apart from a small group of stonemen whom they had disturbed in the act of removing their dead compatriots' stones from their skulls.

"We only managed to shoot three of them," said Maeneb. "The others got away."

Huldarion refrained from the question that leapt unwanted into his head, about how many stones each man had worn. He said, "Did you find anything else?"

Delgeb took out a leather pouch, which she opened to reveal a small lump of creamy paste.

"We saw no jars or boxes, but we did find this. We scraped it off the flagstones in one of the forts, where it must have fallen," she said. "Shebel reckons it's athelid."

"It certainly has ethlon as one of its components," said Shebel, "although I'm not sure about the others. There's probably more than one additional ingredient. The paste smells a little like zalephony, but I'm not aware that zalephony has any pain-killing properties. Maybe it's simply there to make it palatable."

"Possibly," said Huldarion, although he doubted it. Stonemen would not care if athelid were palatable or not, so long as it worked. "Thank you. Let's go and try it out. Come with me, if you will."

So they accompanied him back to the captive stoneman, Girik, for the third time that day.

It was now ten hours or so since he had had the ethlon, and he was showing signs of distress. No longer lying on the ground, he was pacing to and fro as the other stoneman had been earlier, his hands clasped to his head. When he saw Huldarion he almost threw himself at him like a dog on a leash. The tether held him; and his guard pushed him back.

"Have you got it?"

Huldarion showed him the contents of the pouch. "Is this athelid?"

He gasped. "Ah! That's it. Give me that. I need it." He reached out frantically for the pouch; but Huldarion held it back, beyond his arm's length.

"Some information first," he said. "Adon. Where is he?"

"He was up in the snow with us," said Girik. "They showed us him. He's a god."

"A god?"

"He has a shining face and a triple row of stones around his head. No-one ever had so many. That's how we can be sure he is a god. Now give me the athelid."

"What did Adon say?"

"Stuff about fighting and following. How we can—" He wrinkled his brow. "I can't remember."

"You must remember. Otherwise I give you none of this."

Girik gripped his head again. "He said, he said – I know, he said we can win in the north and then go home to the south and win there and have all the land for ourselves between the Darkburn and the sea. We had to cheer. I mean we cheered. Now can I have it?"

"Not yet." Between the Darkburn and the sea: that meant Caervonn. "What else?"

"I don't remember anything else! And it's hurting! You said you'd give it to me!"

"Where did Adon go?"

"I don't know." And now the man began to cry.

"Give him some of the athelid," said Huldarion to Shebel. He had no stomach for any more of this.

"How much do you think he ought to have? It's hard to judge," she said, looking at the pouch.

"Ask him."

"How much of this do you take?" she asked the weeping Girik.

"All of it! Give me all of it!"

Delgeb shook her head. "No, don't do that."

"If we give you all of it," said Huldarion to the stoneman, "there will be none left for tomorrow."

"I don't care. Just give it me."

Shebel put some of the paste on her finger – about a quarter of the whole. "Is this the right amount?"

“More! More!”

“Careful he doesn’t bite your hand off,” Delgeb said.

“This is all you’re getting,” Shebel told him. She held out her hand and Girik held out his until he could wipe his fingers against hers. He put the paste to his mouth. Seconds later his eyes closed. His face relaxed, and he sat down heavily on the ground.

“What will you do with him tomorrow?” Delgeb asked.

“I don’t know yet,” said Huldarion. “There may be something more that he can tell us; I need to think about it. But I’m not hopeful.”

And then we may just have to kill him anyway, he thought, before we leave. Before the pain takes over once again. Even if we take him with us, we only have enough athelid for three more doses. And we need what’s left of our ethlon for our wounded. Kinder to kill him. The Baron found somebody to do that for him. I’ll have to do it myself. A captive. Twelve. Not fair to ask anybody else.

But in the end the athelid carried out that task for him. It must have been too high a dose by far; for in the morning Girik lay curled up, smiling, dead.

Chapter 42

Leor could feel the sadness as they all rode out. You did not need to be Maeneb to sense the loss, the pull at the hearts of every Rider as they left the dead behind with the great mountains guarding them. He should be used to death by now, after so many centuries. Yet it always surprised him with its suddenness and irrevocability.

He saw Sashel, sitting in the cart ahead of him, twist around for one last look. Was the loss of a twin doubly hard?

Adon had been almost his twin. Although he resisted giving Adon the status of a brother, they had been made at the same time, of the same matter; so much Leor had been told. The rest he did not know. There was no-one whom the two boys called parent; they had a group of six guardians, not wizards but ordinary men and women, or ordinary as far as lifespan went. However, the guardians between them held a great amount of knowledge, including something about wizardry – enough to set Adon and Leor on their paths of self-discovery.

Paths which intertwined throughout their early years. As boys the two of them had been glad of each other's company, running through the fields and woods together, revelling in their invulnerability. It made them thoughtless of their safety; for they could feel no lasting hurt. A bone that was broken swiftly mended. A fall from a tree had no ill effects. Cuts healed without trace. They were invincible.

He never understood whose power it was that made them and then kept them safe. Adon declared back then that they had made themselves. Nowadays Adon would probably declare that he – Adon – had made them both, and much of the world besides. Huldarion had told Leor what the stoneman said about Adon: a god with a shining face. Well. No surprise.

He looked over to his right, where the Kelvhan company formed a shorter, separate line of carts and riders two hundred yards away. They moved in perfect, disciplined formation. Behind them trailed the few men of Melmet who had chosen to come this far: a short untidy straggle, outnumbered by the hunters at their rear. There was little communication between the two lines, although Huldarion had ridden over at one point to speak to the Kelvhan commander, Rhadlun; and Yaret had come over from Melmet's ranks to join the Riders.

"I don't like being the only female in the train," she said.

"You don't trust Melmet?" Solon asked.

"Oh, they're all right. My old captain Jerred's still with them and he has a fair amount of clout. But I don't trust Kelvha. They all seem to know; I suppose word had to get out some time. Actually it's not fair to say that I don't trust them – I expect they're trustworthy enough. But I don't care much for the way they look at me. I expect the female Riders get the same sort of looks from them."

"We do," said Maeneb, with a harshness that surprised Leor till he remembered seeing that Kelvhan soldier seize and kiss her. Was a kiss in victory so terrible? To, Maeneb, yes; any kiss would be terrible, he supposed.

But then Maeneb was comely: even beautiful. He wouldn't have thought Yaret had much cause to worry. Although she had a pleasant enough face it was made so by its alert expression, and her baggy clothes did her no favours. He had heard the occasional shouts of *peg-leg* as she passed.

"At least you're not surrounded by them here," said Yaret.

The line of Vonn was looser than that of the Kelvhans, and soon began to flow and ebb around him like a shoal of fish, as various Riders sought friends to exchange sombre words with. Nobody came out of their way to ride alongside Leor. Trying not to mind, he kept his eye on Durba, who was sitting with Sashel and the others in the jolting cart.

Leor didn't think the jolting could be good for her. He had seen battle shock before, on many occasions through the years. He did not know the answer to it except kindness. Poor Durba; she was so young, hardly older than a child...

But older than those stonemen, he reflected. Huldarion had told him, quietly, about that as well, requesting him to tell nobody else before he asked Leor if such a thing were possible.

Stone children. It made his heart sink because he felt at once that it was true. Had he himself not played with men's longevity to give the Wardens of Farwithiel longer life? It hadn't been all that difficult. He'd been proud of the feat until its consequences gradually revealed themselves.

Adon could have done the same thing, in reverse, he told Huldarion; speeding up the stonemen's growth. It would not have been beyond him.

"But why on earth would he want to?" Huldarion had said, in a rare failure of understanding.

"To swell his armies the more swiftly," Leor had replied. To him it was obvious. "And so that he can bring them up more easily in the way he chooses. Indoctrinate them."

"Such youngsters can have no judgement."

"Adon doesn't want them to have judgement. He just wants them to obey."

"If it were true," said Huldarion, "it would be grossly immoral, to breed children to be maimed, and led into addiction, and then to make them fight."

Leor felt himself condemned along with Adon. Not by Huldarion; but by himself. He saw so clearly what Adon was doing – yet he had no idea where he was or why. He could be anywhere in the world. He could be in this very train amongst the Vonn and Leor would not know. The mere idea made him shudder.

He looked round for Maeneb, who had been riding close behind him, and called to her to catch him up.

"Maeneb," he said, "Can you feel where I am? With your mind, I mean?"

She looked surprised. "I can feel you, certainly. You're a different note, a different colour to the rest."

"From how far away can you detect me?"

"A few miles, perhaps. I could tell when you were up in the hills back there with Veron, some of the time. At other times you were too distant."

"Have you ever felt someone that... that might have been Adon?"

She shook her head. "No. But I wouldn't expect to. I should think he always cloaks himself. I'm surprised you don't."

At that, *he* was surprised; even though he'd cloaked, or camouflaged, his body several times recently, it had never occurred to him to camouflage his mind. "Why should I cloak myself? Who would ever sense my presence anywhere, but you? A maybe a few Wardens of the Farwth, but they're a long way off."

Maeneb looked at him. "Who might sense you? Adon, of course," she said, as if he were a child.

Adon. I have never cloaked myself from Adon, he thought, because he told me long ago that I was an eternal beacon to him, that he could always see me no matter where I hid, my soul no less flaming than my hair no matter how I tried to cover it. I have tried to hide that flaming soul. To quench its fire. To not do what I want to do, because it has so often not turned out the way I thought it would. I have tried not to be Adon.

"I don't think I could cloak myself from Adon," he muttered.

"Why not? If he can cloak himself from you?"

"He cloaks everything," said Leor. He felt depressed, and turned the subject. "I think you ought to go and have a talk with Durba."

"Why?" demanded Maeneb. "What about?" She sounded almost angry.

"Why? Because she looks up to you, and a kind word or two might help. As for what about..." He spread his hands. "Does it matter? It's the act of talking that makes the difference."

"I don't see that," said Maeneb. But after a moment she nudged her horse ahead to draw level with the cart. It was another moment or two before he heard her speak to Durba, making some comment on the roughness of the road. Her tone was not kind, not unkind. He sighed.

But then Yaret rode up to the cart on her new horse, Poda. A fine mare, too fine for her really, he thought, and she evidently thought so too. She hadn't wanted to ride it, saying her little Melmet hack had served her well; but Huldarion had insisted. The little Melmet hack was carrying baggage in the rear instead.

Now Yaret joined the two women in conversation, to Leor's great surprise: because Maeneb had been speaking Vonnish, and so did she.

Yaret spoke very halting, rather strangely accented Vonnish. She would try out a few words and then wait for Maeneb to correct her. Even Durba smiled at her attempts and tried to stammer out a word or two, never getting further than the first letter.

Nearby, Parthenal laughed. Then, in a long stream of rapid, idiosyncratic Vonnish he told Yaret just what a slow and rustic illiterate donkey she was to be riding such a noble horse.

"Say that again," said Yaret eagerly. "One bit at a time. Slow and... what?"

He said it again, and now more of them were laughing as she carefully repeated it, with Parthenal correcting her accent until she got it right.

"Could you teach me some Vonnish swear words?" she asked.

"There aren't any," said Rothir.

She looked over at him with a hint of mischief in her eyes. "No, you won't know them. I remember, you're unfailingly polite. But Parthenal isn't."

"You really don't want to know any words that Parthenal can teach you," Thoronal put in.

"But swear words are always useful. I could say them to the Kelvhans and they'd never know."

"Don't do that," said Rothir.

"Melmet, then. There are one or two of them that I'd quite like to swear at. A man called Inthed, for a start."

"Why? What did he do to you?"

She shrugged. "He's just a turnip-head. But he's stuck it out this far, so I don't want to insult him too conspicuously."

Now suggestions came thick and fast, and the laughter became more general as Yaret repeated them, mangling the words with an air of enquiring innocence. He could tell that it was a relief for the Riders to have an excuse to laugh.

The dead were not dismissed, but they could be put behind them for a while. The elastic thread of memory and regret would be drawn out further and further as they moved west, but it would never break. Lost, but not forgotten, Leor thought. In the end everything would be forgotten. But not yet.

Chapter 43

It was a three day ride to reach the western marches. The journey, through increasingly unappetising swampland, was without incident – to Leor’s relief. He’d had enough of incident for a while.

Not much changed except that Sashel and one or two others of the wounded were allowed to leave the carts and ride. Durba only ventured on a horse for short periods, because still she trembled, and could not speak. Leor thought she ought not to be there. Yaret spent much of her time with Durba during the day, talking to her as if nothing were amiss, and in the evenings camped with her and Shebel the herb-mistress and three other women.

Leor himself seemed to have been similarly adopted by Theol, who took care to include him in the general conversations; during which Leor became aware that he was not disliked by the Riders as he had thought, so much as feared. No, *feared* was the wrong word. They were cautious of him – even deferential. They could not forget that he was a wizard.

There was no deference from Veron, however. Now and then Veron would gallop out of some unknown region on his wiry horse to report tersely to Huldarion. He and a few of the huntsmen were clearing up the edges, as he put it; but there wasn’t much that needing clearing. The small groups of stonemen they had tracked down were apparently befuddled with pain, and unable to put up any effective fight. Veron seemed almost disappointed.

“And the huntress?” Yaret asked him. “Where is she now? Can she travel this far east and south?”

Leor would not have dared to ask him such a question. Last time he had mentioned his wife to Veron, the man had looked straight past him as if he hadn’t spoken. Or wasn’t even there. So that was one way of cloaking himself, with Veron at least... Merely speak of the forbidden, and become instantly invisible.

But it seemed that it was a subject not forbidden to Yaret. For Veron replied, “If there is need, she can travel far. But she neither needs nor wants to.”

“She belongs in the mountains?” The austere blue-white peaks were now diminishing behind them, looking even more untouchable with distance.

“For preference.”

“How does she travel?” asked Yaret, cautiously enough. But it was a question too many, for Veron gave her a look as sharp as a knife.

“How she chooses to,” he said. And a minute later he had galloped off again.

“You’re bold,” commented Rothir.

“I have as much right to talk of the huntress as he does,” she replied with a shrug.

“And more than any of us from the south do, I suppose. You worship her in Obandiro?”

That too was bold, thought Leor, surprised that Rothir could speak so casually not just of the huntress but of Obandiro – as if it were not gone. Leor himself had talked of it to Yaret in hushed tones.

However, hushed tones were apparently unnecessary; Yaret showed no sign of distress. Indeed, if anything, she seemed glad of the chance to talk about her stricken homeland. Leor was made aware – as he was so frequently – that he really did not understand people very well.

“We don’t worship the huntress,” she answered. “But we do revere her. We treasure her.”

“Do you have temples?” asked Rothir.

“There are no temples to her – nor to any other being for that matter. Whatever people in Obandiro may worship they hold in their hearts.”

Again Leor found his thoughts reverting to Adon, who claimed to be a god; and who, like a particularly selfish god, desired power and worship above all else. The power, he thought, was not worth much to Adon without the worship – even if it was the glory of being feared and hated. Anything but being ignored. People had to notice him, or rather, notice his effects. Leor felt that in this he understood Adon better than he did any human. But then both Adon and he himself were divided from humanity.

Yet could Adon do as the huntress did, and transform himself into another creature? He could certainly make himself appear to, as Leor could if needed. But that was only in appearance, not true transformation.

What sort of creature, he mused, would Adon be? Leor was rather fond of snakes; so not a snake. He was not fond of cockroaches, but admired their resilience. So not a cockroach. He had heard of a giant lizard in the east that ate its prey alive, extremely slowly. That might be the closest.

And his thought the other day that Adon could be here, now, in the train of Kelvhan soldiers, still lingered in his mind. It was unnerving. He told himself that Adon would not bother coming to these western borderlands. He had spoiled and destroyed them long ago, and would find nothing in them to attract him now.

Except Huldarion. And, perhaps, Leor himself.... But Huldarion had little power as yet, and Leor had forsworn his own, as Adon surely knew. There could be no contest of wizardry to draw him. Doubtless he felt for Leor nothing but contempt.

The two columns came to a halt at the edge of a ruined town. This place was not burnt, but had long collapsed. Moss and ivy crept over its broken walls. Leor remembered it from many years ago: not much of a place back then. Nice people, though. Hospitable, until the land had failed, thanks to Adon’s exploitation, when famine had driven them to move elsewhere.

General Istar of the Western Borderlands emerged from the dilapidated gatehouse to meet them and to hold an immediate council. Leor was gratified to find that he was now a dignitary in the Kelvhan commander’s eyes: for Rhadlun invited him to attend the gathering of captains inside the gatehouse.

He was not so gratified when Rhadlun, outlining the Kelvhan victory to the General, described the routing of the stonemen by the wolves, and then added:

“This was done by the wizard Leor’s power. A most valuable asset to our army.”

Rhadlun gave Leor an approving nod. Leor opened his mouth to put him right. At a single, tiny shake of the head from Huldarion he closed it again.

General Istar was eyeing him suspiciously, with some disdain. “I’m sure. However, I don’t think your powers will be required here, master wizard. There’s only the mopping up left to be done. We managed to deal with the stonemen perfectly well without a wizard’s help.” Leor bowed, relieved.

“Of course, the numbers here were smaller,” Rhadlun said.

“That is true,” the General conceded. “It was a mighty victory that you won in the north.” To Leor’s watchful eyes, the General was careful to flatter Rhadlun; showed genuine respect

towards Huldarion; and disapproved of Leor himself. Some people were like that about wizardry. He didn't mind. In fact he tended to admire them for it.

The plan for "mopping up" was duly debated and agreed. It was perhaps not such a trivial matter as the General had implied, for there were still plenty of stonemen roaming the western marches, but in small uncoordinated bands rather than an army. Their chief commanders had been killed and their base ransacked by the General's men.

"You must have had some losses," said Huldarion in a sober tone.

The General nodded. "Sixty-five," he said, and Leor could see the pain in his eyes.

Not so Rhadlun, evidently. "A small price to pay."

"Not to the men concerned," said Huldarion quietly. "We will honour them in due course, once the task is finished."

It was agreed that the newly arrived troops would ride out to the Marches without delay and then split into twos and threes, sweeping the widest possible area for stray stonemen.

For the Vonn, this meant falling into their accustomed pairings. Rothir and Parthenal were to lead out the greater part of the Vonn towards the southern half of the region: Huldarion and Thoronal along with the General would take on the north. Huldarion manoeuvred for this arrangement, with Kelvha filling in the middle. Leor suspected that Huldarion had no confidence in Kelvha sweeping the edges thoroughly; however, he managed to make it seem as if it were Kelvha's own idea.

Leor himself had no usual riding partner amongst the Vonn. After the council had broken up and he had returned to the troops, he was adjusting Bryddesda's tack and wondering to whom he should attach himself when Yaret came up to him.

"Ride with me," she said. "I have no partner either. I was going to make a three with Maeneb and Durba."

"Durba? Is she fit to ride?"

"Probably not," said Yaret. "But she insists, and Huldarion allows her. Maybe he thinks that it will help her to recover. They don't seem to be expecting too much trouble here."

"Nobody can be sure of that. It only takes one ambush... How would she react?"

"That's why I was going to make a three with them. If you partner me instead, we can ride close by without it being too obvious to Durba."

"I don't think she should be here at all," said Leor. But he saw the sense in Yaret's suggestion.

As they cantered out in the line behind Rothir and Parthenal a thin rain fell feebly on them. This was a barren, treeless country, although to Leor's memory it had once been rich with orchards. Everything that grew here now looked weak and sickly. The place could hardly have been made much worse by the charred streaks of the darkburn trails and the detritus of war. A low haze of smoke hung over the whole scene.

Yaret halted a few times to collect spare arrows. They passed several stoneman corpses, noting that somebody had removed the stones from the heads; Leor did not know which side was responsible. It was all he could do to stop himself from counting the black holes in those skulls, already defaced by carrion crows. How old would that one be? Fourteen?

Don't think about it. No certainty in any case. Don't talk about it either: Huldarion's orders.

He looked away, glancing back at Durba. She seemed to be all right. Now the Riders spread out to begin the sweep of the marches, each pair about fifty yards apart; he could see

them stretching to the horizon on his left. And on his other side, beyond Maeneb and Durba – they had allowed that gap to close to twenty yards – his eye was caught by the flashing gear and glittering harnesses of Kelvhan horsemen. He wondered how much time they spent polishing their gilt and bronze.

Maeneb gave a yell. A lone figure had jumped up from the tussocky plain to run. A stoneman. She galloped after it, unsheathing her sword, while Durba held back. Leor rode after Maeneb, but she needed no assistance: the stoneman was already dead before he reached them.

“He didn’t even fight,” she said in some surprise. “Yet he had his axe with him.”

“But if he had no food, no drugs to quell his pain, maybe he had no fight left in him,” Leor commented.

That seemed to set the pattern. Stonemen still lurked in places, hiding in dips in the ground, amongst the long yellow tussocks of dead grass. Some did not even bother running. They just lay and moaned. It was hard for him not to count the stones; hard not to wonder how old each man might be. There was no triumph in killing them, but Leor knew it was the only thing that could be done, for without their athelid they would die in any case, in an exhaustion of agony. Now that they were helpless individuals, and not an attacking army, he could feel pity for them.

Kelvha evidently felt otherwise. There were distant cheers as a stoneman darted up from the ground and was overtaken by a cavalryman before he had taken a dozen staggering steps. This was necessary, Leor told himself again. The cheering wasn’t, though.

Yaret had stopped using her bow after shooting only once. “A sword is surer,” she said grimly. “Quicker.”

He nodded and glanced again at Durba. So far she had pursued no stonemen. But presumably she needed to prove something to herself just by being here. At least she hadn’t turned and fled. Indeed, she looked quite determined as she steered her horse carefully around a patch of prickly scrub. The ground was rutted, so that they had to slow.

“Stop,” said Yaret suddenly.

He stopped at once. “What is it?”

“Can’t you feel it? Durba! Stop!” she yelled.

But Durba must have been out of earshot, for she kept riding on until suddenly her horse halted, bucking fiercely. Durba was almost pitched over its head: she fell sideways out of the saddle and slithered to the ground next to a mass of dead gorse bushes. Over them, the haze of smoke was thicker than elsewhere.

When Leor rode anxiously across to help her, he felt it: a fierce and savage wave of fear. Almost over-powering dread. So familiar by now, and yet it came as a new shock of horror every time. Darkburn...

But where was it? He couldn’t smell it, which was strange. His horse Bryddesda pulled his head round and refused to walk on any further. Fighting the dreadful weakness that came over him, he dismounted before hurrying to help Durba to her feet.

“Are you all right?”

She leant against him, clinging to his arms. She was shaking.

“D...d...”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Yet he could not see it. Where was it? “I won’t let it hurt you. Come back this way.”

He threw a rough shielding spell around them both as he began to lead her back. It was for her protection, after all, surely allowable in the circumstances: and the only person who could justly blame him for using magic was himself.

But the spell was not necessary, for no darkburn rushed out from an unseen hiding-place. Meanwhile Yaret had dismounted too: she walked past them over the rough ground, motioning to Maeneb to stay away. If the darkburn fear affected her she did not show it.

Yaret halted just beyond the gorse bushes, looking through the smoke at the ground close to her feet. Leor could see nothing there. Then he heard a muffled clanking sound and a series of dull thumps: the earth vibrated slightly.

Yaret bent over to peer down before walking back towards them. Although her step was steady he saw how rigid her face was: it was held tight with the strain as she spoke.

"I can't see it, but it's there," she said tersely. "It sounds as if it's still trapped in its cage. The whole thing's fallen down a pit. Some sort of pot hole, or maybe an old mine-working. It's black in there, so I can't see far, but it must be several yards down at least. The walls of the pit are burnt but they're not burning now."

"Don't worry," Leor said to Durba, who was still clinging to his arm. "It's harmless there. It can't get out."

Maeneb went over to where Yaret had stood. She too looked down; and then she pulled up an armful of grass, damp with the rain, and dropped it in the pit. A yellow flame flared high, before dying down again. A following plume of smoke grew like a thin grey tree, and then dissolved. The Riders on their right called over to ask what was going on.

"Darkburn," Maeneb yelled back.

"We'll just go round it," said Leor. "Ignore it. It can't hurt us."

"C... c... c..."

"It's harmless while it's trapped in there," he assured her. "We'll walk the horses round this way."

But Durba seemed frozen to the spot. It took him a few minutes to cajole her into walking even a few yards away – just far enough to allow the sense of dread to diminish. Not until then was he able to leave her and go to retrieve her nervous horse; then he had to coax both it and Durba into taking a wide diversion round the pit.

They had not got very far before they were joined by a pair of curious Kelvhan soldiers who had ridden over.

"What's going on?" demanded one.

"Darkburn," answered Maeneb curtly. "It's trapped in a hole."

"Show us." The Kelvhans left their horses, to accompany Maeneb to the pit's edge. They looked in briefly; recoiled and hastily retreated. After a brief, vehement argument between the pair, one of them galloped off again.

Maeneb strode back to Leor and the others. She looked not just tense and jittery from her proximity to the darkburn, but also furiously angry.

"Well, that's done it," she said bitterly.

"What has?"

"Those turnip-headed Kelvhans want to keep it."

"They what?"

"They want to pull the darkburn out and take it home with them." Maeneb was almost spitting the words. "That's what they're saying, anyway. They're wondering if the cage is still intact."

"Dear stars in heaven," said Leor. "Are they mad?"

"They mustn't do that! It would be incredibly dangerous," exclaimed Yaret.

"How are you going to stop them?" countered Maeneb. "They won't take any notice of us."

"We need to tell the others." Immediately Yaret flung herself on to her horse, and galloped away towards the nearest Riders to their south.

"I don't think we need worry too much," said Leor to the other two women. "They'll never be able to get it back up to the surface. The cage must weigh a ton or two at least, and it sounds as if it's gone a long way down."

"They could use horses to pull it out," said Maeneb.

"They'd need a lot of horses to drag it up," he argued. "It's not like pulling a cart. And ropes would burn: so they'd have to use chains. I doubt if they've got that many chains handy, and even if they have, they'd need to get down into the pit and attach them to the cart somehow, without being burnt alive. I can't think of a way of doing that."

"B...b...b..."

"It's all right," added Leor reassuringly to Durba, "no-one is going to get burnt alive. We'll prevent them from even trying. There's the Kelvhan commander coming over: I'll have a word with him."

He felt tenderly protective towards her. Patting her shoulder, he managed to unprise her clinging fingers from his arm and latch them on to Maeneb – who looked alarmed – before he strode over to speak with the Kelvhans.

It was Rhadlun who had arrived, with a number of his men. They were inspecting the pit from a safe distance when he walked up to meet them.

"My lord," said Leor. "A stray darkburn. Best left where it is, I think."

Rhadlun turned to him. "We want to keep this one."

"But what for?"

"To take back to Kelvha with us, if at all possible. To study and to understand the thing. It seems to be still trapped within its cage. If we can pull it out..."

"No, that's nigh on impossible," said Leor. "And even were it possible, it's far too dangerous."

"Not easy, granted. But there is a way."

"There is no way that's safe."

Rhadlun looked at Leor with a considering expression. "No? I think differently. You are, after all, a wizard."

Leor caught his breath. "What? I will not use my wizardry on such an enterprise."

"Do you mean you couldn't do it?"

He was nettled. "I could, certainly – but it would be most unwise. The danger to everyone concerned would be excessive."

"I don't see why," said Rhadlun. "We can all stand clear while you lift the thing out. If the cage comes open, surely you can hold it closed? Once it's on the ground, we'll do the rest."

"It's not that simple!"

The Kelvhan commander raised his eyebrows. "You just told me you could lift the creature from the pit. And I saw the effects of your wizardry over the animals at the northern forts: that was undeniably strong magic, to make them fight in such a way. So are you now refusing us your aid, when we request it?"

Leor felt himself trapped. To say that he had forsworn magic would hold no sway with Rhadlun.

"I simply question the wisdom of trying to keep a darkburn captive," he replied.

"Stonemen do it. Why shouldn't we try? Especially now that we have plenty of their stones. We're well protected if by any faint chance it did get loose."

He tried again. "It's not simply the physical danger. The effect on people's minds – the terror that the darkburns induce – the stonemen were, I think, immune to that."

"Yes. Drugged," said Rhadlun. "According to those stonemen that the Baron took prisoner. I heard about those. It made me realise that we should have tried to take more prisoners ourselves – but not stonemen: they cannot be of use to us. Darkburns can. This is a golden opportunity."

Leor did not know what to say. With some relief he saw Rothir galloping towards him, with Yaret's horse trailing behind. Rothir would surely back him up.

Rothir jumped off his horse, looked at the pit and strode across to them, offering Rhadlun the briefest of bows.

"There is a darkburn in that ditch there, so I'm told?"

"Caged," said Rhadlun. "The cage appears to be intact. The thing could be invaluable to us as an object of study. We would like to take it back to Kelvha." As he expounded on his desire to have the darkburn pulled out, his words and tone implied that he was not to be denied.

Rothir listened without expression. "I appreciate your wish to understand the darkburn," he replied. "However, they are unpredictable things, and I believe that such an attempt would be both dangerous and unwise."

"There is no danger at all with the right tools."

"What tools?"

"You say this wizard is your ally," said Rhadlun with a hint of lofty scorn. "He claims to be a friend to Kelvha. He has already told me that he can raise the darkburn using wizardry. I ask you, then, why will he not comply with my request? Is he, after all, an enemy to Kelvha – or is he simply lying, and unable to do the feats he boasts of?"

"Let me discuss the matter with him," said Rothir. He took Leor to one side while the Kelvhans waited.

"Could you do this thing?" he said to him abruptly.

"Yes, I could," said Leor. "But I should not."

"I agree. The very idea of taking a darkburn back to Kelvha... However." Rothir frowned, thinking. "It's clear that to refuse will displease Rhadlun greatly. It could jeopardise our whole alliance."

"Then we need to ask Huldarion."

"Yes, ideally, but Huldarion is miles away. It will take too long to find him and procure an answer. But I think that he would say that you should do it. We have the stones to keep us safe. How the Kelvhans deal with the darkburn once it's out is up to them."

"I could just say that I'm unable. I'm not so proud that I can't do that."

Rothir considered this, before shaking his head.

"I don't think they'd believe you. Didn't you tell Rhadlun you could do it?"

"I did, unfortunately." Leor cursed his own pride.

"And they've already seen a powerful example of what they assume was your wizardry."

Leor groaned. "The wolves weren't my doing, though!" he protested.

"Whether they were or not is irrelevant. If you refuse to aid the Kelvhans now, they'll see it as obstinacy at best, or at worst as outright hostility." Rothir spoke with decision. "No, Leor: do it if you can. If I'm wrong and Huldarion objects, I take full responsibility."

"I really don't want to raise the darkburn."

"I know. Sorry, Leor. Do it anyway. Can I help at all?"

"Just keep everyone well out of the way," said Leor. He was angry – a little with Rothir, but mainly with the Kelvhan commander and his request which was actually an order. The arrogance of it: thinking he could not just control a darkburn, but command a wizard.

However, now he had to set his mind to the task. It must be several years since he'd attempted such strong magic; and for a dreadful moment he feared that he would find his power diminished, or that he would somehow have forgotten how to use it.

As soon as the onlookers were all safely standing back, he concentrated on the darkburn in the pit. He threw back his cloak with a flourish – a little theatre for the Kelvhans – and stretched out his hand. This too was theatre. It didn't matter where his hand was; it was his will that mattered. Now, focusing his will, he stretched it out as well, in a way he had not done for a long time, feeling for the unseen cage.

And the power began to flow through him as it always used to do. He realised that he had forgotten – not how to use his wizardry – but how it felt. The sheer joy of it. The sense of force untrammelled; the feeling that he could do anything he wanted. It blazed through him as hot as any darkburn, but with a fire of life, not death.

Gradually, a ruddy glow of iron bars and then the piece of night that was the darkburn became visible as the cage was lifted, rattling, from the pit. Leor, both arms outstretched now, felt exultant. Curious how he made the earth expel it. He himself did not know how it worked, any more than a man knows how he beats his heart: he knows that muscles do this and that, but the actual thing does itself.

The wizardry does itself, he thought, and I am a mere instrument. It was the first time he had ever had such a notion.

The cage was fully out. It was on its side: he laid it down amidst crushed gorse bushes, looking somewhat twisted and distorted. After carefully setting it upright he next sealed the joints and door with spells to guard against any accident. Behind the bars he saw the darkburn huddled, a small blot of shadow emanating heat and stink and fear. All those were strong to his senses now.

It had taken about a minute. He looked around almost expecting applause – it had been done well, and certainly deserved applause, he thought – and saw Rothir, grave, and Yaret holding Durba who hid her face. Maeneb stood apart and glowering. The Kelvhans simply looked intrigued, while Rhadlun strode over to the darkburn cage as if he took the extraordinary feat for granted.

As he approached, Rhadlun retrieved an object from his pocket and held it out. It must have been a stone; for there was a loud thump as the darkburn tried to hurl itself through the back of the cage. Luckily, though warped, the iron structure was intact. Its wheels were

still in place; long chains dangled from it down into the pit. Around the cage the grass was already steaming and starting to curl up.

"Bring those up," said Rhadlun, pointing to the dangling chains. He meant Leor. Unwillingly, Leor complied, and Rhadlun immediately ordered them to be affixed to horses. More Kelvhans were called over to perform the task.

"Happy?" said Leor to Rothir.

"No. But I think you had to do it. We can leave them to it now. We need to continue our sweep of the Marches. I'd advise you to get well away before the Kelvhans ask you to do anything else."

It was good advice. Rhadlun offered no more than the dismissive wave of a hand as Leor announced his intention to move on.

He strode away fuming. Rothir was right: he needed to get away before Rhadlun tried to give him any more orders. What an ungrateful, over-bearing man. He almost hoped despite himself that the darkburn would give the Kelvhans trouble. Mounting his horse, he beckoned to Yaret.

"Come on," he said, "Let's move. We've still got a job to do."

"Maeneb will go with you. I might take Durba back to camp," said Yaret. "I think she's had enough of this."

And so have I, Leor thought irately, riding off so fast that Maeneb had to hurry to catch up. Resentful anger burnt in his chest. He was almost tempted to blast the Kelvhan commander off his feet and throw him in the pit: that would show him what command really was...

Of course he would not do any such thing. But he had been reminded that if he chose, he could. His whole body tingled as the sense of his own power ran through him; like a river, purposeful and fast and strong, that had just been released after being so long dammed up.

Chapter 44

“What do you want to do?” said Yaret, her hands on Durba’s shoulders.

“A... a...”

“Either nod or shake your head. Do you want to continue the sweep out here, and keep hunting for stonemen?”

It was more of a twitch than a shake of the head.

“Do you want to go back to the camp?”

Another twitch. Yaret repressed a sigh as she tried to puzzle this out.

“My guess is,” she said, “that you’ve had enough of chasing stonemen, but you don’t want to be seen as giving up. Am I right?”

A definite nod.

“I admit I’ve had enough of it as well,” said Yaret. She thought of the four stonemen she had killed in the last hour, while trying not to notice the numbers of their stones... Now that they barely tried to fight back, the slaughter sickened her. Yet it had to be done, to put the men out of their misery as much as for revenge. She just wanted not to be the one who did it.

So she patted Durba’s shoulder, and added, “You’ve managed really well to get this far. But now I’ll take you back to camp. I can pretend my leg is giving me difficulty and that I need to rest it.”

A shake of the head. “B... b... b...”

“All right, Durba. I know you don’t want to give up, but I have my own reasons for wishing to go back. There’s something useful we can do. Interested?”

A nod. Yaret glanced around to make sure that Rothir and Leor were well out of earshot before continuing. But Leor was already galloping off, while Rothir stood at a distance, watching the Kelvhans with a frown.

“I propose that we discreetly follow the Kelvhans who are going to take the darkburn back to their own camp,” she told Durba. “I want to make sure that they don’t do anything stupid. They seem to think they can control it, even though they have hardly any experience of darkburns. I know you don’t like darkburns – nobody does – but you won’t get close to it, and we have the stones to keep us safe. At least, I hope you still have yours?”

Durba took a hand from her pocket and opened it to show two stones.

“Good. Then do you agree?”

A small nod.

“All right. That’s what we’ll do.” Yaret reached down and fiddled with the straps of her wooden leg, before beginning to walk over towards Poda. The leg buckled as it freed itself from its bindings, so that she tumbled over in a very convincing manner.

Ouch, she thought as she sat up. Too convincing. She rubbed the stump and picked up the wooden leg as if in dismay. As she made a performance of trying to re-affix it, some of the Kelvhans were looking at her; one of them laughed. It was Rothir who came over to her aid.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine. The strapping just gave way. I think I’d better go back to the camp to fix it. I’ll take Durba with me.” She found that despite her resolve to say nothing of her motives, it

hurt her to deceive him. Did Rothir ever deceive anybody? Probably not. So she added, "It'll give me a chance to make sure they don't do anything stupid with that darkburn."

Rothir sighed: she read both resignation and exasperation in his face. "I wish that had gone undiscovered."

"It was bound to be discovered at some point."

"But not by Kelvha." A crease had appeared between his brows. "I hope I did the right thing in asking Leor to retrieve it. But I don't think I could have refused."

"Probably not."

The crease deepened. "Anyway, you keep your distance from it, do you hear me?"

"I hear you."

She saluted him. He nodded and strode off to exchange a terse word with the Kelvhans before riding away on Narba.

Yaret sat on the ground fiddling with her leg and watching the Kelvhans, who were attaching the cage's chains to four unhappy horses. The cage had bars on either side, but not the front, which like the back was solid metal – presumably to protect any towing horses or men from the full force of the darkburn's heat. Even so, in places the metal glowed a faint dull red. The fine rain hissed and spat as it landed on it.

The cage's iron wheels appeared to be undamaged; but once it was set trundling across the uneven ground, its progress was slow and very unsteady. The horses didn't like it. They strained and heaved, trying to get away from the darkburn. And the darkburn threw itself repeatedly against the back of the cage, trying to get away from the horses, until Rhadlun told his men sternly to remove the stones that were set into the harnesses.

Once that was done, he made any men who were carrying stones move further from the cage. He himself led the procession from some thirty yards ahead. The darkburn quietened as it was towed away at a painfully laborious pace.

Yaret stood up and made a show of testing her leg before limping over to mount Poda.

"Come on," she said; and she and Durba set off at a safe distance behind the slowly trundling cart.

They were probably still too close to it for Rothir's liking; but Rothir was no longer there to watch, which was a relief. After the great joy of her reunion with the Riders – a reunion which she suspected had given Rothir as much concern as pleasure – and then the great wrenching pain of events in the infirmary, Yaret now felt a confusion of delight and doubt at being with the Vonn. Although she hoped she could be useful in some minor way, she certainly did not want to cause Rothir any more concern. She held him in her heart, because he had found her, twice now: he had brought her back to life: he had helped her up from the dreadful pit of grief, and from the stony shore of death beneath the cliffs along the Thore.

Not that he would see it with the same intensity. It had been merely kindness in him – that, and duty.

But Rothir was not the only one she aimed not to upset right now. In a strange juxtaposition of cares, she did not want to distress the darkburn by getting any closer; and neither did she wish to subject Durba or the horses to its sense of horror. So she kept back to where the aura would not cause a major problem.

It was a tedious and uneventful journey. Rhadlun, at the front, had to stop at frequent intervals while the slowly jolting cart caught up with him. He soon grew restless and

impatient, and after giving a few commands to the four men who accompanied him, he wheeled his horse round and rode off back across the plain to where the action was.

Ten minutes later two more of the men – the senior pair, judging by the quality of their gear – did the same. They galloped off to more exciting duties, leaving the last two men in charge of the darkburn.

Yaret was appalled. Did they have no idea how dangerous the thing was? It was true that the stones ought to protect them; but if the cart tipped over on the uneven ground and the darkburn got out, it could run off to wreak havoc elsewhere.

Elsewhere was a long way off, it was true, but the two remaining men weren't paying enough attention, in her opinion. They glanced back at her and Durba, and evidently made some joke between themselves. Apart from that they ignored the women, just as they ignored the darkburn rumbling along behind them. The back of the cage was glowing deep red in one corner, so Yaret guessed that was where the darkburn huddled.

"How are you feeling?" she asked Durba. "Are we far enough away from it?"

A nod.

"Good," said Yaret. "You stay at this distance. I'm going a little closer."

"B... b..."

"Don't worry, I'll be careful. Hold my stones for me." She handed over her two stones to Durba, who gazed at her doubtfully.

"I just want to take a closer look," Yaret assured her. "I won't do anything foolish."

Well, that was a lie, she thought as she spurred Poda on towards the cart. What could be more foolish than trying to talk to a darkburn? She didn't even know what had put the idea into her head.

But nobody had ever, in her hearing, simply spoken to a darkburn. They screamed, and shouted, and wailed at them, and howled, and died. The dying was the part to avoid.

The two men – even had they taken any interest – would not have seen her as she drew up behind the heavily trundling cage. She realised that she was definitely getting used to the grim aura. After all the exposure to darkburns amidst the horrors of the battlefield, this solitary captive did not seem so terrible. She could bear the fear if she made herself understand that it was outside her.

Poda was snorting and trying to root the reins from her hands, however: so Yaret dismounted and let the mare trot back to Durba. The cart was moving so slowly that she did not need to ride – she could walk as fast as it was travelling. The warmth grew more intense, but from the back it was still bearable. She drew her cloak around her for protection as she moved round to the side and felt the heat flame like a sudden furnace through the bars.

"Be still," she said, for she didn't want it hurling itself over to her side. It was still, but not because of her words, she was sure. Ridiculous to be talking to a darkburn. And she wouldn't be able to stay this close for more than a few seconds.

She glanced sideways, screwing up her eyes against the heat and her mind against the fear. The darkburn was black and small – smaller than she was – a blur with no discernible limbs. Perhaps it had a head. But it seemed to change and shift even in the brief moment that she studied it.

Then she had to retreat back to the less intense heat behind the cart. After giving herself a minute to recover, she tried again. By now she had a little more of a plan. A stupid plan, but still.

This time when she moved up to the bars she spoke to the huddle in the cage.

“Who are you? Do you have a name?” She said it in Standard, then in Kelvhan, and finally in Bandiran. There was a thump. No words, of course. How could there be? It could pump out fear and horror. But it could not speak.

Leor would be better at this, or Maeneb, she reflected as she again retreated. Either of them might be able to find a way to speak without needing words.

But then it occurred to her: had she herself not done that with the Farwth? She had simply thought, not spoken.

So now, from behind the cart, still sweating in the heat, she thought her questions at the darkburn. Since she could not think without language, she thought in Bandiran, asking where it was from, and what it wanted. There was no answer, naturally – either in her head or out of it. Just the despair, unchanging.

Such despair. Although she tried to sit outside the feeling it was becoming almost overwhelming. She began to pity the darkburn. Even if despair was simply something that it used to weaken and dismay its enemies, might it not also have to experience the pain itself? Could you manufacture anguish without feeling its effects?

Poor thing, she thought, this little smoky rag of heat and darkness, lost and trapped so far from home – wherever its home was. But certainly not here, in an iron cage.

And although she knew it was a crazy thing to do, she began to sing to it.

She sang in Bandiran. It was a lullaby that she had sung to Dil, and as she sang she thought of Dil, that small, scared, lonely boy trying to be brave; and she put her heart into the song. She did not even know if the darkburn could hear anything through the iron of the cage. It had no visible ears. Perhaps it heard, or sensed, something. At least it did not thump.

So after that short song, baking in the darkburn’s heat behind the cart, she sang another. This was one of Madeo’s songs, about coming to the end of a long journey; a homecoming. Although it was soothing, the ending was ambiguous. It might even have been about death. It was a song she had come back to often in Obandiro. Ever since she had found it buried in her memory during the search for the skeln, it had been recurring to her without her volition.

As she sang, the unseen darkburn was still silent. But the feeling of despair increased. It brought Yaret up short. She stopped walking; the cart drew away, the despair receded. She gave herself a few moments to cool down and think.

It was a redoubling of the darkburn’s weaponry. An attack. Perhaps.

Perhaps it was simply despair.

She glanced back at Durba, who looked worried but otherwise seemed to be all right. She was too far away to hear any of the singing.

While she walked between the cart and Durba, another song came to Yaret’s mind. Striding forward to close the distance to the darkburn, she ignored the burning of her face and sang once more.

This was a song of comfort to the lonely. It was one she had not sung to Dil and the rest of them back home; because it was a song for solitude. It had run through her head intermittently during her recent trek across the scarred and lonely northlands.

It was a reminder that the sun was always with you, and the moon, and that the stars would not desert you and that the earth would be your friend for ever. Whether or not it was by Madeo she did not know. Part of it was by Yaret herself.

She just wanted to lessen the despair. And somewhat to her surprise it did seem to wane. It was still there, but now there was also another emotion that she could not put a name to. A sense of waiting; a sense of reaching.

And not once had the darkburn tried to throw itself towards her.

She felt suddenly afraid; and this was an inborn fear, not one generated from outside. What had just happened? Had the darkburn truly responded to her singing? If so, what did it mean? She stood stock-still while the cart moved on ahead. Then, deeply troubled, she walked back to Durba and remounted her horse.

"It got too hot for me," she said. They continued to ride, very slowly, at a distance from the cart. She did not try to talk to Durba. She was all the time considering what this might signify.

After a while the camps and the ruined town were in sight although it would still take a half-hour or so to reach them. Time for one more attempt.

What could she try to say to it? *I mean you no harm*? Patently untrue. If the darkburn got out she would do her best to destroy it – hack it to pieces with her sword. No matter what the feelings, it was a thing with one sole purpose: to burn and kill. She wanted to ask it where it came from, but did not know how.

It responded to song. So use another song.

She left the horses and walked swiftly forward again while spinning a song round in her mind. It took some recalling, but she wound it in from the depths of her memory. An old one, this, and definitely not Madeo's: it had come down from the mountains where her people had lived long before they came south to Obandiro.

It was called *The Count*, for it was a count of creatures, from the oldest to the newest, since the world was made. She had not thought of it for many years because it was regarded as childish doggerel. Yet it baffled children – so many of the creatures listed were imaginary, or at least long gone and forgotten. The tune was strange but simple: it used an archaic scale.

The scale of animals was archaic too. It began with worms and fish and worked up to birds via the creatures of the land. She sang her way through these, wondering if any of it reached the darkburn's consciousness. Within the cage, all was quiet, at least, so she kept going through the snakes and lizards. She sang of a number of creatures that she did not know, or not by the names the song used for them, at least. What was a gallowcat?

*Griff and grogg and gallowcat,
and fenny tall and ferret thin,
Slow the brock and quick the stoat,
and in and out the hob and lin...*

There was a crash as the darkburn hit the side of the cage.

Yaret ran around from the back to take a look. The blur of darkness was crouching against the bars on the far side. As she watched, it crashed itself against the furthest bars again, making the whole cage rock.

Had it been her words that set it off? Or something else? Looking round, she saw a body almost hidden in the grass. A dead stoneman lay sprawled there, unnoticed until now... That

must have done it. Although there were black holes where his stones ought to have been, some might still remain on the underside of his head. She walked over to check the corpse.

But she never got there. At the noise of the crash, the two Kelvhan horsemen had turned around and seen her. Angrily they yelled at her to move away. She saluted them and headed back to wait for to Durba.

"I think we'll make our own way home from here," she said, climbing back on to Poda. It would be better not to draw any more attention to herself; so they diverged from the cart's route and rode south towards the Riders' camp. She watched the cage with its imprisoned darkburn being dragged slowly away.

What had she learnt? That the darkburn liked her singing. Maybe. That change in feeling: that had been noticeable.

And she had noticed something else. Just before the darkburn hit the iron bars, there had been another flash of feeling. Hard to identify, but sharp; piercing. Perhaps it had simply been alarm, as the darkburn registered the presence of the dead stoneman. Perhaps it had been something else.

Now that they were no longer following the cart, the two of them rode fast, and arrived back at their own camp while the darkburn was still trundling across the sad plain leaving a thin wake of steam. She watched it from a distance, trying to make out where it would eventually be stowed. It was heading directly for the ruined town in which the Kelvhans had set up their camp.

Surely they wouldn't keep it inside there with them? That would be far too close: too dangerous. And they wouldn't be able to put up with the fear.

No trace of the darkburn fear could reach her now. But as she and Durba rode on side by side, Yaret relived that strange, quick flash of feeling. What had it been?

She felt deeply dissatisfied, as if she were missing something that ought to be obvious to her. Something that lay in hiding, buried in the depths of her mind: something that she needed to lift up and to drag out.

Chapter 45

Yaret spent the afternoon with Durba, endeavouring to create some feeling of normality by involving her in mundane tasks. The Riders had pitched camp to the south of the ruined town: although less well-sheltered than the Kelvhan company's quarters, their camping-ground was dry and flat. Not too far from the tents stood huddled groves of trees, handy for collecting firewood, while a couple of thin streams trickled past close by.

At one of these streams, they cleaned their gear and washed out a few clothes. Durba seemed fully able to do these tasks, though to Yaret's carefully undemanding comments she made no reply except an occasional stammering assent. She was still trembling at times but not as badly as she had been on the battlefield.

Yaret was reminded of Renna's muteness on her first arrival in Obandiro, which had seemed to her a reasonable response to the horrors that the girls had gone through. Renna had been cured – if that was the right word – by Anneke's arrival; so Yaret hoped that the gentle familiarity of their activities now would help Durba in the same way.

"Shall we go and gather some wood for the cooking fires?" she suggested. "Do the other Riders a favour. We won't have to go far: we'll try that nearest copse."

Durba nodded; so they rode together to the copse a mere half-mile to the east, taking Helba with them as an additional pack-horse. It was a relief to turn their faces away from the churned-up battle-plain.

When they reached the trees they found them to be mostly spindly ash and willow, with young hazel muscling its vigorous way through to sprout its robust, rounded leaves; and here and there were delicate bower-bushes, already in flower though not in leaf. All was peaceful but for a lone thrush, repeating each inquiring phrase before trying out another, and the hum of bees investigating the creamy blossom of the bower-bushes, enlivened by the sun.

The subtle intricacies of the natural world continued here as if a hundred miles from battle or from stonemen. They could stroll in airy ease. There was plenty of dead wood lying around, and as they bent to gather sticks, it seemed to Yaret that Durba was relaxing at long last.

Were faraway stonewomen were doing their own harvesting and gathering? she wondered. Somebody must do it, after all. Would the women too have stones set in their heads?

No – don't think about the stonemen or the war. Here is enough. An early butterfly in jerky, eager flight. A fastidious kirrrfinch gathering twigs for nest-building; old nests hiding there in the matted bushes. And those white lilies, arched and bowed as if they're praying underneath the trees... I know those, don't I? Springbells. Oh, that sweetness.

It made her heart lurch. The thin, sweet perfume of the lilies took her straight back to Obandiro, to the edges of the Bander woods, the lilies pale against the green: and she felt a sudden, rather dreadful surge of homesickness; a tenderness just on the wrong side of joy, the wrong side of memory.

She stood up abruptly with a gasp. That emotion. That was it. That was the sudden flash of feeling that had come from the imprisoned darkburn.

Not quite homesickness, but something close. Regret. A sort of longing.

“A... a... a...?”

Yaret realised that she was standing with her mouth open.

“I’m all right,” she said, “just thinking about supper,” and she picked up her pile of brushwood to load it on to Helba’s back. The bigger chunks they threw into sacks to be carried by the other horses.

“It’s a nice spot,” she commented as they secured the load. “Did you see those springbells?”

Durba nodded.

“And we’ve done well here. The Riders should be grateful: we’ve saved them all a job.”

“Yes.”

A whole word. That was progress. But Yaret, deciding it would be wiser not to take much notice of it, said only, “We should head home now.”

As they led the horses back towards the camp they could see the returning pairs of Riders scattered across the marches. Yaret hoped that they had all come back safe, and strained her eyes to check. Beyond the Riders, she could see the men of Melmet on their smaller horses, also returning to their own camp: there was Jerred, and that must be Inthed riding alongside him. She had been surprised at Inthed’s decision to continue this far with the army, and had said so to Jerred the previous day.

“He’s got debts,” Jerred had replied succinctly. “Nobody waiting for him in Gostard apart from a load of disgruntled tradesmen.”

“Ah.” She had reflected that Inthed did not lack for courage: although a turnip-head, he was not a coward. “But you’ve got a wife and family waiting for you, Jerred. What are you still doing here?”

Jerred had merely shrugged. “Same as you. My wife knows me. I’ve sent word home: my sons are old enough to look after the business for a while.”

Jerred, she thought now, was surely an old soldier reawakened to the lure of battle. While she was musing about what previous campaigns he might have fought in, there was a wordless cry from Durba.

“Ah!”

“What?” She turned round. Durba was a dozen yards behind her, staring at something next to Yaret.

Or rather, staring at nothing next to her. Yaret had the impression that an instant earlier there had been a small figure standing within touching distance of her feet. Now there was only a dead stump.

“Oh! It’s a lin,” she exclaimed, in a mixture of pleasure and bewilderment, because she had not seen a lin for so long now. This was the first one since she had arrived at Melmet. But ever since then, her mind had been on other things. However, this quiet, shrubby countryside was certainly the right sort of landscape for lins, when it wasn’t full of army.

“We need to say the rhyme,” she added, and duly recited it first in Standard and then in Bandiran. Not that a lin out here would understand Bandiran: even so, it was only courteous. Durba was looking baffled.

“You know about lins?” asked Yaret.

“Hob.” Another word. Yaret gave a silent cheer.

Then she explained about the lin’s grace and the difference between lins and hobs and woodwones, while they walked back to the camp where the tired Riders were now milling

around. They took the laden horses over to where Rothir and Parthenal's companies had pitched their tents and were stripping off their war gear.

"Ah," said Theol, "firewood, and plenty of it too. That's a welcome sight."

"How did it go out there?"

"Clean as a whistle," said Theol. "I think we got all the stragglers. Some of the stoneman troops might have escaped further west, but not many. I don't think they'll bother us now. Huldarion ought to be pleased." He looked over to Huldarion, who was striding towards them.

It was impossible to tell if Huldarion were pleased or not. His face was like carved stone.

"Rothir," he said. "On whose authority did you tell Leor to raise that darkburn for the Kelvhans?"

Rothir looked up and dropped his leather breastplate to the ground.

"On my own authority," he said. "But I thought it was probably what you would have wanted."

"On the contrary. I would not have wanted it at all. Why didn't you send word to ask me first?"

"It would have taken too long. Commander Rhadlun was impatient."

"And so were you. You should have refused him," said Huldarion.

"And incurred his displeasure?" Rothir asked. "He was already implying that to refuse would mean that we were enemies to Kelvha. Or that Leor was, at least."

"Better that Leor should appear an enemy of Kelvha than become their plaything – their pet wizard, that they can order to do as they like." Yaret became aware that despite his impassive expression, Huldarion was extremely angry. Although he did not raise his voice, his tone was withering.

Rothir looked him full in the face, his own expression as stern and inscrutable as his chiefs. They were of a height, and while Rothir was the broader, Huldarion had a whipcord toughness which seemed accentuated by his scars.

"I hardly think that that will happen," said Rothir evenly.

"You hardly think at all. You should have stayed out of the matter and taken Leor with you."

"To be fair," Yaret put in, "it seems Leor had already told the Kelvhans that he could get the darkburn out." Huldarion turned on her a look which made her wish she hadn't spoken. She lowered her eyes to the ground.

"It is not only that you have now given Kelvha a hold on Leor," said Huldarion. "You have given them a darkburn. What do you think that they intend to do with it, Rothir?"

"To study it, they said. I can see no harm in that. It could even be useful."

"They certainly intend to use it." Huldarion's voice was low and steely. "They intend to use it as a weapon. And possibly an instrument of torture: so Commander Rhadlun implied when he told me about the captive darkburn just now. Rhadlun is most content. I am not."

There was silence for a moment. "I apologise," said Rothir.

"And so you ought." Huldarion turned on his heel and stalked away. There was silence all around them for a moment until Parthenal let out a long, loud breath, and the others began to talk in muted voices: not about darkburns, but about carefully neutral subjects like their supper.

"Where do you want the wood?" said Yaret after a few seconds.

"Anywhere," said Rothir. He was staring into space. Then he recalled himself. "No, put it behind that tent."

"I think they would have got Leor to raise the darkburn anyway," she said tentatively. "With or without your permission."

"Maybe. But I should not have sanctioned it."

"If Leor hadn't done it, the Kelvhans would most likely have gone back later with more horses and found a way to pull the darkburn out themselves."

At that Rothir looked at her. "You don't need to make excuses for me. The point is that I authorised it. And now Huldarion has to pretend to Kelvha that he's happy with it, because he cannot be seen to have had his wishes over-ridden by an underling."

"Perhaps somebody could go over to their camp at night and let the darkburn out," she suggested. "Pretend it escaped by itself."

"Are you out of your mind?" demanded Rothir. "Let a darkburn loose on the camp? It won't just go romping home over the hills, you know."

"No. Silly idea." Somehow she had thought that it would. That was what came of singing to the captive darkburn, ascribing to it feelings that she doubtless had projected on to it – imagining that it had any purpose beyond the need to burn and kill.

As for keeping a darkburn as an instrument of torture: that had never occurred to her. It didn't bear thinking about.

"If the Kelvhans are prepared to use a darkburn as a weapon, or for torture," she said, "then Huldarion should not be willing to enter into an alliance with them."

"If we were willing only to ally ourselves with those whose ideas exactly match our own," said Parthenal with a grim smile, "we would end up very lonely. And we would have no chance of winning back Caervonn."

In that case, maybe Caervonn would be better left un-won, she thought.

But that was not something she could say. So she stacked up two-thirds of the firewood behind the tent whilst saying nothing.

"Who is the rest of the wood for?" asked Theol.

"Melmet. I'll go back and camp with them tonight. I want to keep myself in their good books," she told him.

"Ah! Including the ones you'd like to swear at?" remarked Parthenal. She shrugged. "So, you ally yourselves to those who don't share all your values. Why is that, I wonder?"

"Gratitude," said Yaret. At a touch on her shoulder, she turned round.

It was Durba. She was holding out the two stones Yaret had asked her to look after. Yaret had forgotten them entirely.

"Yours," she said.

Another word. That made three. "Thank you. I'll see you tomorrow." Pocketing the stones she gave Durba a brief hug, and the others a formal salute – as her superiors in command – before she led away her pair of horses.

Poda and Helba: two different worlds, she thought, yet they manage to work together. The worlds of Melmet and the Vonn.

But neither of them is from my world. Mine is the world of donkeys, quiet and slow. A shrubby nowhere, with a few springbells. The world of lins. And darkburns.

Where did that thought come from? She put it aside.

Chapter 46

"You should be pleased," said Tiburé. She studied Huldarion's face, which she had learnt to read, to some extent at least, over the years. Was he pleased? He looked, if anything, perturbed.

"I am sure I will be pleased," he answered coolly, "once I have had a chance to think about it."

"It's what you've been aiming for. An official invitation into Kelvha, signed by the Post-Regent Nerogun, no less – he's the real ruler there until Faldron's crowned High King next year. And Nerogun is proposing an alliance. I don't know the details, naturally, but the emissary I travelled with was very keen to hint at how important his mission was. I managed to get him to give me the general outline. A marriage is offered. So they mean business."

He nodded, absently, and then looked up at her. "And you yourself are here in what official capacity, Tiburé?"

"To see my husband, naturally. To greet him with delight and hail his part in a victorious war."

"I'm sure Solon will be glad to see you." He sighed. "So. We had better go and meet this emissary now. Let me smarten myself up."

She left the tent so that he could change his clothing. Wandering around the camp, she soon found Parthenal and Solon, and greeted her husband with a nod.

"Tiburé," he said in faint surprise. "Have they kicked you out of Kelvha?"

"No. Although I almost wish they would. Life there drives me slightly crazy. Alburé's enjoying it, though. Or she was, until the news about Gordal arrived."

"Yes. Poor young man," said Solon. She waited for more, about either Gordal or their daughter; but that was it. Well, it was stupid of her to have expected anything else. A triumph of hope over experience.

"I'm on an errand here," she said.

"Ah. So the plans are coming to fruition?"

"I hope so. Although Huldarion didn't seem to be that thrilled to hear it. I think he was on edge."

Solon and Parthenal exchanged glances.

"There's been some friction," Parthenal said, and he explained how the Kelvhans had insisted on bringing back a captive darkburn from the battlefield.

"Dear stars," said Tiburé, "do you mean it's in their camp? In the old town? Where I'm staying? Well, that's just wonderful. I can see why Huldarion's upset."

"Annoyed, certainly," said her husband.

"Upset," said Tiburé firmly. "You forget what he suffered at the hands – well, not hands, the whole body – of a darkburn. What he still suffers." She remembered how she had helped to nurse Huldarion through those early months after the fire. She had found it astonishing that he could survive the pain at all, let alone so silently, with barely a murmur or a groan. "I think his revulsion at darkburns is visceral."

"Well, there's nothing to be done about this darkburn now," said Solon. "Did you say you're staying in the old town?"

"Yes, in relative luxury. I'm quartered in one of the few buildings with a roof on it."

"I see you're still playing the part of the fine lady." He gestured at the long grey travelling dress.

"Fine, no – I leave that to Alburé – but lady: that's been necessary. I must admit I'd rather have been here with you."

Solon laughed, somewhat harshly. "You mean you'd rather have been here."

"I'd rather have been doing my job as a Rider," said Tiburé, "than sitting around in gilded splendour in a Kelvhan mansion."

"Personally I feel as if I could do with some gilded splendour," remarked Parthenal.

"Well, with any luck, some will shortly come your way."

She left them and returned to find Huldarion ready, along with Thoronal and Aretor. She nodded her approval: for Aretor, Solon's second in command, was just the sort of man the Kelvhans admired. Fairer than the majority of the Riders, his good looks and casually aloof air would be to their taste. Such things mattered even when dealing only with an emissary – because the emissary would report back to his master, and his master would judge the response not just from his servant's words but from the way he said them.

The master being, in this affair, the Post-Regent Nerogun, that brusque and bullish man, whom Tiburé did not like but had come to warily respect. Although she had spoken to him only briefly, on a few formal occasions, and was sure that he had barely registered her in her "country cousin" role, she had gleaned every bit of information about him that she could. Which was surprisingly little. He had an adult daughter and a dead wife: that was about all that she could learn. Nerogun oversaw the whole country, yet kept himself close.

Now the four of them rode together over to the old town – Tiburé side-saddle, which she still disliked but had become adept at – and after handing their horses to the waiting groom entered the Kelvhan emissary's quarters.

The commander, Rhadlun, was there already. Huldarion bowed to the Kelvhans to the appropriate degree; if he felt any frostiness towards Rhadlun over the matter of the darkburn, it did not show. Then of course, Tiburé had to leave, because this was men's work and she had no place in it.

Outside, she smiled at the young Kelvhan groom – a motherly smile; she was too old for anything else to have any effect on him – and asked with innocent interest about the darkburn they had brought back from the battlefield. Oh, yes, he answered, they were keeping it outside the north wall. It had made a terrible clattering at times but seemed quite still now.

"I hear you could fry a steak on top of its cage," she said.

"Fry? You could burn a steak to cinders in ten seconds. It's that hot."

"I wonder, could I see it? I'm so curious to know what it is that you've been fighting."

The young groom was flattered; he took her ignorance for granted. He hesitated, but evidently decided there would be no harm in it. So he led her, perched delicately on her horse, past the curious glances of the Kelvhan soldiers to the north wall of the dilapidated town.

There was the iron cage, a few yards from the wall, and well away from any of the tumbledown buildings. The grass around the wheels was dark and withered, while the ground steamed slightly.

"It's not nice," the groom said. "It stinks. And it gives you an unpleasant feeling if you get too close."

"Yes, I can feel that."

"It hates us," said the groom.

"No doubt." Although Tiburé had no stone with which she might repel the darkburn, she asked the groom to stay back where he was while she approached a little closer. Which was not very close before the heat became too intense. The sense of fear also increased, but she found she could detach herself from that quite easily. It helped that the darkburn was imprisoned.

Somewhat strangely, this darkburn – small, indistinct, a type she'd fought quite frequently – did not hurl itself against the bars in an attempt to reach her. It stayed huddled in one corner of the cage. Perhaps it had exhausted itself. Could darkburns tire?

"Do you feed it?" she asked the young groom, almost in jest. He answered seriously.

"We gave it a bit of meat before. It didn't even touch it before it just burnt up."

"I see. What an extraordinary thing. You must be very brave to fight such creatures."

"Well, it's our duty," said the groom, almost preening himself. She resisted the temptation to ask him how many he, personally, had killed.

She herself had killed a dozen by hacking them into small pieces. And according to Rothir, if they spent long enough underwater they might eventually die. How long that took, however, was unknown.

Would darkburns sicken and die if kept captive, as some wild animals did? She gazed at the thing, aware that she had instinctively labelled it as alive. Better to say not *die* but *become inert*. Then she studied the cage, noting the thickness of its bars – some bent and distorted – and assessing the strength of the bolts that held it in.

"I do hope it can't escape," she said.

"Don't worry, ma'am. It's safe enough. We'll keep it in there all the way to Kelvha."

"And what will you do with it there?"

"The Post-Regent will decide."

Nerogun in charge of a darkburn. The idea sent a shiver down her spine.

"What a terrifying thing," she said.

"Yes, ma'am. It would be useful to know how they are made."

"Indeed."

"And then we could make more, to do our bidding. That's what's Commander Rhadlun said. Personally, I think we could use them to fire our forges."

"I think that is an excellent idea," she said, to conceal her horror.

"I mean, it's nice and cosy here, isn't it? If you can stand the smell, and the funny feelings."

"Indeed it is." She thanked the groom with her motherly smile and let him lead her back into the town.

Make more darkburns. What an appalling thought. But surely the Kelvhans would not be able? It would be all they could do to keep this one safe, let alone get close enough to study it... That would need wizardry, surely.

She would have to warn Leor, she thought; and Huldarion.

But when Huldarion emerged from the meeting with the emissary his mind was obviously on other things.

"Success?" she said. Thoronal was smirking and Aretor trying unsuccessfully to repress a grin, but she could not read Huldarion's face.

“Success. It is as you predicted. An alliance is offered. Two weeks from now, we should be entering Kelvha City in triumph.” If there was any triumph in his voice, it was well-controlled. “I would like to speak to you, Tiburé, about how things stand in Kelvha – in private, if we may.” The two other men withdrew to ride back to their camp.

Huldarion stared across the ivy-curtained ruins of the town: seeing what, she wondered? Caervonn, within his reach at last?

“Let us go for a walk,” he said. “It might calm my mind.” They walked over to the east side of the old town, well away from the darkburn – mention of that could wait till later, she decided – and there they stood outside the ruined walls beneath a clump of sadly singing pines. From here they overlooked the long green road that led eventually to Kelvha.

“What did you want to know?” She was expecting questions about the Post-Regent and his policies; but Huldarion sighed and said,

“About my marriage. Who I am likely to be offered – that is, if I get any choice at all. How the process will go ahead; how long it will all take.”

Tiburé nodded. “Not long,” she said. “To the Kelvhans it’s equivalent to a commercial transaction.”

“I know. And I’ve always known that this would be the price that must be paid. That I would not be free to take a wife of my own choosing.” He was looking not at her, but at the empty road that trailed into a hazy distance.

“Oh, you’ll have some choice,” she said. “They will offer you at least three to pick from. Up to six if you’re lucky, depending who’s available. Those will be the highest-ranking women. If none of them are suitable, there may be more of lower rank–”

“No. She will have to be of the highest rank. I don’t care about it, but Kelvha will. I just hope they won’t all be too young.”

Tiburé grimaced. “The chances are they will be. High-born Kelvhan girls get married off in their teens, or early twenties at the latest. I would expect the Princess Idria to be married before she’s twenty. They may even offer her to you. If they do, that would be a real mark of respect.”

“Faldron’s sister? How old is she?”

“Seventeen.”

“Dear stars. And would I have to take her if she were offered to me?”

“Not necessarily. If you didn’t, they wouldn’t be unduly offended, if that’s what you mean; because they can keep her as a bargaining tool for somebody else.”

“Seventeen! I don’t want to wed some poor girl less than half my age.” He sighed again. “How long will I get to choose this wife?”

“In theory, several days,” Tiburé said. “In practice, I would reckon on three meetings, maximum, with any chosen candidate. Of about ten minutes each. So, all together, half an hour.”

“Half an hour?” Huldarion sounded appalled.

“Maximum. Plus thinking time in between the meetings, naturally. But the faster you decide, the better, in their eyes. It shows your commitment.”

“Ah. Commitment. That leads us to something else,” he said, still staring out along the road. “To show my commitment, I am apparently also expected to consummate the marriage before it happens.”

"You are indeed. It negates any complaints after the wedding night. If either of you is unable or unwilling for some reason, the marriage can be called off." Tiburé eyed him cautiously. She knew there had been a woman in Caervonn, many years ago, before Huldarion's exile – and before fire ripped across his body. That fire had probably put paid to any thoughts of physical love for quite a while. She did not know what women there might have been in his life since then. If any, he had been remarkably discreet.

However, there was no point in being discreet right now. So she asked, "Given your injuries, do you think that may be a problem?"

"I hope not. I trust I shall be able to rise to the occasion. It's the girl that I'm more worried about, whoever she is. When she sees my scars" – he indicated down the left side of his body – "she may just want to jump straight out of bed and run away."

"Dim the lights," suggested Tiburé.

"That won't work. You can feel it. There's no hiding it." He shook his head. "Imagine some poor teenage virgin facing that."

"Teenage virgins are tougher than you might think," she said.

"But Kelvhan ones are bound to be uneducated. Will she even know what the act of love involves?"

"She will be told that much. Of course she won't expect to gain any pleasure from it. Pleasure is for men in Kelvha. In women, they see it as an aberration. Or a pretence by prostitutes. Maybe some of the women manage to educate their husbands, if they can work out what they want, but it would be an uphill struggle. It's just not in their culture. For a woman, what's going on in her mind is as important as what's happening to her body; but some men don't seem to think that women have minds – not fully functioning ones, anyway. It's difficult for a woman to feel desire where there appears to be no liking or respect or even interest on the man's side. Yet it seems that some men can desire anything from a dead fish upwards." She realised that Huldarion was looking startled; and revised her tone of voice. "Yes, they will know what to expect."

"Well, that's something. Do you have any idea about which women might be presented to me, apart from the princess?"

"I can think of two or three candidates. The Lady Janeya, Lady Sina, possibly Belfura... Sina is the least high-born of those, but accounted a great beauty. I don't see it myself. You might, however."

"Which one of them would you recommend to me?"

"Ah, no," said Tiburé, smiling. "The choice has to be yours. I don't know if I've even given you the right names."

"Half an hour," muttered Huldarion despairingly. She decided to shift his attention on to other things.

"That darkburn," she said. "The one cowering in its cage by the north gate. You know what is intended for it in Kelvha?"

"Supposedly they're keeping it to study," said Huldarion. "In actuality, to use against their enemies. Torture was mentioned."

"According to the groom I spoke to, Rhadlun would like to know how it's made so that they can make more."

He turned round and stared at her. "What?"

"Though I doubt if they can do it. Wizardry must surely be involved."

"Yes. It seems almost certain that the darkburns were created by Adon." He was silent for a moment. "I had intended to ask Leor to accompany me to Kelvha. Perhaps that would not after all be wise – in case the Kelvhans twist his arm to make him work for them."

"I don't see Leor having his arm easily twisted."

"No? I do. They would simply need to appeal to his pride. No, perhaps that is unfair: say rather to his wish to aid the greater good, and his knowledge that he can do so if he chooses." Huldarion began to walk down towards the road, more for the sake of movement, she thought, than anything else. He was agitated.

She gathered up her skirts – annoying things, they did get in the way – and followed him.

"Having a wizard in your train in Kelvha will add to your importance," she suggested.

"Yes. And Leor's advice might well be useful to me there. But I will keep his presence hidden: I will not take him in my personal retinue. The invitation to the castle is for myself and six others. A few dozen more Riders can be stationed outside the castle walls; the rest to take their chances where they will. Leor can join them. I expect the cost of boarding houses will go up."

"The six in your retinue will all be men, of course," said Tiburé drily.

"Of course. I already had certain men in mind."

"Who?"

"Three senior advisers: I thought of Thoronal, your husband, and Leor. But I must change my plans. Instead of Leor I shall take Uld."

She nodded. Uld, a dry, clever, reticent man, was Huldarion's second cousin. In Kelvha such things counted. "And your other three?"

"Picked for their beauty. You know what I mean: the tall warrior types that the Kelvhans hold in high esteem. Aretor and Sashel."

"Sashel? I hear that he was wounded."

"He is recovering. He could probably do with a little luxury."

"And your last?"

"I had thought Rothir. No one could call him handsome, but he does have an imposing physical presence."

"Some might say intimidating."

"But Rothir has countermanded me," said Huldarion. "He acted without my authority in this matter of the darkburn."

"You're angry."

He turned his gaze from the green Kelvha road to face her. Rothir was not the only intimidating one, she thought, eyeing the stern scarred features beneath the close-shaven head. Huldarion kept his hair short because it would not grow on the left side in any case. But it made for a forbidding appearance, and despite her assurances to him she felt a frisson of anxiety lest the princess – and the other high-born girls – might recoil from the sight.

"I'm annoyed," he said. "For a normally astute man Rothir made a poor decision. I do not wish to be seen as someone who lets others speak his will for him. So as my last man I shall now take Parthenal."

"Really?" said Tiburé. "Is that wise? He certainly looks the part, but in view of what Kelvha thinks of men like him...."

"They won't know."

"Well," she said, "make sure he understands that."

“He will. And Rothir will understand that he cannot bypass my authority. He and Leor will have to stay outside the castle walls.”

Chapter 47

"In three days' time," said Parthenal, "we reach Kelvha City. So tonight we get drunk."

"I don't want to get drunk," said Rothir.

"Yes, you do. This is our last chance before we enter Inner Kelvha and have to be sober and discreet. There's a friendly looking inn just down the road."

"I wouldn't mind getting drunk," said Arguril, rather too eagerly.

Parthenal glanced at him. "Only two mugs for you, child. I'm not carrying you home."

"A drink would be nice," said Sashel more wistfully. "As long as it's decent ale."

"It will be decent, here." Parthenal was glad that Sashel was showing some interest in normal life at last. Although his wound had healed, the normally voluble young man remained withdrawn and apathetic since his agonised rush onto the battlefield. Still, it was only two weeks since his brother's death. A week since they had begun the long march down the underused green road from western Kelvha.

They were now more than halfway to their destination. The Kelvhan troops had accompanied them thus far, as had a handful of determined men from Melmet and Ioben, notably Veron's hunters.

But soon this army would split up. Most of the Riders would disperse to various points in Outer Kelvha, where they had friends and connections. Others would return to Thield. So here, in a small town on the Inner Kelvhan border, they had paused for a last evening together. For those progressing on to Kelvha City, it was a chance to load provisions and apply some spit-and-polish to their gear. Huldarion had insisted on their looking smart.

And he had also told them the names of the six who would be accompanying him to the inner sanctum of the castle. Parthenal was delighted to hear that he was in; and somewhat dismayed to learn that Rothir wasn't. But Rothir did not appear to be dismayed. He seemed to have expected it. Neither he nor Huldarion made any comment on the omission. None the less, Parthenal knew that Rothir would be hurting over the matter of the darkburn and Huldarion's exasperated response.

While Parthenal would be savouring the delights of Kelvha Castle, Rothir would have to stay with fifty other Riders in barracks outside the castle walls; about twenty female Riders were to have separate lodgings. Huldarion had refused to keep them shut out of the City.

"Women are an integral part of the Vonn," he said, addressing Delgeb and the others. "You have fought with us and for us and I will not have you hidden away."

"You'd just have us stay quiet and insignificant," said Delgeb, with that sardonic curl of her lip. "You want us to wear dresses as well?"

"Do you have any?"

"Not to hand."

"Wear whatever you like," Huldarion told her. "The Kelvhans will just have to get used to it." Delgeb had bowed. It was hard to imagine her curtsying.

But their arrival at the castle was still a few days in the future. Right now Parthenal was looking forward to an evening's rest and recreation. He considered that Rothir needed cheering up. And he himself... A Kelvhan soldier had been giving him the eye: a silent, lean, hard-limbed man, not too young. It was promising. They had exchanged a word or two. This

would be the last opportunity for that particular form of recreation for a while, until Huldarion's business in Kelvha Castle was complete.

"What do you say?" he asked, looking around at the women. "Last chance to enter a tavern for you ladies. Make the most of it."

Maeneb grimaced. "Not for me."

"I'll join you, Parthenal," said Delgeb, who had been known to drink like a fish on occasion without appearing in the slightest bit intoxicated. And three of her friends immediately agreed.

"M... m..." said Durba.

Yaret looked at her. "Maybe?" she suggested.

Durba nodded. Yaret seemed to have taken charge of the young woman; sometimes she was the only one who understood what Durba was trying to say. Nobody else knew quite what to do with her. Durba's stammering had not abated. Parthenal had witnessed battle-shock before, without really believing in it – since he himself appeared to be immune – but had never seen anyone affected in this specific way. The trembling came and went.

It was hard to know how to treat Durba when she could not talk. All they could agree on was that it would be best for her to stay amongst the other Riders, rather than lodging with strange people in a strange land. So she would accompany them into Inner Kelvha.

And so would Yaret, who had been invited to board with the female Riders rather than the remaining Melmet soldiers – who would stay outside the city walls – or with the hunters, wherever they might be. Veron seemed to have plans for his men, but Parthenal did not know what they were. Veron and his aims were a mystery to him for the most part, and he had long learnt that there was no point asking, for Veron would simply smile and turn the subject. This evening, Veron said, he planned to spend time with his troop – probably exchanging hunting tales in some other, darker and more secret inn, thought Parthenal.

But Rothir and Sashel both needed to get drunk, in his opinion. He just required enough takers for them to be carried along on the wave. In the end about sixteen Riders – and Yaret, and a friend of hers called Zan – crowded into the tavern, taking over one of the small low-ceilinged rooms and ordering enough food to make the landlord very happy. He lit the lamps and tried to stir the fire into some semblance of a blaze.

Parthenal hoped Zan wouldn't put a damper on proceedings. A solemn man who rode with the Ioben hunters, he was not himself Ioben, but from an unknown village which had been wiped out by darkburns. On first seeing him, Arguril had greeted him like a long-lost brother, explaining how they had spent several days shackled together before Rothir had ridden to their rescue; and Zan consequently treated Rothir like some kind of nobility. Quite undeserved, thought Parthenal, amused at seeing Zan bow reverently to Rothir on entering the tavern. Well, almost undeserved.

Rothir looked vaguely embarrassed by the reverence. But he let Zan buy him a drink, which was a good start.

Leor sat in a corner, stroking the beard which he had allowed to grow long over the last few weeks. It made him look more wizardly despite its strangely striped appearance. The white streaks were just as marked in the red beard as in his hair.

"Do us a trick, Leor," Parthenal called over to him. "Speed up the food if you can." Leor shook his head and smiled.

"Fill my tankard," suggested Arguril.

“Get that fire going properly,” said Nerobe. “That’s an order.”

“We could use the darkburn for that,” said Shelvor.

“Somebody fetch it. It could probably do with a beer too. Where is it?”

“They had to leave it west of the camp, well away from the trees,” said Yaret.

“Any change there?”

“It just sits,” she said. “Or stands. Whatever they do.”

“Sits, and stinks, and hates, and burns,” said Arguril.

“I think it might be pining,” Yaret said.

“Pining? What for?” Delgeb was incredulous.

“Human flesh,” said Landel.

“Other darkburns,” suggested Nerobe.

“Heaven help us. They might breed.”

“I don’t think so,” said Yaret seriously, and everybody laughed. She still misunderstood some things that were said in Vonnish, although her accent was improving. Parthenal noted that she did not translate these remarks to Zan, as she did other bits of conversation.

“You’re keeping an eye on that darkburn, then,” he said to her.

“Well, somebody has to, Parthenal. The Kelvhans are altogether too casual about it.”

“I trust that everyone still has their stones to hand?” said Rothir. He too was serious. General nods and mutters of assent. Several patted their pockets.

“Let’s not talk about darkburns,” Parthenal said. “Here’s to Kelvha and the fine time awaiting us there: and after that, and more importantly, Caervonn.”

“I’ll drink to Caervonn,” Delgeb said.

So they all did, and then the conversation turned to what might await them, and particularly Huldarion, inside Kelvha Castle. There was curiosity, and some obvious envy, which entertained Parthenal. But then he had never been tempted by any line-up of aristocratic virgins.

“A bride, untouched, young and fair,” said Arguril wistfully. “Lucky man.”

“He’d be better off with someone who’s been touched,” said Delgeb.

“And done a bit of touching,” Birané added.

“The Kelvhan women are out of bounds,” said Rothir soberly. “Men too.”

“Spoilsport!”

“We can still look,” said Arguril. “I hear they’re very beautiful.”

“They dye their hair,” said Nerobe. “The men as well, unless they’re naturally fair. It’s meant to be as yellow as spun gold – that’s the ideal; not that strange orange colour that some of them end up with.”

“What, all their hair?”

More laughing speculation about the ladies – and the men – of Kelvha. None of them, Parthenal noted, touched on what Huldarion himself might make of the arrangements for his marriage. Speculation about Huldarion’s love life was out of bounds. Maybe Parthenal himself was the only one who privately mused about it. Who had touched that scarred body since that woman long ago in Caervonn? What had they done, and how?

Pointless, he told himself, pointless. Stop it. Food arrived and was a welcome distraction. But now he wanted more than food.

“You could find yourself a bride in Kelvha, Leor,” Arguril said with his mouth full. “You’re not Vonn; no ban on *you*.”

“And you’ve got a fine head of red hair,” Birané pointed out, “even if it’s not quite gold enough to attract the highest rank.”

“So no princess for you. Still, I’m sure there’ll be some chambermaid who’ll have you,” Delgeb said.

Leor smiled and shook his head. “I shall never marry.”

“But you’ve had time to marry a dozen wives and more,” Shelvor objected.

“That’s why I’ve never married one.”

“Ah! You’ve just not met the right one yet.”

“In five hundred years? You must be picky,” said Nerobe.

“I’m too old now for such things.”

“You’re never too old! You just need to meet a nice three hundred year old lady. Though she’d be a little young for you, admittedly.”

“I’ll leave the marriage-making to you Vonn,” said Leor, still smiling, although with some aloofness now. Parthenal wondered if it were possible that he could be hurt.

“And we Vonn will leave it till we reach Caervonn,” said Rothir.

“Is that an order?” Delgeb asked.

“When we reach Caervonn,” said Sashel softly, and everyone immediately stilled to hear him, “the women there are more beautiful than any here in Kelvha. Isn’t that right, Rothir? That’s what you once told me.”

Rothir shrugged.

“Caervonn it is, then,” said Shelvor. “We can wait.”

“But the whole city’s beautiful, isn’t it?” asked Birané. Not many of those present were old enough to have much memory of Caervonn, Parthenal realised. The youngest – Durba – would only have been about seven or eight when she left. And the city had already greatly changed by then in any case, its stones wounded by war no less than its people.

“It is beautiful,” he said, and thought of the young Huldarion, unscarred, untroubled, laughing as he climbed up onto the stone horse in the splendour of the Tiled Courtyard. Both he and the horse had been decorated with bands of feathers: it was the Festival of Birds.

“Especially in the evenings,” said Theol. “The light turns it golden.”

“Beneath the lamps, on the long terraces,” said Rothir a little dreamily, “when the swifts have gone to bed and the nightingales start to sing in the tangles of the rose bushes and the bats flit from the trees, that is the best time in Caervonn.”

“Are there trees inside the city, then?” asked Yaret.

Theol smiled at her. “There are many little greens and planted squares – or rather, hexagons – and trees aplenty.”

“Especially fruit trees,” said Rothir. “Small groves of plum and peach and cherry, in the open spaces. There used to be, at least.”

“We can replant them,” Delgeb said.

“Underneath an apple tree, I saw my love and he saw me,” recited Birané.

“Maybe that’s where you’ll find your love, Leor,” said Nerobe. “Underneath an apple tree in Caervonn. You too, Sashel.”

“Nonsense,” said Sashel, but Parthenal was pleased to see he wore a smile. The ale was working.

It was working on Rothir too. Although not drunk, he was more relaxed than Parthenal had seen him for a while.

"You, Theol, you left a lady languishing for you in Caervonn all those years ago," he said. "Possibly more than one. About five, I believe."

"Theol! And you a married man."

"There were only two," said Theol, grinning. "Both married now themselves in any case, the last I heard."

"You didn't leave anyone behind, Rothir?" That was Arguril.

"No."

"Ah! So it's the apple tree for you too."

"When we enter Caervonn," said Rothir, stretching out his legs in front of him, his empty tankard on his knee, "when we ride in through the gates in victory, with the people cheering from the balconies, and throwing handfuls of petals down on us, I shall look up and see a women waiting at a window there as soft and velvety and lovely as a rose." Parthenal understood at once that this was a vision that had carried Rothir over many a wearisome mile.

"Is that a real woman?" asked Arguril.

"Who knows?" said Rothir. "I can always hope."

"Velvety?" said Delgeb. "Are you sure this is a woman, and not a vole?"

"Roses aren't all that soft," said Nerobe.

"Their blossoms are."

"An orange rose," said Parthenal, "or just a lilac one?" General laughter.

"Any colour. I'm not fussy." Rothir inspected his tankard and reached for the jug.

"Actually, as long as she has two arms and two legs and a kind smile, she'll do for me."

"Well, I'm sure we can find someone in Caervonn to fit that bill," said Theol, and he got up to call the landlord and request more ale. Arguril put his own demand in for more food and was shouted down.

"I think we'll go," said Yaret to Parthenal under the clamour. "I'll take Durba back to our quarters. She's getting tired."

Durba nodded and put her hands under her cheek in token that she wanted sleep.

"All right," said Parthenal. He thought that Yaret looked weary too. Something struck him. "That about two arms and two legs," he said. "It's only a figure of speech."

"Yes, I know. Good night, Parthenal."

He wanted to say, *And you have the kind smile*; but he didn't say it, because he didn't know how things lay between Rothir and Yaret. Although Rothir had been so desperately anxious to find her after her long fall – and then after the battle had found her a second time, to bring her to the hearthside – all that might be no more than his sense of responsibility. Over-developed, in Parthenal's opinion.

As for Yaret, she wasn't smiling now, but that might not be because of Rothir. It could be concern for Durba. It could be that the conviviality made her miss her home.

Zan put out a hand to her and asked something with concern, and she did find a smile for him as she replied. Nobody else noticed when she and Durba left. The ale was doing its work on everyone – Zan included – and a general chatter filled the room, sometimes becoming raucous. Even Leor was telling jokes, at which everybody groaned, more loudly with each joke. Some of them were very old indeed.

“Did Yaret go already?” Rothir asked Parthenal when he went over for the third jug of ale.

“You drove her away, you lummock. All she needs is two arms and two legs?”

“What?” Rothir stared at him. It seemed to take a moment to sink in. “Oh. That? But I didn’t even think of it like that. It’s just a – and in any case, it’s not as if – I mean, she wouldn’t be interested anyway.”

“In being your velvety rose? I have no idea. But *two arms and two legs* has probably given her the idea she’ll never be anybody’s velvety rose. She certainly looked disheartened just now.”

“But... she’s with Durba.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“She has her arm around her half the time.”

“She’s looking after Durba, dimwit. Even if Durba is that way inclined, I don’t think Yaret is. She’s just being sympathetic.”

“Well, anyway,” said Rothir, somewhat grumpily, “that hunter in the corner, Zan, he’s set his sights on Yaret. Arguril reckons that he’s keen, and that she might be too. So there you are.”

“Not Durba after all? You can’t have it both ways.”

“Parthenal, the whole thing is irrelevant.” Rothir sat up, irritated. “Yaret is far too sensible to be affected by any stupid remarks I might make over a mug of ale. She would know I’m talking rubbish.”

“So your hopes and dreams are rubbish, are they?”

“It was tavern talk. I’m not even thinking about anything like that until we reach Caervonn.”

“Ah, so you’re determined to be celibate until you meet your velvety rose?”

“Oh, go away, Parthenal.”

“I’m going,” he said. “I’ve got a prior appointment. I’ll see you later, Rothir. Have fun carrying Arguril home.” And then he left.

Chapter 48

As they rode into Inner Kelvha, he felt the very air seem to change.

What caused that? How could it be? It was just his own sense of occasion, thought Parthenal, the feeling of a step taken irrevocably. He had spent time within the Kelvhan kingdom before, without having any such sensation.

But those trips had been as a journeyman, anonymous, selling his skills in horsemanship and falconry. Even the Kelvhan nobles who approved his way with a hawk had hardly ever thought to ask his name and heritage. He had seldom been within the city, and had never stepped inside the castle.

Now he was to enter it as part of the retinue – if the stars were willing – of a future king. He glanced over at Huldarion, riding at the head of the line. He looked the part in manner if not yet in trappings. Severe, austere. Beloved.

Parthenal sighed and gazed back at the train of Riders, trying to assess them through Kelvhan eyes. Well, not too bad, although there was a little too much laughter, maybe, while the sight of Kelvha ought to fill them with respectful awe. No doubt it would, later on and further down the road, when the barley fields and scattered villages gave way to the bigger, stone-built settlements.

Then would come the high wall with its four gates: inside, the many-storeyed buildings of the city streets, each storey built leaning further out until the edifices seemed about to topple; and at the city's heart – huge, sprawling, many-towered – the castle. The fortress palace of another future king.

He nodded to Sashel, who looked a little more comfortable than he had of late. Theol had taken him under his wing today. And Maeneb and Leor were arguing – amicably enough – about something or other over the head of Durba, who switched her gaze from one to another like a spectator watching a game of rackets.

Earlier on, Yaret had been called to the front, to ride alongside Huldarion; apparently to tell him about those children of Obandiro. Huldarion was storing not merely knowledge, he sensed, but alliances. Though of what use a tiny burnt-out northern town could be, Parthenal did not know.

And Yaret too was building her alliances, he thought; which she certainly had much more need of. She had returned to the centre of the line of Vonn and now was practising her Kelvhan verbs with Rothir. Her attitude was casually friendly. If there had been any mention of numbers of arms and legs since last night, it had been outside his hearing. Right now she was struggling to comprehend the Kelvhan tenses.

"If we will have would have went," she said in laborious Kelvhan.

"Gone. But close," said Rothir.

"If we will have would have gone, we will have would have see – no, seen – oh, this is ridiculous. Why do you need a future indefinite tense in any case?"

"For those moments when you don't know what's going to happen," Rothir answered.

"Well, that applies to the whole future. You never know what's going to happen."

"Sometimes you do. In a few minutes we will reach that tree."

"Probably," said Yaret. *"But we don't know for sure until we actually get there."*

"I think some things are so close to certain that it doesn't matter."

"It always matters. *If we will not would not have gone to Kelvha, perhaps we will not would not have regretted it.*"

"Good," said Rothir. "But I don't think we'll regret it." He smiled at her; and she smiled back.

Ah, thought Parthenal, there's your kind smile, Rothir. Forget the arms and legs.

He looked back over the Riders' heads to where the Kelvhan army were slowly following them at a distance. Where was his soldier of last night? That encounter had been almost wordless: abrupt and strenuous, even fierce; and then the man had left the room without a backward look. Parthenal was not averse to fierceness, but he did expect a backward look. Ah well. Look forward now, towards the glory of the castle.

But he himself cast one more look towards the north. A mile away a small contingent of Kelvhan men and horses was taking its own unobtrusive route along a less-used road. Those distant soldiers marched to the same final destination as the Riders of the Vonn, and kept pace with them, despite their weighty, shadowed load.

A haze of heat, or steam, or smoke, wrapped the soldiers in a dusky shroud. For there travelled in their midst a square of night: the iron cage that held the darkburn.

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End of Book 2