



Derek Vortimer, MBA MBA

Manager Of Worlds

By Uncle Jasper

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Chapter one

The interview

Had Derek Vortimer known what was to follow he would not have gone near the place. What he wanted was to be Chief Financial Officer of a profitable business. What he got was quite different, but certainly more exciting.

A Mr Edmund Codd rang the day after the award ceremony and congratulated him for having gained Honours in an MBA class. (Master of Business Administration.)

Mr Codd explained he needed a young and brilliant graduate and there was a job available. A position with high pay, and limitless possibilities and he would learn about it if he came to Mr Codd's office the following morning at 10 o'clock.

By a quarter to ten Derek was outside the address he had been given, and got his first surprise. The street he had come to was lined with gleaming, high rise office buildings. The footpath was crowded with prosperous looking people.. Expensive cars glided along the streets. Everything was bustling and businesslike.

Only one building did not match the rest, it was shabby, a mere four stories high, and at least a hundred years old, but the street number over the entrance was that given to him by Mr Codd.

He was disappointed but entered and found a notice board with a list of tenants. Mr Codd's office was on the third floor.

A creaking lift struggled up to the third floor and opposite Derek, when he stepped out, into a drab passageway were, two hands painted on the wall, each with a pointing finger. One indicated right, one left. Over the one pointing to the right was Mr Codd's name. A few steps further on was his door with the name *Edmund Codd - Agent.* painted on the frosted glass of the top half. Lower down, near the door knob, was a smaller sign. *Enter without knocking* . A strange rattling noise was heard through the door.

Derek entered and found the source of the noise. He faced a woman sitting at a large oak desk. And it was she who had been making the rattling noise by typing away on a black 'Remington' typewriter.

It was a museum piece, he had never seen such a thing before. The typiste may have been from a museum too. Her hair, streaked in grey, was done up in a bun at the back and held in place by two pins with turtle shell knobs. Her long-sleeved white blouse had lace cuffs and was fastened at the neck by a cameo brooch.

She looked up at him. 'Yes?'

Derek stammered, but said. 'Mr Codd, he asked me to call and see him.'

She opened a notebook, which lay on the desk and examined it. 'You are Mr Derek Vortimer, am I correct?'

Derek admitted to being that person!

He sat on an uncomfortable chair as directed, but was astonished when the lady stood up and went into another room. She had on an ankle length black cloth skirt which ended just above a pair of lace up black boots. He had been in many offices but had never seen a receptionist dressed like this. What sort of job was he being offered?

She returned and held the door open for him. 'Mr Codd will see you straight away.'

The man also sat behind an oak desk which was covered in documents tied into bundles with red tape. He rose as Derek entered and leaned over to shake his hand. His hair was snow white and carefully parted in the middle. Black suit, stiff white collar A large, ruby stickpin was the centrepiece of a black bow tie. He had blue eyes which beamed at Derek.

'Ah, Mr Vortimer,' 'What a pleasure to meet you at last. I have followed your progress through school and university with the greatest of interest. Your reports are all here, uniformly excellent.' He held up a manila folder containing papers. 'And now a crowning achievement for a twenty two year old, your degree, of which I have a copy. Well done! Well done!'

Derek was astonished. He had no idea that someone he had never met was taking such an interest in his affairs. Perhaps the man was a loony, and would be hard to get rid of.

'Have you been spying on me?'

Not spying my boy, not spying! Supervising, studying! Watching your splendid progress from afar. I have your school photographs here, all of them.' He held up the folder again. I have been watching you blossom into manhood.'

Derek was astonished to hear of such prying into his affairs. 'Why have you done all this, what's the point?'

'The point is we need people of your intelligence and capacity. I was present in the audience when you and all the other clever young students received their degrees, and when I saw you take yours from the chancellor there were tears in my eyes. I knew it was time to act.' He opened the folder to study one of the documents.

In spite of his amazement Derek took advantage of the moment to look round the office. He was astonished to see some leather bound volumes on a shelf. They were business directories dated from 1895 to 1930. In spite of what the proprietor had said he was rapidly losing hope of getting anything worthwhile out of this rackety old office. The man was a nutter!

'What job are you offering?' he asked, to distract Mr Codd from his papers.

'Excellent question!' cried Mr Codd. 'Excellent! The position I have in mind for you is the management of a small country.'

This was a let-down and Derek was irritated. 'A small country what? A pub? A general store? A stock and land agency?'

'No, no, Mr Vortimer, you mistake me! I speak of a country that is having difficulty making its way in the modern world. You would be in charge, you would be the manager'

'What country? What are you talking about?'

'The country's name is Sultania, and I am proud to be its agent in this city.'

'Sultania!!' Derek thought the conversation was becoming more bizarre by the minute. 'Thank you Mr Codd, but I feel I should look around a bit more before deciding on my career. and there will be other offers.' He thought it would be best to leave before the man started raving.

Mr Codd smiled at him again. 'Think, Mr Vortimer! You may never be offered another opportunity like this. All your life you will be wondering - what did I miss out on when I refused the chance to manage a small country. - 'Let me tell you about the wonderful opportunity I am presenting to you'

Derek leaned back in his chair while Mr Codd smiled and smiled. The ruby on the stickpin blazed a brilliant red. Derek felt tired. It was only ten o'clock, two hours to lunch time and he had nothing else to do, and the name Sultania haunted him. It was as though he had heard it in a dream. He decided to listen for a while.

'The manager's salary,' said Mr Codd, 'Is five hundred dinars per week. They are gold coins. Not legal tender here of course but dealers in gold are always eager to buy them. You can also sell them as curios.' He pushed across to Derek one gold coin in the shape of a crescent. 'That is a half dinar, there are also copper coins.'

'I can look all this up on the internet, or Wikipedia' Derek was wondering why he felt so tired and reluctant to move.

'There's nothing on the internet concerning Sultania,' said Mr Codd. 'I have studied encyclopaedias, atlases, gazettes, history books, there is no reference to it anywhere. But I know it exists, I have been there. How else could I be its agent?'

'If it is not on any maps, not even the internet, how would I get there?'

'You will be guided, my boy, guided! You will be taken straight to the capital, Sultanopolis, and there you will meet the Council of Elders whom you will be advising.'

'I can't advise anyone about running a country, what would I know about the government, or the country? Honestly, Mr Codd, I think you should look for someone older and more experienced.' He then remembered something. 'Sultania!, that was the name of the scholarship that paid my way through college and university.'

Mr Codd was delighted. 'Exactly my boy, exactly. We were with you all the way, and now our investment is about to pay off. because you have talents and abilities that would let you grow. into the job. But if you don't want it look into my eyes and tell me so. Look me in the eye and say you don't want the job. Come now, straight into my eyes.'

Derek gazed at the blue eyes in front of him and started to say, 'I don't want--- ' when a sudden spark passed between them. Derek fell back in his chair and stared at Mr Codd, wondering what had happened.

'Mr Codd's lips curled in another smile. 'I believe you've changed your mind,' he said.

After the interview Derek was in a nervous state all day. Common sense told him that the man was talking rubbish. It was impossible for an unknown country to exist in the world. It was nonsense. Still, he had been very persuasive and Derek thought he had committed himself to something or other, he was not sure what.

Derek lived in a house from where he went by tram to the university. His host family was away for a few days. If they had been at home, things may have been different.

He was in such a state that he jumped when someone knocked on the door that night. The caller was a stranger Derek had never met before but would have remembered.

The young man, scarcely older than himself, was tall, and black as midnight. He wore a polished steel helmet with a spike on top. The helmet was swathed in a white scarf, the ends of which were tucked into the neck of an embroidered silk shirt, and he had on long, soft leather riding boots. His outer garment was a coat of small steel links.

'Peace be on this house,' said the strange figure who was armed with a curved sword that swung in a scabbard by his side.

He strode in and sat down cross legged on the floor rug with his back to the TV. Derek was about to say that he must have lost his way to a fancy-dress party. He would have made a joke of it but the hooked nose over a firm mouth together with a level, direct look, were a bit scary.

Unable to think of anything else he said, 'Can I help you?'

'I am Lord Ramses, head of my clan in Sultania. Effendi Codd recommended you for the position of manager of our country. The Lady Frederika will be here shortly and we can discuss the matter. Gus, your servant, will also be here.'

Before Derek could say he didn't want the job, nor a servant named Gus, there was another knock on the door. This time it was a girl with fierce blue eyes looking out from either side of a nose guard attached to her helmet.

She also was a memorable figure, her helmet had no spike like that of Ramses but was adorned with fine silver bands around the rim; she too wore chain mail. She stood her spear and bow in a corner of the room and threw herself into Derek's only arm chair.

Is that him?' she said, pointing with her thumb towards Derek who was gazing at her, astonished.

'This is indeed him,' was the grave reply. 'He is a young man of courtesy but knows nothing of Sultania and its customs. Perhaps you could rise and greet our host.'

The girl jumped to her feet and took Derek's hand in a powerful grip. 'Frederika von Hohenberger,' she said, 'Lady Frederika to you, manager.'

Derek thought his guests were more interesting than anything to be seen on television. He did not intend to manage their country but wanted to find out all about them.

You have an unusual name,' he said to the young man. 'Wasn't there a Ramses, king of ancient Israel?'

'Certainly not,' retorted Ramses stiffly. 'I am a direct descendant of Ramses the Second, the greatest Pharaoh ever to govern Egypt.'

Behind his back Lady Frederika pulled a face and rolled her eyes.

To cover his embarrassment Derek asked, 'Tea or coffee?'

'Wine,' said Ramses.

All Derek could find were two bottles of non-alcoholic wine. One bottle was full, the other half full. Everyone hated the taste.

Lord Ramses took a sip from his glass and relaxed. 'You have passable wine in this city,' he remarked. 'Frederika, will you join me in drinking to the health of our host and wishing him a long and happy term as manager of our dear land, Sultania.'

The two drank the toast with enthusiasm while Derek smiled nervously and waited for a complaint. None came, he suspected that his guests were not regular drinkers.

Before he could explain that he did not want to go to Sultania, or be its manager a third and last stranger arrived.

This guest was a dwarf, a hairy dwarf straight out of *Lord of the Rings*. He had on a leather jacket with no sleeves, leather shorts and lace up boots. His arms and face were brown, and his beard and hair bristled out beyond any possible grooming with comb or brush. He bowed to the assembled company.

He said to Derek, 'My name, your worship, is Gustavus Adolphus Schrumpf and I am your worship's butler and bodyguard. My duty is not only to look after your needs but to protect your worship's back during the battles to come.'

Before Derek could explain that he didn't need protection in battles because he was not going to attend any he was interrupted by Lord Ramses.

'He is also an excellent knife thrower,' said Ramses, 'Gus, let's have a demonstration.'

Derek was waiting for Gus to start when a knife, which he had not seen before whizzed past his head and embedded itself quivering in the door to the kitchen. It was well no one came through the door at that moment; the unfortunate person would have been skewered between the eyes.

'Quite right,' said Ramses as Gus walked across to recover his knife. 'A handy skill, considering the unsettled state of our political life at the present time. You will also find him very strong. He used to be a professional wrestler but his last bout had to be cancelled because he accidentally broke his opponent's neck.'

Gus looked ashamed at the memory of this encounter.

'Well Gus, what kept you?'

'I apologize, Lady Frederika, but I have been arranging our passage home. It took a little longer than expected but there will be no difficulties.'

'Excellent,' cried Ramses, he raised his glass. 'A toast to our dear land Sultania, may the manager soon solve its problems.'

They threw their heads back and drank. Derek tried to say that he hoped that they would soon find the manager they were seeking, but for some reason his tongue had become too thick to pronounce the words. It didn't matter anyway, no one was listening.

The conversation had turned to Sultania and Derek listened with growing unease to what they had to say.

He learned that Frederika's father had been killed by a huge boar.

'Yes, it was the biggest pig anyone had ever seen. Even the old legends don't tell of a boar that size. I'm going to hunt it down personally, and kill it,' said Frederika. 'I tell you what, the manager can come too. He can have my spear because I've ordered a bigger one with a stronger cross piece.'

Derek was about to rise and denounce the whole project. If the boars were any bigger than rabbits he was not interested.

His objections were never heard.

He was interrupted by the arrival of the pizza delivery man. Derek had forgotten the order but was reminded of it when Ramses tried to pay the bill in gold dinars. The man would have taken his pizzas away but Derek had enough money to pay the bill.

Gus cut up the pizzas and put them on plates; they were greatly appreciated and more wine was needed to wash them down.

With no more wine left they decided to end the party. Derek tried to rise and address his guests in order to clear up any misunderstandings. He was going to tell them that he enjoyed their company and they could call any time when passing, but on no account would he accept the job of manager. He would have said all this, instead the tiredness he felt in Mr Codd's office came over him again and he fell asleep on the couch in front of the television set.

He was still asleep when Gus picked him up.

Chapter Two

Sultanopolis

Derek groaned when the sun speared a beam of light on him through the windows far up in the wall and crawled further under his bearskin rug

Rug! What rug?' It seemed as though someone had come into his room during the night and glued his eyes shut, but he could still feel. His hand wandered over the hairy texture of what seemed to

be a hard bed cover with fur growing out of it. There were no sheets and from the rustling noise he made at each movement he guessed his pillow was stuffed with straw.

He managed to open his eyes to see the blurred view visible over the top of the rug. He was in a room with a high, vaulted ceiling. Rough stone walls were partly hidden by hanging tapestries showing hunting and battle scenes. His clothes were folded on top of a wooden chest. His wallet and telephone were also there.

Derek slid back under the rug and waited for the nightmare to go away. He was sick. His mouth felt as though a small, furry animal had come to a nasty end there some weeks ago and had just been removed. It could have been too much pizza last night. His head ached.

The best plan was to lie quiet, but after ten minutes of discomfort he tried to sit up. It was a failure and he was about to sink back again with a moan when a voice by his ear said, 'Allow me, your Honour.'

An arm slipped round his shoulders. In the stranger's free hand he could see a goblet which was held to his lips. He drank. The stuff was terrible and revived the taste of pizzas past their use by date.

He was allowed to lie back on the bed while the voice, which he now recognised as belonging to his butler, bodyguard said, 'I think your Honour can have a wash and breakfast now. You will feel much better afterwards.' He lay back hoping to wake up in his own bed at home.

Gus left the room and came back with a bowl of water, soap, and a brush. He wetted the brush and rubbed it on the soap. He started on Derek's face and hair. The bristles were stiff and better suited to scrubbing floors than tender faces. Derek, by this time was wide awake and wondering where he was as he cringed away from the brush.

'Where am I? What have you done to me?' croaked Derek, while trying to spit out the taste of soap.

'Your Honour is in the Castle Maledisant in the City of Sultanopolis, which is the capital of Sultania.'

Gus had overlooked his pyjamas and apart from the rug Derek had nothing on, only underclothes. The air in the room was frigid, and he shivered.

'Sorry, your worship,' said the dwarf who was drying Derek with a coarse towel. 'I should have known that you would be cold. You can't start managing the country with your teeth chattering in your head. But never fear, I ordered the finest clothes in Sultania, most suitable for a manager.'

The clothes were on a cabinet Derek had not noticed before. Gus was about to slip a shirt over Derek's head when he was stopped by a feeble protest. Derek wanted his own clothes.

'Your Honour, it is not proper. No doubt those strange garments are suitable for your own country but here we are very fashionable and they would not be right for a man of such importance as our manager.'

'What Derek had thought to be long underwear was put on with the help of two servants; actually they were trousers, baggy round the behind and the legs narrowed and his feet just got through.'

Boots and socks were put on next. Last was a smock which had hundreds of colored beads sewn to it. The skirt of the smock was divided front and back for, as Gus explained, horse riding.

Derek didn't want to ride a horse, he hated them. All he wanted was to be chief financial officer of a profitable company back home.

The outfit was finished off with a scarlet cord round the waist. Gus looped it round several times and tied it with a complex knot.

'Now,' he said while kneeling to tie bows at the top of Derek's boots. 'A light breakfast for your worship; a simple repast, I think.'

In another, larger room it was surprising to find several dozen people awaiting his arrival. They bowed low when he entered and sucked in their breath excitedly while whispers ran round the room.

He was served a large meat pie with the handles of a carving knife and a fork sticking out through a hole in the crust. These were removed with a flourish by a servant who broke the crust and speared lumps of meat dripping with sauce and gravy on to his plate. This was too much to face and Derek waved the pie away; he still hadn't recovered from the pizza.

There was a wail from the onlookers and Gus protested. 'Your Honour, the cook will commit suicide! If you reject his creations, he will stab himself and we will lose one of the great cooks of Sultania. Good cooks are hard to find. The Sultan alone has ordered three to be strangled with bow-strings at different times after an unhappy choice of dishes and since then no apprentices have come forward to learn the art of cooking. I beg of you, take a little and send a message of congratulations to the cook.'

Derek did not want a dead cook on his conscience and by gagging a little he managed to force down a mouthful or two of pie.

Lady Frederika strode in. She dropped a battleaxe on Derek's table and turned to face the room. 'Out!' she ordered.

Some of the crowd murmured against this but she stilled them with a gesture of her thumb towards the door and they began to move, bowing deeply while leaving. She took off her helmet and ran her hands through her yellow hair which was drawn back in two plaits hanging to below her waist. She was no more than twenty, and good-looking, in a forbidding sort of way.

Gus moved the battle axe to one side and placed the tray in front of Derek.

Lady Frederika seemed short tempered, it was possible she had not recovered from the socializing of the previous evening. Though it may have been the pizza.

'The country is in sore need of management,' she stated. 'You must begin at once. There is no time to linger over breakfast.'

'Take this away!' she said, pointing to a platter that Gus had just put on the table. 'Breakfast is over!'

'Like hell it is!' cried Derek who didn't want the breakfast, but wasn't to be bullied by Frederika. 'I'll say when I've finished, not you. And I've never agreed to manage this rotten country, and I want to go home.'

'You can't go home!' Frederika retorted. 'You are hundreds of leagues from your own country and it would take months to get there. Forget going home; you are the manager of Sultania and the council will see that you carry out your duties.'

'Well, how did you get me here? It was only last night, wasn't it?'

'We came the short way,' was the answer, and Derek's further questions were ignored.

'You will feel better after drinking this Your Worship,' Gus presented him another goblet. It was terrible stuff and bought back the taste of pizza

'Come,' said Frederika. 'It is time to go to the great hall; The Council of Elders will be meeting shortly, important decisions have to be taken, and you must be prepared to carry them out.'

Derek put a hand to his forehead to indicate the extent of his misery, but the girl was not interested. She was not that well herself but was more determined than Derek.

'You have been engaged to manage this country and manage it you will,' she said, in spite of his protests and explanations that he was there by mistake. The Lady Frederika cut short these complaints, she grasped him firmly by the upper arm to march him out of the room and down the corridor to the great hall.

The business of the council had not yet begun because a crowd was standing around chatting and waiting.

A herald in a blue velvet cap and a tunic of the same with a palm tree in silver sewn across the front bustled across, took off his cap, flourished it and bowed low to Frederika. 'Your Ladyship!' He then turned to Derek. 'Welcome, Effendi Vortimer, to Sultania. May you have a long and happy term as manager.'

He turned to face the room. 'My Lords, Ladies, Gentlemen, and commoners, make way for the mighty Effendi Vortimer, newly appointed manager of Sultania.'

Derek was not an impressive sight. His complexion had a greenish tinge and sweat had broken out again on his forehead in spite of its recent wash. He had difficulty focussing his eyes and tended to stagger a little while walking. His youthful appearance did not help. Many of those present exchanged grim and doubtful looks with their neighbors.

He was presented to the more important persons present, none of whom seemed particularly enthusiastic at meeting him. He couldn't remember their names anyway.

One, Sir Nigel, was chief of the council and made a brief speech. 'Welcome!' he cried. 'Thrice welcome Effendi Vortimer to your first meeting of the Council of Elders and to Sultania.' This speech was followed by a patter of applause.

A servant led Derek to a place at the foot of the table, facing Sir Nigel who was at the other end.' Scribes sat at smaller tables ready to take notes of the proceedings.

Sir Nigel said, 'Now that the manager has arrived I ask you all to stand and observe two minutes silence in memory of our late, former manager. I am happy to announce that his head has at last been recovered. It will be returned with Honour to his grieving family together with the balance of his salary, though we fear the rest of him has been eaten.'

Derek could barely stand for the horror of this news, but before he could collect his thoughts, and present his resignation, Sir Nigel spoke again, he said, 'I draw the attention of the council to the ambassadors from our great neighbour, The Khan, Lord of the Carthaginian Empire.' He indicated three grim faced men whose black hair and beards had been ringleted and their eyes outlined with black make-up. They sat in chairs near the council table but were quite silent. They nodded slightly and gazed with stony faces at the gathering. The third looked at Derek, his eyebrows flicked up and down, and he winked.

Derek stared, astonished. It was Mr Codd! How did he get here, dressed in outlandish clothes, and decorated with abundant hair, and a beard. Why was he masquerading as an ambassador from some place called the Carthaginian Empire. Perhaps he really was an ambassador.

This sudden appearance was so unsettling that Derek forgot to announce that he had never accepted the job of manager, did not want the job, and would withdraw until they had arranged his return home.

His thoughts were interrupted yet again by a door which crashed open and the appearance of two armed men who strode into the hall.

Sir Nigel rose from his chair. 'Sir Humphrey Swiftblade, Seigneur Michel du Lac, what is the meaning of this? How dare you break into a meeting of the council in this unseemly manner.'

'Sanctuary!' cried one of them. 'We demand the protection of the council!'

'Against what?'

'Murder! Seizure of our lands and homes! The troops of the Sultan are marching against us at this very moment'

Consternation around the table. Every man gazed at his neighbors and at the accusers.

'We have heard nothing of this. Why should the Sultan order such a thing?'

'Treachery Sir Nigel, Treachery! Someone has poisoned his mind against us, and I accuse Lord Grausam who is at this very table.' He pointed at a black browed man sitting opposite.

The man accused, Lord Grausam, went white as quarrels and shouting broke out.

Sir Nigel hammered the table with the handle of his dagger until the noise died away. 'This is very serious,' he said. 'It is a matter for the manager. He shall head a Board of Enquiry into these accusations. We will give him a body of troops as protection and to enforce his orders'. Derek looked round to see if he could make a bolt for the door and escape. It was useless, and Mr Codd was shaking his head. Derek had no idea how to get out of this strange and perilous situation. He would just have to lead the enquiry. Though, what it was to be and what they would make of it when he reported back did not bear thinking about.

'A Board of Enquiry!' sneered Lord Grausam. 'This so called manager barely got into the hall without tripping over his own feet; now you want him to head a Board of Enquiry. He's a foreigner a child, still got the ring of the pot on his bottom, no doubt. Where are his weapons? What is his authority?'

'He is a deeply learned young man.' Said Sir Nigel. 'Effendi Codd's message informed us that he was held high in honour in his own country.'

At this point Derek saw Mr Codd nodding agreement.

'As for authority, he will have a guard, and he may be accompanied by one or two members of the council, such as are at liberty. They will advise him on the customs of Sultania and bear witness that he is conducting the enquiry on behalf of the council.'

He said thoughtfully, 'I think my young, though greatly respected friend, and wise counsellor Lord Ramses can be one, and -- '

'I will be the other,' interrupted Lady Frederika. 'The hunt for the giant pig can wait. I helped bring him here and I am responsible for him to the council.' Perhaps she thought less could go wrong if she was on the spot and overseeing his actions. 'And I suggest to the council that we go direct to the castle of Sir Humphrey and start our work there.'

'Very good,' said Sir Nigel as people around the table nodded. 'Your military escort will be waiting at the city gates at dawn tomorrow.'

The ambassadors filed out, surrounded by their bodyguard and Derek was unable to speak to Mr Codd.

Chapter Three

The ambush

Derek slept badly that night, wondering what Mr Codd had got him into. He did fall asleep at last but Gus woke him before daylight. It was time to get up.

Afterwards Frederika and Ramses came to escort them to the town gates. Derek no longer explained or complained because he was either ignored or misunderstood and had little to say as Frederika and Ramses led him and Gus through narrow, dirty streets.

Waiting a little distance beyond the gates of the city was an escort of fifty foot soldiers and twenty five mounted troopers.

When his charges appeared from under the arch of the gate the captain, a fierce looking red-headed man, roared an order. His men sprang to attention and the troopers sat up straight in the saddle. The Captain approached, stamped to attention, and saluted Derek. 'Edmund Codd, Sir, Captain in the Council's Guard.'

Once again Derek was taken aback, unable to speak, for this was definitely his Mr Codd, yesterday a Carthaginian ambassador, today a captain in the Council's Guard.

'Good morning Codd, We'll inspect your men.' said Frederika. She led Ramses and the dumbfounded Derek round the ranks while looking keenly at the men and horses. 'How many pubs did you raid to get this lot?' She enquired sourly, Ramses seemed amused at the question.

'They're all good men ma'am,' said Captain Codd. 'When the manager gives me his orders I'll see they're carried out to his satisfaction, and to mine.'

Nearby were wagons with canvas covered tops which they were not asked to inspect, though they were obviously coming along to carry supplies. Derek could not help glancing uneasily at one black wagon drawn by four horses of the same color. Two men sat on the plank seat in front. Their gowns were black also, and their faces were hidden in shadow by the cowls which had been drawn over their heads.

Derek wondered if every Board of Enquiry was accompanied by its own undertakers, ready to bury the dead. He tried to concentrate on the inspection.

When they had examined every horse and every soldier to Frederika's grudging satisfaction he said, 'Mr Codd, may I speak to you privately?'

'Certainly Sir,' replied the captain, saluting smartly and stamping to attention once again.

The others went off to inspect some horses that Gus had led out from under the archway.

When they had gone Derek asked, 'Are you an agent with an office in Melbourne, or an ambassador of some empire I have never heard of, or are you a captain in this country's army?'

'I am all three, and more. My dear boy, surely you didn't think I would throw you to the wolves in this country without any protection. I thought I mentioned coming with you to Sultania.'

'You didn't. I would have remembered if you had told me that.'

'Well, I'm sorry if I didn't. As regards my various persona, I am anything I want to be. The ambassadors have already forgotten me, and the Captain of the Guard is still fast asleep. The soldiers of the guard do not know that I am not really their captain, but they think I am.'

'But how do you get away with all this?'

'It's a gift, a family trait, and now it is at your service. Fear nothing, my boy, you will triumph. I am here to protect you.'

Derek saw that Gus was leading two horses towards him. The small one was for Gus and the other for Derek. Clearly he was meant to get on its back. Frederika was mounting an even larger horse but Derek did not want to take that liberty with the one that was presented to him. It was a chestnut mare with a silky coat and had its ears back looking down on him with a mixture of dislike and contempt. It expressed its opinion by shaking its head and nodding violently, swinging Gus off his feet as it backed away from Derek. As far as the young man was concerned that settled the matter. Neither he nor the horse liked or wanted each other.

He said 'I have decided to ride on one of the wagons; anyone who wants to take on the mare can have it.

Frederika rode forward. Her own horse, was much heavier than that chosen for Derek. 'Come, Mr, Vortimer' said Frederika, 'The Manager of Sultania, and head of the Enquiry does not ride on wagons. He leads us on horseback. I will hold her for you.' She grabbed the bridle of the chestnut and dragged the two horses together. 'Not to worry, Ramses and I chose her specially for you because of her speed and spirit. 'Gus,' she cried, 'Help the manager on to his horse. Half the morning gone and we're not even on the road yet.'

Gus cupped his hands together for Derek to put his foot in them. Derek glanced round desperately but there was no escape; everyone that had a horse was already mounted, waiting, and looking at him. There was nowhere to hide and seemingly no chance of his horse falling dead within the next few seconds. It was tall and the saddle a long way from the ground. He sighed, gave in, and put a foot into Gus' hands.

Wrong foot, your worship, wrong foot. You always put your left foot in the stirrup to mount.' He tried to correct Derek quietly, but everyone noticed. Derek at last got on to the horse and barely escaped falling over the other side. Gus adjusted his stirrups.

Captain Codd rode along the ranks to quieten the noise of throat clearing and spitting that expressed contempt for such a display. 'Enough!' He roared. any more of this and you will get fourteen days field punishment, the lot of you!

Instant silence followed except for the jingling of bits and the stamping of hoofs.

Ramses rode to Derek's side. 'You will recall the council agreed we should go first to the castle of Sir Humphrey Swiftblade. Lady Frederika and I think that correct, what is your opinion?'

Derek had no idea what he was supposed to do or how he could escape, he nodded.

Ramses passed his order to the Captain and they moved off along the stony road that was the main route to the north. Derek prepared mentally for a day of discomfort, but he would not gallop, no matter what anyone else did.

Hours later they were about ten miles from the city gate, on an unmade track, and came at last to where thick forest grew on either side of the road. Frederika called Gus to ride alongside with the two pack horses he was leading so she could exchange her spear for a bow and a bag of arrows.

The captain halted their march for a few minutes while the foot soldiers strung their bows and once again checked the arrows they carried.

When the sun was at its height they came to a stream which crossed the road under a stone bridge. The stream wandered over a clearing before disappearing again into the forest.

Captain Codd ordered the wagons to be pulled off the track so the horses could rest and graze.

It was time for lunch. Sentries were posted. They scouted a short distance into the forest watching for hostile movements. Their arrows were set and the bows half drawn. Others were put to

gathering fuel and lighting fires while the cover of a wagon was thrown back to reveal packages and bags of food.

Derek dismounted with Gus' help. This was noted but no one made disapproving noises, they remembered the threat of fourteen days field punishment. Derek walked stiffly to a tree and sat with his back to it.

Ramses was too restless to wait in camp while the food was cooking and had trotted off on his horse with the scouts to a point where the road curved to avoid a large boulder. Those who had ridden this way before knew there was a long, stretch of forest crowding the road from that point, an ideal spot for an ambush.

A few minutes later Derek heard the ring and clash of metal against metal, then there were screams.

Frederika ran towards her horse while shouting for Derek to follow. Gus was close by and she roared at him too as she danced round her skittish horse, one foot on the ground the other in the stirrup. 'Come on, Gus!' she cried, 'Help the manager on to his horse.'

Derek didn't want to ride anywhere, especially not towards a battle. Besides he and the mare still didn't like each other. Gus helped him on.

Frederika mounted and advanced towards Derek's mare which was as excited as her own horse at the noise and the sight of troopers mounting in haste.

'Keep open order,' roared Captain Codd it may be a trick or an ambush. You, sergeants, make sure the infantry follow on.' He and his troopers galloped towards the road scattering camp fires and upsetting cooking pots as they went. They were soon out of sight.

Frederika checked her fast moving horse. She cried, 'Manager, you don't have any armor or a sword. I can't take you and I can't leave you. Sir Nigel told us to look after you. He's tired of losing managers.'

Around them the foot soldiers were falling into ranks under the direction of a sergeant. It seemed orderly and secure so Derek thought he might be safer in their company than that of the warlike Frederika. If the soldiers were to march towards the sound of battle it would take a little while and the trouble might have been sorted out by then.

You go ahead,' he said. 'I'll stay with the men.'

Someone grunted and then groaned. A soldier sank to his knees. An arrow had driven into his back and the shaft stood straight up as he hunched forward in agony.

That was only the first. A storm of arrows swept from the woods, rising high and then plunging into the ground or into the bodies of soldiers. Archers hidden in the forest poured out unceasing flights of arrows at the soldiers in the open.

The sergeant was shouting for them to run towards the forest so as to get into shelter where they could come to close combat with their unseen enemy. An arrow bounced off Frederika's helmet as she drove spurs into her horse's flank; it bounded forward and in passing she gave Derek's mount a

hard smack with her mailed glove, then caught its bridle and towed them both towards the edge of the forest.

Derek was saved from falling over backwards by the raised back of his saddle, then he grabbed for his horse's mane and held on. The ground was thick with soldiers running in the same direction but Frederika paid no heed and several just escaped from being trampled

They were soon in shelter among a group of trees and bushes and the arrows stopped coming. Frederika jumped off and with help from Gus, who was close by, they got Derek off his horse and standing in a tangle of trees, bushes and horses.

'Keep the manager here, Gus,' ordered Frederika. 'Stay in shelter and make the horses stand on either side so no one can get a fair shot at him, and you stay at the back so you can see any trouble coming. I won't be far away.'

By this time everyone still standing had reached the cover of the forest. They paused, thankful to be free of the arrows for a few minutes and looked round for someone to give orders.

Frederika, taking the place of the missing captain, was soon issuing commands to the survivors and with the sergeant was pushing them into a two deep line so they could advance and flush out their hidden foes.

When everyone was in place she raised her hand for quiet. The forest was silent but for the breathing of the men and the rustle of wind in the tree tops. That was all except for the moaning of the wounded, who still lay in the open. Their enemies made no sound and it was as quiet as though the attack had never happened.

The soldiers began to advance into the forest. Those in the front rank were armed with spears and swords while those behind had bows and arrows at the ready.

The movement had just begun when there was a shout from someone in the forest, followed by a noise of trampling and crashing as bushes were trodden down. The noise advanced so rapidly they were scarcely aware of it before they were overwhelmed. Their attackers burst out from the forest mounted on what appeared to be huge tusked boars, grey or black and covered with hair. The boars, were not as tall, but much heavier than horses. They squealed as they charged and foam slavered from their chops.

Derek scarcely saw the destruction of the line which was beaten and trampled down because the horses took fright at the sight of these hideous tuskers and their riders. They bolted spreading their own terror and confusion as they knocked men over in their flight.

The rest of the battle was disaster and ruin as the boar riders laid about them with sword and club, beating down cowering or running men. He had a glimpse of Frederika standing up in the stirrups and holding her horse from bolting while she hacked away with her sword to save herself.

Their assailants were not men, but creatures covered in body hair with ape-like features. They could have been gorillas, but were far more active and dangerous, for no gorilla ever before had worn war harness or wielded axe and club in battle.

In a moment Frederika was down, though whether dead or thrown from her horse by the speed and weight of the attack he could not guess. There were so many active figures, so much human wreckage in the way, so many plunging beasts, so many muscular, hairy arms rising and falling with weapons in hand, so much blood, that he was unable to see where she lay in this press of warriors.

The next clear picture was of his own coming death. A huge gorilla figure had ridden close, bared its fangs at him in a grin and raised its axe. He dived between the legs of its boar and came out the other side from where he saw the mounted troopers galloping back into the clearing as hard as they could drive their horses. It was the moment to sprint towards them and hope not to be ridden down. What the horsemen could do against these creatures and their terrible weapons did not enter his mind; instead it was filled with panic and the need to run and run until he was safely back home where they could no longer find him.

Something brutally hard hit him on the side of the head. He fell, and that was the last he saw of the lost battle.

Chapter Four

Captured by Apes

Derek's next memory was of spiky plants slapping him in the face. He pulled back to escape this punishment and opened his eyes. He was looking at the belly of a beast, and the ground which was moving along about a meter below his jolting head.

He had been laid face down across the back of a boar, in front of the rider. This creature was guiding the boar with one hand and with the other had bunched the back of his jacket and was holding it to keep him from sliding off.

Everything hurt. The ape had bony, hairy knees. The saddle blanket felt like sand-paper; the bristles of the boar prickled his skin. His head ached and every now and then his face would be scraped by another bush as they passed. He wriggled to seek a position, less painful, there was none, and his efforts were rewarded with a blow on the side of the head that made him groan and wish yet again that Mr Codd had recruited someone else.

'Be still!' grumbled a stony voice. 'I might kill you, but doctor said he wanted to talk to manager.'

Derek froze into position. He was a captive being taken somewhere, surrounded by apes and boars. The apes had finished business for the day and now were riding through the forest. They were not concerned to find a path but pushed straight through the bushes and undergrowth, turning aside only for trees.

Moving his head as far as he was able Derek could see another part of his nightmare. Grey, furry creatures were bounding through the bushes with them. They were more careful in their progress and avoided bushes by hopping round them. These were the archers and carried bows and a quiver of arrows each. Derek stared, wondering why their shape and appearance was so familiar.

Memory clicked into place. They were kangaroos, but different. Kangaroos could not pull or aim a bow. By some witchcraft these had been given arms and hands with five fingers. He turned away, he could no longer look at the creatures of this world into which he had been kidnapped.

He could not see any other prisoners. Frederika had been beaten from her horse but perhaps she and Ramses had survived. He wondered if Mr Codd was alive and could somehow save him.

A long time passed in pain and discomfort before the party halted beside a stream.

The rider bent over in the saddle and lowered Derek to the ground where he collapsed into a heap, scarcely able to move. He shambled on his hands and knees to a tree close by and sat with his back to it waiting for the pain and misery to go away.

His captor also got down and came to loom over Derek. A hairy paw shook Derek. 'Doctor said, get manager,' the owner of the paw rumbled. 'What's a manager?'

Derek thought that explaining the techniques and theories of management to a semi-intelligent ape was beyond him. He closed his eyes again, hoping the monster would go away. However this unlikely seeker after knowledge was not satisfied. He stirred Derek up once more, but harder. 'You tell me what a manager is or I cut you up, then we say to doctor we never seen no manager. He won't know.'

He produced a long thin knife. Its blade had been almost worn away by constant sharpening. It was old and greasy. He held it under Derek's nose so that no detail would be missed. Some of his friends came over to watch.

'What's a manager?' repeated the beast, flicking his knife near Derek's throat, 'what's he do?'

'He manages. It's his job to take charge of a company - or a country - and look after all the details and make sure there is a dividend for the shareholders at the end of the year.'

It seemed the ape was not a student of commerce. He became irate and started to grunt at his friends. 'You make fool of me,' he said. 'You talk stupid stuff I no understand. What's companies? What's dividend? What's a year? You better tell me what a manager does or I'm gunna slice you up.'

He would have carried out his threat while his friends, who were trampling round the spot, looked on; but they were interrupted by the arrival of another ape-like creature. He was larger than the others and wore a more colorful harness; evidently the mark of a higher rank. He forced his way into the circle by cuffing a few out of the way and caught sight of the knife which was being used to threaten Derek. The newcomer reared up to a magnificent seven feet or more, and began to slap his chest and roar while everyone else added to the din by howling.

Derek's tormentor forgot all about him and roared back. He dropped to face the challenge with one fist on the ground, the other held the knife.

The second ape instantly scooped up a handful of twigs and dirt and threw them into his opponent's face and then, not pausing for a moment, kicked him under the chin to bowl him over backwards and jumped straight on top. He slipped his own knife out of its sheath and it appeared even longer than the one that had threatened Derek. He held it at the throat of the other ape.

'The doctor said, 'Get manager, bring him back, no hurt. Maybe I hurt you, maybe you learn to do what doctor says.'

As quick as thought he slashed a cross shaped flesh wound on the chest of his enemy, then leaped back, ready to fight.

The injured ape rose on his hind legs, his mouth open in a scream of pain, in which everyone joined. He pressed his paws to the wound and the blood flowed over his fingers staining the hair on his chest and belly.

Derek's rescuer now spoke to the others. 'Doctor said, 'Bring manager', that don't mean bring him in bits. I don't care if I kill you all; I do what doctor says and bring him manager, and not cut up.'

Derek struggled to his feet amid the circle of sullen animal figures whose eyes strayed from him to the wounded loser and then to the winner. Derek could feel their hatred and decided to stay close to his new friend.

In spite of the tenseness of the moment Derek's eye was caught by a movement in the trees. More kangaroos were coming up from the rear. No matter what had been done to them these animals still moved like true kangaroos. They would take long hops, avoiding bushes and trees, and after almost every hop would stand to their full height using their two rear legs and tail as a tripod. At times there were up to twenty or more heads visible over the tops of the bushes peering around in all directions and sniffing the breeze; then they would start bounding forward again.

All on!' cried Derek's rescuer, 'All on! We'll be back home before dark. You,' he said to Derek, 'you ride with me. I no trust that stupid monkey and he's gunna bleed a lot until the doctor fixes him up. Maybe the doctor put him to sleep for good, eh? Anyway he might cut your throat on the way; better come with me. My name's Webster.

Derek was struck with the madness of his situation. He must be the only person in the world ever invited to ride on the back of a huge pig under the protection of a talking ape named Webster.

How could a gorilla talk, reason and use weapons? Perhaps the doctor, whoever he was, would answer all these questions.

Webster reached down a hand for Derek to swing up behind him. This time Derek sat astride the boar behind his rescuer and was just a little more comfortable than before. The animal smell from the hair of the creature's back was not too bad if one took shallow breaths.

They set off again. The kangaroo men came with them. Their long hopping progress easily kept pace with the boars and they still had time to look around between leaps and sniff the air.

They pressed on through a wooded valley where the ground was dappled with shade.

A stream chuckled and ran alongside the path. The floor of the valley was rising as they proceeded westward along it while the forest and undergrowth became less dense and matted.

Late afternoon they diverted away from the stream because the valley came to an end at a high rock face. A waterfall tumbled over the cliff and bounded off boulders to reach a large, foaming

pool at the bottom. They climbed steep, paths which led them out on to a plain. The kangaroo people had gone a different way, climbing was hard for them.

At the top was open country and rounded, grass-covered hills. The grass was darkened now and then by clouds shading the sun. Their shadows swept along faster than a racing horse.

Close to the stream, a two storey building was enclosed by a stone wall. Mounted on the roof a sign was too distant to be seen clearly.

The kangaroo people had caught up and were bounding ahead.

A message on a signpost alongside the track said **No Trespassers** Derek's conductor ignored it. Perhaps he could not read, and they came closer to the strange building.

Further on another sign said **Private Property - Keep Out** This sign too was passed by and they went on.

A line of windows could be seen above the wall of the building, and on the roof above was mounted the sign that Derek could now read. Its message was, **Grozny's Experimental Laboratories** and, in smaller letters, **Science is the Light of the World.**

The wall surrounding the laboratory was high and there, keeping watch on the approaching party, were more strange figures.

Derek thought he saw a tiger's head peering over the wall and what appeared to be packs of dogs which barked and rushed back and forth.

Another sign just to the right of the high, barred gate gave a last warning, the message said,

TURN BACK - TRESPASSERS SHOT

Derek was eyeing this warning and thinking he would soon be recaptured if he tried to get away, but the apes ignored it.

There was a pause while a large group of creatures, of all shapes and sizes, crowded to the top of the wall to examine Derek. No one said anything for a while and there was no noise except for the boars sniffing around on the ground with their snouts, grunting and farting.

The gates were unbarred from inside and creaked open.

Chapter Five

Grozny's Experimental Laboratory

The building inside the walls could have been a modern laboratory or factory built anywhere in the world. At the front was a carefully tended lawn with shrubs growing close on either side of three steps that led up to automatic sliding doors of tinted glass. Over the entrance was another sign on which the name of the establishment was repeated:

In spite of the press of creatures staring at him, Derek saw only the men and women waiting on the steps. One person was in front while others grouped behind.

When first seen, the man appeared to be of the type of kindly hospital director or supervisor so valuable to our health services. He was older than Derek, in his forties, gold rimmed spectacles, blonde hair smoothed down, a fair complexion. Like the others he wore a white laboratory coat and had a stethoscope looped round his neck with the end diving into his top pocket. The only item out of keeping with his professional appearance was a heavy leather whip he carried coiled in his hand.

The doctor came down the steps with the other hand outstretched. 'Doctor Ivan Grozny, how do you do,' he said, 'Welcome!'

Derek slid painfully off the back of the boar and stood tottering as the man approached. The doctor's welcoming smile faded as he got a good look at Derek and realized his condition.

'Good Lord!' he cried. 'What have they done to you?' His pink cheeks turned bright red and he advanced on the apes, who were dismounting. 'I asked for a manager, not a scarecrow,' he shouted and lashed out with his whip causing Derek to flinch. The apes cowered away, though the boars bucked and squealed as the lash caught them too.

'Idiots, cretins!' the doctor screamed. 'I created you, I made you, I put brains in your heads, I breathed the breath of life into your nostrils. You stupid monkeys it was not worth the trouble. I should have left you in the trees where you belong.'

The other animals were delighted with this and seized the apes who were trying to get away, and then held them so the doctor could get a fair whack. He indicated they should hold Webster with his buttocks upward and he was lashed painfully a few times while being questioned by the doctor.

With his limited vocabulary and understanding it required some time to get from the unfortunate beast an account of the attack and Derek's capture, and the doctor used his whip freely.

'So,' said the doctor when the story had been told and he had become a little weary from the exercise. 'So, I ordered you to get the manager and bring him back here and you, you half witted ape, you launched an attack which might very well have killed the manager; and when he was in your hands did you treat him with Honour and respect? No, you did not. That was too much to ask, wasn't it.'

All the gorillas were howling by this time. The doctor's words as well as his blows had gone home and they cowered on the ground and moaned.

'Pah!' said the doctor after giving the group a few more lashes. 'Really, I don't know why I bother. Take this thing away and have it cleaned, and mind, plenty of boot polish.'

He threw the whip to a leopard look-alike that had been dancing round the edge of the group and giggling at the misfortunes of the apes. It ran off immediately clutching the whip.

'Someone take these miserable, disobedient creatures to the infirmary,' he ordered. 'Send for Doctor Singh and tell him to clean them up. And he's to use the stinging. antiseptic, iodine. When I give orders they are to be carried out in full.'

He turned to Derek who was still awestruck and amazed. His manner was now charming and pleasant -- the perfect host

'Really, I am terribly sorry you had to see this but you must understand, discipline is all important in my work. Without discipline the whole project would collapse.'

They moved towards the door and the little group of people behind the doctor turned away and went inside. The doctor ignored them and led Derek through the door and up a carpeted staircase.

'A bath, I think, would be in order and a change of clothes; the butler will be able to help you there. You look pretty knocked up so tell him to put in plenty of bath salts; that should ease some of your aches and pains. Fortunately, being so young, you will soon recover.'

They stood in a wide passage with doors on either side. 'Herbert!' he called sharply, 'Herbert! Where is that fellow?' There was a short pause and his cheeks began to redden. He raised his voice. 'Herbert! Where are you?'

There was a patter of feet from around the corner and an animal in a long, white caftan scuttled towards them bowing as it came. It was the creature which had taken the whip.

The butler, or whatever it was, seemed to be made up of parts from other animals and humans but basically it was a leopard with a leopard's head and tail but an altered jaw so that it could speak. It had hands, and walked erect. though what the rest of it was like under its caftan and white skull cap could only be guessed at.

'You have been at the pantry again, haven't you, you sneaking, crawling excuse for an animal. I have a good mind to give you a note to take to the punishment shed; half a dozen cuts of the best. That might teach you to come when I call.'

'This is the sort of assistance I have to put up with,' said the doctor turning to Derek as the miserable creature whined and fawned and cringed back from fear of a blow. 'Still, I needed a butler so he will have to do for a while. No doubt things will improve as the work goes better.'

Overawed by these astonishing sights and the violence of the doctor Derek had scarcely spoken, but Doctor Grozny seemed not to care; he was willing to talk enough for both of them. His rage had gone as quickly as it had arisen. He addressed the butler mildly and told him to take the guest to a bedroom, find clothes, prepare a bath and so on.

'We dine at 7.30,' he said. 'Herbert will have other duties but he will see to your comfort and make sure there is a servant on hand to show you the way to the dining room. Everything is to be done to your satisfaction or I will know the reason why.'

He was about to turn away then remembered something else. 'Oh, by the way; tonight at dinner you will meet the rest of the staff and it will be a pleasant, social evening, but tomorrow morning we can get down to business. Herbert, or one of the servants, can show you the way to my office at, say, ten o'clock, then we can have a good old chinwag about your future here.'

The doctor went away leaving Derek astonished. He was not sure, but it seemed that the raid that afternoon had been a head hunting expedition in the business sense of the word. It was possible that he had met yet another determined employer who was just as bloodthirsty as the others. How

he could escape from either or both he had no idea. In the meantime it would be best to go with Herbert and have a bath.

Herbert led Derek to a bedroom. He peeped out into the passage after Derek entered to make sure the dreaded bully had really gone away then started a miserable, snivelling tale of abuse and complaints aimed at his tormentor.

'Not fair,' he said whiningly, while getting the bath ready. 'Someday Herbert get back, someday Herbert get even, we'll hit him with a whip and see who squeals then.' He dashed out and got a dressing gown but even so scarcely stopped whimpering and complaining.

It was a relief to Derek when his bath was ready and he could relax alone in that steaming, scented luxury.

Derek was drying himself when there was a tap on the bathroom door. It was not Herbert this time.

'George, sir, George, assistant butler,' this individual said. 'The doctor sent me along to look after you. You be happy, sir, or the doctor said he would skin me and nail my hide to a tree.'

Derek was so astonished at the sight of the newcomer that he forgot his manners and stared with open mouth. The appearance of the assistant butler seemed to cap off a mad, mad day. He wore a caftan as did Herbert, but it was the head that was beyond fantasy. The creature, whatever it was stood and walked like a man but had a cow's head.

George paid no attention. He may have been used to people goggling at him, and he laid out fresh clothing on the bed giving Derek a little time to recover.

'Underpants, sir,' he said, 'socks, a shirt, all nicely pressed and warmed. The doctor didn't think you would have your own dinner suit so he said to get one for you. Here it is, sir.'

He wore a white skull cap sewn with colored thread. It rested between his horns which had been trimmed and decorated with inlaid silver bands.

Derek tried not to stare but had the greatest difficulty in accepting the fact that intelligent conversation was proceeding from the mouth of a cow; even his talks with the apes had not prepared him for this. He felt as though the cow's head should come off to reveal a grinning human face underneath.

When George knelt to slip on the black shoes he had got from somewhere he looked up at Derek sadly and tapped his forehead. 'Sorry, sir! I can't do anything about it; a gift from the doctor. I wish he'd let me alone as an animal or a human but he experiments and doesn't care about our feelings.'

He fussed around for a while with a hair dryer restoring the natural wave that appeared in Derek's dark hair in humid weather. The dressing bell had rung half an hour before and now the dinner gong was being sounded up and down the passages by a passing servant.

'Mustn't keep the doctor waiting, sir. He doesn't like it when people are late for dinner.'

George led him to the dining room along a passage lined with polished wooden panelling, and adorned by masses of flowers in crystal vases. This rich display was set out on wooden pedestals and tables along the walls.

They came to the dining room door. George seized the heavy brass handle and flung the door open.

'The manager, the Honourable Effendi Vortimer MBA,' he cried, and Derek found himself in the dining room with the door closed behind him. George had disappeared.

Chapter Six

The doctor and H.G.Wells

There were a dozen people in the room standing around talking, with glasses in their hands. They were clothed in their best. All in dinner suits or evening gowns. The group turned to look at Derek. and seemed surprised to see how young he was, but no one commented on it. He was pleased to note that they were all were just ordinary people.

A man wearing a turban stepped forward. 'Ah, Mr Vortimer, greetings. We are sorry about the circumstances under which you were brought here but we are very glad to have an addition to the staff, and we hope that your stay with us will be a pleasant one. My name is Doctor Singh, deputy to Doctor Grozny. May I introduce my colleagues?'

He was about to do so when everyone was silenced by the arrival of the doctor.

He had changed his white coat for a dinner suit but was no less menacing and Derek felt a sensation of uneasiness, almost of terror on looking into the man's bland face and gleaming spectacles.

The doctor presented himself as a good host and saw to it that a very odd looking servant should bring Derek a drink to his taste. He was the same with the other guests who treated him with the politeness one would show when locked in a cage with an unpredictable savage animal.

He turned to Derek. 'Mr Vortimer, my agents in the capital informed me that you are a brilliant young man with the degree, Master of Business Administration, the youngest student to gain such a distinction. May I ask why you are here in The Sultanate, this cesspit of peasants, cannibals and ignorant aristocratic cutthroats. And where did you gain your Master of Business Administration degree?'

Derek stated that he had been awarded that important document by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He wanted to add that he had been kidnapped and would like to go home, but the doctor was not interested. He asked questions merely to pause before starting to talk again.

He continued, 'I have more need of your services than has this miserable backwater they call a country. It is a great pity you never took up research in biology but that cannot be helped now; even managers have their uses and the Grozny Experimental Laboratory needs a manager. The human race has need of you because by taking the load of administration from my shoulders I can

get on with my true work which is demonstrating to humanity that its stubborn belief that only human beings have the intelligence to reason to a logical conclusion is totally and utterly false.'

Derek was about to ask what services the laboratory could possibly need from his talents when a doglike creature in a white garment, the same as the others, came forward and touched the doctor on the arm.

'Yes, what is it? What do you want?' The doctor asked.

It was dinner time. The meal was waiting to be served and Herbert and George were pushing back folding doors that had hidden the dining table at the other end of the room. 'We will talk further at the table,' said the doctor. 'You, Wells.' He was indicating the dog-like servant. 'Mr Vortimer is to sit at my right hand tonight, make sure you take him to his place.'

The servant had a furry, pitch black head and, but for its hands, seemed to be no more than a dog walking on its hind legs. It looked dumbly from the doctor to Derek and back again.

You born fool, I take the head of the table as always and tonight Mr Vortimer will sit at my right hand. Dammit,' said the doctor. 'If they send me any more Labrador dogs I will not accept them. They are more trouble than they are worth. I will just have them put down.'

To save the strange creature, part Labrador, from getting into more trouble Derek led it over to the table and, by touching, showed which chair was his. Everyone found a place and remained standing, waiting for the doctor to take the head of the table. He gestured for them to be seated and indicated to the servants that they could commence serving.

Derek's appetite had returned. He had missed out on lunch and had eaten nothing since. The soup was excellent, but he would have enjoyed it better if it had not been for the doctor's long winded commentary on Darwin's Theory of Evolution which lasted long after the soup had gone. No one else spoke and the servants seemed in terror of interrupting the great man's thoughts by bringing out the next course.

He himself noticed after a while that the dinner had come to a standstill and angrily ordered the food to be brought on. After the main course was almost gone he happened to call Wells an idiot and this brought back a memory of long ago school lessons.

Without thinking of the wisdom of bringing up the subject, Derek said -- 'When I was at school one of the books we studied was *The Island of Doctor Moreau* it was by a man called H.G.Wells and it was about this doctor called Moreau who lived on an island in the middle of the ocean. He was experimenting, creating living beings out of a combination of human and animal parts.'

The doctor said nothing but put his knife and fork down with a clatter and clenched his fists. Derek looked at him for the man was staring straight ahead with reddened cheeks, his fists rested on the edge of the table. He was breathing heavily

The doctor's mad eyes, magnified by his glasses, swivelled round towards Derek. He spoke. 'That ignorant scribbler Wells did write a book in which he distorted the work of my great grandfather on my mother's side. It was a tissue of lies from beginning to end and he used it to slander the work and life of Doctor Moreau, a great and grossly abused and misunderstood scientist.'

He held up his hands which were now clawed and trembling. 'I hold the torch of scientific progress which fell from his hands as he was hounded to his grave by the ignorant, yapping of critics, and those jealous of his genius. Not killed by one of his creatures, as Wells has it.'

He glared at Derek. 'You may be sure, Mr Vortimer, in spite of your blundering and meddling I will continue with my great work and none of the obstacles that are daily placed in my way will stop me from founding another and greater branch of science -- that is to say, *The New Theory of Evolution* - - *The Grozny Theory of Evolution*.'

'Really,' remarked Derek, for the doctor, who had been shouting, paused at this point, and he could think of nothing better to say.

'Yes, really!' was the retort. 'I intended to call on you, Mr Vortimer, to take the load of administration from my shoulders. I see that I was wrong. Your reading of foul and libellous books renders you unfit for any purpose.' He pointed at Derek. 'You, Mr Vortimer, are tainted with the words of that infamous, lying, despicable enemy of truth and science, Herbert George Wells.'

He was shouting into Derek's face, his features distorted, his teeth chattering with rage. The man stood up. 'You will regret this attack on the reputation of my great grandfather. Now I would not use you in any position no matter what you may have learned, but you will make a fine subject. At eight o'clock in the morning we will start a new series of experiments using you. When I have finished you will know better than to worm your way here, to my table, and then start slandering the noblest and finest pioneer of science of the nineteenth century.'

The other guests were now huddled in a group towards the door looking at Derek and the doctor in horror, but no one offered any sign of help.

'I'm sure I didn't mean any harm,' pleaded Derek. 'It was a prescribed book at school, we all had to read it.'

Hanging from the ceiling by the fireplace was a woven cloth cord finished off by a gold tassel that almost brushed the mantelpiece. The doctor tugged the cord; somewhere overhead a bell sounded.

The doctor ignored them all while waiting for a response to the bell. He made no reply to Derek's apologies but strode back and forth, fists clenched and breathing heavily.

There was no response to the bell, which added to the doctor's rage. He pressed a button mounted on the wall. Buzzers sounded in the distance and the noise was followed by the appearance of the butler.

'Where are the guards?' shouted the doctor. 'I have rung for the guards and no one has come. Run and tell them I want them instantly; and bring my whip, I will need it.'

Before Herbert could answer there was a shouting and thudding of feet outside the door. A bumping sound was heard and an occasional crash as the tables and wooden pedestals were knocked over and vases smashed.

The door to the passage swung open to reveal a scene of confusion as the ape people tried to subdue two struggling figures.

'Spies, doctor, we caught spies trying to get in,' puffed Webster as he came through the door, aided by a kick from behind.

'Bring them in,' was the order. 'Let me see these sneaking wretches in the light.'

The two intruders, caught at last and held firmly by guards were dragged into the room. They were Ramses and Frederika.

'What can you ignorant savages possibly want in my laboratory?' enquired the doctor. 'How dare you trespass here?'

'Your animals have slaughtered our men and kidnapped the manager,' was Ramses' retort. 'We have come to rescue him.'

'Rescue him! What nonsense! Mr Vortimer has been engaged by me as business manager of my experimental laboratories. Surely you cannot imagine that a man with a Master of Business Administration Degree from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology would waste his talents and probably end up being murdered trying to sort out the problems of this miserable little sinkhole of a country that calls itself a nation?'

He looked at Frederika. 'Still, I am glad you came. I have been looking for a young, healthy, white, human female for some experiments I have in mind. If you are even half way intelligent you may make a passable subject.'

Frederika ignored him. Possibly she did not understand what he was saying. For the first time they saw Derek standing nearby in a dinner suit and a shirt with diamond studs. They noted the luxurious furnishings, the table set for a dinner party the flowers and silver, the crystal decanters, the snowy white linen.

'Dammit, manager,' she cried, 'Lord Ramses and me bust a gut following you here and we scraped the devil out of ourselves climbing the wall, and then we were caught by these monkeys, or whatever they are, and all the time you've been sitting up enjoying your dinner. If we'd known you were living in luxury we wouldn't have bothered to try and rescue you.'

'It was not well done, my friend, not well done at all,' said Ramses whose blouse and trousers were torn; his normally trim beard grizzled and awry.

'An aborted rescue attempt, eh!' said the doctor with some satisfaction. 'You cannot even carry out a proper abduction. Never mind; The Manager stays here under my protection and you two will be locked up until I am ready for you. Put them in the large holding pen,' he ordered, 'And make sure it's locked. Last time someone forgot and the place was overrun with goats.'

'There is no prison that will hold us,' retorted Ramses, and Frederika vainly tried to twist loose while she kicked and elbowed her captors.

'Take them away,' the doctor ordered and the two struggling, shouting prisoners were borne off down the passage.

'Don't worry about them,' said the doctor, who saw Derek's face. 'I will try and keep them alive but if they die during the experiments they will be no great loss. At least they will not have died in vain for they will be sacrificed to the onward march of science.'

The doctor had quite recovered his good humour. He showed no recollection of his outburst and now seemed to believe that Derek had agreed to become his business manager. It was best to say as little as possible and try to avoid more trouble. For the moment he was quiet and cheerful, though his whip had been brought in and lay coiled on the sideboard.

They finally ended dinner. The whole meal had been stretched out by all that had happened. When they adjourned for coffee and cigarettes and the folding doors had been pushed back into position it was after midnight and some of the diners had difficulty in suppressing yawns and fidgets.

Soon after the doctor announced it was time to go and departed leaving everyone relieved.

'You were lucky,' said Dr Singh when they were sure their tyrant had departed for the night. 'Oh, my goodness Mr Vortimer you were the most fortunate young man I have encountered for a long time. If those two strangers had not turned up you would be down in the holding pen right now waiting a fate worse than death. I hope you survive service with the doctor; I hope we all do. He is a very dangerous man and is always glad to get new subjects for his experiments.'

Derek didn't want to listen to all this, he said, 'Those two people that broke in tonight are friends of mine and I have to get them out. Where is the cage he was talking about, and how do I get the key?'

Dr Singh was aghast. 'No, no! my friend. You do not know what dangerous ground you are rushing on to; be like the angels and stay away. I advise you, Mr Vortimer, go to bed, get a good night's sleep and don't try and save your friends. If anything happened the doctor would go mad. You would suffer, we would suffer, the whole establishment would feel the weight of his anger.'

The other members of the staff listened for a moment to this idea of rescuing the prisoners then they muttered excuses and withdrew. Dr Singh was determined not to help. He refused to join any rescue attempt, instructed George to show the newcomer to his room, and advised Derek not to stir from it until daylight.

When they were in the bedroom Derek gripped George by the arm and turned him around.

'You hate the doctor, don't you?'

'I couldn't hate him more. Look what he did to me.' George touched the cow's head that he bore. 'But I'm afraid of him. You don't know how terrible his rages are.'

'I know what he's like! I was nearly a victim tonight, you saw that yourself, but I am not going to leave my friends to his ghastly experiments.'

For a moment George was terrified, then his face, as well as Derek could tell, hardened, 'I'll help you,' he said. 'But if we are captured one of you must kill me. I don't want to face his anger. Wait here,' He was trembling 'I'll get some knives from the kitchen.'

He came back a few minutes later holding a tray piled with food. Underneath the napkin were some carving knives.

'This way!' He led Derek back along the passage. The knocked over pedestals had been righted, the smashed vases replaced by others filled with flowers.

'I've brought a knife for you,' George whispered, handing it over.

Derek looked at it doubtfully. 'I'm not very good with knives,' but he took it and put it in his belt. 'Will you come with us?'

'This is my home,' said George. 'Where else would I fit in? But I will have to go with you if you escape because the doctor will find out everything.' He considered for a moment and continued with the whisper they had both adopted. 'But don't forget to kill me if everything goes wrong. I don't want to be brought back to be punished by the doctor.'

Chapter Seven

The Laboratory

They went down some steps, George had a key and unlocked the back door. The guard-house was around the corner and there was no one in the yard. Light spilled out on to brick paving from the brightly lit window. Someone was in the guard room for the light on the ground altered from time to time as vague shadows moved across.

'Wait!' cautioned George, as they stood in the dark shadow of the wall, then he stepped round the corner with the tray in his hands, the model of an industrious servant carrying out the orders of the master. Everything would have appeared normal except for the strange outline of his head.

When he disappeared Derek realized that in their hurry they had made no plans beyond giving the captives knives and letting them out of the cage. There was no part for him to play and he was not sure what George intended to do. He moved closer taking care to stay out of the light. George spoke to someone, though it was impossible to hear what was being said.

There was a chinking noise, as though of keys being taken from a hook, and he heard footsteps. It was such a strain waiting that Derek left the shelter of the wall but stayed out of the direct light. He could see a steel cage with a roof, and shadowy figures inside. Someone was unlocking the door.

The cage was furnished with a bench or table of some kind and the tray would be put on this. Then the whole lot went flying. There was a loud, clang, the door burst open, a guard tumbled backwards and two figures ran out. The escapers were Frederika and Ramses who instantly made for some stairs which led up to a platform where guards could march to make a complete circuit of the wall.

At that moment, a patrol, which had been relieved of duty, started to descend the steps. Derek had not noticed them, neither had the other two until they almost collided. Not willing to tackle such odds the two warriors retreated. They bolted away back to the building and through the door that

had been left open. Derek was almost stranded outside as they slammed the door behind them. He just had time to throw his weight on the closing door and fall through on top of the others.

In a moment Ramses' powerful grip had him round the neck and his arm was being twisted up behind while Frederika finished slamming and locking the door.

'It's the manager,' she said. The headlock loosened and Derek slid to the floor.

'What are you doing here?' asked Frederika. 'You should be tucked up in bed sleeping off that nice dinner you were having.'

'We came to rescue you. What happened to George?'

'George! Who's George?'

'The servant with the cow's head, he was going to give you some knives, did you get them?'

'No,' said Ramses. 'No words passed between us. Frederika seized the tray as soon as he put it down and gave him such a whack with it, right on the head.'

Hammering sounded on the door and heavy bodies were flung against it; there was no hope of escape that way. Weaponless but determined Ramses led them upstairs to find another way out.

They were in the laboratory, and astonished to see such a place crammed with equipment. None of their experience in Sultania had prepared them for the sight of a modern, fully equipped research laboratory with benches bearing dozens of glass retorts, humming motors, computers, racks of test tubes, pipettes and other delicate equipment.

They got a good view for all the lights were switched on a few seconds after they entered and Dr Singh appeared at the door. He had not been to bed for he still wore his white turban and dinner suit.

'Mr Vortimer,' he said, 'what is causing this commotion and what are you doing in the laboratory at this hour?' He caught sight of Ramses and Frederika. 'Oh, Mr Vortimer,' he cried. 'I warned you and warned you not to have anything to do with the prisoners. This foolishness of yours cannot be concealed from the doctor--'

He would have said more but was checked by the sight of Frederika striding forward. 'Stand aside you, or you'll feel the back of me hand!'

Dr Singh disappeared from the doorway for Frederika was in part armor except for her missing weapons. Though not big she looked most formidable, besides Ramses was at her shoulder and Dr Singh was not going to stand in the way of such a pair of warriors.

An alarm bell was ringing and circumstances suddenly altered. The doctor arrived dressed in a dressing gown and slippers. He too made no resistance as Frederika and Ramses went through the door into the passage, but stood aside.

However the ape guards had arrived and he ordered them to capture the two escapers which they did, after a struggle.

'Now,' said the doctor, when they were secured, 'Take Mr Vortimer too and put them in the pen together. This time they are not to escape: see to it! In the morning I will be looking into the matter and whoever was at fault will be punished most severely.'

'Hold it, hold it!' roared Derek who was still in the laboratory. 'Let my friends go! Let them come back in here or you'll be sorry'

'Stop talking nonsense, boy. Give yourself up, fighting is useless.'

Derek had taken note of some of the switches controlling the flow of liquid into the retorts. He rapidly flicked them off; the pattern of colored lights in the gauges collapsed, the motors stopped running, television monitors became dark, and liquids stopped flowing.

'You young idiot! You will ruin years of work; turn them on at once, turn them on! 'Singh. get those machines running again!'

Derek picked up a chair and made as if to smash a number of glass retorts filled with cloudy liquid and containing what appeared to be foetuses. The nutrient which had been dripping into these glass vessels to feed the foetuses had stopped flowing.

'If Singh or any of your monkeys come in here and try and take me I'll smash up half this equipment while they're doing it. Now, I'll count to ten; if my friends aren't in here unharmed by that time I'll start on this one.' He indicated a large glass retort that swarmed with life.

'Yes, yes!' screamed the doctor. You can have them back. Turn on the switches quickly!' He gestured to his supporters whose paws fell away from the two friends. As they came through the door Derek switched the equipment on again.

'Well done, manager, well done,' Ramses cried enthusiastically. 'Effendi Codd was right after all in sending you to us.'

Derek gave him the chair. 'Here, take this and be ready to use it.' He handed Frederika a broom that had been leaning against a bench. 'If anything goes wrong sweep all that glassware and stuff off the benches on to the floor. I'll stand by the switches.'

Frederika looked at her new possession. 'A broom eh? I've never touched one in my life, but now it's a weapon, good work, manager.'

'Vandals!' said the doctor. 'Enemies of science! This will be a lesson to me not to be so hospitable. My establishment will be closed in future to ungrateful, destructive rascals like you. I cannot afford to have my research threatened as it has been tonight by ignorant louts so typical of this beastly country.'

Derek had no time to discuss the doctor's problems, instead he said, 'Tell your people to bring swords, spears, bows, arrows and knives. They're to throw them through the door on to the floor, then they can stand well back.'

'You don't dream of escaping from here, do you?' asked the doctor. 'The place is surrounded.'

'Perhaps not, but there are three of us here now, and if we go down the laboratory will look as if it's been hit by a cyclone.'

Someone had forced the back door and a nightmare collection of figures rushed up the stairs ready for battle. The doctor screamed at them to go away and they retreated while he moved back out of sight in the passage.

Minutes later weapons started to appear, being tossed through the doorway and landing on the floor. Frederika dropped her broom, she and Ramses selected what arms they wanted from the pile. Derek stayed in the background ready to smash as much equipment as possible if they were attacked. Nothing happened. Shortly his friends were equipped with various spears, swords, and bows and arrows. The feel of weapons in their hands gave them new confidence. Derek gathered up the rest of the swords and spears and disposed of them down a laundry chute where they rattled out of sight.

'Now we can show these monkey people what real fighting is,' said Frederika. 'We will carve a passage out of this place over their bodies.'

Ramses did not disagree but looked first to Derek. 'You have bought us a breathing space, manager, and an opportunity we were too thickheaded to see. Do you have a plan that will save us from wading out of here knee deep in blood and guts? Especially as some of it may be ours.'

'Yes,' replied Derek, who had been thinking the matter through. 'We're going to take a hostage. Doctor, come in here!'

'The doctor, glaring through the doorway, ignored this order until Derek flicked the switches off once more and turned to Frederika.

He said loudly so everyone could hear, 'Freddie, I'm going to count to three. If the doctor's not in here and sitting in a chair by the time I finish use your broom. Sweep the benches clear of all this gear. And Ramses, everything that falls to the floor, just make sure it's smashed, and you can start on anything else you like. Ready! One -- Two'--Doctor Grozny shrieked and came into the laboratory.

He was made to sit on a chair and tied down with plastic coated electric wire. Derek had been a scout and knew all about knots. When the doctor was securely fastened to the chair the power was turned on again and the experiments continued.

'Now call in Webster. I want to speak to him. By the way, why did you call him that?'

'He was named after a former teacher of mine, a Professor of Biology who would not admit the correctness of' my theories.'

Derek shrugged and stepped out into the passage to call the ape. Webster appeared and peered through the door until he saw the doctor tied down and helpless.

'Yes, come in Webster,' said the doctor pretending, as best he could, that he was in charge of the situation. 'Mr Vortimer has something to say to you.'

Webster was astounded and it showed, even on his inexpressive face. In all his life he had never seen a god tied down with electric cord.

'Listen to me, Webster,' ordered Derek, trying to distract him from looking at the doctor. 'You will go and tell your people to saddle up four of the best boars. They must be ready to ride when we get

down to the courtyard. The gates must be open, because the doctor has decided to come with us. He will be alright and you can expect him back tomorrow or maybe the day after.' He thought Webster became unhappy at the thought of the doctor ever returning.

'None of the other boars is to be saddled. Is that right, doctor?' He stood with his hand on a switch.

The doctor nodded. 'Quite right! This is my decree. I will withdraw my presence from you for a short while but I will return and resume management of the laboratory. In the meantime Dr Singh will be in charge. If I see him I will tell him to take special care of the laboratory; if not you must pass my orders on.'

Once Webster had absorbed his instructions, as well as he could, he went away mumbling it over and over so as to remember.

'He'll forget,' muttered Frederika striding up and down impatiently. 'I should have gone myself.'

'And be cut down before you got to the end of the corridor! Have some sense, girl. You listen to the manager. I do not know what a Master of Business Administration might be but I can see it is not given to fools. If this is their quality we must get another Master of Business Administration and make him general of the army.'

The doctor paid little attention to the departure of Webster or the conversation which followed. To be seated in his beloved laboratory seemed to have a calming influence even though he was tied to a chair.

He watched Derek's movements around the room. 'What a pity you did not take up science. I have observed from your actions tonight that even though very young you exercise decision and forethought, and these are qualities absent in my present staff. If you had been a biologist, or bio-chemist I could have taught you so much.'

Dr Singh came to the door and gazed at them sadly over the spear points presented to his throat by Frederika and Ramses.

'You cannot leave us, doctor!' he said. 'Webster is down in the courtyard telling everyone that you are about to ride away and may not come back.' For the first time he realized that Doctor Grozny was tied to his chair and that the others were guarding him. He wrung his hands. 'Oh, Mr Vortimer, you cannot take the doctor away. Already the creatures of this place are buzzing like bees. You should hear them scream and roar and they have the grindstone out and are sharpening weapons.'

'It's not my problem,' said Derek, you brought it on yourselves, now you have to wear it.'

Dr Singh became even more agitated. 'Look, look!' He indicated an anxious group of fellow researchers who had gathered in the corridor behind him. 'You can't take the doctor off like this. Who will protect us? We will be attacked within hours; you have no idea of the hatred these creatures feel towards us.'

Derek could understand the feelings of the poor beings waiting outside the glass doors. Grozny was mad, but Singh and the others were not, and knew what they were making.

'You will not come with us,' said Derek, 'But the doctor will. He is to ride with our party. You will just have to wait until he comes back.'

Ramses joined in. 'If you fear for your lives that is too bad. Effendi Vortimer tells me that the weapons he dropped through the hole in the wall are now in the cellar. Go get them and prepare to defend yourselves. I understand now that it was the doctor who created these poor creatures, but you helped him, and if they turn against you do not expect pity from us.'

The doctor had listened to all this. 'If things go badly defend the laboratory to the last,' he ordered. 'Don't bother with the nurseries they won't attack them because we are growing their own kind there but if they get into the laboratory the work of years could be destroyed in a few minutes.'

Come, Dr Singh, you must play the man; I will be back soon but I am entrusting the laboratory to you, and it is your responsibility to keep it secure.'

'I am not a warrior but a medical researcher,' was the reply. 'What do I know of swords and spears? We make lives, not destroy them, and there are women in our company, what of them?'

'Well, they'd better learn how to handle a sword and spear, and do it fast,' interrupted Frederika who had been listening with contempt to the complaints and pleas of Dr Singh. 'The first thing you gotta do is barricade the stairs and if they get past that have a fall-back position worked out. It could be here, it could be one of the other rooms, find the one easiest to defend. How long you hold out depends on how good you are. You'd better get food and water too. You don't know how long you'll be here.'

'Right!' said the doctor. 'Your duty lies here at the laboratory. There are only two entrances, the doors and stairs. Make sure the lift is on this floor and prop the door open so no one else can use it. It is your responsibility, Singh; see to it!'

Dr Singh was making another plea for consideration but Derek cut him short by finding a push button mounted on the wall marked *Service*. He pressed it and one electric buzzer sounded in the hall and another further off. After a short time Herbert appeared. He could have been in bed and woken by the buzzer but Derek thought he was pretending and had been listening at keyholes. He became agitated when he saw the doctor tied to a chair and ran away to cower at the far end of the passage.

Derek had to buzz several times before he would venture back. 'I want a bag of food we can carry with us,' he ordered, and get warm clothes. We will be riding all night -- and send someone to find George. I want to speak to him.'

Herbert was in such a nervous state that he pretended not to see the doctor and listened trembling to Derek's instructions. He scuttled off as soon as he was allowed but screeched with laughter in the passage.

The researchers were still waiting outside the door. It was hard for them to go away even though the hour was late; they had to see what would happen next to their leader who had been brought low.

Chapter Eight

Doctor Grozny departs

Webster came back and they shrank away, some hid in the dining room afraid of the creature they had despised. Their courage had disappeared along with the doctor's authority.

Webster, unlike Herbert, could not take his eyes off the doctor as he was freed from his chair. Derek bound the tyrant's wrists together and he trailed after Ramses, led, as though on a leash, by more flex which was fastened to the cord round his wrists.

Herbert returned with clothing and food. Frederika took the bag of food and they threw a heavy jacket over the doctor's shoulders. For some reason Herbert had decided that as Derek was wearing a dinner suit a scarlet lined opera cloak would be suitable for his night ride. It was too late to send it back, though the matching top hat was left in the laboratory. There was no time to worry over clothes, they had to get out fast before the animals started to think about the possibilities of the situation. The cloak was fastened round his neck and they went on.

In the courtyard all of Grozny's creations had come to see the spectacle promised by Webster. Feather and fur were crowded together in a tight mass, all greedy with impatience to see the dreadful doctor captive at last and led away by strangers. When they knew the doctor was coming there was a hush until he appeared then they all chattered, hooted, twittered, screamed, or clapped their bills together according to their kind.

The doctor astounded everyone. He was at his mildest and did not seem upset by the circumstances of his departure from the laboratory but smiled and nodded as he passed. He seemed so benevolent that if his hands had been free he would have patted some of his smaller creations on the head.

Their boars were saddled and ready. They were monstrous, incredibly fierce and dangerous, made even more restless by the excitement of the crowd. The creatures were held closely by the apes for they were grunting, snorting and continually throwing their heads around attempting to gore those who stood nearby. Several of the crowd had come too close and had their clothing or harness caught by the tusks and been thrown to the ground. Of these only one had to be carried away. Happily no one had been trampled for several apes hung on to each boar to stop it from bolting through the crowd.

The doctor looked at these appalling mounts with interest. 'You have done well Webster,' he said to the ape leader who was standing by and staring at him out of bloodshot eyes. Webster's lower jaw chattered a little, perhaps with rage, as he looked at his creator.

'You must know that I have been watching your progress for some time,' said the doctor kindly. 'I have been considering your promotion within the organization and have been looking forward to great things from you. When I return make an appointment to see me before long; we must have a little chat about your future.'

As much as could be judged from Webster's face there would be no future for the doctor if they were to have their interview.

George was also present and pushed his way forward.

Frederika saw him. 'I'm sorry I hit you on the head. The manager told me what you were trying to do and I thank you for it.'

'Having a cow's head is not altogether bad,' said George, 'it can take harder bumps than a human head. What are you going to do with him?'

He is to come with us to guarantee safe conduct. -- Webster! Webster!' Derek called.

The ape appeared from the crowd.

'Webster,' said Derek. 'Take George as your leader, he will look after you.'

'Thank you for that,' said George, 'But you had better go quickly. We have no quarrel with you, especially now that you have brought him down, but once my people understand that he can no longer hurt them then I would not give much for his life - or yours either, if you get in the way.'

'I fear, George, that there is a germ of disloyalty in you that I had not suspected before,' remarked the doctor severely, with a flash of his old spirit. 'Disloyalty is a terrible thing George, it must be nipped in the bud before it can grow and spread.'

Someone gave him a hoist on to his mount so that he nearly disappeared over the other side, but he recovered and his remarkable calm persisted as he gazed down from the saddle at his discontented subjects.

Derek was helped up out of the struggling mass of animals and half humans when another voice was heard screaming on the edge of the crowd. It was Herbert, he had the whip and was waving it round his head in a kind of frenzy.

'Doctor, you've forgotten your whip!' he screamed and lashed out with it. Luckily he had not yet become expert in its use and the doctor caught the end of the thong by his two tied hands and with great strength twitched it from Herbert's grasp. The doctor soon had his whip by its butt end and Herbert fled with a yowl of terror while the others fell back at the sight of their devil with the whip in his hands once more.

Before anyone else had time to react Frederika smacked her beast on the rump with the flat of her sword and it burst out of the crowd tossing spectators right and left. 'Come on,' she cried, 'Let's go!' Her steed pigrooted across the courtyard trying to throw her off while she, in turn, tried to steer it towards the open gate. The other boars were quick to follow.

Derek had much to do in hanging on with a death grip on the saddle, knees clamped firmly. There was a glimpse of Ramses lying face down across another boar and swearing as he attempted to get a leg across the saddle and sit upright. His mount was swinging its head wildly from side to side trying to gore him, but without success.

The doctor's boar went in another direction and Derek was nearly pulled backwards out of the saddle as the flex he was holding suddenly tightened. He let go, the doctor would have to look after

himself, and soon the doctor's mount was galloping wildly with a length of flex trailing on the ground behind. In this confused manner they followed Frederika out of the gate and galloped flat out across open country towards the distant forest and away from the river. Their boars were not nearly as fast as horses but they covered the ground at a good rate. The difference in speed soon showed up for some horses that had been hidden from view in a hollow in the ground now appeared and began to overtake them.

There were four horses but only one had a rider, and he was on the smallest of all, scarcely more than a pony. This group was easily overtaking the party mounted on boars when the horses realized what they were pursuing and started to whinny and balk and tried to turn away.

The lone rider was short, outnumbered, but had strength enough to force the other horses to follow and dragged them by their reins. Frederika leapt from her boar, rolled a couple of times, and then ran towards him. She climbed into the saddle of one and held another while Ramses followed. The rider who had met them was Gus who had been ordered to wait outside, hidden while the other two went in to find Derek.

The two warriors soon had their horses under control and they spurred forward to pick up the reins of the boars they had just left. It was a lively encounter for the boars kept trying to charge the horses and gut them with their tusks and the horses were terrified by these disagreeable neighbors.

Derek's friends brought up the frantic chestnut mare and made him leave his boar and mount her while they were at full gallop, his most frightening experience so far.

Gus grabbed the reins of one boar to keep it under control and was about to go after another.

The doctor was still quiet in spite of his danger. He had gained some control over his mount, then rode at ease seeming to pay little attention to where they were travelling.

'Are we going to head back to Sultanopolis?' Roared Derek.

Ramses seemed a little surprised at the question. 'Why, we are still under instructions to go to the castle of Sir Humphrey. Don't forget you have to head a Commission of Enquiry. '

Other, more recent events, had driven all thought of the enquiry from Derek's mind. It seemed that after all that had happened no one could criticize if they had gone back to the capital to turn the doctor over to the authorities and to get fresh instructions.

'Shouldn't we go back and warn them?' was all he said.

Frederika flashed past on a terrified horse that was looking over its shoulder at the pursuing demon she was dragging behind her. 'No!' she shouted. 'They will have news about the attack in the forest by now. Some of the troopers that ran away would not have stopped riding until they got to the city. Their story won't lose anything in the telling, believe me.'

'Can't we get rid of these bloody pigs before they kill someone?' Derek was irritable and frightened at this dangerous gallop across the countryside in the dark in fear of falling off and being trampled. More than anything he wanted to be free of these wild, uncomfortable beasts, he was sore and

aching and longed to lie down somewhere for a good sleep. There was no hope of rest or relief anywhere.

'If your worship gives the word I can dispose of them,' said Gus, 'No worries, I used to work once in an abattoir.'

Frederika, her horse, and the boar she was leading galloped alongside. 'If we turn them loose now they may go back and the monkeys will get them. The fewer of them that have something to ride the better, as far as I'm concerned.'

'I think Gus and I should put them down,' was Ramses' opinion. 'I am not bloodthirsty, as you know, but if these animals run wild and start to breed with sows the countryside will become very dangerous.'

Derek thought it was dangerous already but said nothing. He was jolted at every stride of his horse and was in constant fear of falling off.

The doctor became upset when it was suggested that the boars be killed rather than turned loose. They were his creations and he repeatedly asked if they were aware of the ruinous cost of importing them and then breeding suitable strains. Ever since they left the laboratory he had been calm in spite of the excitement of their departure and the dangers of the ride. But any talk of putting down his boars made him angry.

By the time they reached the scattered stands of trees which stood on the edge of the main forest they had to make a decision on the animals. The matter was urgent, let them go or kill them. Once in the thick press of trees and bushes and tangled undergrowth the horses would not have room to run and dodge.

Frederika, decided to ignore the doctor and cut the throat of the animal she was leading. She leaped off her horse on to its neck and, using a tusk as a handle, tried to drag up its head while holding a knife in the other hand. The pig squealed and propped so she fell over its head and landed on the ground in front. The boar was about to be rip her with its tusks when Ramses crashed his horse into the animal and drove it to one side. Frederika missed the plunging hoofs and the tusks by rolling like an acrobat until she was able to catch hold of a stirrup leather on Gus' pony and ran with it. This gave her a start and she dived under the shelter of a bush where she stayed for a moment until matters had been sorted out.

The instant she disappeared the boar forgot its intention of killing her and galloped off, erratically slashing at bushes and undergrowth with its tusks as it went, and squealing.

In the excitement of saving Frederika Ramses had dropped the rope of the boar he was leading. It took off followed by the doctor's animal.

Frederika, unhurt as usual, was climbing back into the saddle while Gus held her horse.

Derek wanted to follow and rescue the man before he fell off and was gored or trampled to death.

Ramses shook his head at the thought of having anything further to do with the departing scientist. 'The man made them,' he said, 'and if they destroy him in the end, so be it; besides we have no horse for him.'

'My father was killed by a wild boar bigger than anyone had seen ever before,' said Frederika. 'Now I know who made it. I hope he falls off and they kill him.'

The doctor was galloping far across the dark plain with his little escort. He was sitting upright in the saddle, though his hands were tied, and he had not cried out for help or even turned his head to see if anyone was coming to the rescue.

'It's a pity we didn't put them down, Your Honour,' said Gus. 'I know how dangerous they are. I used to work for a nobleman once who enjoyed boar hunting. My job was to stir up the animal until it charged then run towards my master with the pig after me. His sport was to kill it before it killed both of us.'

Gus' companions, while taking in this information, noted the direction in which the runaways were galloping. It would not take them anywhere near the laboratory. It seemed the boars did not have the same homing instincts as horses, who would have found their way back to where they were stabled.

'Now they have left us that will confuse the trail,' said Ramses. 'If the apes follow they will be more interested in getting their mounts back than capturing us. Come, we will go a little way on and make camp.'

They slept on the ground for the rest of the night about a mile or so into the forest. The sky was clear and starry so the air was cold. Derek's cloak was as warm as a blanket and he was glad of it. He had taken off the bow tie and slipped it into his pocket.

In the morning they ate some of the food from the laboratory and then tried to work out their next moves. Frederika and Ramses thought it would be about another ten miles to the road through forest country which neither of them had travelled before. A sharp watch would be needed to avoid bandits, wild beasts, and perhaps unwelcome company from the laboratory.

It was a dangerous forest with tangled bushes and fallen logs, so closely grown and wild that it was hard for the horses to push their way through. They rode in single file, changing position every half hour or so to give the leading horse a spell. Often they stumbled over hidden obstacles and now and then came across fast running streams lined with fern, bracken and thorn bushes.

Later they found a track. It was narrow and overgrown, suitable only for horse riders or travellers on foot but it offered an easier way than the wilderness they had just crossed. Best of all it was going more or less in the direction they wanted to travel. So they followed it. Soon after they came upon a broad, strongly flowing river.

For a while the track ran alongside the river and about forty feet above the surface, well above the flood line which was marked with debris of leaves and tree limbs caught in the bushes lining the steep banks. To their left was a ridge and an overhanging canopy of trees.

They paused for a minute in the sunshine for the sun was about to disappear behind the ridge. The flowing water made hardly a sound as small eddies and ripples formed and disappeared on the surface, driven by a strong current. A flock of birds was calling and swooping just above the water as they picked up insects in flight.

Then they came to a village in a clearing.

The village had been built above the flood-line but with a clear view down to the river and a sandy beach. Wooden posts had been driven into the sand as though boats or canoes were hauled out of the water and tied there. They picketed their horses in a grassy spot while scouting around on foot.

The little settlement appeared deserted. It was made up of a number of huts scattered around the clearing and built of wood or wattle and daub; the only substantial building was a 'long house' made of logs. It had a high, peaked front and a raised verandah facing the river.

Though the village was deserted they must have been seen from the forest. They would have ridden on except the horses were tired, they had little food left and wished to shelter for the night.

They looked in all the huts, holding weapons ready for a hostile reception. There was no one there.

At last they approached the 'long house', which dominated the village. It had a straw thatched roof held from moving by a criss-cross pattern of long poles which were tied in place. Just under the eaves were window openings high up and small. They had been made by leaving out some of the clay that was jammed between the logs and smoothed by hand. The building could be defended with arrows or spears from these. The center post which supported the peak of the verandah roof was carved with designs and very old.

There was only one entry to the building and that was by way of a door at the front which was protected from the weather by the overhanging roof.

A fire had been left burning inside and gentle wreaths of smoke were coming through the window openings but most escaped through a hole in the roof. They stepped cautiously on to the wooden floor of the verandah and Frederika used her spear to push aside the leather curtain which kept out the winds but also stopped smoke from escaping.

A long table was in the center of the room with chairs and stools on either side. A whole village could eat here and be served from cooking pots which hung over the fire. Either the newcomers, or someone else, had frightened the villagers away no more than an hour ago, but in spite of the strangeness of it all they did not feel like moving on.

Gus fed the fire and inspected the pots. This was satisfactory because they contained enough food to feed a village, it was half cooked, and Gus set about finishing the job.

Not knowing what the villagers might be planning. Frederika and Ramses kept up an almost constant patrol around the building having first made sure there were no hiding places inside.

Nothing happened for about an hour. There was no sign of the owners of the house and the clearing, which must have been busy during the day, was quiet and still.

Frederika shook her head over the design of the building. 'Anyone could get us out of here,' she said. 'Just a few fire arrows in the thatch and it would burn a treat.'

Gus called them in to eat, the food was almost ready to serve.

They were about to sit down when someone blundered against the leather curtain and fell through the doorway on to the floor.

Chapter Nine

Lady Cicely

Frederika and Ramses instantly dived in opposite directions away from the light of the fire and leaped to their feet swords and spears at the ready. 'Get out of the light!' roared Ramses. Derek and Gus scuttled into the shadows. They waited for something to happen but there was no sound as the figure on the floor struggled to rise.

Without a word the two warriors moved forward and took station by the doorway while Derek and Gus knelt by the helpless stranger.

'What is it?' muttered Frederika.

'It's a girl, she is not armed and we can't see any wounds.'

'Hmm! Cover me!' Frederika took her bow, fitted an arrow, then shot past the curtain with Ramses close behind. They took an end each of the wooden veranda and faced opposite directions waiting for attack, but no one came.

The fires outside had died away and an evening hush had descended on the clearing. It was deserted. Looking round they once more withdrew to the shelter of the house.

The girl was young, about eighteen and, as far as Derek could see, would have been good looking but for the marks of exhaustion on her face and her torn and muddied clothes.

Gus and Derek carried her closer to the fire and Gus threw on some dried sticks so they could see better by the light of the fire. There were some village made candles on the table. which Gus had lit earlier. By this poor light they could study the girl who appeared to have fainted.

'Derek found a blanket, folded it and put it under head. Ramses and Frederika had come back in and taken a side each of the house. They were going from window to window, looking out. They scarcely glanced at the girl.

'This is a young lady of quality,' announced Gus. 'No one from the village would have riding boots so soft and strong. I know, my people trained me as a leatherworker. The ladies of the Sultan's court would be pleased to wear a riding habit of style like this.' He stood back, unwilling to touch one so obviously a member of the upper class. As a manservant it was not his place to lay his hands on a noblewoman, no matter what.

'Probably stolen,' said Fredrerika from her place by the window. 'I know what these peasants are like.

'I think not. Lady Frederika,' retorted Gus. 'The clothes fit and so do the boots.'

Derek had some water. He raised the girl's head and held a cup to her lips. She drank and some ran over her chin; he wiped it away as she stirred.

'Who are you?' asked the girl, looking round for a familiar face.

'We are only travellers,' answered Derek. 'Just passing through on the way to the castle of Sir Humphrey. We thought we would be given hospitality here but there is no one about, but don't worry we will move on in the morning.'

Frederika strode across. 'It's alright, I will question the girl. Gus, you get on with your cooking. Now girl, you can speak up, tell the truth and fear nothing. All we want is information and if you don't lie to us you can go free. There is no need to be afraid.'

'I am not afraid of you, Frederika!' said the girl. 'You always were a tomboy and it is a pity you did not grow up to be a lady instead of wearing armor and carrying a sword. I am sure your mother would be very sorry if she could see you now.'

The girl had risen while saying this and drew a stool to the fire to sit and warm her hands and feet, for though the day had been fine an evening chill was penetrating the house.

She watched as Derek put more firewood on the blaze.

Frederika snatched a candle from the table and held it close to the face of the stranger. She swore. 'It is you, Cicely! Where the hell did you spring from and what are you doing wandering around on your own here? You're miles from home.'

Cicely, for that was her, name ignored the question and spoke to Gus. 'Gus, isn't it? I heard Lady Frederika call you Gus.' Gus nodded. 'When will dinner be ready, Gus? I have been wandering in the forest for hours; I'm utterly famished and the smell from that pot is divine. If you don't serve it soon I will have to help myself.' She saw Ramses.

'Lord Ramses!' cried the girl, 'how lovely to see you, and how charming to meet a civilized person in this dreadful place.' She ignored Frederika and held out her hand which Ramses, after his first astonishment, bowed over and kissed.

'Lady Cicely,' he said, 'what an unexpected pleasure to come across a single rose blooming in this wilderness. We never looked for such a charming addition to our company.'

She smiled at the speech. 'A wilted rose I fear.' She plucked at her skirts. 'I would not let one of my handmaids wear a dress in this condition and as for the boots!' She pushed her feet towards the fire. 'I would have the girl whipped if she let them get into the state they are in. Now you are a gentleman, Lord Ramses! Not a word of surprise at finding me here and in this condition; no comments about my appearance. We do value gentlemen such as you.'

Frederika sniffed and said in a low voice, 'Oh, it's Lady Muck today, is it? Always bunging on the helpless maiden routine for the men.' She was overheard, and her words had been noted.

Ramses quickly changed the subject. 'I believe you have not met our new manager. He has just accepted the position. Lady Cicely, may I present the Honourable Effendi Vortimer, Master of Business Administration and manager of our dear country.'

Lady Cicely was astonished at this introduction. 'I do beg your pardon, Effendi Vortimer! Lord Ramses, how can you possibly permit the manager to put wood on the fire like a mere servant?'

She held out her hand to Derek. 'Really, Effendi Vortimer, I must warn you against performing any kind of menial task. If we do servant's work how will they respect us? I am sure if you had asked, Lady Frederika she would have done it for you. Somehow she has managed to get a different set of values to the rest of us.'

'At least I'm defending the country. Not poncing around and pretending to be a lady.'

Cicely ignored the remark but said, 'Frederika you always were such a tomboyish girl. Do you remember the time you fell into the village dung pit and mother wouldn't let you back into the castle until you went for a swim in the moat, and we threw fresh clothes for you down from the battlements?'

Ramses cleared his throat loudly. He changed the conversation yet again by asking how this young noblewoman had got into the forest clearing exhausted and without servants or supporters.

'Ah, all dead, I fear,' said Lady Cicely who, as Derek soon discovered, was a daughter of Lord Smedhurst, yet another member of the nobility.

'We went on a picnic,' she said. 'Daddy thought it would be alright, he had already dealt with a lot of thieves and tramps in the area, cleaned out their hiding places and so on, so we thought it would be safe enough. My maids and some young knights, we all went together.'

'What happened?'

'Some very rough looking men on horses appeared from nowhere. They chased us and the knights stayed to fight them.'

'What happened to the young men?'

'Those poor boys are all dead. It was to be a picnic, and they weren't wearing proper armor, or expecting to fight anyone.'

'And these men that appeared from nowhere, they caught you?'

'Yes, me and my maids. They took us back the way we had come and I saw the boys on the ground, and the robbers had taken their horses. Some of them recognized me so they took the maids' horses too, and told them to walk back to the castle and tell Daddy they wanted ten thousand dinars for my safe return.'

'What happened then? How were you able to get away?'

'One of the men held the reins of my horse, we rode like mad and crossed the river by a ford, went through a village this one, I think, and then we ran into more trouble. Give me some wine.'

'Sorry, Lady Cicely, no wine. Gus found some village beer, and we have water.'

She shuddered. 'Beer made by peasants, no thank you I will take water. She drank and continued. 'There were dreadful hopping things with bows and arrows and they ambushed us on the track. My horse was hit by an arrow so it reared up and I fell off.

'Were you hurt?'

'Not really, only a bit bruised and sore. I don't think anyone noticed that I had fallen off, or else they were too busy fighting'. I ran away and no one noticed. I've been walking and running ever since until I got here.'

'This country is becoming more and more dangerous,' said Ramses. 'Armed bandits we can deal with but these kangaroo people, as the manager calls them, that attack without any reason, they are going to be a great nuisance until we can get rid of them. I wish the doctor had found somewhere else to practise his magic.'

Frederika held up her hand. 'There's someone outside. Put out those candles!'

Gus instantly blew them out and the civilians stepped back into the shadows while Frederika and Ramses stood by the door. A pause followed, then the leather curtain was softly pushed aside and a small branch with leaves on it appeared through the opening. It waved from side to side in an apologetic manner.

They all looked at it. 'Enter!' barked Ramses sharply, 'Leave your weapons outside the door.'

A man came in. He was unarmed and held his hands up with the palms facing forward in a gesture of peace.

'Well?'

'You are in our house. We have been watching to see if you were going to leave but it is getting dark and the little ones are cold.'

'Where are your men?'

'They are not here. If they had been here we would not have let that band of cutthroats ride through our village so easy. We have all been hiding in the forest.' He sniffed. 'The children are hungry too. Would you share dinner with us?'

He was a sturdy individual with a weather tanned face, light brown eyes and snaggle teeth which appeared from time to time when he grinned. 'We have had quite a debate about you. We hope you are visitors and not raiders, but they sent me on to ask to be let in out of the cold and dark. There are about thirty women and children, all told. It's their house you know, and we will feel better with people like you standing guard.'

'Manager!' said Ramses, 'If they were warriors wanting to fight their way in we would know what to do; but women and children, that is different. He may be telling the truth, what is your opinion?'

'Lord love us,' said the man, 'Of course I'm telling the truth. I just want to get my people under cover for the night, tomorrow, well, we'll see.'

'We couldn't defend the place against a real attack,' said Frederika, 'That roof thatch would go up straight away if anyone threw a bit of fire on it. I don't mind staying the night and we will guard it turn and turn about, but if it starts to burn I'm off, and don't try and stop me.'

'Well, I have to admit that times were a lot more peaceful when our grandfathers built the long house,' replied the man. 'The way things are now I don't know what's going to happen to us, blowed if I do. We just get on as best we can.'

'Don't let them in,' said Lady Cicely. 'We nobles can't associate with the lower classes.'

Derek made up his mind. 'They can come in but no funny business. We will be leaving first thing in the morning and you can have your house back, but for tonight we want to sleep here.'

The man was satisfied with this.

'Two at a time,' ordered Ramses. 'Just let them in slowly.'

'If any man comes through the door carrying weapons he'll be sorry,' said Frederika. 'I'll stick a spear right through his belly.'

The man went outside, whistled, and after a time they could hear feet shuffling on the platform and the murmur of voices.

There were about thirty people, as he had said, mostly women or girls because there was no male present older than about ten years of age. They came in two by two, as instructed. They were glad to get in out of the evening cold and the children soon made for the fire where they sniffed at the aroma from the cooking pots.

Lady Cicely was aghast at the sight of them. She sighed, frowned, and looked at Ramses accusingly. Their clothes and country manners did nothing to reassure her.

'Really!' she said, 'there are cozy little huts outside; they could have used those instead of intruding on us. Of course they are peasants and don't feel discomfort the way we do so there is no reason at all why they should not be out there where they belong.'

The others paid little attention and Frederika was going to disagree with anything Lady Cicely might say. She had been doubtful when it was decided to let the river people in but Cicely's dislike of the newcomers made up her mind.

'Of course they should be here,' she said, 'It's their house and they belong. Just leave them alone, Cis. Go back to sharpening your claws.' Lady Cicely sniffed and sat closer to the fire so no one could get in front of her.

Dinner had been delayed long enough so Gus and some of the women proceeded to turn out the cooking pots. A steaming fish broth was served up in bowls, followed by a stew that would have been enough for twice their number, so everyone was urged to eat second and third helpings.

The dull old house had come to life with the bustle and talk of the villagers as they went about their business of clearing up, tidying, getting the children ready for bed, and so on.

While the visitors were sitting at the table and watching this pleasant activity they asked the headman about the missing villagers, but they could get little from him. He would talk about the weather and the history of the village, about crops and fishing and the scraps of news they received from the outside world but was quite vague when asked about the expected return of the men, or why they went away.

The visitors set up their own watch for the night with two hour shifts.

Lady Cicely refused to have any part in guarding the place and Frederika was not serious in asking.

She said that if Frederika wished to engage in such unladylike activities as playing sentry she could do so. Her opinion was that Frederika was a disgrace to her family, the Hohenbergers. Everyone who knew her would not expect anything different but no female of noble birth should be called on to take part in any such activity.

Frederika left her while she was saying all this and went out to have a look round. Moments later she burst past the leather curtain that hung at the door. 'Lights out! lights out!' she shouted, 'Somebody just had a shot at me!'

Little light could have leaked out through the small, high windows, even with the candles burning and the fire had been allowed to die down. The candles were put out and the leaders hurriedly conferred in the gloom.

'Are there many out there?'

'Couldn't say, it's too dark. I don't think they're up wind, I couldn't smell anything.'

She had an arrow in her hand which she had wrenched from the wall as she ran inside.

'We should be out of here,' said Frederika. 'If they set the roof on fire there'll be no stopping it. The whole place will go up in flames and they'll be able to see us as we come out.'

'What about my people?' asked the headman. 'You just can't run off and leave us because you're afraid. You nobles are supposed to protect common folk.'

He could not have made a stronger plea to Frederika and Ramses than appealing to their sense of honour, but Lady Cicely didn't like the idea.

'Don't be selfish,' she said. 'Have you no consideration for others? You people are peasants and will not live long, but we are healthy, and it is our duty to stay alive for the good of Sultania. How can the country survive if the ruling class is to be murdered by savages?'

In spite of this powerful argument the children responded by howling dismally and some of the women threw themselves to their knees to beg for protection.

A girl Derek had noticed earlier did not plead for help. Instead she crouched by the fire and picked out some of the smaller hearthstones which she handed around. 'You can go!' she announced loudly. 'We'll do it ourselves; stones, everyone. Get some good throwing stones we'll show these strangers we can fight our own way out of here.'

'You be quiet Shani,' ordered the headman. He turned to the strangers. 'There is a secret way out to the river, a tunnel. Once we are on the river bank we'll have to take to the boats. I need warriors to help escort the women and little ones to a safe place we know about. I want your promise to escort us there.'

'Where is this tunnel you speak of? Show us and we will consider what promises we will make.'

'I will show you nothing until I have your promise. I can get my people out of here but I want them to live through the night and the next day until we can get to the safe place. Our men-folk will know where we are and when they get back they can protect us; until then we need you.'

'Daddy would know how to deal with insolence like this,' said Lady Cicely. 'You have a fire, put his feet in that for a while until he learns better manners and tells us this secret way of getting out of here.'

Frederika still thought a sudden rush towards the river was best but Lady Cicely's idea now changed her mind. 'Oh, shut up and listen to the man,' she said. 'You're not at home now, Cis.'

'We can't walk away and leave them to be burned or killed with arrows,' said Derek 'I was made manager of this country and told I was to advise the Council of Elders. You're the only ones here so my advice is 'stick with it' and get them out if we can.'

Lady Cicely could scarcely believe what she was hearing. 'Everyone knows Frederika is mad, she always has been, but I expected a manager to have a little common sense.' She turned in desperation to Ramses 'You can't listen to these fools! I am a member of the nobility and your first duty is to get me safely to father's castle. If we ride now we can leave them to enjoy themselves dodging arrows. You must do it Lord Ramses, otherwise I will tell my father to make a personal complaint to the Sultan that you are a traitor to your class.'

Ramses would have answered but was interrupted. Frederika had stood on a bench to listen and watch at a window. She raised her hand. 'There's someone on the verandah. Get ready to stick them if they try and come through the door.'

Derek turned to the headman. 'We'll do it,' he said, in spite of Lady Cicely's protests. 'We will escort you for two days. After that we must go about our own business. Now, show us the way out.'

Chapter Ten

Escape downriver

'Fair enough.' The man moved quickly to a far corner of the house and threw back a hand woven floor rug. Underneath was a trapdoor which he lifted. This revealed a square hole and the start of a tunnel which receded into blackness. He jumped in. 'I'll go first, but I want a fighter with me and one at the end in case we're followed.'

Derek gestured for Gus to go first, and handed down lit candles for them to carry.

Some of the children squealed and struggled when they were passed down into the pit but two mothers went first to take them in their arms. Ramses and Frederika stood by the door ready to slice up anyone who tried to force a way inside.

'I am not going to get into that hole with all those awful people,' declared Lady Cicely. 'I would sooner stay here; Frederika may be imagining things again. I think those nasty creatures have gone back into the forest and you would have had all this trouble for nothing.'

'You will get in or I will put you in,' retorted Ramses. 'I will not go to your father and say I left you to behind to be killed or taken for ransom.'

'She was always frightened of cobwebs and spiders and dark places,' said Frederika. 'Do you remember the time I locked you in a dungeon, Cis? They had to keep you in bed for a week after that.'

'I'll never forget and I'll never forgive you,' said Lady Cicely as she disappeared into the tunnel, clutching a candle. 'I remember the nurse gave you a terrible whipping and it served you right.'

'It was worth it,' said Frederika, jumping down after her.

Ramses was last and pulled the trapdoor shut behind him in the hope that it would overlooked, at least for a while.

They were in an earth tunnel that had been propped up in places with timber. Gus and the children could walk upright but the adults crouched almost double. Frederika and Ramses, who was tall, both had trouble with their helmets catching on the roof. They crawled on hands and knees. Derek was between Shani and Frederika. Ramses came last. Apart from the sound of breathing and the shuffling of their bodies there was nothing to be heard but Lady Cicely's complaints.

This did not last long. No more than ten minutes could have passed since entering the tunnel to when an order was passed down the line and everyone stopped for a brief pause. The underground passage had come to an end in a hollow below the top of the river bank. The opening was shielded by bushes and creepers.

'A wise precaution,' said Ramses softly to Thorkild, for that was the name of the headman. When everyone was out they helped him replace some of the greenery that had been pushed aside.

'It's been there many years,' said Thorkild. 'It's not much of a secret in the village because all the children discover it at some time or another but we ask them not to talk about it before strangers. Now, I don't suppose you gentlefolk know how to handle boats and canoes.' He led them along a path by the water's edge, still concealed from the long house.

My people were brought up on the river and these women and children have been in and out of boats all their lives. I'll put you each in a different canoe because they're chancy things for those who aren't used to them and we can look after you better if there is only one of you to each.'

About fifty paces along the path they found the canoes which were safe and undamaged. They were hidden in a hollow close to the water's edge, covered under canvas which was masked by having living creepers trailed over it.

'Boots off,' ordered Thorkild as they threw the covering aside. 'No one gets into these canoes with boots on because they could go right through the bottom.'

Derek looked round while sitting down removing his boots. Even though the night was dark he could see his companions by a flickering light.

'It's the roof,' suggested Frederika. 'I told you it would burn as soon as they laid some fire on it.' They could hear the noise of a fire now and see sparks drifting up from where the longhouse roof

was being consumed by fire. Some of the sparks floated down and winked out as they touched the surface of the river.

'They're probably still waiting for us to come out,' said Frederika, 'But they won't be doing that for long and they'll soon be looking to see where we got to.'

'Yes,' agreed Ramses, 'there is little time. Cicely you cannot get into the canoe wearing riding boots; now, take them off instantly.'

'I will do nothing of the sort,' Lady Cicely retorted. 'If you refuse to escort me I shall find one of the horses and ride straight home and tell my father to report your traitorous and cruel behavior to the Sultan.'

'What your father says is his own affair. But he is not here and I order you to take off your boots and get into a canoe. If you do not we will hold you down and remove them ourselves. Come along, Miss, now! We are running out of time.'

Lady Cicely began to unlace her boots while mumbling and snivelling. Never before in her life had she taken off her own boots.

None of the villagers wanted to take Cicely but Gus volunteered. He said he was a champion canoeist and boat handler on the rivers of his own country, which, Derek knew, was up in the mountains somewhere. Gus held the canoe in the fast flowing current while Cicely struggled with her bootlaces.

Shani, the girl who wanted to fight the archers by throwing stones, now appeared. She said to Derek, 'You can come in my canoe, I'll get you there safely.'

Cicely was having a terrible struggle to unlace and take off her boots so Shani produced a knife with which she slashed the laces.

Cicely screamed as they pulled off her boots and she was dumped into Gus' canoe. Her boots were dropped on top of her. Gus got in and paddled out into midstream. Shani and Derek followed.

The watchers on the river could see by the light of the flames that it was the kangaroo men who had attacked and they were bounding towards the bank, ready to loose off their arrows.

The roof thatch of the long house was flaring and the flames were eating their way downwards towards the timber walls which would soon take fire. The old logs laid horizontally had been in place for many years. They were dried from long use and would burn until the structure was entirely destroyed.

'Don't stand up,' roared Ramses for he saw that Frederika was rising to use her bow and arrow to better effect. Everyone shouted at her but it was too late. She upset the balance of the canoe and it went straight over on to its side spilling everyone into the river.

This mishap was no problem to the villagers. They all bobbed up again in a moment and their heads were visible in the water as they clustered round the canoe setting it to rights and recovering the paddles.

Frederika had disappeared and Derek, who was watching horrified from another canoe, could picture her being dragged to the bottom by the weight of the armor and gear she was carrying.

Lady Cicely was shrilly commanding full speed ahead to get away from the dreaded bowmen.

She was left on her own because Gus and Shani went over the sides of their canoes like otters and disappeared. All the heads had gone from near Frederika's canoe everyone was down below, searching the bottom of the river.

Ramses was now loosing off arrows to make their attackers keep back from the bank. He shot while sitting down and holding the bow horizontal.

'Get away from here,' he called to Derek while an arrow flashed now and then from his bow. 'You can't help and she is probably drifting downstream. You are only making a target now, move off!'

'He's right!' shouted Thorkild. 'If they don't get your friend in a few minutes it will be too late. The current will sweep her away and we will find her body in a day or two in the pool under the waterfall. If they find her they will bring her up, if not there is nothing we can do. Come along.'

'This was hard advice to accept but Derek was helplessly adrift. Thorkild sent two women to look after him and Cicely. They swam over and flipped themselves expertly into the canoes without upsetting them. Cicely was in a bad mood, not made better by being splashed.

A sudden commotion in the river behind them drew everyone's attention. Shani and Gus had burst to the surface bearing between them a sodden figure. It was Frederika. Her helmet had gone and her blonde hair was unbound and floating in the water. As soon as the woman in Derek's canoe saw this she started paddling strongly with the current refusing to turn and offer any aid.

'Don't worry,' she said. 'If Shani can't bring her to shore no one can. She's the best swimmer in the village and she'll get your friend ashore at the island.'

Ramses was forced to follow and could not loose off any more arrows because his canoe was racing after the others. The kangaroo people were now behind him.

No one attempted to help Shani and Gus as they swam supporting Frederika between them. Children and adults popped to the surface to breathe and seeing the rescuers were supporting the unconscious Frederika they swam towards them, gathering up floating arrows and paddles as they went.

Soon the river began a wide curve to the left and their pursuers who had been bounding alongside them, and letting off the occasional arrow, started to fall behind.

'We'll stop at the island,' shouted Thorkild. 'Left hand side.'

They were coming to an island in the river. It was a rocky outcrop, and a few trees had lodged in it here and there. Over the years enough sand and soil had gathered at the foot of a low cliff to make a tiny beach where there was room to draw up the canoes. They were sheltered from arrows and the only way they could be attacked was for the kangaroo warriors to swim out to them.

Thorkild stopped Derek and Ramses from wading into the strong current to help pull Frederika to shore. He understood their anxiety but said that one drowning a night was quite enough. The

rescuers came in swimming strongly and Frederika squelched as she was laid on the sand. Her face was white and she lay with mouth open and eyes turned up, her hair was lank and some strands lay across her face.

Derek looked down and thought he had never seen such a pitiable sight. The villagers treated her according to their custom with rough first aid, squeezing her stomach, rubbing and vigorously working her arms and feet.

Derek pushed them aside. He had been a Venture Scout and knew what they were doing was useless; the girl would slip from coma to death within minutes. Somewhere at home was a first aid badge, an award for one of the things at which he had really excelled

He started to give mouth to mouth resuscitation while Ramses and then Shani, under his direction, pressed in steady rhythm on the unconscious girl's rib cage. Everyone crowded round to see this novel method of first aid. The villagers had lived by the river for generations and in that time many drowning people had drifted by. They had been very good at dragging these unfortunates from the water but no one had thought to breathe into the mouth and nose of an unconscious person.

Lady Cicely's instructions to gather driftwood and make a fire were ignored and she looked on as the attempt went on to revive the unconscious girl.

'Poor Frederika,' she said, shaking her head and shivering in her wet clothes. 'She never would learn. I warned her and warned her that no good would come of a girl running around in armor and pretending to be a warrior. No good has ever come of it and it never will. Look at that Joan of Arc person. I pointed out her story as a warning to any young lady not to dress up in men's clothes, but it was useless. Pity she never took my advice and made fun of me.'

No one listened, they were too intent on the drama being played out on the beach as people took turns with the work.

Derek was beginning to despair and Ramses' face was showing anger and grief when at last they were rewarded with signs of life returning. The villagers shouted and clapped as Frederika's fingers twitched. She breathed a few times shallowly and quickly, then her eyes fluttered and she vomited some water.

She looked up vacantly at the ring of faces on the dark beach.

'Are you alright?' were her first words as she looked wonderingly at Derek. She reached up vacantly to touch her wet hair and realized that her helmet had gone. With sudden concern she patted her side. 'My sword's gone. I've lost my sword!'

'You idiot,' shouted Derek, suddenly overcome by a mixture of shock and relief, 'you nearly lost worse than that. What do you mean by standing up in a canoe? Anyone but a dill would know it would fall over, and all that weight you carry around with you took you straight to the bottom. Bloody sword!, you're lucky to be here at all.'

Ramses was shocked at this and put his hand on Derek's arm to restrain any further outbursts.

Frederika coughed up more some water. 'I'll do what I bloody please and I don't have to ask you; I don't need a manager, or a nanny.'

'Do not speak like that!' Said Ramses, while Lady Cicely sniffed in the background. 'Tonight you were in the presence of death and you would be giving an account of your life to your maker at this very moment if this girl, Shani, and Gus too, had not brought you up from the bottom of the river; and the manager was a marvel. If he had not been here tonight you would have died. We all saw him blow the very breath of life into your nostrils while the rest of us pumped your chest. It was simple yet something we had not seen before. We must send our young people to the great schools of the west, we have so much to learn.'

'That's right,' said Shani. 'We brought you ashore to bury you because most people that long under water don't get over it. That was the luckiest thing I've seen for a while.'

Frederika was mortified at hearing this and the two young people made their apologies.

Derek was surprised and ashamed of his outburst; it had happened without thought. Until that moment he had not considered his feelings towards Frederika. The words had been wrenched out of him by an unexpected burst of relief and rage at the thought of her having been so rash and thoughtless. Her body could have been even now at the bottom of the river weighed down by armor and weapons and rolling over and over in the rushing current.

'We have the sword,' said Thorkild, and laid it on the sand within reach. 'The children took it so you wouldn't weigh so much in the river. They also found your helmet and your bow and arrows.' The children shyly laid these things on the sand, while Frederika muttered her thanks.

'We should go on,' he continued. 'The falls are about ten miles downstream and I want us to go ashore there while it is still dark.'

'Lady Frederika is wet through,' said Cicely. 'I really think you should light a fire and let us all dry off. I'm soaked too. It is not right that I should have to get round in wet clothes like these, especially with my bootlaces cut.' She glared at Shani.

Thorkild shrugged. 'Shani is wet too, most of us are. We will soon get warm and dry by paddling hard, that is how we dry off after falling into the river. I think you should do the same, and the Lady Frederika also, if she feels well enough.'

Lady Cicely was appalled at the suggestion that she should do any paddling. She would have turned to Ramses to rebuke the man but was shocked even more when he agreed and said the sooner they got away from the place the better.

'Yes, we must go on,' said Frederika getting to her feet with Derek's aid, after making several attempts to get up on her own. 'Maybe we can find somewhere safe and warm to sleep once the sun is up.' They were weary as the reaction after terror and anxiety began to set in. The past days had been spent in a seemingly unending experience of battle and flight.

They departed the island with Thorkild in the leading canoe. 'Follow me exactly,' he told them. before they left. 'The river is high right now, and flowing very strongly, but we'll come across boulders just under the surface to tear the bottom out of a canoe. And there are hidden snags, like fallen trees and such. You passengers, don't jump about or scream at danger; the villagers know exactly what to do.'

'Tell them about the portages,' someone cried.'

'Oh yes, the portages. There are two stretches of the river where it's so dangerous we have to get out, carry our gear, and the canoes, and walk for a while. That's all, now let's go.'

'We shouldn't get out at all,' said Shani forcefully. 'There's nothing to it, the .manager and. me, we'll go through Hell's Gate first, if you like, and show how easy it is.'

'No!' shouted Thorkild. 'Absolutely not. Not at night, and not while the river's so high. It's madness!'

Shani did not argue further but took Derek by the arm and led him to her canoe and held it steady as he climbed in and squatted down.

Afterwards Derek could not remember how long he was on the river, it seemed like hours, while he gripped the sides of the canoe with whitened knuckles as Shani coolly steered them through turbulent water and past great rocks which stood firm against the rushing water.

Later the party had to get out and carry the canoes over rough tracks to a spot lower down the river, past the cataracts which were too steep and rocky even for this daring race. As they were pulling into the bank for the second portage Shani was the only one who did not want to avoid the danger. She had shot the rapids before and offered to take Derek through in a quarter of the time and with a tenth of the energy required to walk round them. She explained that it was very exciting and if the canoe did tip over she would be on hand to drag him out of the river.

Thorkild, her father, heard her talking like that and shouted at her not to be so stupid. He said it was madness to even think about such a thing, particularly with Derek as passenger. They were still in her canoe, waiting to land when he ordered her to come ashore. Everyone else had got out on to some small, smooth stones at the river's edge ready for the next portage and she was hanging on to a tuft of grass waiting for Derek to alight.

As soon as she heard Thorkild's order she let go of the grass and pushed her paddle at the bank. 'We'll see you at the next landing,' she shouted, and then to Derek, 'You're going to enjoy this.' In a moment they were too far from the bank to leap ashore and Derek felt as though a powerful hand had grasped the boat from below and was shoving them at an accelerating speed towards a mass of white, churning water.

Shani paddled strongly to skirt the edge of a whirlpool that would have dragged them under 'Don't move!' she shouted. Derek was incapable of movement. He could only hold the sides of the canoe with an unshakeable grip and stare straight ahead at the maelstrom of water that was about to swamp their frail craft.

The Yarra, where he had tried kayaking with some university mates, was a kindly, gentle stream compared to this raging monster. This river was trying to smash them on rocks and drag them down in the terrible undertow that would hold them under only to let their dead bodies go days later to float round and round in some quiet pool beyond the waterfall he had heard about.

Shani was happy fighting these dangers. Derek had given up kayaking after his vessel kept tipping over and dumping him into the water. He was rescued each time but soon decided that boating was not for him.

Now the memories came back as he was trapped with a crazy enthusiast in a wild, wet roller coaster ride in a canoe which appeared to be made of leather sewn round a flimsy wooden frame.

Without warning the river fell away from beneath him. It seemed, as he took one look over the side, that the bow of the canoe was over an almost vertical, thunderous fall of water, then they lurched over the edge.

It was like toppling among breakers. His wall of water was not what he had first imagined but a sluice carrying millions of tonnes of water, and their tiny vessel. They slid down a foam flecked slope to where spouts of water and spray flooded past a line of boulders that waited for them across the stream. It was easy enough to see the danger looming in front. The night was moonless but bright starlight illuminated the white water pouring over and round the rocks which appeared black by contrast. Nothing could be seen on the dark banks of the river but in midstream two of these unmoving sentinels stood high out of the flood, a matching pair of stone pillars. The current was forced at a mad pace into a narrow gap between them so that the surface rose and water spouted out on the other side.

Shani was whooping in a high, melodious voice as they went over the first of the standing waves, down into the trough, up again and then down and then up as they headed for the space between these two rocks. Their tiny craft sped through this fearsome opening as though riding a jet of water from a hose and thumped down a little further on. It dawdled for a few moments, and then picked up speed once more as they faced another downward slope, and another hazard.

In front of them was a rock ledge which spanned the river, a natural dam which held back the water so it rose, at that point, to spill over the top and crash down on the other side making a continuous roar. This was a small waterfall, not much higher than a man but deadly because the canoe would spear nose down into the confusion of water below. Derek gripped the sides of the canoe even harder. No frail craft like this could survive the approaching turmoil.

Shani was still whooping and shouting. She had done all this before when the river was lower. She knew it better than anyone, and she followed the currents that would lead her to the only spot where her craft could pass through without destruction. Some collision in the past had gouged a chunk of the wall away so the passage through this now hidden channel was not a waterfall, but a cataract, and she took them through with inches to spare on either side.

Derek realized he had survived yet again. He looked inside the canoe and was astonished to see how little water there was on the bottom. His opera cloak was only sprayed with damp, except where Shani's paddle had flicked water on to it as she wrestled with the current. Derek did not dare express an opinion. He was so afraid of upsetting the wobbling craft by any movement that he did not stir but stared rigidly ahead. They were over the most exciting part for though they glided rapidly round great boulders and he thought he felt others scraping the bottom of the canoe Shani easily avoided all hazards. The hurrying waters lapped about them but not a drop came over the side.

Twenty minutes later they floated round a bend where the river was wider and almost placid once more. Shani drove them into a place by the bank where the water bubbled over the smooth shingles and Derek was able to step ashore, barely wetting his feet.

'The others won't be here for three quarters of an hour yet,' said Shani. 'They should have come with us instead of missing the excitement, and there's a fair bit of uphill walking. But it was the last portage, we'll go the rest of the way by canoe. Wait till you tell them about how I drove us straight through Hell's Gate and over the dam without shipping a cupful, they'll be sorry then.'

She started breaking off dead branches and gathering driftwood for a fire. Derek still could not speak. He sat down; his knees were weak and his feet hurt from walking on the stones. He had his socks in his pocket and these he pulled on with trembling hands, and then his boots.

Shani carried a tinder box with her as well as a knife and after some trouble was able to get a fire going on the little beach. She kept throwing dry wood on the blaze until it was burning well and Derek had to move back from the flames. It was a spark in the darkness that illuminated a few feet of the chuckling river as it poured by and lit the trunks and lower branches of trees that had survived floods of past years.

Derek was sitting on a stone by the fire, brooding and feeling thankful to have survived his ordeal when Shani, who had been absent for a while, appeared in the light of the flames.

'They're coming,' she cried. 'I climbed part of the way and they'd just turned the shoulder of the hill, and now they're coming down the path.'

She was right. After a few minutes he heard voices and then the noise of feet walking down the stony path.

It was a tired party that arrived at the river bank and they were glad to sit at the fire for a while even though still heated with the exercise of the portage.

Everyone, except Lady Cicely, had taken some of the load. Gus had to carry their canoe on his own as well as a large pack, but he seemed not to mind. He said he used to be a smuggler carrying goods over the border between Sultania and the Carthaginian Empire. He often ran up mountain passes carrying loads of smuggled goods while escaping from the customs officers. Those of the party who had not paddled a canoe carried tired children in their arms. They put the little ones down as gently as they could on the stones by the fire.

'You should have come with us,' said Shani. 'The river tonight was the best I've ever seen it.'

'What, take these in a canoe through Hell's Gate and over the weir?' retorted Thorkild, gently brushing a mop of fair hair as he laid a child down. 'You must decide, daughter, whether you are a child playing games on the river or a young woman who has a responsibility to her people.'

Shani was taken aback at this and looked at Ramses who was shrugging his shoulders to ease muscle strain. 'He is right,' said Ramses nodding. 'You can play on the river any time, tonight we are running away to escape from a danger to your whole village, besides you could have drowned the manager.'

No more was said but Shani did not answer back and Derek was sorry when he looked up and saw her face. The pleasure of matching skill and strength with the river had been taken away.

They could not wait at the water's edge. There was no room to camp. They had to go on even though everyone was tired and it was so late at night. By morning they would be in the safe place that everyone knew about and the men of the village would find them.

Not long before dawn, when it was still dark, they came ashore for the last time just above a waterfall which they could hear but not see.

Thorkild led the little fleet into a tiny, rocky cove where the current flowed in a half circle covered in froth before drifting out again to join the main stream.

'We can't leave the canoes here,' announced Thorkild. 'They must be carried a little further so we can hide them.'

They groaned but knew it had to be done. The canoes were valuable property to the river people, and took many hours to make; they did not want to leave them in sight to be stolen or smashed.

The hiding place was close by among the trees and bushes. Pieces of soft leather sewn together were kept bundled up in a hollow tree and were used to cover the canoes and then creepers and moss were trailed over them.

It was almost dawn. and could see to do all this in the cold, grey light of morning. though a mist lay everywhere and half way up some of the taller trees.

Having hidden the canoes they walked down into a small valley. If the river had come this way it would have been a mad cataract. They walked about half an hour, descending all the time then turned off into a clearing to eventually stop at a sheer wall of rock about seventy feet high.

'Where do we go now?' asked Derek irritably, he was weary and thought Thorkild must have taken a wrong turning.

Thorkild looked at this high barrier with satisfaction. 'No problems,' he said. 'We're going straight up.'

Chapter Eleven

A safe place

The wall of rock had a slight overhang and Derek could not see how it was to be climbed. Some trees grew nearby, their leaves brushed the rock face but offered no way up, the branches were too small. This seemed not to worry the river people. They laid their children down in the soft grass at its foot and waited.

Thorkild leaned forward and raised his hands to lay them flat against the rock. Derek thought he was about to pray for guidance, but no, Shani climbed on to his shoulders. She stood up and

reached as high as she could to catch a hand-hold above her head. That was all she needed, a moment later she was climbing straight up.

The girl disappeared over the edge. Nothing more happened for another minute until a rope ladder with wooden rungs tumbled down and swung there. The lowest rung was only a step from the ground.

One climber at a time was allowed on the ladder but the villagers were quick and soon disappeared over the top. Frederika and Ramses were to be last up in case there were enemies about.

Derek was next after Gus. He had delayed the moment as long as he could. He was terrified of heights and hated climbing. He had gone on a Uni rock climbing week-end once and froze half way up the beginners slope. Some girl climbers had to prise his fingers loose from his hand-holds, and lower him to the ground on the safety rope.

He forced himself to put his foot on to the lowest rung. The ladder swayed and shook as he climbed. Twice he had to stop, shut his eyes, and just hang on.

Frederika made things worse. She tugged and rattled the ladder and shouted for him to get on with it. He clung even tighter to the ropes.

A voice breathed in his ear, it said,. 'If you like I'll drop a rock on top of her head, that should shut her up for a while.'

He opened his eyes to find Shani's grey eyes only inches from his own. She was resting easily on what seemed to be invisible hand and foot-holds.

He shook his head. 'No rocks,' he muttered.

'It's alright, she's wearing a helmet. It'll hurt for a while, but it won't kill her.'

He shook his head again.

Shani smiled encouragingly and shouted for Frederika to stop shaking the ladder.

'Don't drop any rocks.' He tried to find the next rung with his foot, but not daring to look down, it evaded him.

'Not far now,' said Shani. She climbed down a bit and placed his foot on the rung. 'A few more steps and you'll be able to go the rest of the way easily.'

As he reached upwards for another rung Shani caught his hand and guided it to a solid outcrop of stone, which he clutched. Then she found a higher one for his other hand. The wall sloped in again at this point and though his feet were still on the swaying ladder at least it was impossible to see the empty space below.

He felt his right foot being eased off the rung. He resisted but she was firm and placed it on another stone outcrop. 'Up!' she said, and in a moment he was clear of the ladder which jerked and grew taut as someone else started to climb.

It was easier now because the whole of his body was against a stony slope. There were plenty of hand-holds and with his nose almost against the rock he did not have to look at the scenery or the cliff he had climbed.

Shani coaxed him up even further until he was in a steeply sloping fissure. Steps had been hacked out and he was able to walk up these while steadying himself against the walls on either side.

At the top was a large flat area, mostly rock, where some small trees had grown in soil fallen from another cliff rising behind it to a peak. On the far side was a straight drop to a pool fed by the waterfall. The light of the rising sun created a rainbow in the mist from tumbling water.

Already some of the children were celebrating their arrival by making the long jump from the ledge on the far side into the icy water. They came out shaking with cold to climb up and do it all again.

Lady Cicely had climbed the ladder easily and was now sitting on the edge watching the others come up as she enjoyed the sunshine and waited for breakfast to be served.

She was in a better mood and advised Derek to sit in the warmth of the sunshine, but not too close to her. They were looking out over a wide vista of tree tops, and in the distance a range of snowy mountains touched by golden light along its peaks. The roar of the waterfall was always in their ears, but after a while they forgot and paid no attention.

'Really,' said Cicely. I did not think we would find such a pleasant spot after that dreadful ride in the canoes, and the hard walking.'

Derek did not reply. He was tired and just wanted to sit there, his eyes closed, absorbing the warmth.

Lady Cicely seemed not to notice, she said, 'It does not seem right that these people should know about this place and we did not. When I see Daddy I will tell him because, with a few years forced labour from the peasants, a magnificent castle could be built here. It is well protected on all sides and he could make it the best stronghold in all Sultania.

She saw Derek yawn and said, 'After breakfast I will tell them to make up a couch for me in the open; you should do the same. There is a nasty cave there. I wouldn't like to stay in it. I peeped inside, that was enough for me. Fancy sleeping there with all these uncouth people.'

Derek's head nodded forward. Not even the smell of a cooked breakfast which Gus and the women were preparing in front of the cave could keep him awake for long.

Shani came from the fire with a wooden platter heaped with steaming food. She offered it to Derek.

Cicely looked at her and said, 'You should serve me first. I am a lady of superior rank. If you wish to get on in life you will have to learn some manners.'

Shani smiled and said, 'I'm sorry Lady Cicely, I'll go and get yours.'

The young noblewoman was quite pleased at this unexpected submission. She said, 'I am sure some of these children could be civilized and trained as maids and servants. That girl had a very bad attitude, but now, perhaps, she is showing some sense.'

Shani came back with another platter of food. 'Will this do, your ladyship?'

'Yes, give it to me, then go about your business.'

Shani took a few steps forward and threw the food, platter and all, over the edge. 'It's down there,' she said. 'Go and get it yourself.'

A moment of shocked silence followed until Frederika cracked up and started laughing.

Cicely lunged at Shani to push her over the edge, but the girl dodged. Cicely missed and fell out of sight with a horrifying scream.

The scream suddenly cut out, everyone ran to the edge to see where Cicely had fallen.

'What shall I tell her father?' cried Ramses. 'I made her come here. If I had let her take a horse from the village she could have been home by now.'

'You can tell him she's stuck in a tree,' shouted Frederika. She was laughing again.

The branches of a tree below were shaking and Cicely was hanging on and struggling to get a foothold amidst a mass of leaves and broken twigs. She glared up at the people lining the edge of the cliff. They were all laughing except Derek, and Ramses.

'Get me out of this,' she shouted, 'at once!'

The villagers thought the situation hilarious. Their laughter was not unmixed with malice at the sight of Lady Cicely brought down. They were tired of her and her ways.

They soon stopped laughing. Grey figures were hopping into sight in the clearing and they were clustering at the foot of the tree where Lady Cicely was marooned. Frederika ran and got her bow and tried a shot or two while the villagers began pitching stones over the edge at the enemy.

'We must get her out, but how?' cried Ramses?

'Throw her a rope,' suggested Frederika, pausing for a moment from loosing arrows at the enemy. 'She can tie the end round her waist and we can haul her in.'

'No, no,' said Derek. 'That's no good, she's too far out. If we pull her up at this angle she will swing like a pendulum against the rock wall. She could be badly injured. Besides I don't think she knows anything about knots. It could come undone.'

'That's better than being shot with arrows,' remarked Thorkild cheerfully, and we've got plenty of rope. We make miles of it for hammocks, fishing, animal traps, hundreds of uses. You can never have too much rope.' The thought of Lady Cicely, plucked from her tree and dashed violently against the rock wall did not seem to upset him.

'You will have to do something, and do it quickly' cried Cicely. 'And be careful, with those stones, some came quite close to my head.'

She was right about the near misses. Shani had hit one or two of the archers who then staggered out of range. But every few shots she would change aim and a stone would whizz past Cicely's head. She was not attempting to hit the girl, just worry her.

Thorkild saw her mischief and ordered her to stop and concentrate on the real enemy. Still, she got in an occasional shot at Cicely, but only when Derek and her father were not looking.

A few of the kangaroo men hopped to the foot of the wall where they were out of sight and safe except for heavy stones which were pushed over the edge from time to time.

'They can't climb,' announced Derek. 'There is no way they can get up here, even with the ladder, and they can't climb the tree either. If we could get Cicely back we would all be safe enough.'

'We are in your hands, manager,' said Ramses. 'If you want Frederika and I to fight anyone we are at your disposal, but drawing a lady up from a tree while surrounded by savages is beyond us. Perhaps the great colleges of the west have taught you an answer to the problem.'

'No, but the Scouts have,' Derek replied. 'Alright, Thorkild, we will have that rope, as much as you can find.'

Thorkild went off to get rope stored in the cave.

'Now Shani,' Derek continued, 'we need a small bag and some stones.'

Thorkild returned with coils of rope over both shoulders and more carried in his hands. Derek and Gus examined it. 'This is good stuff,' said Gus. 'My people know all about rope. I have made a lot of it myself in the old days. Your Honour can rely on it to rescue the lady from the tree.'

Shani returned with a small bag and some stones. Derek tipped the stones into the bag and tied it closed with the lightest cord he could find.

'Allow me, your Honour,' said Gus, 'and stand back.' He whirled the bag of stones around his head a few times and threw it so it landed in the tree alongside Cicely.

'What now?' She called, 'What am I supposed to do with the wretched thing. I have never touched a rope in my life.'

'It's only a light cord and wouldn't support your weight,' shouted Derek. 'I have tied this end to a much heavier rope, and you're to pull it across.'

In spite of her bitter complaints and refusal, at first, to even touch the cord which, she said, prickled her hands, she was at last persuaded to pull the heavier rope across to the tree.

'I suppose this all has some purpose,' she said

'Yes, we're going to rescue you. Wind your end of the rope round the trunk of the tree as many times as you can, and try and pull it tight.'

'Why should I do that, pray?

'Because you can't tie knots and the rope has to be secure at both ends before we can send anyone across to help you.'

'We don't need all this! Lord Ramses, you are a knight, it is your duty to go down and drive away those horrible, hopping creatures, Frederika will help you. Then you can bring a ladder; a wide one with a handrail, so I can get down.'

Frederika and Ramses are not going to do that. I won't let them.

'And why not? It is their duty!

They would be shot down before they got anywhere near the tree, and as far as I know there is not a ladder with a handrail within a thousand miles of here.

Cicely saw Shani standing near the edge. 'That girl caused all this. She is to be whipped now, severely whipped! Lord Ramses, make sure it's done properly.'

'She will not be whipped,' stated Derek. 'You brought all this on yourself, and if you won't let us rescue you, you can just stay there until you decide to co-operate.'

Shani poked her tongue out at Cicely. Derek ordered her away to where she was out of Cicely's sight.

'She'll be safe enough in the tree,' he said. 'The kangaroo men can't see her because of all the leaves and stuff in the way. I'm going to lie down for a while. We all need some sleep.' He ignored Cicely's cries of rage and turned away

Chapter Twelve

Sir William and his servant

There was an unspoken truce between the two sides now. Everyone kept well back from the edge out of sight of the archers below and Shani reported that most of the kangaroos were sleeping in the shade of the tree while others were out of stone throwing range. Derek decided to leave them alone.

Bedding was stored in the cave and Shani got a mattress and pillow for Derek which she made up into a bed where he lay down and went to sleep straight away. There was enough for everyone and the platform was soon dotted with people lying out in the sunshine, fast asleep.

Some hours later Thorkild shook Derek awake, it was about noon. 'There's an armored knight down in the clearing,' he said. 'And he's decided to take on the kangaroo people. Come and see.'

Derek was groggy from his short sleep but he was not going to miss seeing an armored knight in action. He threw back his opera cloak and got up.

Everyone was there looking down and throwing stones at the nearer kangaroos.

The knight was armored from head to foot and his shield was painted with a diagonal red stripe and three crescent moons.

'That's Sir William's coat of arms,' said Frederika. 'You remember, he's one of the Ockhams, a very old family.'

'Of course I remember him,' answered Ramses. 'We were pages together, and knighted together. A handy fellow to have alongside you in a battle.'

'But, like the rest of his family, he's not too bright.' said Frederika.

Some arrows had been launched at Sir William when he took the kangaroo people by surprise. They bounced off his armor but were enough to give notice that the creatures around him were hostile. He waved his sword and spurred his horse towards the nearest warrior who bounded high in the air to land some distance away its bow and arrow at the ready. It loosed the arrow at the rider, a perfect shot. The watchers heard the 'tock' of the arrow striking steel, but it bounced off and winged someone else.

The fight was going badly. The knight chased the archers and made terrific swipes at them with his sword, but they were too quick, they leaped too high, and the knight was being drawn away, out of range from the stone throwers on the cliff. After a while they would stop wasting the arrows on plate armor, instead they would bring the horse down, and the knight would be at their mercy.

Everyone was calling him to come back so they could give him some protection with their stone barrage. Either he did not hear, or ignored their shouting.

Come,' said Ramses, 'we will go down and help him.'

'You'll be killed,' objected Derek. 'They'll bring you down with those arrows.' He stared in horror at his mad companions who were ordering the rope ladder to be lowered so they could descend to almost certain death or injury.

'You can't do this to me.' He said, following them almost to the head of the ladder.' How will I get home without you two to show me the way? I don't even know how to get to Sultanopolis.'

'Let them go,' said Shani, who had rolled the ladder over the edge. 'I know the way and I'll look after you. Once my people are safe I can get you there.'

'Never fear, manager. We will be back, said Frederika. But if we don't come through just leave Cicely in her tree, she's bad news. After saying this Frederika disappeared down the ladder.

'Effendi Vortimer, we still don't understand each other,' were Ramses' parting words as he too began to climb down. 'We are dedicated knights, we cannot ignore a challenge such as this. Our code says we must come to the aid of a fellow knight in battle. Do not despair, we are not dead get.'

Then he was gone and all Derek could see was the top of his spiked helmet and the ladder shaking as they went down.

Derek went as near as he dared to the edge of the precipice; even though it made him dizzy. If nothing else he could at least throw stones. It was possible that a well aimed rock could save the life of a friend.

The kangaroo men had at least one leader who was shouting orders. Derek understood that he was ordering his followers to lure the knight further away from the rock throwers so he would be beyond any protection they could give him.

The archers who had been sheltering under the overhang of the wall now appeared in the open. Frederika and Ramses had flushed them out, and they were followed by a hail of rocks as they bounded away across the clearing.

Suddenly it all changed, every kangaroo warrior disappeared, the arrows stopped coming as another figure appeared from the forest. This person trotted into the open on the back of a large boar. It was Doctor Grozny still wearing a dressing gown and pyjamas. He guided his mount round the clearing while inspecting the bodies of dead and stunned kangaroo archers.

He rode up to the three who were in the middle of the clearing and waiting to see if the fighting would start again.

Frederika and Ramses had to help control Sir William's horse which whinnied with fear at the sight and smell of the huge boar. It tried to back away with its eyes so wide open that a circle of red showed round the whites.

The doctor's eyeglasses flashed in the sunshine. 'Have you any idea of the cost of what you are doing?' He demanded. 'Each of my kangaroos has to be imported from Australia. I pay so called taxes to aristocratic robbers to get them into the country. Their genes are altered at the cost of millions yet you fighting oafs feel free to cut them down.'

Doctor Grozny's hands had been untied since they had last seen him departing on his runaway boar, and the electric flex that bound them had disappeared. He was able to wave his hands freely while venting his anger.

'You and your boars, and your kangaroo bowmen are menace,' said Ramses. 'Whenever they attack us we will fight back.'

'There is no excuse for vandalism of this kind,' retorted the doctor. 'I will lead the survivors back to my laboratory, and I shall expect no further interference or violence from you, or anyone else in this disgusting country. And let me tell you, my man, I must seriously consider going somewhere else, as far from here as possible, to carry out my researches. Why, even the island of my great ancestor, Doctor Moreau, would be better than this.'

They were interrupted by Sir William. He had tried to join the conversation but his visor kept falling down. After a struggle he gave his helmet a half turn and was able to lift it off.

'Phew! That's better!' He was a pink faced young man with black hair and a drooping black moustache. 'It gets terribly stuffy inside there, specially when you're doing a spot of fighting. Hello Ramses old chap, and you too, Freddy. In trouble as usual, are we? You couldn't direct me to the nearest castle, could you?'

'What, you're lost again?' said Frederika. 'I've never known anyone to get lost so easily as you, William. I suppose Castle Smedhurst is the nearest and when we get Lady Cicely out of her tree she can guide you there.'

'Lady Cicely is climbing a tree??'

'It's a long story, and she can tell you all about it on the way, if you want to escort her home.'

'Gladly,' said Sir William. He seemed quite pleased. 'I'll protect her from those hopping thingummys that were shooting at me, and I thank you for your assistance, but, as you could see, I was doing pretty well on my own.'

He pointed at Doctor Grozny. 'Don't put up with any nonsense from this feller. He's my servant, you know. I found him dressed in these strange clothes and under a spell, condemned to ride for ever on the back of a magic pig. Well, I freed him from the enchantment didn't I, and in return he had to swear to serve me for a year and a day as my body servant. He's got a year to go.'

'It is true,' said the doctor, glaring at Sir William. 'He did make me go through a childish form of words, some vow of service which he seemed to consider important before he would cut the flex with which you people tied my hands. But I do not feel myself bound by any such foolish nonsense. I shall lead the kangaroo people back to my laboratory where there is important work to be done.'

'He would have turned to go but there was a whisk of steel and the flat of a sword was laid across his chest.

'Nay, nay,' said Sir William. There is a pledge between you and me. Do you not remember? You promised to serve me faithfully for a year and a day when I freed you from enchantment. In this land an oath is sacred.'

'I cannot be bound by such a ridiculous oath,' was the doctor's retort. 'My work is of great importance. Four generations of my family have been laboring on the same project and I cannot afford to lose a day, let alone a year and a day.'

'This is very sad,' said Sir William. 'In this country oath-breakers are put to death. You may have noticed that my horse is not speedy, but is faster than that enchanted pig you are riding. If you break your oath I will have the duty of following and cutting you down.'

'This is barbaric,' protested the doctor.

'Nay, it is most civilized. If we cannot have fair dealing and honest pledges honestly carried out then disorder will follow, society will collapse, but you, my friend, I will not allow you to start the rot.'

The doctor angrily wheeled his mount away from the sword and shouted to the hidden watchers, 'I am coming to lead you back to the laboratory. If these people try to stop me shoot them down.'

An arrow from the forest went through the flesh at the side of his neck, another struck the pig he was riding making it squeal and buck so that between pain and shock he fell off. The pig galloped away still squealing. The kangaroo warriors had been startled by his appearance in the clearing but were now recovered. He was not going to lead them anywhere.

Ramses did not hesitate but hoisted the scientist to his feet supporting him under one shoulder with his arm around the man's waist and led them at a run to the rope ladder, which was still down. Frederika followed, stepping backwards with bow and arrow at the ready. Sir William followed too on his horse giving Ramses' back some cover. He slid off the horse at the foot of the ladder and held

it as Ramses made the tremendous effort of climbing straight up while supporting the doctor, who was still in shock.

A kangaroo man leapt out of the bushes to get a clear shot at the departing group but a thud and a yelp reminded the attackers that the villagers were deadly accurate with stones. He fell over backwards on his tail and lay still.

Ramses was soon up and out of danger. He carried the white faced and fainting doctor straight up the ladder without stopping and handed him over to the village women to extract the arrow and bandage his wound.

Derek was concerned about Frederika and Sir William. They were still at the base of the cliff. The ladder shook from time to time but no one appeared.

'What's going on down there?' he shouted. 'Come up, you're in danger!'

'It's Sir William,' Frederika cried back. 'He's too heavy for the ladder, it's the armor.'

'Tell him to take some off!'

'He won't! He says no knight at arms would remove his armor in the face of the enemy.'

Derek sighed in exasperation as he turned to Thorkild. 'Bring the rope again, we're going to need it.' Thorkild went away and returned as before, laden with rope. Derek selected the heaviest rope of all and tied a knot on one end.

'Throw that end over the edge,' he said.

He had made a running noose which landed at Frederika's feet.

'Slip the loop over his shoulders, then fix it under his arms and haul it as tight as you can. We're going to take a lot of his weight from up here so he can climb the ladder. Tell him not to raise his arms above his head, the noose might slip upwards and we'd hang him on the way up.'

There was pause at the foot of the ladder. 'He wants to know if you can haul his horse up too.'

'Tell him no! This is no place for a horse, especially if it walks in its sleep; and anyway, we're not strong enough to hoist it. Now, Freddie, If he won't budge and wants to stay with his horse leave him there. You're to come up as quick as you can.' He turned to Ramses. 'Everyone can help pull him up. I hate going near the edge.'

Derek had difficulty controlling the crowd's enthusiasm as they helped to haul Sir William out of danger. They were all eager to see up close this novelty of a fully armored knight, and he dangled rather than climbed. Frederika swarmed up the ladder straight after Sir William and they were all safe on the platform, at least for a time.

Sir William was not grateful, he objected to being hauled up like a sack of coal, and his mood was not improved when Derek refused his pleas to bring the horse up too.

Chapter Thirteen

Enter The Sultan and Lord Grausam

Derek's next concern was for Cicely. She had been marooned in the tree for hours.

'She's been asleep for a while,' said Shani. 'She had her arm round the trunk of the tree, and she's sitting on a branch.'

'That's dangerous, she might fall while she's asleep. I'll talk to her.'

Before Derek could speak to the girl he heard a growing din from the forest.

'What now?' He complained. 'Couldn't your people have found a quieter spot than this?'

Dozens of kangaroo men bounded across the clearing in flight and were sped on their way by a shower of rocks from the villagers. They must have fought someone and been defeated for they hopped past in a panic.

The doctor was shouting at the villagers and pleading with them to take care as they excitedly hurled stones at the fugitives. They knew nothing of the cost of turning kangaroos into warriors but they recognized enemies when they saw them, and kept up their barrage until the last had been brained and laid low, or else hopped out of sight.

As they disappeared into the trees some soldiers trotted into the far side of the clearing in pursuit. 'Those are Lord Grausam's men,' said Ramses, eyeing their uniforms. 'And look, there are some of the Sultan's bodyguard, what are they doing here miles from the palace? Something serious has happened.'

Derek remembered Lady Cicely. 'You can leave the tree now. Lord Grausam's men are down below.' Lady Cicely, in a black mood, ignored him and started to climb down to the lower branches though hampered by her long riding skirt, and roughly laced boots.

Frederika and Ramses dropped the rope ladder and climbed down. Sir William would have joined them but did not trust his weight to the ladder without a safety-rope.

As Frederika and Ramses reached the ground some mounted men appeared. They were clad in chain mail and helmets.

Lord Grausam's device was a black bear walking on all fours and each of his soldiers had this symbol on the left breast. One of the riders wore decorated armor and a model of the bear on his helmet, it was the man himself.

He spurred his horse forward and confronted the two warriors. 'Where the hell have you been, Lord Ramses?' he asked, in his grating voice. 'We sent you off with an escort and half of them came back riding as though the devil was behind and babbling nonsense about being attacked by great, hairy monsters riding boars as big as elephants. Then those that could say anything sensible told us that you and Lady Frederika rode off into the forest looking for that manager fellow. God knows why! We could have used you and the escort if you had held them together. There's been hell's delight back at the

capital. Those poxy rebels struck; they had hundreds of men outside the walls and others opened the gate from the inside the night you left.'

'Is the Sultan safe?'

'Yes, he's safe enough, but he's not happy. He was nearly captured, but we got him away just in time.'

'Another troop of soldiers now appeared. A representation of a silver palm tree had been worked into their coats and they were guarding a palanquin, a sort of covered bed, carried on poles on the shoulders of four black slaves, with another four in reserve. The soldiers were the Sultan's personal guard and the palanquin contained blankets, cushions and the Sultan himself, but he was hidden. The curtains had been drawn shut.

'We should have cut the throats of those rebels while we had them in the council hall,' said Lord Grausam

'This is a bad business,' said Ramses, shaking his head. 'It is a pity about the escort, they may have made all the difference, but the captain was in command, not me. We left him because our first duty was to the Commission of Enquiry and we could not have that without the manager. Unhappily he had been kidnapped by apes riding huge boars which you don't believe in.'

He turned away. Come Frederika, we must pay our respects to the Sultan.'

They approached the palanquin. The guards knew them and the officer in charge gestured for it to be lowered to the ground. Where it rested on stumpy legs. The curtains were drawn back to reveal an obese figure reclining on heaped up cushions.

'We missed you, Lord Ramses?' said the Sultan in a squeaky voice. 'We had need of your strong right arm when the rebels attempted to capture our royal person. If our trusty Lord Grausam had not acted quickly we would have been taken by those dogs of mutineers. However, with ones such as you and the Lady Frederika who, we are told, will one day be a warrior of renown in spite of her sex, we will smash this uprising ----'

The Sultan would have said more but stopped and looked over their heads in astonishment.

They turned to see a furious Lady Cicely holding on to the lowest branch of the tree in which she had been trapped. She had slipped and almost fallen but had managed to hang on and was now clutching a branch about twelve feet from the ground.

'That is the Lady Cicely Smedhurst, is it not?' enquired the Sultan. 'Her father brought her to court last month but we thought she was too old for such foolishness. Tell her to come down at once before she does herself an injury.'

Lord Grausam rode under the branch just as Cicely fell. She landed on top of Grausam and shrieked because of a painful fall on his suit of armor.

'Bring her here at once!' ordered the Sultan. Lord Grausam rode over and dumped the girl alongside the palanquin where she also had to kneel, trembling with rage.

'These are serious times,' said the Sultan. 'The rebels have risen; we have been driven from our palace and every loyal subject must unite to restore us to the throne of our ancestors. There is no time to

climb trees and play childish games; you must come with us to your father. His men are out searching for you when they could have been better employed protecting us and our throne.'

'Your Majesty,' said Lady Cicely, 'They have been horrible to me. A girl cut my bootlaces, pushed me off the edge of that cliff up there and I would be dead now if I hadn't landed in the tree. Then they wouldn't rescue me and they didn't give me any breakfast and made fun of me and I want the man hanged and the girl flogged to death.'

The Sultan looked troubled and glanced at Frederika and Ramses 'Surely you do not mean it, our good friends will be needed to put down the rebellion.'

'Not them!' She said in a rage. 'It is the man they call the manager, and a cheeky slut of a village girl; they're the ones I want punished.'

The Sultan's brow cleared instantly. 'My dear child, what a small favor to ask to avenge these terrible wrongs. We will have the man hanged and the girl flogged to death within the hour. Just point out to my soldiers who has done these dreadful things you speak of and they will attend to the matter straight away. There is nothing like a hanging or a good flogging to lift everyone's spirits and we need some diversion to take our mind off problems of state.'

Before Ramses and Frederika could protest at this terrible sentence there was another interruption. The rest of the Sultan's harem had been straggling through the bushes and a fat woman in tattered clothes appeared and flung herself at full length on the ground with her head towards the palanquin. The Sultan sniffed and looked at her unfavorably.

'Oh Mighty Sultan, Live for Ever!' she cried, 'how much longer must your wives continue this journey that has no end and no rest? We are weary and footsore; we stumble and fall; the bushes tear at our clothes; what sins have we committed in past lives to bring such terrors on us?'

'They must have indeed been vile,' retorted the Sultan, shaking his head and looking over his other wives who had appeared and fallen to their knees behind the fat woman.

'We are hungry, my lord, hungry! Give us something to eat or we shall starve and die.'

'There is little enough for us,' retorted the Sultan severely, 'and nothing for you and the others. When we get to the castle you may be given something to eat, but it does not concern us, we have matters of state to deal with. Now, Lady Cicely, if you will be good enough to point out this man and the girl justice will be done, but we cannot linger; we must try to reach your father's castle before dark, even if it means leaving these wretched women behind.'

Ramses had been trying to attract the attention of the Sultan during this drama; now he burst out, - 'Sire, I cannot let you commit this great injustice on my friends. The Lady Cicely is mad and spoiled. Neither the manager, nor the village girl have done anything to deserve this cruel punishment. All that happened to the Lady Cicely she brought on to herself by stupidity, pride, arrogance, ignorance, and childish behavior. You cannot put loyal subjects to death on the word of a bad tempered child.'

'She has always been spoiled, your gracious majesty,' added Frederika. 'What she really needed was a good kick on the bum from time to time but no one dared to give it to her because she would have run to daddy with a pack of lies, and that would have been the end of them. You needn't expect us to

stand by and see anything happen to the manager. He will be more use to this country than Cis ever was.'

Lady Cicely was aghast at these words. 'That's the last time you come to our castle, either of you! Just wait until father hears about this, he will know what to do to protect me. As for you Frederika, you always were a low, common, nasty girl and everyone laughed at you. You should have been born a peasant, and that's the truth.' Her agitation became too much and she started to cry.

'Peace, peace!' cried the Sultan. 'You mean this man doesn't deserve to be hanged, nor the girl flogged?' He shook his head. 'How unfortunate; we consider this most sad, but you know the ancient law that governs our realm. Once the word of the Sultan has been given it cannot be changed or drawn back. We regret to inform you my friends these persons must die.'

He caught Frederika's eye. 'No, my dear Lady Frederika, not even in memory of your family's long service to The Sultanate can we alter this decree. The two must die because if we alter one jot or tittle of the sentence our word will no longer mean anything and the authority of the Sultans will be gone forever.'

There was a pause and Frederika's hand dropped to the hilt of her sword but Ramses reached out and caught it without looking so she could not draw.

'Lady Cicely,' he said, 'do you mean this? Do you want those two to die because you got into a rage? Have you considered the justice of what you are saying and of the sentence you want imposed?'

Lady Cicely was whimpering. 'They shouldn't have treated me like that; they made me look so foolish in front of everyone, and she threw my breakfast away. Daddy would know how to deal with them.'

'Perhaps so,' said the Sultan, brightening a little. 'Perhaps this is a minor matter that does not require a royal decree and if we are on Lord Smedhurst's land I could pass the matter of judgment over to him; after all it is Lady Cicely Smedhurst who has been wronged.'

Lord Grausam had been fretting in the background waiting for the Sultan to stop quarrelling with his wives and handing out death sentences.

You cannot change,' he said, barely concealing his contempt for his weak sovereign. 'I have heard you make your decree and it must be carried out. My men will administer the sentence. Lady Cicely will point out the persons responsible. I can leave four men behind to see that your justice is done; then they can catch up, but we cannot delay any longer. Now, Lady Cicely, who are these people? Speak up!'

'I've changed my mind,' said Lady Cicely still sobbing. 'I don't think I want anyone killed. Can't you punish them some other way?'

'It is too late, You know the ancient law of the Sultanate. When the Sultan has spoken, he has spoken. Neither he nor anyone else can retract that word.'

'We are the only ones that heard him,' said Frederika. 'I think just this once he could let the matter drop.'

The Sultan nodded eagerly. He had realized, perhaps too late, that he could not afford to offend two noted warriors such as Frederika and Ramses; besides, they represented powerful and warlike clans. The von Hohenbergers, Frederika's family, were particularly numerous and fearsome in battle.

Lord Grausam did not care, and the chance to humiliate Ramses and hang a manager at the same time was one not to be passed over. 'The Sultan cannot show weakness at this serious moment in the history of our country,' he said. 'Lady Cicely will point out the guilty persons and my men will carry out the order.' He turned fiercely on the Sultan. 'Is this not so, your majesty?'

The Sultan cleared his throat and said at last, 'Unhappily we must agree with our noble Lord Grausam. It is unfortunate that this has to happen but we trust it will be a lesson to the Lady Cicely to be, in future, more guarded in her remarks to her sovereign.'

Cicely was upset again at these words and to Lord Grausam's disgust was unable to answer his questions because of her crying.

'Leave the girl,' said Ramses. 'I will lead your men and point out the condemned persons, but they will have to act quickly or there will be trouble with the villagers.'

Neither the Sultan nor Lord Grausam had expected this sudden surrender. The Sultan was relieved but Lord Grausam stared suspiciously.

'We had better get on,' he said. 'There is a long way to go and it's getting too late in the day to fight anyone else.' He shifted impatiently on his horse causing it to move a little. 'I will detail three men and a sergeant for the execution party. That should be enough, but they will get the job over as quickly as possible and then rejoin us. If it wasn't a matter of royal principle I wouldn't do it. I don't like detaching any of my force in this forest with those hopping things around that are so good with a bow and arrow.'

He called to a sergeant. 'Follow Lord Ramses with three of your men. He will point out to you two persons who are to be executed. Do it straight away. I will wait here ten minutes, no longer. If there is any delay catch up as quick as you can.'

Ramses looked up at Lord Grausam. 'Lady Frederika and I will join you as soon as the sentences have been carried out.' Grausam nodded as they turned away to lead the soldiers to the ladder. Lady Cicely cried out something, but she was ignored.

Ramses had kept a firm grip on Frederika's sword arm the whole time so she would not do anything rash, and he led her without letting go.

'You first,' he ordered. Frederika climbed the ladder and was out of sight in a moment. Ramses heard her sword being drawn from its sheath, but said nothing. 'Wait here!' he ordered as he put his foot on the first rung. 'We will bring them down.'

The sergeant shook his head. 'No, we come too. Lord Grausam said no tricks or he would have my guts for garters. We'll come up, do the job quickly and go.' He looked round cautiously. 'We don't want to get left behind in the forest, that's no good.'

Ramses climbed the ladder with the file of soldiers following close behind. When his head was above the level of the top rung he saw that Frederika was waiting crouched in the rock cleft, sword in hand. Ramses glanced down and shoved the sergeant in the face with his foot.

'Cut the ropes!' he cried and swung himself up and off the ladder in a single movement.

The sergeant had not lost his footing or his head. He roared and swarmed up the ladder to grasp Frederika's arm as she leaned down to slash one of the ropes. Ramses leaned perilously far out from the cliff edge and, saving himself with one hand, grasped the sergeant's throat with the other.

'Let go, go back!' he ordered as the little group clutched each other at the head of the ladder. The sergeant shook his head again and hung on.

They scarcely heard feet running down the rock cleft until a tree branch appeared over Frederika's shoulder and, after slipping twice it lodged in the breast plate of the sergeant and began to force him back and outwards away from the cliff.

One side of the ladder gave way. Frederika had nicked the rope with her sword and the side collapsed so that all the rungs hung vertically from the other rope. The patrol was scarcely able to hang on and several weapons fell to the ground as the soldiers grabbed at the remaining rope.

'Go down now or we will cut the other rope,' ordered Ramses while Shani, for it was she who had come to their aid, kept whacking at the helpless sergeant's helmet with her tree branch.

He swore and tried to dodge the blows while hanging on Frederika's arm and feeling with his feet for the useless rungs. The other soldiers had given up and were swinging their way down the remains of the ladder.

The sergeant glared up at Ramses. His hand slipped from Frederika's arm and instead he clung to the rope as the trailing rungs clattered against the rock face.

'You'll regret this, Lord Ramses,' he muttered, sparing one hand for a moment to massage his throat where Ramses had been gripping it. 'Lord Grausam won't forget what you done when I was obeying orders, and they was from the Sultan too. I wouldn't like to be in your boots when they finish putting down this rebellion.'

'You may be right. But you had better go down now before my young friend knocks you off the ladder.' Ramses pushed away the branch with which Shani was about to hit the sergeant again.

'That's done it.' Ramses remarked to Frederika as the sergeant retreated. 'That foolish girl has forced us into the rebel camp. Come, let us tell the Sultan to his face that we cannot permit our friends to be murdered at the word of a spoiled child.'

A crowd gathered around, eager to know what was happening. 'Keep back out of range,' he ordered. 'Frederika and I must talk to our Sultan. He or Lord Grausam may order us to be shot down, but there is no need for you to risk your lives.'

They went to the edge of the cliff where, in spite of orders, everyone followed to peer down at what was going on below. The two groups looked at each other.

The sergeant was standing by Lord Grausam's horse talking and pointing. Grausam addressed the two rebels. 'What is this man is telling me?' he bawled. 'Are you mad, Lord Ramses, or is he a liar?'

'He may be a liar, but not this time. We would not let him take our friends so they could be unjustly put to death. Not for the Sultan, not for you, not for anyone.'

By God, you're in rebellion against your Sultan. You know what this means when we have finished dealing with the other rebels? -- total extermination!'

'You have betrayed us!' squealed the Sultan. He was so agitated he had risen from his palanquin and was waddling nearer to the foot of the cliff on short, fat legs. He had never done such a thing before. None of the present company had ever seen him stand up. His recent experiences had unnerved him for he staggered, but ignored the servants who urged him to return to his couch in the palanquin.

'Treachery! Treachery!' he cried. 'Would you disobey your Sultan for the sake of two miserable lives? Lady Frederika, we knew your father well as a faithful defender of the throne, and you, Lord Ramses, your family has served Sultania time out of mind. Is this all to end because of two common people that would not be missed. At least give us the village girl, even if we pardon the manager. Lady Cicely said she was a common, nasty girl of no worth whatever. We cannot have less than the girl otherwise our authority is entirely gone.'

Shani suspected she was the girl in question and moved closer, clutching a stone. 'Silly old goat; I reckon I could bounce this rock right off the top of his turban. If I did that they might make you the new Sultan.'

'I don't want to be Sultan, and if you don't behave I will hand you over to his justice; now drop that!' She pulled a face and did so.

'Well, will you do as your Sultan commands and let our soldiers carry out the sentence on the girl or will you be a traitor?' cried Grausam.

'I am not a traitor and I will not let her die; not at your hands.'

The Sultan's face reddened and his cheeks quivered as he became angrier. He saw Sir William who was clad in full armor except for his helmet and was standing with the others gazing down, an astonished witness of everything that was happening.

'That is Sir William of Ockham, is it not?' enquired the Sultan for he recognized the design painted on Sir William's shield. 'At least we have faith in your loyalty, Sir William. Two of our most trusted subjects have turned against us and are enemies of the state. We declare them to be outlaws who may be put to death on sight. Sir William, draw your sword and kill them now!'

Sir William gaped at this order and looked helplessly from Ramses to Frederika and back to the Sultan.

'Well?'

'You mean, kill them?'

'You heard your Sultan!' roared Lord Grausam. 'Either kill them both now or we will have to come up and do it for you.'

'You and who else?' enquired Frederika stepping closer to the edge and shaking her sword at Lord Grausam. She ignored Sir William. 'Sir Billy won't go up against either of us because he's got too much sense. As for you, you coward, I'll meet you hand to hand any day and skewer you in the guts.'

This seemed an unlikely challenge but it enraged Lord Grausam and he instantly ordered the archers to loose their arrows at the two people who defied him.

Frederika would have kept on shouting and waving her sword but Derek caught her round the waist and dragged her back out of view.

No one had been hit except Sir William who was unable to dodge fast enough. Several arrows struck his armor before he lumbered back out of sight of those below.

The villagers were reluctant to take part in the latest outbreak of violence and did not understand what was going on. Also they were astonished. That was the mighty Sultan down there. A comic figure no doubt, and a great disappointment. Until then he had been a distant part of their lives, far off in the capital, and never seen by them, but in spite of his appearance he had great powers and they did not wish to rouse his anger without reason.

Shani was the only one prepared to try him out, and Lord Grausam, by lobbing stones on them, but Derek restrained her. The river people listened, at first awestruck and then with anger, as Ramses and Frederika explained what had happened. They had expected little of Lady Cicely but had not thought she would approach the Sultan with such a terrible request, no matter how much she may have cried afterwards. As for the Sultan the last thing they expected of any ruler was justice or mercy.

The Sultan was not to be seen. He had had been so shocked at the disobedience of two of his most trusted subjects that he had retired to his palanquin and the curtains were closed.

Lord Grausam, anxious to continue the march, was in no mood to bargain. He said, 'You have angered the Sultan but I can say in his name that there is still time to make amends. Will you give us the girl and the man?'

'No, never!'

'Very well, the Sultan will give you one more chance. Come with the Lady Frederika and Sir William of Ockham to the castle of Lord Smedhurst before nightfall tomorrow and be prepared to serve the Sultan with your bodies and your weapons. The Sultan will decide your fate after consideration of your behavior during the coming battles. If you do not appear the Sultan will know you for what you are - rebels and outcasts.'

He said nothing further and did not even glance at them again as he gathered together the reins of his horse.

Four slaves picked up the ends of the poles that supported the palanquin, raised them to their shoulders and, urged on by a small whip carried by an attendant, trotted off.

A horse had been found for Lady Cicely. It belonged to Sir William. She ordered the troopers to alter the stirrups so she could ride side-saddle, as a lady should.

'It's dangerous, lady,' protested a sergeant. 'It's a trooper's saddle, not a lady's saddle, and you could fall off.'

'Don't argue, my man, just do what you're ordered, or I'll report you to Lord Grausam.'

There was no more to be said and the troopers did the best they could in hanging both stirrups from one side of the saddle. If there was an accident, and she fell off, no doubt they would be blamed.

Sir William shouted indignantly when he saw her riding off on his horse, but it was no use. To get down the cliff and recover the animal was beyond him, unless he took off his armor or was lowered on a rope.

Lady Cicely rode Sir William's horse at a walking pace behind the noble lord. They both followed the palanquin.

Lord Grausam was swearing under his breath at Cicely's stubbornness.

She said, 'No doubt Frederika would ride astride a horse, but I am a lady and we ride facing left.'

'You will be left, right enough, if you fall either side off the horse. You'll be left behind.'

As Lady Cicely moved off without looking up at the villagers or her former friends some stones struck the rump of the horse making it move to one side. She was a good horsewoman, did not move in the saddle, and soon had the horse under control. Still she did not look up or pay any attention to the people lining the cliff edge but rode off with her eyes gazing straight ahead.

Shani could easily have hit Lady Cicely instead of the horse but she was not sure how Derek would have regarded such an action.

In a few minutes the palanquin, surrounded by its escort, had swayed off into the distance and was hidden by the forest while the ladies of the court and the servants picked up what few articles they had been able to carry so far and trailed off after it whimpering and complaining. Soon they too had gone from sight and hearing and the glade was deserted except for a few dead bodies here and there.

Chapter Fourteen

The villagers return

'What do we do now?' asked Frederika.

'Sleep,' said Derek. 'If we don't get some sleep soon I'm going to drop.' He was suffering a reaction from the terrible danger he had just escaped and weariness had caught up with him. He was yawning and scarcely able to keep his eyes open.

Derek wanted to thank Frederika and Ramses for saving his life at the risk of their own but was not able to think of any words to show the depth of his feelings. He had forgotten that it was they who had got him into the job in the first place.

The bedding had been put out again and. Derek was settling down when he was startled by raised voices and the sound of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. Sir William was about to settle a labour - management dispute with Doctor Grozny by taking to him with his sword. Ramses leapt to his feet also, his own sword held at the ready.

'Stay, Sir William,' he cried. 'You cannot slay an unarmed man, put up your weapon.' He held Sir William firmly with his eye while the doctor glowered in the background.

'You need not fear for the fellow,' retorted Sir William, waving his sword in the direction of his servant. 'I have never killed an unarmed man, though many deserved it. If he was of noble blood and armed for war that would be different; I would try some hand-strokes with him, but a low born servant like this who refuses to do service for his lord deserves to feel the flat of my sword. I will leave a few marks on his backside that will remind him of his duty.'

'You are not my master! No one owns me and I have better things to do than serve a mental fossil in a scrap iron suit.'

Ramses looked at the doctor gravely. 'Did you swear an oath on your life to serve Sir William for a year and a day in return for his freeing your hands?'

'Well, yes, but I was desperate. I had to kneel and say a childish form of words; but I do not consider myself bound. As for this nonsense about an enchantment: you know very well what happened. You helped to kidnap me from my own laboratory and turned me loose with my hands tied.'

'Our world is bound by oaths,' said Ramses. 'We swear to serve the sultan and he, in turn swore to protect us and Sultania. If you knelt and swore to serve Sir William for a year and a day then, if you break that oath, he has the right to put you to death.'

'Yes,' said Frederika, 'That's how it all hangs together. Just do what you're told, get through the year and you're free, unless you decide to renew the oath.'

The doctor listened grimly to all this, then went to assist Sir William remove his armor. This was the first time Sir William had been able to get it off in two days. His former squire had disappeared somewhere in the forest and the appearance of Doctor Grozny in trouble was stroke of luck.

Under Sir Willam's direction they soon had the armor laid to one side, and leaving him to sigh and scratch contentedly, Doctor Grozny went muttering to ask the village women for cloth to wrap up the armor to protect it from the night air and rust.

'We've pulled up the ladder and fixed it,' said Thorkild to Derek. 'No one can get at us for a while, not unless they climb up the rock face. We can sleep now but some of our people will stay awake. I have told Shani to take first watch.'

Derek nodded sleepily, scarcely aware that Shani had settled down with a rug on a rock nearby ready to keep guard over him and her people while they slept. He drew the opera cloak over his head and in a short while was asleep. Some of the children were fretful, but they settled down and then they too slept.

Only Shani was awake. She sat on her rock with her knees under her chin and looked alertly out over the forest or up at the overhanging cliff, and every now and then she looked at Derek to make sure he was comfortable.

Hours later the evening fires had been lit. The children, some of them, were up and collected near the warmth of the flames in the clear, chill air of the coming night, while their elders worked. Others played and shouted across the rocky and uneven platform where they were camped. They were kept from straying too close to the edge by nervous mothers who took turns in this duty. The opposite side, the drop down to the pool, was not considered so dangerous. If children fell over the edge they would appear after a while shivering and demanding a change of dry clothes.

Gus had risen half an hour before and was assisting with the cooking pots and griddle. Shani had been relieved from the watch after about two hours and then slept. She was now watching Gus to make sure his cooking was of the very best, but seemed satisfied.

The sun had sunk below the forest canopy when Shani jumped up from the rock where she had been brooding and watching. 'Quiet!' she cried, 'Quiet, everyone!'

They listened, but Derek could hear no more than the crackling of the fires, not even the breathing of the villagers who were hushed and attentive. The birds had been making a racket while settling down in the trees for the night but now they were quiet. Every bird had found its own nest. Somewhere below the edge of the cliff an owl hooted.

'They're here!' shouted Shani and everyone followed as she ran to the cliff edge where she too put her hands to her mouth and made the cry of an owl, and was answered. Then she hurried to the cleft in the rock. The rope ladder was cast loose and dangled over as an invitation to come up.

Soon after men started to arrive, climbing up to join them, and were affectionately greeted by their wives and children.

One young man wanted to embrace Shani but she evaded him in the crowd as they went back to the fires where more food was being put into the cooking pots or laid out ready for the extra mouths. Derek noticed the incident and decided sourly that the young man, about twenty years old, was too handsome for his own good. He had a green cap with a feather sticking out of it on a head of golden hair, exactly the same color as Shani's. His name, as Derek learned later, was Ric.

Derek joined a group round one of the fires where Thorkild was telling of their experiences from being attacked in the long house until they had seen the Sultan and his party off from the clearing below the cliff.

He listened until he felt a hand placed on his shoulder. A voice said, 'My dear boy, my deepest and most heart-felt apologies, I let you down.'

Derek jumped and turned towards the voice, Mr Codd was standing alongside him. The newcomer took his arm and led him to one side.

'I should never have left you,' he said, 'But I was galloping back with the troop, and when we entered the clearing we met those ape creatures and I was knocked off my horse. I didn't wake up until it was

all over and everyone had gone. I searched for you among the dead, but happily you were not one of them.'

'No, I'm still around. The apes picked me up and delivered me to a mad doctor who was breeding freaks. He wanted me manage the place so he could have time to make a lot more of the poor creatures.'

'Yes, I know. I traced you to the laboratory and met a perfectly splendid ape named Webster and managed to get the story out of him. I was so proud to hear how you turned the tables on the doctor.'

'Well, we're not rid of him yet. He's here now, and as mad as ever. How did you find us?

'Easy enough, Webster pointed out the direction you went and I followed your tracks until I came to the village and the men were there checking the damage. They saw all the boats were gone, so they guessed you were here, and I joined them.

Shani had seen Derek walk away from the group and came over. Talking to yourself now, are you?' she said.

She seemed startled when Mr Codd raised his leather cap to her. He was dressed the same as everyone else, in village-made cloth and cured leather jacket and pants; even his cap.

'Hello Miss Shani,' he said. 'It's good to see you again.'

She seemed confused, and smiled at him uncertainly, as though she couldn't quite remember where they had met.

After the pleasure of greeting their wives and children Derek could see the newcomers were taken aback at finding strangers invited to share the tribe's secret place, and their rations. The village had been evacuated before, but they had managed on their own, without the help of strangers.

The young man, Ric, sidled up to Shani and asked in a voice meant to be overheard, 'What are these strangers doing here? Why were they allowed to come with you? This place is supposed to be our secret.'

'It's not so secret now,' answered Shani. 'The Sultan, his court, and most of his army have seen us today. Lord something or other might build a castle up here. Our friends are with because we needed them. Where were you?'

'You knew where we were,' said Ric sulkily. 'We have done a great thing for the village it would be a shame if it was spoiled by these strangers.'

'Have you done all you hoped to do?'

'Yes, and much more besides. You'll change your mind about me when you see what we brought back.' He stopped, it was clear that he would say no more while there were any but his own people present.

A reserve had come on the villagers. They were excited and thankful to see one another safe and well but the conversation died away and they exchanged glances and whispers as though there was a secret between them that could not be shared with outsiders.

'Are the donkeys safely tethered?' asked Thorkild.

'Yes,' said one of the men, with an uneasy look at the visitors, 'They should be safe enough.'

'Bring up all that you have,' ordered Thorkild. 'It will be better in the cave than anywhere else, and better guarded, too.'

There was a pause while two men went down the ladder. They returned presently, each carrying a small, heavy sack, both were taken into the cave and left there.

'We take great care of our donkeys,' remarked Thorkild uneasily to Ramses. 'Our boys were lucky not to have met the Sultan and his army or those hopping things you call kangaroos; they could have been killed or taken prisoner.'

'We went to the village first,' said one of them. 'The Long House is just a burned mess. There was no one about, and the canoes were gone so we came here as fast as we could. Thank the gods everyone's alright.'

'Did you see the army after it left here?'

'We heard the sounds of men marching, and hid in the forest until everyone was out of sight, then we hurried on again to make sure nothing bad had happened to our families.'

Their talk was interrupted because food was ready. Out of politeness the visitors sat together to eat so that the villagers could talk among themselves without strangers listening. Mr Codd was with the villagers. He was given some food, but apart from that no one seemed to pay him any attention.

Thorkild and some of the others asked the friends to join in, but it was no good. Since the return of the village men their easy friendship had changed and the river folk shared a secret or a worry of which the visitors knew nothing.

It was not mentioned for a while but when Frederika reached the stage of mopping up her meat juice with bread she spoke suddenly. 'There's something going on round here that they won't talk about. I reckon they've picked up something valuable, it might be treasure, or smuggled goods, and us being here has spoiled everything.'

'They're not smugglers,' said Gus. 'They're a long way from the border and you can't carry much in two small sacks. I should know, I was in the business once.'

'Whatever they have,' said Ramses, 'Is it any concern of ours? This is a hard country and we all seem to live by stealing from each other. If poor folk like this find something of value why should we try and take it away from them?'

Derek agreed. 'If whatever they have was seized from them perhaps it would add to the wealth of the Sultan, or Cicely's father. I wouldn't want that to happen.'

'Anything of value should be sold,' suggested the doctor. 'The money would be far more valuable spent on research than it would be in the hands of a tribe of peasants.'

The doctor's views on research funding were not well received by the others; they knew all about his experiments.

Sir William took it very ill that he should speak at all. He did not know what research was, had never heard the word before, but he ordered the doctor to sit well back from the fire and only respond when he was called on to do some service. After all, he was a menial, a servant, and his views would not be of any interest to his betters. Sir William thought he should be more grateful after being rescued from riding forever on the back of a magic pig.

The doctor tried not to burst with anger and did as he was told.

'We can leave in the morning,' said Derek. 'We have done what they asked and escorted the women and children this far. I think our agreement is finished. They have their own men to protect them now. They can protect Shani too, if some of Grausam's soldiers come for her.'

Ramses agreed. 'If you consider it wise, manager, we can tell Thorkild so, and also that we have no interest in anything the villagers might have found or own, they can keep it.'

'I don't care what you tell them,' said Frederika. 'But I think we should mount our own guard tonight. It shouldn't be hard. We have caught up with some of our lost sleep today, and there is nothing like greed or fear of losing something valuable to turn friends to enemies.'

When Sir William heard this he ordered his servant to polish yet again his armor and sword so he would be ready for sentry duty.

They went to the other fire to speak to Thorkild. Whatever the villagers were discussing the talk stopped suddenly when the visitors appeared.

'We're leaving, first thing in the morning, or straight after breakfast, anyway' said Derek. 'We think we have carried out our side of the deal and you should let us go.'

Shani was talking to Ric. but turned her attention to Derek when he made his announcement. She got up and frowned. 'Leaving! Why are you leaving? We thought you liked being with us.'

Yes, we like you all, but we can't stay anymore. The Council of Elders sent us off to do a certain job but everything has changed, so we have to go back for fresh instructions, and now that your men are back they can look after everyone.'

'I'm coming with you!'

'No you're not,' interposed Frederika. 'You're not a member of the Board and you're not a member of the nobility so you can just stay here with your tribe. If there is any fighting to be done it will be our duty to protect the manager and you will just be in the way.'

'I can look after myself and protect the manager too!' Shani produced a knife from the sleeveless leather jerkin she wore over her homespun blouse. Frederika took a half a pace backwards and loosened her sword in its sheath.

They all looked at the knife; it was long and sharp. 'I can bring a bird down with a bow and arrow or I can hit it with a stone. If you want to have a duel with stones at fifty paces I'll take you on, and I'll let you wear your armour.'

'Shani, stop talking rubbish!'

She ignored her father. 'You can't look after him. He had to rescue you from the place where they were making animals.'

'We wouldn't have been there either, if it hadn't been for him,' retorted Frederika. Silly twit! He got himself captured by those monkey and we had to go in and get him out.

'There, that proves it; if I'd been there I wouldn't have let them capture him in the first place.'

'Shut up Shani!' ordered Thorkild. 'If you thought more and talked less you'd get on a lot better.' He looked at Derek. 'I'm glad you and the others are going to Sultanopolis because we still have need of you. My people have authorised me to show you these.' He held out his hand and some stones on his open palm glinted dully in the firelight.'

They were puzzled at this until Gus reached out to pick one up.

He examined it. 'That's a gold nugget,' he said. 'Water washed gold. If those bags you have been carrying are full of this stuff you're wealthiest tribe in Sultania.'

Derek took a nugget and looked closely. 'How do you know it's gold?'

'I know it is, your Honour. My people have been digging the stuff up for centuries. This lot comes from near a river somewhere, or perhaps an old river bed.'

Thorkild nodded.

Derek suddenly felt sorry for the river dwellers. When the news got out, and it would, their peaceful lives would be ended as the river banks were dug up by gold seekers. All the titled thugs in the country would descend on them looking for a share and the present fighting would flare up into a full scale war. 'We need to get this into someone's safe; if there are any safes in this country,' he said.

'Bogrod the Goldsmith,' suggested Gus. 'He's got a shop in Sultanopolis.'

'He's honest?'

'Yeah, he's honest. We were partners in a gold mine once, your worship. We took a lot of gold out and I trusted him with my life every time he lowered me down the shaft. He set up as a goldsmith after the seam was finished.'

They all examined the gold nuggets.

'This is truly soft, first class gold,' said Mr Codd. In a furnace it would melt like butter.'

'Does this Bogrod have a safe?'

'Yes, your Honour, a big one, I can stand upright inside it.'

'I will escort you there,' cried Sir William. 'With me on guard you need fear nothing.'

Thorkild seemed unimpressed with this offer. He had seen the knight battling the kangaroo men. He turned to Derek.

'I am a knight errant,' continued Sir William. We protect the poor and rescue maidens without thought of reward.'

'What, you will escort us to Sultanopolis for no fee at all?'

'Of course, that is the knightly code, and it is my gift to you. However you will give me a gift in return. If you are generous you will give me enough gold to buy some spare horses, servants, and a new suit of armor. The one I have belonged to my father and it's got dents all over it.'

Derek looked at his companions, they nodded. 'Yes, we'll come too,' he said to Thorkild, who seemed relieved at hearing this news.

'This will be very good,' said the knight. 'Myself, Lord Ramses, and Lady Frederika will escort you to this place you are talking about, as long as someone knows the way. And I will command!'

'Anything you say, Sir William.'

Chapter Fifteen

Departure

Next morning Derek woke to another cloudless day. Their ledge was flushed with morning sunshine and they looked over a forest to the east which sloped down to a broad valley, many miles across. Further again was a wide, grassy plain which he could scarcely make out and which stretched to the foothills of a range of mountains with snowy tops. The snowfields glittered so brilliantly over miles of clear air that they were almost painful to look on.

'That's my country,' said Gus. 'My people live on and under those mountains, and on the very top is the border between Sultania and the Carthaginian Empire, but we dwarfs don't worry too much about borders. We live on both sides, though no one's quite sure where the border is, and we fought them off every time they tried to move us.'

Mr Codd had joined them. Derek turned to him and said, 'What is the Carthaginian Empire you talk about. I've never heard of it?'

'No, I understand that,' said Mr Codd. In your reality Rome defeated Carthage, a city in North Africa, and totally destroyed it. In this reality Carthage overcame Rome and established an empire The Latin language was lost at the same time. But that is enough history, we are being called to breakfast

Breakfast was shared out cheerfully. Shani helped to hand round the food but was more silent than usual. Derek wanted a chance to speak to her alone to explain why she was to be left behind. She would be safer among her own people than travelling to the capital, but she avoided him.

Another problem was Sir William. Dr Grozny helped the knight on with his armor but did not bother to point out they were on the edge of a cliff and his master was stuck there. Derek had to supervise and control Sir William's descent with the aid of the village rope. His shield, lance and sword were lowered the same way.

Everyone was bustling to get ready. The villagers, at their council of the previous night, had decided to go back home to discover what damage had been done and to start again. Ric and another young man

would go to the capital with Derek's party. They would be in charge of two donkeys which would carry a sack of gold each, and anything else required

Most were travelling by canoe. It was hard work getting the canoes up river against the current but it had to be done and it was considered safer to go that way. In face of danger they could escape to the far bank, or downstream, with the river current to help.

Villagers and visitors alike went down to the water's edge and helped push the canoes out from the bank. The canoes were to proceed slowly up river for the party was to spend one night on an island where they would be safe. Thorkild did not want them to arrive at the village before his own group, who were to walk, had got there and made it secure.

Derek's telephone showed the time as eight in the morning when they left the riverside and began their march to the main road. He had his doubts about that. The battery was running down and he was as sure as he could be that there were no transmission towers in Sultania; or power points to recharge the battery.

Mr Codd had a full pack and was ready, though as far as Derek could see no one but himself looked at or spoke to him.

Before they could set off Derek had to settle another problem, Sir William, refused to go anywhere until they found him a horse.

'We have no horse,' Derek said. 'You can walk with us or wait until a horse without a rider wanders by. If that happens, you can get on the horse and follow. Otherwise we leave you here.'

'Why not ask Thorkild if you can borrow one of our donkeys?', suggested Shani. 'They're as good as a horse any day.'

Sir William pretended not to have heard the suggestion. Women did not understand such things. Knights errant did not ride donkeys.

Derek turned to go and Sir William knew he was beaten. Wearing armor he could not keep up and once the walkers were out of sight he would be hopelessly lost. He caught a donkey by its bridle and dragged it over to a fallen log which he used as a mounting block. He was in a black mood and his servant, who was laden with his shield and lance, as well as a pack, had sense enough to not make any smart remarks.

Shani, the best canoeist, had been asked repeatedly to go by river but she refused. and carried a pack not much smaller than those borne by the men. She strode off closely accompanied by the young man Ric, who talked to her earnestly for a good part of the time.

They marched for hours. The Sultan and Lord Grausam's force and the camp followers had been that way before them and they could track their progress by the valuable but useless articles that had been dropped on the track. The folk who had been turned out of the palace at short notice had brought away some odd things, either for the comfort of the Sultan or for safe keeping.

They had not expected a long trek in the wilderness and it was astonishing to see some of the objects that had been carried so far.

Among other items of booty was what appeared to be the Sultan's private toilet commode lying upturned on the grass. It was made of inlaid patterned timber, but the gold decorations had been prised off, and it was pocked with a pattern of ragged holes where precious stones had been levered out by thieves.

They came across a heap of rich bedding. Someone had stripped the Sultan's bedroom and tied the sheets blankets and mattresses into bundles only to throw them down many hours later to lie beside the track. No doubt this costly pile had been left undisturbed by the soldiers because bedding was too easily identified. The unlucky looters would have been hanged at the castle.

Arguments broke out at the sight of these treasures. The men were aware of the dangers of the forest and wanted to hurry forward before the effect of the army's passage wore off and the dangerous men and creatures that lived there drifted back again.

Shani would have none of this. She insisted on stopping, making them fold blankets and sheets which were added to the packs carried by the men, and Gus. She wanted the mattresses and cushions too but was overruled by Derek. This happened several times as fresh treasures came in view until Gus and the villagers began to resemble ants labouring under great loads.

Frederika, Ramses, and Sir William carried nothing but their weapons, they were ready to fight at any moment. Derek refused to carry any of Shani's treasures, and Doctor Grozny was so grumpy no one dared ask him anything.

Mr Codd was not loaded up either, Derek was not sure that anyone else in the party, except him, actually saw the man.

Gus had started off with two weighty packs because he insisted on taking Derek's. 'His Honour is the thinker of the party,' he said, 'and should not be burdened because he would not be able to carry a heavy load and think at the time.'

Well, how can you think if you are carrying two big packs instead of one, as well as all this stuff Shani is stacking on you and the others when she thinks I'm not looking?'

'I don't think, I leave that to your worship, but I can carry heavy loads. When I was a smuggler,' he said 'I had to carry huge, weighty bundles of goods through steep mountain passes, and haul a donkey with a load at the same time. And if the customs officers were after us we had to run uphill to wear them out.'

Shani stacked even more of her new possessions on his back

Derek stopped her at last. The party was so burdened it would not be able to run speedily enough if enemies appeared. Two lovebirds tweeting sadly in their cage abandoned in the grass were especially appealing. She longed to take them with her but Derek refused, and the birds were let go.

In spite of all this they went as fast as they could. Afterwards Derek would not allow anything else to be picked up though a number of objects of great beauty had been dumped by the Sultan's followers. They were in a hurry to reach the road before dark and Derek refused Shani's suggestion that some of the goods be removed from the track and hidden, to be picked up later.

In spite of all this they came to the road in the late afternoon. The sun was already shining through the tops of the trees as it declined towards the horizon and because of the clear, cloudless sky the air was cold and still.

Close to the road was a hollow screened by bushes and rocks.

'We will camp there,' said Ramses. 'It seems free of rocks except the ones that hide it from the road. If we are in a tight circle it should be easy to defend.'

They moved into the hollow and were making camp with the men gathering wood for the fires when Shani called for them to be quiet. They knew how keen was her sight and hearing so everyone stood still and silent.

She was proved right yet again for after only a short time they could all hear a creaking, and shuffling and a clinking of horses hooves striking rock. It grew louder. The noise was punctuated now and again by a crash as an iron tyred wheel fell into a pothole in the road and metal objects were heard rattling together. The source of the noise was some distance off but quite plain because of the stillness of the cold evening air.

As the vehicle drew nearer and appeared round a bend in the overgrown road the observers could see that it was a four wheeled black wagon drawn by four horses.

Riding on the bench in front were two men. They were garbed in long, black, monk like gowns with hoods that could be drawn over their heads to leave their faces in shadow. They seemed to be as weary as their nodding horses and their bodies jolted roughly at every movement of the wagon. In spite of this they still they looked fearfully at every bush as they passed, and every now and the one not holding the reins would stand on the seat to get a clear view over the top of the wagon to see if they were being followed.

It was the same wagon that had accompanied Derek from the capital city until he had lost his escort during the ambush. No one had told him what was in the wagon or why it had come with them. He had not liked the look of it then and did not care for it now.

When it was almost level with their hiding place Frederika, Ramses, and Sir William drew their weapons and stepped out into the middle of the road.

The man holding the reins shrieked at this sudden appearance and pulled back hard on the horses' mouths. He stamped on an iron brake lever by his foot and the outfit lurched to a halt. The two monkish figures were raising their hands to plead for mercy when they recognised the people on the road. They both jumped from their seat on the wagon, ran forward and sank to their knees in front of the three warriors. Behind them their horses, with the brake locked, remained still, their heads hanging.

'Lord Ramses, Lady Frederika, gentle knight, help us!' wailed one with a grating, reedy voice, 'In the name of the Merciful One protect your humble servants. Since we lost you we have encountered terrors that would shrivel the soul. Save us from the dangers of the forest.' They showed signs of throwing themselves flat in the dust of the road.

'Get on your feet,' said Ramses. 'If you have anything to say stand up to say it.'

They rose, brushing at their gowns where they had been kneeling.

Derek joined his friends to ask what was happening and the newcomers would have kneeled again but Ramses, who did not seem pleased at this encounter, roughly ordered them to remain standing.

'What are they doing? What's in the wagon?'

'We shall see,' Ramses answered grimly.

The villagers were there now. For a while preparations for making camp for the night had been forgotten. They clustered round when Ramses ordered the newcomers to proceed to the rear of the wagon. The men untied the canvas cover and let drop the tailboard which was supported by heavy chains. Inside, packed neatly and padded by the bedding of the wagoners, were some wooden frames with ropes and harness attached to them.

'Take them out,' ordered Ramses. 'Everyone should see what you carry round the country with you.'

The men expertly pulled the gear out over the tailboard of the wagon. They had done it many times before, and soon the different items of equipment were assembled on the grass at the side of the road.

Derek was puzzled. The largest thing the two men had pulled out appeared to be a table, or perhaps a bed. It had a flat, slatted surface but the two ends were raised like headboards, and very thick. It was about eight feet long and fitted with ropes and chains and on one end was a winding gear with a handle. It seemed designed to pull the ropes tight.

Frederika recognised this machine and with an exclamation of disgust turned away. Everyone was uneasy at the sight, but Derek still could not understand its purpose.

The spokesman for the two newcomers smirked at Ramses and said, 'perhaps, my lord, you would care for a small demonstration. If you wish us to use one of your slaves for the purpose we will be happy to oblige.'

Derek nearly collapsed when he realized that these were nothing more than torturers who carried their instruments of trade around with them and he had been looking at the rack which was used to stretch its victims in unbearable agony. It had been an official part of the Commission of Enquiry when he had set off on that first day.

'Yes, we can have a demonstration,' said Ramses, as the villagers shrank back from the instruments of torture that had been set out for them to see. 'You can be stretched on the rack first. Your assistant can show us how much screaming pain it can cause. Then you can change places. No tradesman should tell us the value of his tools without showing us first how they work.'

It was the turn of the torturers to shrink back when they understood this suggestion. They were about to go down on their knees once more when Ramses stopped them.

'Give them a taste of their own medicine,' said Frederika. 'If they can hand it out they should be men enough to take it back again.'

In spite of Ramses' order the two men grovelled and cried for mercy. They said they could not stand the pain of torture because they knew how severe it was; besides, they were faithful servants of the

Sultan. They said they had been ordered to go with the commission to assist the manager with his enquiries.

Derek was sickened at the sight of them and the thought of their dreadful trade. 'I won't have it,' he said. 'We've talked about me managing the country but it's a dream. This is not even a nation, it is only a place with a bloodthirsty set of nobles, no reasonable system of government. A collection of primitive laws backed up by torture and execution. I don't have an army behind me, or a police force, not even proper courts; just leave me out of all this. I want to go home.'

Shani cried out and caught hold of his arm

'We need you more than ever,' Ramses replied gravely as the other members of the party listened. 'We have long grieved over the condition of our country yet have not known how to set it right.'

'But why me? What about that poor man whose head was being returned to his relatives. I don't want my brother and sister to get a lot of gold dinars because I was killed in this rotten place.'

'Frederika and I asked Effendi Codd to find us a man skilled in government and the arts of administration. We thought he may have made a mistake, and you were too young. But you have been different. During the trials we have undergone you have shown yourself to be quick minded, courageous and strong. We now require your wisdom and strength.'

Mr Codd spoke and everyone became quiet as their attention seemed to wander. He said, 'I saw that too when you were very young. You have abilities and strengths that have not yet been tapped. You don't know your own strengths, at least not yet. We have stood by you all these years during your education, now you can stand by us.'

When he finished the folk gathered around seemed to shake themselves awake.

'There is little demand for wisdom in this mediaeval shambles,' said Doctor Grozny. 'How can you criticise my work, which at least has a purpose, even if you cannot understand it, when you permit obscenities such as these to drive their trade under the open sky. How much genetic material must they have ripped and destroyed in the name of the Sultan's justice. If you want to show wisdom turn them over to me for experimental services, and burn their instruments.'

'You're not getting them,' said Derek. A statement with which all agreed.

'Very well, manager,' asked Ramses, 'should we kill them? A word from you and we will burn their gear and throw their bodies on the fire.'

The wretched torturers would have fled howling, if they had not been restrained.

'No, you are still mistaken. If torture here is legal and they are employed by the Sultan for that purpose they have not broken the law, but if you want me as manager it is the first law that has to be changed.'

'Fair enough,' said Frederika, 'I never did like torture, anyway. We'll give them a boot in the arse each and send them on their way. I reckon we should burn all this stuff before it can be used on any other poor sod.'

'Yes, yes! Burn it all and the wagon too.' Sir William cried enthusiastically, 'And I will take the near front horse.' He had ignored the discussion but instead examined the horses. 'If I cut the reins down and used one of those blankets until I get a proper saddle it should be alright.'

Shani let go of Derek's arm and confronted the knight. 'If you touch any of my blankets you'll be sorry,' she said. Those blankets are for people, not horses. If you try to take them or cut them you'll be sorry. I'll cut you up.' She produced her knife, but Derek ordered her to put it away again. From that moment Sir William was a little afraid of Shani.

They turned again to the question of what to do with the wagon. Everyone agreed that it should be burned. Shani pointed out an ornamented box which had not been taken out with all the other gear.

It contained an axe with a carved and brightly painted handle. The blade was protected by a decorated leather cover with silver studs and rivets that had been worked into a pattern. The head of the axe also had a pattern cut into the metal, the edge was as sharp as any razor.

The torturers became alarmed and fearful when the box was taken out and opened. They pleaded for the axe not to be used for any purpose that would blunt it or chip the cutting edge. It was the Sultan's property, hundreds of years old, and had featured at many formal executions. It was one of the Sultan's favourite instruments of state.

The torturers were fearful men and it seemed the Sultan did not know that the axe was not in its proper place. If they returned it with the blade notched or blunt they would be subject to a slow and painful demotion.

Sir William, assisted by Shani and Gus, unharnessed the horses and tied them to bushes near the edge of the hollow. There was grass for them within reach and they could be watched over.

'They're good horses,' remarked Sir William. 'Whoever bought them did very well for the Sultan and they have been looked after properly, except for the last few days. Pity about that. I wish I had some oats; poor old boys; they're a bit hungry right now; still, they can get by on grass until we can arrange for some proper food. When I get my gift my horse will have all the oats it can eat.'

'We'll burn the wagon in the morning before we leave,' said Derek. A big fire like that after dark could attract a lot of attention that we may not like. It might draw trouble during the night, and we could deal with problems better in daylight.'

Derek knew that the Sultan and Lord Grausam would look on its destruction as an act of rebellion and he wanted to have Frederika and Ramses committed to the cause. Once they had burned the Sultan's property, and lost his axe, there would be no turning back.

The night was clear and still and a heavy frost started to settle on them in the early hours of the morning. After a few hours of cold and darkness the whole party, apart from those on sentry duty, and the torturers who slept in the wagon, were huddled together underneath, sleeping as best they could. The Sultan's blankets were warm and soft and if the travellers had known how cold the night was to be they may have carried off more of his gear when they had the chance.

Chapter Sixteen

Webster again

Derek woke up when the world was quite still in the cold grey light that preceded sunrise. Others had risen earlier to set about the work of the camp and he had the luxury of an extra blanket which had been thrown over him. This showed the difference between management and labor.

Shani and Gus had gone out together and caught some rabbits. They were now cooking them in the village frypan, and if ever a heavenly scent was going to bring greedy intruders down on them this was it. Derek hoped the sentries were keeping a good look-out. He got up and folded the blanket.

He was warming himself at the fire when he noticed that someone was missing. 'Where are the two men who came yesterday? They're not here.' Derek looked about but the pair were not in view.

No one remembered seeing the two since the previous night. Sir William had attempted to take their blankets to keep the horses warm but Derek had made him hand them back.

'They've probably bolted,' was Frederika's opinion. 'I'll bet they're on their way to the capital right now to tell that we're destroying government equipment. Well, the Sultan's not there. They can find that out for themselves when they arrive.'

'I don't think so,' said Ramses. 'They are fearful men and I believe they would sooner stay with us than take their chances with the terrors of the road.'

Derek said, 'If they are not here when we are ready to move off, we go without them. If we hang around here we might meet a party from the castle coming back to pick up some of the stuff that was thrown away.'

'We'll fire the wagon now,' He announced. The thought that such a vehicle and the torture instruments could still exist was offensive to him. As well as that the act of burning would be seen as a defiance of the Sultan's rule.

'Gus and I will do it,' Shani said. Breakfast had been served and their fire had burned down to a bed of glowing embers. She and Gus scraped them on to the frying pan and then dropped the contents into the wagon. They did this several times until it was all in.

The torturer's equipment had been shoved back into the wagon which was starting to catch fire from the burning embers.

Derek urged everyone to toss something on to the growing blaze. The wagon was old and its timbers had dried out over the years so, with the fallen branches they had stuffed into it, and the torturers' gear, it soon began to flare up. Everyone was fascinated by the sight. They knew they should move on quickly before the fire drew unwelcome callers but the warmth was so pleasant in the cold morning air, and the sight so interesting they wanted to hang around and watch.

Their attention was attracted by a shout from the forest and someone came blundering out of the undergrowth. It was one of the torturers. He ran towards them, almost exhausted but driven

forward by terror. From time to time he looked over his shoulder watching out for pursuers even while running as fast as he could. He fell to his knees panting and clutching at Ramses' chain mail.

'What is it,' asked Ramses. 'What happened this time?'

'Terrible things, replied the man, trying to control his panting and coughing. 'Some apes saw us and they jumped on us before we could escape. They wanted us as prisoners.' He looked back in terror; 'maybe they're seeking human sacrifices.'

'Did they give their names?' enquired Doctor Grozny. 'I am particularly anxious to speak to an ape named Webster. He is taller than the others and wears a red harness.'

The man shook his head. It was clear he had not been introduced to his attackers.

'They threw us over some huge pigs they were riding and started to gallop away but the one that had me was not holding on properly. I fell off and ran into the bushes before he could turn the pig around and go after me. I have been running and hiding I saw the smoke so I was able to find my way back here.'

Doctor Grozny clicked his tongue in annoyance. 'That Webster was one of my best apes, and we parted under a misunderstanding. I do wish you had brought them back here! I want to have a long talk with Webster. They're like children, you know. They need my guidance and if I can influence Webster the others will be sure to follow his lead. But it is what I have always said. I should have gone and talked to the apes myself. As it is the whole matter may have been bungled beyond repair.' He withdrew, disgusted.

'What of your comrade?' asked Ramses. 'What became of him?'

The man shrugged. 'The apes still have him, as far as I know. Poor Braun, perhaps we will never meet again.'

No one was pleased to learn that the apes were nearby, roaming around the forest. Derek suggested that they be pursued to rescue the missing man, but he was overruled. No one wanted to risk themselves in the forest to rescue a torturer. Doctor Grozny supported Derek in spite of being told several times to hold his tongue.

'We had better move on,' was Frederika's opinion. 'It's a long way to the capital. The manager can ride behind me.'

'That's no good,' said Shani. 'I'll ride one of the horses and he can get up behind me. You're such a great warrior, Frederika, you will need to have both hands free and full control over your horse if you have to go into battle.'

'You ride horses too?' asked Derek.

'Yes, saddle or bareback, it doesn't make any difference: and tell her she doesn't need to look like that; I can take care of you better than she can, sword and armor and all. I've even stood on the saddle when the horse was cantering.'

Frederika moved dangerously close. 'You don't give up easily, do you?'

Gus recognized trouble when he saw those two together. He stepped forward and said, 'I think it would be best if his Honour rode with me.' They all looked at him. 'Thorkild told me I could have the donkey that Sir William no longer needs, and I will ride that.'

'I don't want to ride on anything,' said Derek. 'I'd sooner walk than ride. But I guess I can't walk all the way. I'll get on the donkey when I have to.'

Shani frowned, she was disappointed, but said, 'Just as you like, but donkeys are very uncomfortable.'

'That's true,' agreed Gus. 'But they're better than walking. Many a time I've escaped arrest by fleeing on a donkey. But if there are any spare blankets from the wagon His Honour and I would be pleased to have one.'

'You can have one of mine,' said Shani. 'You'll be more comfortable that way.' She folded a blanket and put it over the back of Gus' donkey.

Sir William could not believe what he was seeing. Shani had threatened him with violence when he wanted one of her blankets but now she was giving in to this low born manager fellow as though he were someone important; and putting the Sultan's blanket on a donkey. Of all animals, a donkey. Another puzzle was that he seemed to have more influence over Ramses and Frederika than Sir William himself, in spite of being a low born commoner. He remembered too that the fellow had refused to haul his horse up to the rock platform. If the horse had been up there with him Lady Cicely could not have ridden it away.

There were no saddles or stirrups, and he and the others had only the torturers blankets to sit on when riding. Sir William knew he would never understand women.

Sir William mounted first to establish his right to the horse he wanted. He was holding something wrapped in a cloth, and everyone noticed. He tried to move it out of sight when Derek asked the question.

'It's something I own,' said Sir William. 'It's mine and I don't have to tell anyone what it is.'

Derek was surprised at this answer but shrugged and turned away. He did not want to pry into any little secrets that Sir William might keep from them. It was something to do with the horses, no doubt.

Shani, not being a gentleman, did not mind telling his little secret. 'It's the axe,' she cried. 'He pinched it out of the wagon when he thought no one was looking, and it wasn't burned with everything else. He's going to use it as a battle-axe.'

'It is a battle-axe!' Sir William was ready to own up now that Shani had told everyone. 'It is a beautiful axe and I'm not stealing it. I'll give it back to the Sultan when I see him. That's better than throwing it on the fire. That would burn the handle and ruin the head and it wouldn't be good for anything afterwards. But if we meet an enemy,' Sir William exclaimed triumphantly, 'I'll go whack! whack! whack! and chop down all the enemies of the Sultan, but I'd have it sharpened before I gave it back.'

No one was ready to take the axe away, and no one reminded him of what he had forgotten: that if he did not report to Castle Smedhurst before the day was out he would be known as an enemy of the Sultan; also, if he was caught with the Sultan's family treasure things might go hard with him.

The party moved off leaving the wagon burning by the side of the road with Sir William now openly and proudly carrying his battle axe in a leather sling he had made out of one of the harness straps..

It was time to part. The river people would go home to start all over again while Derek and his party were for Sultanopolis.

Thorkild and the other men were taking Shani's loot to the village where it would be distributed.

Derek took Thorkild to one side. Mr Codd came too. 'That stuff Shani picked up is dynamite', said Derek. 'If Lord Smedhurst and his soldiers raid your village and find the Sultan's property there you will be in a lot of trouble. Hide it or get rid of it, just in case.'

'Why would they raid our village?'

'They'll be looking for gold! The news about the gold find will soon spread and Smedhurst will hear about it sooner or later. Just be very careful. If I were you I'd take all that stuff we picked up back along the track, out of sight of the road, and dump it so Grausam's men can find it. Shani won't know until she arrives home, then it'll be too late.'

They parted. Shani kissed her father and the other men. Everyone else shook hands, then they proceeded along the road, in opposite directions. Derek knew that as soon as they were out of sight the village men would double back to dump all Shani's treasures. Though she had kept two of the blankets.

'That was good advice you gave to Thorkild,' whispered Mr Codd. 'You've got your head screwed on the right way.'

'Why didn't you speak up when we were on the road?'

'Because you worked it out for yourself, and I am proud of you. The advice you gave Thorkild might save the village from disaster.'

Derek's party had gone almost a mile, well out of sight of the others when he saw something that gave him an almost physical shock. There were four brooding, hairy shapes squatting by the side of the track. They were doing nothing but sitting quietly and waiting as the humans approached. They were backed up by kangaroo archers and the boars they rode were tied to trees behind them.

Derek shouted and everyone saw the intruders at the same moment. He heard a whisk of steel as Frederika and Ramses drew their swords. He raised his hand and heard the swords go back into their sheaths.

'By Jove, there's Webster!' cried Doctor Grozny, dropping Sir William's spear and shield. He started forward. 'Webster, my boy, I'm delighted to see you. I am sure we can settle our little differences, and if you can guarantee proper respect in the future I am quite ready to come back and lead the community.'

On hearing this, Webster, for it was he, rose on his bowed hind legs and waving a knife in one hand he slapped his chest repeatedly with the other and roared. His companions did likewise; they reared to their full height waving a club or dagger and with the free hand slapped away so that all made a great drumming noise.

The noise of slapping and roaring echoed round the river and through the forest startling birds resting in the trees. This sudden fright drove them up into the sky in great clouds circling and screaming.

No one heard Sir William ordering his servant to pick up the arms he had dropped.

The doctor halted; he was taken aback by the tremendous racket and Webster's terrifying reaction to his friendly advances.

'No want you,' roared Webster. 'You come back, we kill you. You keep away from us, no one beats us any more with a big whip. We want him!' He pointed to Derek. 'You come back to laboratory. Things no good, Dr Singh he hide and cry out when we go near him. The others, they no better than cubs - no use to us! Come back with us, we fall down and worship new god that tells us what to do.'

'This is monstrous!' Doctor Grozny cried 'What ingratitude! They are offering you my position as leader of the community. They cannot do this; I created them; it's my laboratory. Come to your senses, Webster. What you are saying is completely out of the question and I will not tolerate it for an instant. Now you will withdraw this silly offer and apologize or you need look for no further promotion.'

Webster and the others made no response except for a rumbling growl deep within their chests.

'This is not an offer one gets every day,' said Ramses. 'To become a god as well as a leader is a chance that few people ever have. The manager may be tempted.'

'He certainly is not!' cried Shani. 'He has better things to do than take charge of those apes and kangaroo people. He didn't come here to look after animals.'

Derek would have expressed his own views on the subject but Frederika, annoyed at Shani's remarks, cut him off. 'The manager can make up his own mind without consulting you, miss. If he wants to be a god that's up to him and he doesn't need any advice from ignorant peasants, so just mind your own business!'

Shani's hand instantly went to her knife while Frederika stepped back a pace so as to have fighting room.

Ramses reached out to drop his hand on to Frederika's sword arm and Gus drove his donkey between them. The two girls stood glaring at each other but unable to set to.

'I don't know anything about gorillas,' said Ramses, 'But if they were men I should say they wanted to talk. Shall we meet them?'

'Yes,' said Derek. He turned. 'Sir William, take the Lady Frederika and ride with her for a little while, that way.' He indicated the way they had come. 'Gus, I think you and Shani can go in the opposite direction. The young village men can go with her. Doctor Grozny, you stay here while we talk with the apes. We may call you in presently.'

'This concerns me,' said Doctor Grozny. 'These animals, which I created, are proposing to give away my property, my research and the community which I have built up over many years. Who has a better right to talk to them than I?'

'You may be right but if you go near them in their present mood you could be hurt. If I were you I should keep well back.'

'We have to be careful,' said Ramses, 'They kidnapped that man in the forest last night. God knows what has happened to him.' He glanced round at the remaining torturer who had followed them meekly during the trek, shunned by all. 'He could be lying around somewhere with his throat cut.'

They approached the four apes, who were now quiet, and sat down to face them.

Mr Codd came too. He whispered into Derek's ear, 'Good move dear boy, going well so far'. No one else noticed him.

One of the apes had a bandaged, cross shaped wound on his chest.

Now,' said Derek, 'what do you have to say to us, and why do the kangaroo men attack with no warning whenever they see us?' He pointed at them. 'They burned down the Long House in the village where we were sheltering, and then shot at us on the river?'

'We was lookin' fer you, said one of the kangaroo men. We wanted you to take charge of the lab, instead of old Grozny. We follered yer tracks and saw where you changed over to horses and went through the bush and then down to the river. We was on the track by the river. Then a big mob of bushrangers come thunderin' up and started shootin' at us. Well, we got a bit cranky when they done that. We don't cop that sorta thing without shootin' back.'

'Did you see a lady fall of her horse while you were fighting?'

'Yair, but we let her go. Sorry about burnin' yer house, Boss, and the trouble on the river. We thought you was them bushrangers again.'

'Do we look like bushrangers? We had women and children with us!'

'Yair, well, sorry about that.' He pointed at Webster. 'Old Webby here he put us right. He said we should'a known better. Compared to us he's a Rhodes Scholar. That's why we want you to come back and be boss cocky at the lab.'

'Well, why were you shooting at us when we were up above you?'

'Same thing, Boss. We was crook on you because we still thought you was the bushrangers, but in a different place. Some of your people are pretty good rock throwers; we lost a couple'a mates in the clearing because of that. Then them soldiers turned up and we had to go for our lives, we weren't gunna be caught on the hop.'

Derek had another thought. 'What happened to that man you caught in the forest, did you kill him?'

'No kill,' said Webster. 'We wanted to talk but they screamed and ran around like cubs. No hurt! One ran away, the other just cried and asked to be let go. No use to us, we threw him off in forest'.

'Where is he now?' In response Webster blanked out. The fate of the second man was not of the slightest interest to him or his companions. He also made it clear that he was not cut out for the role of leader. If the animals wanted anyone fought he would do it, if a leader needed assistance to keep order he would be available, but he would not be putting himself forward as a candidate for high office.

'But before we left I told you about someone who could take charge -- George could do the job. He helped me with our escape. He's brave and smart, and he'll look after you. I'm sorry, I can't come back.'

'George no good, him servant. We want fighter, or manager.'

'Well, I'm a sort of servant, and I'm no warrior either. Take George, he's your best bet'

He turned to Ramses. 'He was the character with a cow's head and horns that I sent to help you, and Frederika hit him over the head with a tray'. This seemed an unlikely description of a possible leader of the community but as no one else could make any suggestions they had to leave it for a while.

Webster conferred with his companions. They scratched their bellies thoughtfully and looked at each other under lowered brows while considering the idea.

'Will your people help us?' asked Ramses. 'You may have to fight because bad men are running the country.'

'Bad men, like the doctor, eh?' Webster talked again with his followers. 'Yes, we come. You give us food and everyone comes. If you want us to fight bad men we start with the doctor, right?'

Derek could see there was going to be trouble with this unexpected group of allies. Not only had they eaten up all the food at the laboratory they still hated Doctor Grozny. As manager it would be his job to find enough food for all, and what use was a doctor taking care of sick animals if they hated and feared him.

'Do you remember the place on the road by the stream, where you attacked us?' enquired Ramses. 'If you and your people wish to join us we will wait for you there tomorrow. It is only half a day's ride from that spot to the capital'.

Webster bobbed to show that he understood. It was difficult for him to nod as a human would, but they understood him. 'How long you wait?'

Ramses held up one finger. 'One night, no longer. We camp in that place tonight and move on in the morning. If you are not there we go on; we will leave at first light.'

The apes rose and untied their giant boars. They rode away without another word. The kangaroo men followed and the little group soon disappeared into the forest.

Chapter Seventeen

Captured

After the apes and the kangaroo men departed Derek's party reassembled. Sir William was still angry with Doctor Grozny for dropping his shield and spear. He made him pick them up and wipe off the dust.

'Behave yourself,' he said, 'And don't fall behind, I may need my lance and shield at any moment.'

Doctor Grozny had a heavy pack and to carry the war gear besides was most awkward. He did his best to express his opinion of Sir William by glaring at him. 'This is a crime against science and society,' he retorted. 'You have captured possibly the finest scientist you will ever see, and given him the duties of a pack-horse. When I publish my results don't think you will escape criticism; I will warn the entire scientific community to have nothing to do with this intellectual black hole.'

Sir William was not upset. He had no idea what his servant was talking about. He was unable to read or write, nor could anyone else at his father's castle. It was unlikely that any criticisms published by Doctor Grozny would affect them one way or the other.

Sir William saw which way Ramses and Frederika were heading so he placed himself with them at the head of the group as they resumed their journey to the capital.

Doctor Grozny walked beside Derek and Gus for a while. He was determined to escape one way or another and wanted Derek to assist. That young man was tempted with offers of money and important positions in Grozny's laboratories.

'We could get away on a horse,' said Doctor Grozny. 'Why don't you ask those young women, they would both give you anything you wanted, including their horses?' If we had good horses we could outride that aristocratic nit-wit; we would be half way to the laboratory before he knew we were gone.'

Derek shook his head. 'Not a chance.'

'I could bring in beautiful young women,' 'They would be excellent companions for you in the laboratory.'

Derek was not going to fall for a honey trap like that, either. Having a private harem of some kind in the same country as Frederika and Shani would be more trouble than it was worth.

Doctor Grozny was indignant when these offers were all refused. He decided that Derek also was an enemy of science and not worthy of notice. He fell silent after a while and trudged along muttering and scowling.

It was another four hours of marching before they arrived at the clearing where the ambush had taken place. No one knew what the time was when they got there. Derek's telephone had given up, but they judged from the position of the sun that it was about noon.

None of the creatures from the laboratory had arrived.

Derek lay down with the others in the grass. A pleasant breeze rustled the tree leaves. Shani refolded the blanket from the donkey and put under his head.

The clearing was much the same as when they had last seen it surrounded by trees on the edge of the forest. The ashes of their cooking fires were still there and one or two broken dishes to show where the mounted soldiers had galloped through when their party was taken by surprise. All was quiet except for the birdsong and their voices, and it was sunny. The stream still ran under the stone bridge but all signs of the battle had disappeared. The casualties they had last seen lying around pierced with arrows had been removed; probably buried somewhere, but no one asked.

Shani directed Gus and the young men to gather firewood ready to prepare lunch, but Ramses stopped them. 'No fires for a while,' he said. 'Things look peaceful now, but you never know. We'll move into the cover of the forest later so we can't be seen from the road. You can make a small fire there but be ready to put it out any moment. Right now it's cold rations for everyone.'

'If we're going to move we should do it now,' said Shani. 'I want a fire so everyone can have a hot meal.'

Ramses pointed to a bush. 'When the shadow of the trees touches that bush we will move into the forest, people can rest on the grass until then. Tell them that no fires are to be lit in the open and later I will say where they are to be placed. I don't want the smell of smoke blowing across the clearing.'

Frederika was restless. She pulled the head of her horse round and thumped its opposite flank with her heel. 'I'm going to have a look-see down the road,' she bawled at Ramses over her shoulder.

'Don't go too far,' Ramses shouted in return as she galloped into the distance, in the direction from which they had come. 'It's dangerous - '. He tailed off because she could no longer hear him.

Shani handed out some food that had been brought with them, and everyone settled down to eat. She sat in the grass near Derek and they were thinking it would be pleasant to stretch out in the sunshine and sleep when they heard a galloping horse.

Frederika was driving her horse, far faster than when she left. She was not directing the horse in the middle of the road which was no more than a clay track, but along the grassy edge where its hoof-beats were not so loud. She leaned well forward her head lower than the horse's ears to avoid overhanging branches.

Everyone jumped up when Frederika bolted into the clearing and slid off the horse alongside Ramses.

'There's a big force coming up the road,' she said hurriedly. 'Mixed horse and foot. It wouldn't surprise me if it isn't Grausam's lot with reinforcements. I dare say they talked Cicely's father into joining up and bringing his own people with him. We had better take off into the trees and wait for the apes there. You wouldn't want them blundering into Grausam's force without warning.'

By the time the approaching host reached the clearing the watchers had faded away into the forest in the direction from which the fighting animals had appeared last time.

Lord Grausam was in the lead of the oncoming force. He was accompanied by a dark browed, heavily built man clad in magnificent flashing armor. His war helmet was surmounted by a lion crouching and snarling.

Derek and his friends had not gone too far into the forest. They still lurked out of sight in the shelter of the bushes and watched with interest as the men at arms marched into the clearing and were halted by their sergeants at a command from Lord Grausam. There were a few mounted knights and troopers but the larger part of the force was made up of foot soldiers.

Frederika had been eyeing the expensive armor. She said to Derek, 'That's Cicely's dad; Lord Smedhurst. He must have wrung his tenants dry to be able to afford that suit of armor.'

'They're on their way to the capital,' said Ramses. 'Grausam must think they have enough men to take on the rebels.'

The two leaders were thinking about other things. They seemed most impatient and fidgeted about on their horses as they looked in the direction from which they had come. They spoke only occasionally to each other but appeared to be agreed on the cause of their annoyance.

What concerned the two men soon came into view. As their soldiers filed into the clearing a smaller force was still coming along the road. It had been slowing down the pace of the main army. Colored plumes could be seen swaying above the heads of the soldiers who were marching close up around something in the center of their group.

Derek recognized the plumes; they decorated the posts on the four corners of the Sultan's palanquin. Behind the palanquin was a straggling group of wives and courtiers who followed after, still carrying burdens of varying sizes.

They were footsore and unhappy but were more sensibly dressed than when last seen. The gaudy silks and baggy clothes had been replaced or covered with drab homespun that would give them some shelter and warmth during cold and wet weather. They could not be left behind because their duty was to serve the sultan so the whole column had to crawl along at a slow walking pace.

Travelling behind the palanquin, but in front of the camp followers, was Lady Cicely with two ladies in attendance. She was riding side-saddle, as were her ladies. They were clothed in their best and Cicely had on a grey riding habit and a hat with a tall red feather. It was clear they were dressed for an outing and not for war.

Behind them manservants were riding and leading heavily laden pack horses.

At the tail of the procession were twenty mounted troopers ready to deal with anyone attacking from behind.

The lords Smedhurst and Grausam, seemed irritated at the sight of this untidy addition to their forces; it complicated their supply problems and weakened their own forces by having to allot troopers to the sole duty of protecting the palanquin, which contained the sultan.

Lord Grausam was heard to swear bitterly about his problems with the camp followers and make disloyal statements about the Sultan.

While this had been going on the soldiers already in the clearing and the armed horsemen had been edging close to the trees. They had spread themselves out in a line at the limit of the clearing, with their backs to the forest, facing the two lords.

The watchers among the trees had been spying on the Sultan's late arriving party and had not paid attention to the troops already near them. Ramses and Frederika, experienced warriors, should have noticed that the foot soldiers were strung out in a line and were supported by mounted troopers.

When this was done, Grausam turned and nodded to a bugler beside him who put the horn to his lips and blew a tremendous blast.

It was a signal. Every soldier, afoot or on horse, turned about and plunged into the forest straight in front of him, rushing through even the most tangled undergrowth without pausing. In a few moments they had taken by surprise and overcome Frederika, Ramses and the doctor. Both warriors had used their swords to hold the soldiers at bay but others worked round behind them and in a few moments they were held down by dozens of strong hands, helpless.

Sir William escaped. His only thought was to protect his charges and keep his horse from capture. The soldiers who found him could not get past the shining arc of his battleaxe which he handled like a master. Two soldiers went down spouting blood and the others drew back letting the knight lead the young villagers and their donkeys further into the forest.

Shani could have got away easily but she stayed to protect Derek and was taken with her knife in hand. A soldier was badly slashed in this encounter but none of the captives was hurt except for a few bruises and grazes from the struggle.

Derek did not wait to see. Mr Codd was with him and crying 'Run, dear boy! Run.'

Derek fled in a panic, certain that the soldiers were close behind and he would be brought down and captured. He ran for almost half a mile in this heavy country, leaving Mr Codd behind.

At last the stitch in his side was too painful to let him go on. He became stuck in boggy ground, in thick bushes, and sank down mouth wide open, gasping for breath.

The stitch was painful but not as bad as a new pain that took its place. He had run away and left Shani to be a captive of the Sultan and Lord Grausam. Now they would carry out the death sentence which had been decreed earlier.

His panic was in vain, no one had followed and the noise of shouting and of horses crashing through the bushes had died away. After a few minutes he recovered enough to push his way from the bushes and stood leaning against a tree trembling, spitting bile, and waiting for his heart to stop thumping. A painful stinging on his face and hands from the bushes and brambles that had whipped him in passing was almost welcome. It helped to stop thoughts about his cowardice, and fear, of what was going to happen to Shani now she was captured. The thorn marks seemed small punishment for his desertion of the girl who had tried to save him.

He had seen Cicely and wondered if she would go to watch the hanging.

Someone was coming through the bushes nearby and Derek straightened up quivering and ready to run. He sighed and slumped against a tree when he saw the newcomer had a shabby jacket and uncombed brown hair; it was Gus, who had been looking for him.

'Sir William's over there on the left, somewhere,' said Gus, pointing, after a period of heavy silence which Derek did not care to break. 'He got the young fellows from the village out of the way, and the donkeys.'

Derek was relieved to hear that Sir William had escaped and saved his Honour by protecting his charges, but nothing made up for the disaster of being alone and helpless in the forest and blaming himself for not having stood by Shani. He stared at Gus; his feelings of guilt were almost too much to bear.

While Derek was hiding in the forest the others, who had not escaped, were searched for weapons before being brought to face the two lords.

'Still in rebellion against your Sultan?' Lord Grausam said to Ramses. 'You had until yesterday to present yourself for his service. I dare say if you had joined on the march today the Sultan would have been pleased to accept your loyalty. You and the Lady Frederika both would have been welcome, but now it is too late. Your father, Lady Frederika, was loyal to the Sultan all his life; he would have been most angry if he had known of your conduct.'

'There are plenty of kinsmen left who will take up my quarrel if you kill me,' Frederika retorted angrily; and Lord Ramses too. 'You will have the best warriors in Sultania in arms if anything happens to us.'

'There will be no violence said Lord Smedhurst. 'I am a politician as well as an advisor, along with Grausam, to the Sultan. 'You two will be treated with every courtesy, but nevertheless we cannot permit you to go free; not unless you renew your oath to serve the Sultan.'

'How did you know we were here?' asked Ramses, glancing at the other captives, Shani and Doctor Grozny, who were held firmly on either side by soldiers.

'Any instrument, however vile, can be used in the service of the Sultan,' replied Lord Grausam. He indicated a grinning figure behind him who bobbed at Ramses and Frederika in a mockery of respect. It was the torturer.

'This honest servant of the Sultan,' he said, 'whom you captured and this clearing. We knew you would be here.'

Doctor Grozny had been waiting impatiently to speak and he now addressed Lord Grausam without waiting for permission. 'I am Doctor Ivan Grozny,' he burst out, 'and I am not in rebellion against anyone. I don't care what you aristocratic thugs do in settling your differences. My one aim is to return to my laboratory and to get on with the most important research that will take place in this, or any country.'

His insolence in speaking before the lords in this manner would have been instantly punished except the guards were stayed by Lord Grausam.

'This is the magician!' he said, speaking to Lord Smedhurst. 'I am glad the men did not know who he was otherwise they wouldn't have touched him. They've been full of talk about the fellow turning poor travellers into animals and creating great boars and giant apes who carry swords and axes that no army can resist. They tell me he made those kangaroos that can shoot with great war-bows.'

Lord Grausam's judgment of the soldiers was right. The men holding on to the doctor looked alarmed when they heard the news and would have run off but their fear of their commander was greater than their fear of the captive.

'I've met quite a few wizards in me time,' answered Lord Smedhurst cheerfully. 'I find it best to hang them at once. If it's a genuine wizard he can say a spell to save his life; if not there's no harm done. I'd recommend you try it on this one before he can call up his apes and kangaroos.'

Lord Grausam thought this to be excellent advice. They quickly decided that Doctor Grozny should hang at sundown and he was taken away in spite of his protests and tied to a tree at a far enough distance so that his shouts would not upset the camp.

This left only Shani to deal with. As the lords were about to turn their attention to the matter Lady Cicely rode up and stopped her horse near them.

'My dear,' said Lord Smedhurst to his daughter, 'Is this the girl you want hanged?'

Lady Cicely seemed ill at ease and her horse sensed her mood. It had to be quietened before she could answer.

'Where is Effendi Vortimer?' she asked, looking uneasily round the clearing, and at the soldiers, but failing to meet the eyes of Frederika and Ramses.

'Still hiding out there somewhere,' answered Lord Grausam, waving his hand at the surrounding forest. 'I think we need fear very little from the fellow now that we have Lady Frederika and Lord Ramses safe. He's no warrior, he needed the girl to cover his retreat when he ran away. If he is seen the men have orders to shoot him down.'

'I don't want him killed, change the orders. If they catch him he is to be well treated.'

Lord Smedhurst was astonished. 'You're just like your mother. You change your mind from minute to minute. What's happened now? Last night you were all for having the fellow flogged and hanged, and now you want him well treated. I warn you Cicely, when you are lady of the castle you will have to be consistent otherwise people will lose all confidence. I suppose next you will be wanting us to turn this girl free. Well, I won't. You told us how insolent she was and that is something the upper classes cannot tolerate under any circumstances. Whether you like it or not she is to hang.'

'The girl was not at fault,' Ramses interposed. 'She comes from a free village and knows nothing about courts and subservience to one's betters. Lady Cicely demeaned her high station by the rudeness with which she behaved towards the girl and drove her beyond endurance.'

Lord Smedhurst smiled comfortably. 'Well, Lord Ramses, knowing Cicely as we both do I don't doubt your story. Our Cicely has been totally spoiled all her life and she can be quite the most annoying person I have ever met. I am sorry for the girl but as a defender of the nobility and for the

sake of national peace I cannot afford to let the matter pass. If I do the news would soon spread and we would have all sorts of persons of the lower class challenging our authority. No, you can see yourself how impossible that would be. As a matter of policy she must hang and if Lord Grausam is agreeable she and the wizard can be turned off together at sundown.'

Cicely was nearly crying at the horror of what she had done and at the frank description of her character.

'I have thought it over and I am sorry about everything,' she said. 'I don't like the girl any better than I did but I don't want her hanged; can't we make her a slave instead?'

'No!' retorted Lord Grausam. 'It's too late, hanging the girl is a political necessity. Let this be a lesson to you, young Cicely. You're a member of the nobility and we have great responsibilities to our peasants. They rely on us for everything and we can't do or say exactly what we please. She is a pretty girl and I am sorry about all this, but you brought it on, and don't you ever forget!'

Lady Cicely turned away sadly. 'I'm sorry,' she said to the white faced Shani. 'I didn't know it was going to be like this and I have been riding with the army all day hoping they wouldn't catch you, or the manager. I will go to your village and tell your father. I will ask him if he can ever forgive me. Goodbye.'

She rode away as Lord Grausam was giving orders for Shani to be removed and guarded until sundown.'

The bearers had brought the Sultan into the clearing and put the palanquin down from their shoulders on to the grass. They flexed tired muscles while two of their number fell out and relief bearers moved in. However they were to go no further for the present and one of the attendants rolled back the silken curtains and another came forward with a water pipe that had been kept alight all day. It was well known that several attendants had lost their lives because the Sultan's hookah had not been ready when he wished to smoke.

The Sultan was astonished and disturbed by a furious argument that had broken out between the four aristocrats over Shani's death sentence. He was greatly upset at the language Frederika was directing towards the noble lords Grausam and Smedhurst.

Everyone present fell to their knees when the curtains parted to reveal the Sultan. Everyone but the four aristocrats who ignored him and quarrelled in his presence; something that had never happened before.

Frederika was saying, 'I don't like the girl any more than Cicely does, but I am warning you, if you two thugs kill her then it's war. I'll raise my people to fight you wherever you are and whatever you do and don't talk to me about national policy. You can put your policy where the monkey put the nuts'

Ramses agreed with her. You two are wrong,' he said. 'I have been talking to the manager over the past few days and thinking of the future of our country. We aristocrats are hated by the ordinary people of Sultania and one day they will take their revenge unless we change our ways. You can make a start by showing mercy to the girl. She is a friend of mine and if you kill her Frederika and I will raise our people against you. It will open war between us.'

Lord Grausam, never a patient man, was enraged at this talk. Lord Smedhurst also lost his temper and they shouted at the two captives while Frederika retorted and Ramses stood listening patiently but with an expression of great determination. All the bustle of the men settling down after the long march ceased while they listened.

The Sultan's butler implored the opponents to remember that their sovereign was nearby and greatly pained that this quarrel should occur in his presence and in the hearing of the lower classes. His requests were vain, they ignored him.

'Don't threaten me with that bloodthirsty clan of yours, Frederika, or you, Ramses, trying to frighten me with talk of a war of revenge,' shouted Lord Grausam. 'I don't frighten easy as you well you know. And I don't kill noble prisoners, either, but you had better watch out because some of them have been known to be killed trying to escape --'

He stopped. Everyone in the clearing had heard those words. They hung in the air.

Frederika stepped close and met him face to face. 'You are a coward, Grausam, and so that's what happened to those knights you caught last year, was it?' She waved her arm round the clearing. 'Everyone heard you. How long do you think it will be before their families get the news?'

Ramses put his hand on her arm. 'Lord Grausam has done us a great service, Frederika. He can no longer have us put to death; our families would never believe that he had committed other than murder.'

'I have to agree, Grausam,' said Lord Smedhurst. 'That was a careless remark. Even in the country I heard rumors about the deaths of those knights. You were under some suspicion but now there is no hope of recruiting their families to our cause and I think, for everyone's sake, Lady Frederika and Lord Ramses had better be placed under my protection.'

The Sultan's butler had suffered much over the past few days. His clothes of silk had been so torn after his hike in the wild that they had been replaced by tough but uncomfortable homespun. In spite of all he managed to retain the dignity of the court and at last was able to make them pay attention to the Sultan.

'Really, my lords,' cried the Sultan, drawing vigorously on his hookah so that the water bubbled in the pot. 'We have had an exhausting journey from the palace; we cannot go further today and you have been indulging in a quarrel in our presence that would have been better conducted in private.'

He drew heavily on his pipe and continued. 'Lord Grausam, we were shocked to hear about those knights and we warn you, if it is necessary to kill prisoners please do not discuss the matter in our presence. Regarding Lady Frederika and Lord Ramses, we are most displeased with them and they are forbidden attendance at the court. We will not receive them again until they have proved their loyalty by valiant service in the coming battles.'

He waved the two of them away, unaware that they were prisoners, and no one bothered to tell him.

They were taken to be put with Shani in a guarded tent.

Chapter Eighteen

Lady Cicely to the rescue

After failing in her efforts to save Shani Lady Cicely left the two lords and rode away to be joined by her maids who had stayed well back so as not to overhear anything that was said. She rode around the camp for a while in deep thought.

The commanders had decided that the army would go no further that day. It was only a five hour march to the city and there were no other camping places on the way. They would wait for scouts to report on what lay ahead and they were sending out others who would ride all night, to Sultanopolis and back, to bring information.

A multi colored tent with several rooms had been provided to house the Sultan. It could not be compared with the luxury he had left behind in the palace but it would have to do. After it had been put up and some carpets laid inside for his comfort, as well as the cushions and blankets that were left, he retired within and was seen no more.

There was not enough space for all his wives and hangers-on. Other tents had been found and this led to a number of quarrels as to who was to be accommodated, and where.

Lady Cicely noticed none of this. She rode aimlessly for a while amid all the noise and argument and then, after some thought, rode her horse into the forest followed by a fearful pair of ladies in waiting.

The sentries, who had been stationed around the clearing, saw this but no one tried to stop her. They would have been in danger of losing their ears if they had tried to, but a sergeant ran to Lord Smedhurst to report what he had seen.

Lady Cicely seemed not to notice the thick undergrowth through which she was leading her ladies. Sometimes she would lean forward in the saddle so that her hat would protect her face when riding through thickets of trailing brambles that rose higher than the horse. Sometimes she drove the animal through dense clusters of bushes.

One of the ladies, after getting herself, with some pain and torn clothing, free of a bramble bush, spurred alongside Lady Cicely and pleaded with her to go back. She was rebuffed silently with a shake of the head. Cicely was looking intently all round the forest as she rode and gradually made a wide sweep about the camp.

After a while she was rewarded by the sight of Sir William scrambling on to his horse. He had heard them approaching and was waiting on horseback, axe in hand.

The party stopped and Sir William looked at them astonished. He had not expected to meet in the wild forest a group of young women dressed as though out for a pleasant afternoon ride. The feather on Lady Cicely's hat had been broken by trailing brambles and drooped to one side. She approached Sir William while her companions stayed in the background.

'Good afternoon Sir William,' she said politely. 'I see you were able to get another horse. We left your horse at Castle Smedhurst; you can come and get it anytime'

Sir William fingered his moustache, sat up straight in the saddle and cleared his throat nervously. 'Thank you Lady Cicely; that will be two horses I have. I'm on a knightly quest, you know. It's a sort of treasure hunt and there should be enough gold for me to buy new armor, proper steeds and servants and esquires. When I get my new armor would you like to see it? I can always call into your castle when I am riding by.'

'Of course,' replied Cicely politely. 'Sir William have you seen Effendi Vortimer? It is important that I should speak to him. Something terrible is going to happen, it is all my fault; and he is a clever man, he may be able to stop it.'

'He's here with the chaps I'm guarding. The fellow's in a bad way because that girl Shani has been captured by Lord Grausam's men. They didn't get me,' he said proudly. 'I wish you'd seen me fight them off, chop, chop! I made some beautiful strokes; it's a pity you weren't there. I would have rescued you too, as well as the others.'

'Where is he?'

'In the clearing behind me, but he'll never rescue the girl, he's no warrior. You just say the word, Lady Cicely, and I'll go in and save her myself; that's a job for a knight errant, not a manager.

Cicely raised her hand to indicate that her followers should stay where they were and rode round Sir William to the clearing he had indicated.

The charred and weather beaten ruins of a cabin, and a post and rail fence, showed that someone had worked in years past to clear a small area of ground and sow a crop. Nothing else remained and the forest was encroaching on the space still left. Some people sitting on the ground jumped up when Lady Cicely forced her way into the clearing.

She slid out of the saddle and faced Derek, Gus, and the young men from the village.

'What do you want?' cried Derek in a fit of anger. 'You've got Shani, do you want me too?'

She shook her head. 'I don't want to kill anyone. I was angry when I was in the tree, that's why I wanted you punished, but I was glad when Lord Ramses and Frederika saved you. Then I made myself angry again and I was still angry when I got to the castle, or thought I was. I said a lot of things to my father and Lord Grausam that I knew were not right even when I was saying them. I'm sorry for what I've done and I couldn't sleep that night so I came with the army in case you were captured.'

They were astonished by this confession. In the time since they had seen her last she had changed.

'What have they done with Shani?'

The question could have been a blow. She gulped, gazed desperately round the clearing and then at the afternoon sky. 'She and Doctor Grozny are to be hanged at sundown.'

In the silence that followed Gus could hear horses crashing through the forest and men shouting. Lord Smedhurst's soldiers were out searching for Lady Cicely. None of the others noticed so intent were they on the horror of the news.

Derek was the first to react. He turned to Ric, 'Give me a sack of gold!' They stared at him.

Balanced on either side of the rump of Cicely's horse were saddle bags made of decorated red leather. They were meant to carry cosmetics, a little food that might be needed on a long ride, or personal items. Derek quickly unstrapped the leather covers and threw the expensive and delicate contents on to the ground. 'Come on, give me the gold,' he ordered. He snatched the bag from Ric and emptied gold into the saddle bags.

Sir William appeared. 'I say, the soldiers are getting awfully close. I think the young ladies rode back and told them where we are.' His eyes widened at the sight of the gold, but did not comment. 'I've got to get these young fellows out of the way quick smart.'

'Hold them off,' ordered Derek. 'All we want is two minutes and then we're away.'

'Right you are,' Sir William responded. 'I can give you two minutes easy enough. Start moving west and I'll follow, as soon as I'm clear.' The bushes closed behind him as he rode towards the noise of shouting.

'Use the gold to buy her out,' Derek explained hurriedly, checking Cicely's questions. 'Bribe every soldier in the army if you have to. Just spend it, there's plenty more where that came from, throw it around, we just want her out of there. When she's in the forest we'll find her.'

'I'm truly sorry all this had to happen,' said Lady Cicely, she stood on tip toe and kissed him unexpectedly on the cheek before Gus locked his hands together so she could stand in them to mount. 'But I will try and get her out, really I will. I want us to meet again so I can ask you to forgive me: Goodbye.' In a moment she had gone riding in the direction that Sir William had taken.

She was seen almost immediately for some soldiers called out her name and she answered.

'Come on,' said Derek. 'Let's go; we had better make ourselves scarce, they're looking for us.'

As they left the clearing they heard Lady Cicely saying, 'Don't go any further, you men, escort us back to camp!'

'The fugitives are out here somewhere, my lady, and we should be searching for them, and what about him? Do you want him dealt with? The man was obviously referring to Sir William who stood in their path. 'I can just order the archers to shoot him down?'

'That is Sir William of Ockham,' Lady Cicely replied, 'And he is not for common persons like you to deal with. Escort us back to the camp at once!'

They lost the rest of the exchange while hurrying away. When they paused after a while to listen they heard Sir William blundering through the bushes, but in a different direction to the one he had indicated. It seemed that Lady Cicely had got rid of the soldiers for he was not driving his horse

hard, but something went wrong. His horse began to whinny loudly and plunge through the bushes while Sir William shouted at it to settle down.

They ran towards the noise and discovered that Sir William had met some of the apes who were heading for their meeting by the roadside. The apes were mounted, as usual, on boars and it was these animals that had so upset Sir William's horse.

To his surprise Derek felt a twinge of pleasure and relief at the sight of Webster's hairy face; he may have been mistaken but he thought that Webster was also pleased to see him, but the ape's features showed no human emotions.

Webster and his group were at the head of a procession of creatures from the laboratory. As far as could be judged they had all come; even the little ones from the nurseries had walked or been carried for all that distance.

'The feller's a mighty magician,' muttered an astonished Sir William, partly to himself. 'He could have put a spell like that on me, as easy as winking. They won't hang him, that's for sure; I just hope he turns Lord Grausam into a toad.' He brightened. 'P'raps he'll turn Lord Memsworth into a snake, or something nasty, and then I can go on a quest to set him free from the enchantment, just for Cicely.'

He stopped. He had formed a low opinion of Derek as a commoner with no warrior traits to redeem his character, and had no desire to exchange confidences with him. Besides he held him responsible for the loss of his horse. He frowned and was silent until a new sight jolted him. 'Good God,' he cried, 'There's a feller over there wearing a cow's head; is he a witch doctor or something? Tell him to take it off, it doesn't look right.'

'He can't, poor chap.' George was with his people. From somewhere he had got a horse and managed to control it in spite of riding so near the boars. 'We'll stop here for a minute,' he called to Webster, and Webster put up his arm for a halt.

'I'm very pleased to see you again, Mr Vortimer,' said George, leaning forward in his saddle and looking down while Derek's companions gaped at this extraordinary sight. 'I want to thank you,' he continued, 'for what you said to Webster. They're trying me out as leader now that Doctor Grozny has gone and I am grateful for the chance. It's hard to be leader and make decisions for the folk, but it's better than being a servant.'

'How far are we from the clearing that Webster was telling me about, and where is Doctor Grozny? Webster told us that yesterday he was with you.'

George had been preparing himself for an encounter with the doctor and was delighted to discover that he had been captured by Lord Grausam's men and was to be hanged.

'Well, we needn't do anything until it's all over. I wonder if we can hide in the forest and watch.'

Back at the clearing Cicely had gone straight to the tent where Shani was being held. The soldiers on guard shook their heads when she ordered them to stand aside. Their refusal was nervous but their orders were that no one was to be let in or out of the tent.

Her ladies were not with her. She had ordered them to leave her alone and see to their sleeping quarters for the night. She turned in the saddle, looked into one of her saddlebags and selected two water worn nuggets of about the same size and threw them on the ground at the feet of the sentries. 'That is gold,' she said, 'Real gold, bend down and pick it up.' They looked at her and the gold and then at their sergeant who was standing nearby and watching curiously to see why Lady Cicely should be talking to two common soldiers.

She picked out another nugget which she threw to him. He caught it and then gasped when he saw what he was holding. The two soldiers searched the grass, and then spat on their treasures to wipe them clean on their jackets.

'Let me into the tent. I wish to speak to the prisoners?'

The sergeant shook his head. 'My lady, I cannot! Your father would have us hanged too.'

She threw each of them another piece of gold, and several into the grass. The sentries dropped their weapons and scrabbled for the hidden nuggets. The sergeant put his in his pocket but continued to gaze steadily at Lady Cicely. She threw some more at his feet.

'You have enough gold there to run away from the army this very minute and go hundreds of miles away. You could each buy an alehouse, or a farm, you could marry the most beautiful girl in your village.'

'She threw them all more gold but the sergeant shook his head again.'

'Very well. You will force me to go to my father and say that you stole gold out of my saddlebags while I was talking to you. Who do you think he will believe, me, or three thieving soldiers? The torturer has lost his equipment but he can make do with what we have in camp; I am sure he will devise something suitable for men who threaten the daughter of their lord, and steal from her.'

The men turned white. They knew the force of what she was saying. Not for an instant would their story be believed if Lady Cicely testified against them. No one would believe she had been throwing gold nuggets at a group of soldiers.

She slid from the saddle, threw the reins of her horse to the sergeant, and walked towards the tent. The sentries moved aside as one of them lifted the canvas flap to let her through.

In the tent Shani, Frederika and Ramses were squatting on the ground because there was nowhere else except for some rough bedding which had been dragged to one side so that they could claw at the grass and soil at the back to try and dig an escape hole. It was hard work because their knives and weapons had been taken away and the sentries frequently patrolled round the tent alert for escapes.

They had stopped and listened to Lady Cicely talking with the sentries. Shani heard little of it because she was caught in the horror of her situation and was deaf to all else.

When she entered the tent Lady Cicely did not greet them and dropped some gold on the ground behind her. This action was followed by excited shoving and wrestling. 'Help me with her!' she said. 'There's no time to talk. I've bought the guards off for a while and you're to lift her on to the back of my horse.'

Shani,' she said to the distressed girl, 'if they lift you up can you hang on to me? You are to hold me round the waist and whatever happens don't let go. It's your only chance, we can't rescue you a second time.'

'The manager put you up to this, didn't he?' said Frederika, exultantly. 'What a head that man's got on him.'

Lady Cicely went out and gestured for the sergeant to assist her into the saddle. He did so and as soon as she was safely aboard and before Shani was up behind she reached into a bag for some gold which she threw freely to the soldiers who were standing about gaping at them.

Startled faces throughout the camp were turning to see what was going on and there were shouts as the girl, suddenly aware of her chance to escape, scrambled frantically to get on the horse helped by Frederika and Ramses. When she was on and clutching Lady Cicely Ramses shouted, 'Go!' and smacked the horse hard on the rump. It kicked and went like an arrow towards the forest. He saw that Frederika had forced her hand under the girth strap and was bounding along with the horse. A rash soldier tried to stop her but she ripped off her helmet and used it to gave him a whack on the head in passing; he went down flat on the ground and stayed there.

'Come with me!' shouted Ramses to the sentries and the sergeant who had been searching the grass for the gold Lady Cicely had been tossing around. The others thought she was throwing pebbles and had been too slow and startled to pick up this wealth.

'Run while you can;' he cried, 'If they catch you the first thing they will take is your gold.'

He needed to say no more; already the men had become attached to their new treasure. With Ramses, and before anyone else had moved, they started sprinting after Cicely's horse.

The sergeant ran with them and shouted for all to join in to recapture the prisoners. His powerful voice was heard everywhere in the camp so that even the most inattentive knew that something had happened. He roared out that there was a gold piece reward for whoever took the girl, an offer which caused a sudden wave of shouting and running. The confusion of noise and activity spread through the camp causing an uncontrolled rush of men towards the forest. Within a minute the disciplined, ordered force had become a mob without thought or direction. Only one or two were on horseback because the troopers not on duty had been ordered to unsaddle and groom their horses. Many of the animals were already tethered in the horse lines while their riders were running with the mob.

Shouting was heard in The Sultan's tents while camp followers and retainers poured out to pause and look round, bewildered. A few ran after the crowd though they had no idea what was happening, except for the cries about a reward of gold. They headed off after the others ignoring the Sultan who was calling to be told what had happened.

Cicely and her charge were approaching the forest just as Frederika tripped over something and fell. She let go of the girth strap and landed in the middle of a thorn bush but Cicely did not turn her head. Instead she reached round behind Shani and gave the horse a hit on the rump with her riding crop; it galloped even harder. Frederika was left behind to be picked up by anyone who cared to drag her out of the bush.

Ramses ran to help and was freeing her when a hand was laid on his shoulder.

At that moment Doctor Grozny's creatures launched an attack on the camp, preceded by flights of arrows

Lord Grausam was trying to marshal his own archers out of those left behind. A few arrows flew from the camp towards the forest, but they were very few at first and did little damage.

The army, which had been streaming into the forest, was now running the other way and shouting for everyone to save themselves. The noise they were making drowned the voice of the butler who was calling for the palanquin carriers to rally around and bear the Sultan out of danger.

The reason for the gust of panic among the soldiers was made clear by the appearance of nightmarish figures in the clearing led by apes on huge black boars.

Following were stork legged figures with clapping bills who waved spears. Hyenas that laughed but were unarmed, they preferred to leap and bite with powerful jaws and sharp teeth. There were leopard creatures in white caftans who carried curved swords which were deadly in battle. Somehow Doctor Grozny had obtained some grisly bears and bred new creatures with arms and hands, these wielded long-handled poleaxes causing terrible damage.

Lord Grausam's army began to fall back. There had been much talk about an increase in the number of strange, savage beings wandering loose. Most of the men came from villages and since childhood they had been told tales of the demons, werewolves, banshees and hostile sprites that lurked deep in the wild forests of the country. Now these terrible creatures had burst out of the trees to overwhelm the army and those who did not escape would be killed or hauled back to the dark places of the forest to suffer a terrible fate.

Some ugly birds like vultures flapped in on great, stinking wings to add to the racket and confusion. They perched on the branches of nearby trees and cackled harshly as they watched the fight below. Now and again a word could be heard among all their shrieking but they made no sense. The soldiers saw them and knew that these chuckling monsters would feast afterwards on the bodies of the slain.

Riding in the midst of this army on his horse and directing the battle was George, filling the role that Derek had suggested for him. He struck down men himself with a club and as they fought their way to Lord Grausam's tent he directed the archers and spear carriers to deal with knots of resistance.

The apes had a different mission. They galloped on their boars to where the Sultan was and slashed the walls and ropes so the tents collapsed in a heap while the Sultan's guard ran away screaming, or hid under the canvas.

The Sultan himself was about to make a getaway in his palanquin and waddled towards it when Derek, who had been riding behind Webster and hanging on to his harness, either got off or fell on the ground in front of him.

The Sultan shrank back and looked round fearfully at the encircling apes who had ridden up roaring and waving home-made but fearsomely effective weapons.

'Your majesty,' said Derek, rising to his feet and addressing the terrified monarch, 'Please go to your litter, I will direct the slaves where to take you.'

The Sultan would have run away if he had been able but many years of overeating and little exercise had made him fat and helpless. He could do no more than gape at Derek and gaze round hoping for his bodyguard to come and rescue him from these horrors.

Derek, fearing that Lord Grausam would rally his troops, took the Sultan's arm and forced him towards the palanquin. In other times, for a commoner to lay a hand on Sultan Osmund II, Lord of Lords, Monarch of Sultania, would have brought the offender to a lingering and painful death.

Now the Sultan could do no more than go where he was led and plead not to be killed. The palanquin was the only refuge in sight since the imperial tent had collapsed. He hurried to it, got in, and with his own hands drew the curtains across to shut out these awful sights.

At this time the apes, who had been instructed by Derek, were busy rounding up the panicked carriers; they were ordered to pick up the palanquin and march. Derek indicated that they were to go into the forest at full speed and this order was reinforced by Herbert, the leopard servant, who had brought one of Doctor Grozny's whips with him. He was dancing around giggling and lashing at the bearers who screamed as the whip cut them, but did little else; they were accustomed to being hit or lashed. Derek took the whip away from him.

Not trusting himself again on the back of a boar Derek led the way on foot and gestured with his whip for the bearers to follow.

They had no choice but to do so, surrounded as they were by apes who bared their teeth, growled and pointed towards Derek. In a few minutes they were trotting into the forest and the palanquin disappeared from the sight of anyone in the clearing.

Chapter Nineteen

Lady Cicely's advice

By the time the Sultan had been captured and removed Lord Grausam had got his men into order and now there were enough of them under command to provide a solid resistance to Doctor Grozny's creatures. Derek had expected this, he had told George not to let his people get into a stand up fight with Grausam's soldiers. They had the Sultan and it was time to withdraw.

George got his people out with few casualties and they retreated under the cover of flights of arrows while Grausam drove his men to follow them into the forest. The soldiers cared little for this kind of fighting where there was a fearsome creature behind every bush and, seemingly, hundreds of arrows launched from hidden archers.

The Lords Grausam and Smedhurst urged them on with threats and promises. It was useless; the pursuit soon stopped when the soldiers realized their enemies were prepared to fight a rearguard

action. They had had no training in forest warfare and their leaders could not drive them on to where the close grown trees and bushes waited.

The army fell back to the clearing to regroup. Witnesses to this setback were the Carthaginian Ambassadors, who had ridden up with their escort before the fighting started they had seen everything, including Derek's abduction of the Sultan.

The two commanders were having a blazing row in front of the ambassadors about who was responsible for losing the Sultan, and their three prisoners, when a white flag was waved at the edge of the trees.

It was Derek who had turned up yet again, this time wanting to talk. The two lords and the Carthaginians galloped over to see what was wanted. Though on foot Derek was with Gus, who had waved the flag, and was backed by six mounted apes, and two bears with poleaxes. Mr Codd was with them, but only Derek noticed.

'Where's the Sultan?' demanded Smedhurst. 'What have you done with him? And my daughter too, what's she been up to? She was seen riding off with that peasant girl on the back of her horse. I'll have the hide off the backs of those sentries!

'If you can find them,' Said Grausam. 'They've disappeared too.

Smedhurst looked at Derek. 'You put her up to rescuing the girl didn't you? She wouldn't have the brains to think of it by herself. By God she's gone too far this time! And where did the ---?'

Derek thought he was about to ask where the gold had come from. There were rumors about gold running through the camp, but there was none to be found. Those that had it were not admitting anything, or had disappeared.

Lord Smedhurst stopped. He remembered to whom he was speaking and had no intention of saying anything further about his daughter in front of a commoner and the Carthaginians.

'The Sultan is well,' Derek replied cheerfully. If you want to make sure we will escort the ambassadors under safe-conduct to where he is at present and they can report back. But none of your soldiers are to go with us.'

His work of the past hour had refreshed him because Shani was saved and the Sultan was the most valuable hostage that could possibly have been taken.

He was not going to tell Lord Smedhurst that Lady Cicely was free to come and go as she chose. When he left she was looking over some of the laboratory creatures with a view to training them as domestic servants. His problem was to know what to do with his supporters now they had won this victory. They were in the forest far from their base with little food. The best plan might be to take the Sultan back to the laboratory and do his bargaining from there.

'I want Lord Ramses and Lady Frederika set free,' he demanded. He needed Ramses' advice and no doubt Frederika would give him advice whether he needed it or not.

The ambassadors wanted to see the Sultan for themselves, so Derek took them and Mr Codd to meet him.

The Sultan was already afraid, but he was terrified when the Carthaginians appeared before him. All his life he had feared the might of the Carthaginian Empire now it had come to him, armed with swords swinging from their belts, and his bodyguard was nowhere to be seen.

He crouched back in his cushions, pulled a sheet upwards, over his mouth and gazed at them in horror.

No one kneeled in his presence but the ambassadors made a slight bow and then one nodded at Derek. They had seen enough.

Frederika and Ramses were not to be found. The tent where they had been imprisoned was lying collapsed with its guy ropes slashed, but of the missing warriors there was no sign. No one remembered seeing them since Shani's escape.

'Alright,' Derek said, after he returned and heard from Lord Smedhurst that his friends were missing. 'We have the Sultan, as the ambassadors told you. He is well hidden and guarded in the forest. My people have orders not to do him any harm unless something happens to me, or the young woman Lady Cicely rescued.'

Lord Smedhurst gritted his teeth and snarled when he heard this.

'Now, we could use some food,' said Derek, 'Because if we're not fed the Sultan doesn't get anything either.'

The lords tried to bargain but Derek had the Sultan and threatened to hand him over to the rebels so they decided on a truce. Derek was not what sure what his followers would eat. In the end it was agreed to give a representative safe-conduct to come into camp and look over the food supplies with a view to selecting what was suitable.

George had ridden up and Derek called on him to deal with that problem. His appearance caused consternation but the lords had to bargain with him whether or no, and Derek thought it would be good for both sides if George were to take charge. If he were to lead and look after his people he would have to start somewhere.

A sergeant was ordered to take him to the cook-tent to be given food suitable for the folk.

Once out of sight of the soldiers in camp Derek was greeted by Shani who had worried about his meeting with the two lords, she feared treachery. As well she was almost hysterically grateful for being rescued by his use of the village gold. She burst into tears and clung to him for some time resting her head on his shoulder, and whispering her thanks into his ear. This was most pleasant but spoiled by the arrival of Cicely, who rode up on her horse.

She reached down from the saddle and tapped Shani on the shoulder with her riding crop. 'No woman,' she said, 'Should be carried away by her emotions. It is a great pity they did not teach you that back in the igloos, or whatever they call those strange little houses where you live.'

Shani looked up and was about to answer when she remembered what she owed to this young woman who had nearly got her hanged and then saved her. Instead she took her arms from around Derek's neck and attempted a curtsy.

'Thank you, Lady Cicely. It was very brave of you to rescue me like that and I am at your service; just call on me if I can help you.'

'I do not think I will ever be in the position of requiring your help,' replied Lady Cicely, who smiled maddeningly at the thought of needing Shani for anything. 'And bravery scarcely comes into it. Not one of those men would have dared to lay a finger on me. They would have paid with their lives. Now, on the other hand, I can help you. I feel that with training, you may someday become a passable lady's maid, or a servant. However you would have to learn to curb your temper and keep that bold tongue of yours under control. Now, go and find a useful task to do, I wish to speak to Effendi Vortimer.'

Shani could not answer. She was caught somewhere between rage and gratitude, but after hugging Derek once more to show that she was not put down by Lady Cicely's remarks she walked away.'

'Well, that's done,' remarked Cicely sliding from the saddle after she had commanded Derek to help her down. 'Now, it's alright to rescue the girl, and I must say it was very well thought out, and no doubt she's grateful, but you must not let her take advantage of your natural politeness.'

She raised her finger in warning. 'These peasants are not like us, you know. They don't have the same feelings, and they are very cunning. Now I can see that you are meant for higher things than being a mere manager, and you must never let that girl take liberties with you ever again.'

'Why, you might even marry into the nobility. I am sure you must be an aristocrat in your own country. and I think, while you have this influence over the Sultan, you should ask him to make you an earl, or a duke.'

'I don't want to be an earl or a duke.'

'This is not the time for false modesty! You're to go straight to the Sultan and tell him you want to be a lord. Don't let him fob you off with a baronage; there are barons everywhere; unless there is a valuable estate involved being a baron is nothing. Just to make sure give him a gift of gold; gold is always acceptable. Well, that's all arranged. I will go back to father and tell him to be ready to welcome another member into the nobility. Now, I don't like to follow a peasant girl in anything but you may kiss me if you wish, then help me back on to the horse.'

Cicely stood on tip toe to be kissed. Derek could see new complications arising in his life but he dutifully kissed the young noblewoman on the cheek. The girl responded with unexpected warmth before he lifted her on to her horse. She smiled down at him. 'Don't forget,' she said. 'Go to the Sultan, now!'

She turned the horse and rode away. While leaving she bowed from the saddle to Sir William who watching all this with wide-open eyes.

'By God,' said a familiar voice behind Derek, 'so you've talked Cicely round, too, have you? You are the limit, manager; first the peasant girl, and now the aristocrat. I told Ramses to keep you away from the skirts or there'd be trouble.'

It was Frederika looking not much the worse for wear in spite of being recently pulled out of a thorn bush.

'Where have you been?' asked Derek, ignoring her remarks.

'I came looking for you, Ramses needs advice. I didn't expect to find you kissing and carrying on with Cicely, of all people.'

'Well, forget it!' retorted Derek. He was tired of dealing with unreasonable females. 'Tell me where Ramses is. That's more important than all this stuff you're going on with.'

He turned and found Shani standing close by, hands on hips. 'I saw you with Cicely,' she said sternly, 'and I won't have it! Don't you ever touch her again. She's dangerous, and she's bad news for you. I'll thank her for rescuing me but it was your idea that saved me, not hers. And she shouldn't have got me into all that trouble in the first place. '

'Don't tell the manager what he can do and can't do. It's none of your business,' said Frederika. 'Go away, you're making a fool of yourself.'

'Oh, shut up both of you.' Derek exclaimed. 'You wait here, Shani, and keep well back in the forest. We don't want you captured again. I'll leave Gus here to protect you. Frederika and I have to go and see Ramses, he needs me for something.' He was about to go when he noticed Sir William and his charges, the young men from the village.

Sir William!' he called out. 'Watch over Shani as well, if you please. If Lord Grausam's people catch her again we may have to hand over the Sultan to get her back.'

'Right you are manager. She'll be safe in my care.' Sir William, having witnessed Shani's rescue, the Sultan's abduction, and the kiss bestowed on him by Cicely, seemed to have a better opinion of Derek.

'About the tents, Gus and the boys can put some back up again, well away from Grausam and his lot, but near enough to the laboratory folk so we can call for help if anything bad happens. But the tents are for us. The people of the court can make their own arrangements.'

'You should eat first before you do anything else,' said Shani. 'I can soon cook something nice for you.'

'Later, later! Gus, keep an eye on things here. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

They walked away through the trees, being careful not to stray close to where Grausam's army was camped. They could hear loud talking and someone was playing a musical instrument that sounded like a banjo. They went further into the forest so they could no longer hear any noise from the camp, or meet any stragglers. Mr Codd still walked with them.

MrThe ambassadors and their escort caught up. 'We shall come and protect you,' said one. 'This forest is not safe to walk in, especially when Lord Grausam's army is nearby. The young lady's sword may not be sufficient to fight off your enemies.'

They walked on and met George returning to his people. Frederika drew in a breath of astonishment and stepped back while loosening her sword in its sheath. She had found another since being captured. 'What the hell is that?' she muttered.

'A friend; you hit him over the head with a tray; don't you remember? George, make sure the sentries are awake during the night. We have a truce with Grausam but I don't know how good it is. Keep a close watch on the Sultan. We don't want to lose him in a raid.'

'The doctor has escaped,' said George, who seemed both terrified and angry.

'Escaped? How could he do that?'

'They told me he was tied to a tree, and I went to have a look after I finished organizing food for the people. The rope was still there, but he's gone.'

'We had better have a look. Take us there.' George led them to the tree but Doctor Grozny was gone, somehow he had struggled out of his bonds and disappeared. While they were deciding their next move they heard the sound of a whip being cracked among the trees. The sound seemed to come from where the laboratory folk were settling down.

'He's got his whip back!' cried George. He trembled and fear showed in his face.

'It's alright, George.' said Derek, touching him on the shoulder. 'We'll look after you, whatever happens, and we'll break his power over your people. Come with us, we'll go and face him.'

After a search they found it was Herbert who had been practising with the doctor's whip. It was the same one that had been taken from him after he tried lashing the palanquin bearers. Derek had no use for a whip and had thrown it away, he could not remember where, but now Herbert had it again. He was parading around their camp giving whip-cracking demonstrations. For the first time in his life he had an audience and was admired for his growing skill.

He clutched the whip's heavy woven leather butt when he saw Derek. 'It's mine!' he said. 'You dropped it in the forest, I saw you, and I picked it up. Finders keepers! It's mine, you can't have it back!'

'It's not yours and never will be,' said a voice behind them. 'Give it to me at once!' Doctor Grozny had appeared from the trees. He too had been attracted by the sound of the whip.

Herbert opened his mouth and howled at the sight of his monster appearing so unexpectedly. There were shrieks of despair and shock from the audience.

Doctor Grozny stepped forward and snatched the whip from Herbert's hand. 'This farce has to stop!' he said. 'All of you are to come with me back to the laboratory. Disobedience ends now!'

Mr Codd had followed him, he put his hand on the doctor's arm. 'Your time is over, Doctor,' he said. 'They will not follow you and you cannot continue your ghastly experiments.'

'Get away from me!' roared the doctor. He struck out with the heavy leather butt of the whip, Mr Codd stunned, fell over, but Frederika caught him in time and lowered him to the ground. With her other hand she tore her sword from its scabbard ready to cut Grozny down.

A shock ran through the onlookers when they saw the doctor strike out. Wells, the servant, the onetime Labrador dog, leapt madly out of the group of creatures looking on and clamped his teeth round Doctor Grozny's wrist so he couldn't strike again. The doctor yelled and dropped the whip.

It was snatched up by Herbert who then became frozen with terror at the thought of defying his master; he couldn't move.

The doctor was punching Wells trying to make him let go. The little servant hung on, teeth locked on the man's wrist.

'Someone get him off me!' Roared the doctor.

George ran forward, crashed into the hated tyrant and brought him down. The others followed and swarmed all over the body lying on the ground. They jostled one another as each tried to get in a death blow.

Through it all Wells hung on, his teeth biting harder into his enemy's wrist. When the doctor went down, overwhelmed and fighting for his life, Herbert recovered his nerve, he started lashing and giggling.

Derek tried to take the whip away from him but Herbert was in a frenzy. He dodged while giggling and lashing away, but his aim was so poor and the crowd around the doctor so dense that he was hitting them instead. They hardly noticed.

Derek turned to Frederika. 'Stop them!, They're going to kill him!'

She shrugged. 'Let them! My father was gored to death by one of Grozny's boars, and he was going to use the three of us in his foul experiments, I haven't forgotten.'

George had his arm around Grozny's neck from behind and had hauled an arm up in a painful hold so that the man stopped fighting, and panted. George struggled up out of the scrum, dragging the doctor with him.

Webster had been fighting too. His knife was in his hand, he looked at George.

George, panting hard, nodded.

'Webster, don't! don't!' cried the bloodied doctor.

Webster picked a spot between the ribs. The knife drove into the doctor's heart, right up to the hilt. The body heaved for a moment, then slid from George's hold and lay quite still. The doctor's spectacles slipped off and lay in the dust until someone trod on them to bend them beyond repair.

Derek and George looked at each other. Derek felt sick. 'We'll make our own lives now,' said George.

Derek felt Frederika take him by the arm. She said, 'Come on Derek, let's get you away from here.'

As she led him away she said, 'None of that was your fault. He shouldn't have grabbed the whip. Once they saw it in his hand he was as good as dead.'

Derek stumbled as they walked. He had never before seen deadly violence of that kind. Frederika held on to his arm to keep him from falling. Neither noticed but the ambassadors, and their men, had witnessed Doctor Grozny's death, and were following them.

Chapter Twenty

The Ambassadors

'The rebels are here,' announced Frederika. 'They were out looking for Grausam's forces and now they have stopped only a mile down the road because their scouts told them that Grausam was in the clearing and he was in some sort of trouble because of an attack, but they didn't know who was doing the attacking, except there are all sorts of rumors about monsters wandering the forests and killing travellers.'

She led him through the forest, making for the place on the main road that she knew about. She explained how she and Ramses had been captured and were being taken back to be handed over to Lord Grausam. A scout, from the rebel forces had been able to enter the camp unnoticed, recognised them, and offered their captors money to take them to the rebels.

They accepted the money and joined the rebels rather than go to Lord Grausam and explain what had happened to their captives.

A well equipped army of at least a thousand men waited to take on Grausam's forces. They had been drawn off the road into the forest since Frederika had last seen them, and now a traveller could pass by and never know of the host of soldiers concealed in the trees.

Derek was so shocked he scarcely knew where he was being taken. Frederika led him through the camp straight to the leader of the rebels. He was a man with a square cut black beard whom Derek remembered from the council meeting in Sultanopolis; it was Sir Humphrey, and Ramses was with him.

The ambassadors came too. Their guard stayed back at a distance and held the horses as the ambassadors approached and listened.

Sir Humphrey rose from a camp stool, touched a finger to his helmet to acknowledge the ambassadors, and thrust his hand out to grasp Derek's. 'Effendi Vortimer,' he boomed. 'Welcome to our camp. My good friends, Lord Ramses and Lady Frederika, have had nothing but praise for you since we met and I wanted to see this marvel of wisdom and cunning for myself.

'Get him a stool,' said Frederika. 'The laboratory folk just killed the doctor and he saw everything. It was terrible.'

Sir Humphrey pushed his stool across and Derek sat down trembling. His host called for more stools, and some wine.

'How did it happen?' asked Ramses.

'Grozny brought it on himself', said Frederika. 'I think all his troubles, and the fear of being hanged if he was caught again, drove him mad. He was going to herd the folk like sheep back to the laboratory and when he tried to force them they rose up and killed him.'

She patted Derek on the shoulder.

'He'll be alright,' said Ramses. 'He is a manager, not a fighter. We're used to blood and sudden death, managers are not, nor should they be. He's here to advise us, not to fight.'

'Yes,' said Sir Humphrey, 'That's exactly what I want to talk about. Do you feel well enough to give me some advice?'

Derek nodded.

'Now,' said Sir Humphrey, 'I have been a fighter all my life and I know only one way of doing it, that is you go straight in and don't count the cost. It seems to work most times but Lord Ramses tells me that your young headpiece is worth more than all of ours put together and you might be able to tell us how to deal with Grausam and Smedhurst without slaughtering them and their army.'

Derek tried to put the vision of Grozny's death out of his mind. He said, 'I've been thinking about it and I have one or two chips to bargain with. Before I say what I can give you let me tell you my conditions. I want the laboratory to be given to the creatures who were made there. It will be their home, and enough land round about to grow whatever they may need, also they will want hunting rights in the forest.'

Sir Humphrey nodded. 'This is the place of magic I have heard about? Ramses and Frederika told me something of it. Well, that's no problem. No one I know would want to go near the place. They say the magician caught poor travelers and turned them into swine, or apes, or great, flapping birds that live on rotten meat. They can keep it and welcome.'

Derek nodded again. If the citizens of Sultania were too frightened to go near the laboratory he had no objection. It was probably the safest place for the folk in the whole country.

He went on. 'Next, you should trim the privileges of the Sultan. He must not have power of life and death over people. All trials will be conducted in proper courts. Torture to be outlawed and no evidence will be accepted from witnesses who have been tortured.'

Sir Humphrey raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Derek continued, 'You must take away from the Sultan the right to tax or to spend public money. That will be the job of the Council of Elders.'

Sir Humphrey's eyebrows rose even further when he heard these conditions. He smiled and held up his hand. 'Wait! wait!. You go too far. We have governed Sultania in our own way for a thousand years or more. You cannot walk in and overturn our customs like this. We have heard what you want; what can you give us in return?'

'Government!' retorted Derek. 'If you accept my terms I can give you victory over Grausam and Smedhurst.'

'Go on,' urged Ramses. 'There is more to come, isn't there?' He turned to Sir Humphrey. 'What he is saying is not a bad idea; we should have thought of it ourselves.'

'There is something else I have to tell you. We hold the Sultan, he's frightened but quite safe, and he will be handed over if you give your word that the reforms I have mentioned will be carried out.'

They looked at him, astonished, 'You have the Sultan?'

Yes, he's in the forest, guarded by my people.'

'And you captured him?'

'Well, not me personally, but I organized it.'

'Of course you did. Who else would be bold enough to kidnap the Sultan, and clever enough to get away with it.'

Ramses slapped his knee delightedly. 'There, I told you he would have the answer; he can out-think wooden headed warriors like us any day of the week.'

'The Sultan, is he safe?'

'Yes, but if you give your word, as knights of Sultania to work to carry out the reforms I have mentioned you can have him. And there is something else. You may think it the least important; but if you refuse my conditions I will resign and go home.'

'Never!' cried Frederika, leaping to her feet. She had been listening with admiration up to this time. 'We won't let him go, will we, Ramses? He's to stay here and manage the country.'

Derek picked up his stool and sat some distance away so the leaders could discuss his terms.

The ambassadors were still listening and Derek wondered why there were taking such an interest in his activities.

The rebel leaders indicated that he was to join them to hear what Sir Humphrey had to say. 'We have decided to follow the advice of the manager. All his terms are accepted, for that we pledge our Honour as knights. Now, how do we proceed'

'It's too late to start a fight now,' said Derek. 'Let your men sleep but have them up well before dawn. Form them up on the road opposite Grausam's army and send a message to say you have the Sultan and if he wants to fight he will be attacked from the road and the folk will attack from the forest. He may decide not to fight at all.'

'Excellent,' cried Sir Humphrey. 'I can see why Frederika and Ramses have such a high opinion of you. Will you go back to the strange people and tell them of the plan?'

'I'll come too,' cried Frederika. 'You shouldn't be walking through the forest on your own.'

'Thanks Freddie, I'm still shaking after what happened to Grozny. It's, something I won't forget in a hurry. Let's go.' They left the two men to talk.

Frederika looked at Derek. 'I hope all this works out. They're big changes you're asking for.'

'I've just started. That's nothing to the changes I would make if I get the chance. Given time and backing I could transform this country. He put his hand to his mouth. 'I'd forgotten Mr Codd was stunned and we just walked away. 'We'll go back and see if he's still there.' Frederika wondered what he was talking about, she didn't know anyone called Codd.

The pair had walked well out of the sight and hearing of the rebel camp still accompanied by the Carthaginian ambassadors and their escort. Little was said, Derek was still shocked, and very tired. The escort surrounded them.

Then, well clear of the camp, the older ambassador, who was in the lead, put up his hand, everyone stopped, then dismounted. Derek looked round to see what was going on. Frederika's hand dropped to her sword hilt.

'You are a clever young man,' said the younger ambassador, addressing Derek. 'At the council table we thought you were a child and a fool, but not now. We know you have been scarcely a week in this country, yet you defeated a powerful magician and made him your captive. At the same time you rescued your friends from becoming human sacrifices.'

'He saved me a second time,' said Frederika. 'I was drowned and he brought me back to life.'

The ambassador nodded. 'We would have expected nothing less from this young man. Then he recruited the magician's army of strange creatures to fight your enemies; he has captured the Sultan and can do with him what he wishes, within another week he may be ruler of all; who knows.'

'I'm not interested in being ruler. I'll try and manage the place, nothing more.'

'Yes, but tonight we heard you instructing your friends in a simple but excellent way of defeating their enemies.'

'He rescued the girl too, before they could hang her, that was well done,' said Frederika.

'Indeed, it was, an excellent plan. You have had a busy day, Effendi Vortimer. You rescued a girl from hanging, captured the Sultan, and instructed your friends how to win a battle. You also made time to use his own beasts to kill the magician.'

'Well, thank you for all these kind words,' said Derek, 'But I'm tired and hungry, if you would step aside we will be on our way. Oh, and to set the record straight I did not order Dr Grozny's death, I tried to save him.'

The Carthaginians appeared not to believe that he had tried to rescue the doctor. They has seen it all. Nor did they stand aside. Frederika failed to notice that one of the escort had moved sideways and was close behind her.

'I must explain,' said the spokesman, 'That the Carthaginian Empire is in great danger. Invaders from the east have entered our country and defeated our generals, so that we face disaster. We came here to seek assistance, but the Sultan is weak and the nobles too divided to help.'

'You should try younger generals, they might do a better job.'

'Exactly so. Will you come with us and be general of our armies?'

'He will not!' cried Frederika. 'His duty lies here.'

'Yes, but what says the young man?'

Derek was astonished at this latest development, but said, 'I don't want a military career. But if you know of a profitable company in need of a Chief Financial Officer I would be interested, otherwise no.'

The other ambassador who had said nothing gestured to the bodyguard. They seized Derek and held him tight. Frederika was about to draw her sword when the man behind her put an arm round her waist, with the other hand he caught her sword and threw it far into a thorn bush. She struggled and kicked but her captor was too strong for her to break free.

'Will you come with us?'

'No!' Derek shook his head.

One of the soldiers mounted and the others lifted Derek behind him on to his horse. They passed a rope under the belly of the beast and tied Derek's feet together. A rope around his waist and that of the rider, tying them both together ensured that he could not fall off. Everyone mounted leaving Frederika standing.

'Tell your people,' said the ambassador 'that we have the manager. Anyone who pursues us across the border will be killed.'

The ambassadors solemnly saluted and the party galloped away bearing Derek to new terrors in the lands of the Carthaginian Empire.

Chapter Twenty One

The road to New Samarkand

The ambassadors of their Khan, Lord of the Carthaginian Empire, rode hard for the remainder of the night, escorted by warrior horsemen, and through the following day. with their captive, Derek Vortimer, manager of Sultania. They were racing towards the border between Sultania and the lands of the Great Khan

After about thirty miles of hard riding, and three changes of horses. the land began to rise. Further on was a steep road that led them to a mountain pass through which an icy head wind slowed the labouring horses even more. When they struggled to the top the ambassadors halted only to change horses once more and order some more troopers at the border post to ride with them to strengthen their escort against any attempt to rescue Derek.

The party stopped about noon, after twenty hours of flight. The horses they were riding, the second change since crossing the border, could go no further. The party halted at an inn where the ambassadors ordered the troopers to untie Derek and lift him from the horse.

He was unable to stand or walk so the men carried him inside and sat him on a chair from where he sagged forward on to the table with his forehead resting on the rough timber.

His whole body was one intolerable ache. He hated horses. Every organ had been jolted and beaten during the seemingly endless ordeal. His buttocks and inner thighs were red raw after a night and a day's contact with the rump of a horse.

He lay there; half on the table, unwilling to move in case some body part fell off.

The ambassadors sat on a bench opposite and eyed Derek doubtfully. Perhaps they were regretting having brought him this far. However it was too late. Already a messenger had been sent ahead to inform the Khan that a new man of extraordinary inventiveness and cunning, a veritable wizard, had been recruited to serve the empire.

On the table before them was a jug, and three cups. The escort troopers stood in the background awaiting further instructions. An ambassador gestured for them to hold Derek upright and pour some drink down his throat.

The troopers stank of sweat, horses and unwashed clothes as they lifted Derek and held the bowl of liquor to his lips. These mountain warriors wore sheepskin jackets, baggy pants, and high crowned felt hats. The men had put their jackets aside while dismounted which was lucky because they were infested with lice.

The drink was vile and burned while going down. Some dribbled over his chin to stain even more the white shirt given to him when he was entertained at dinner by Doctor Grozny.

Derek coughed and gurgled weakly as the stuff coursed through his throat to a temporary, uncomfortable lodging in his stomach.

'We can't take him to the Khan in this condition,' said one of the ambassadors. 'He's no horseman and will need at least a day's rest before we can continue.'

'Let me go,' pleaded Derek. 'The Khan won't want to see me, and I won't tell him if you don't. I've changed my mind; I'll never ever apply for a manager's job again.'

'No, you are coming with us. You will be presented to the Khan and it would be wise not to mention any doubts you may have about serving him. He is quite short tempered and the torture chambers are close at hand.'

The ambassador continued. 'The Khan particularly wants a wizard. That doctor fellow who created strangely shaped animals would have done. It was a great waste, that you had him killed. We were about to make an offer to Lord Grausam, to buy him. The Khan collects wizards. He believes in such things, and he would have been glad to get another. But you ordered the wizard's creatures to kill him, and that was that! A great error; above all don't mention it to the Khan.'

Derek would have shaken his head but it hurt too much. He had never ordered Doctor Grozny's death, and had tried to save him, but he did not want to discuss the tragedy.

He tried to be threatening. 'I have powerful friends in the Sultanate; chiefs of strong clans who would lead them into battle to set me free.' The ambassador shrugged. 'The Khan will be interested to hear that, but he will not tremble on his throne. The clans you speak of would be cut to pieces before they got this far. We do not fear the Sultanate because we have defeated its armies many times. They have invaded our borders in the past but in the end they flee for their lives before the power and glory of the mighty Khan.'

'If your armies are so good why do you want me?'

'Because we face a greater threat than Sultania will ever be. A powerful army has come out of the north we are facing barbarian horsemen and foot soldiers without number, and before them our armies fail.'

'Besides,' said the older ambassador, who had scarcely spoken. 'The Sultan would forbid the attack you speak of. Why would he risk war with the Carthaginian Empire to rescue one who subjected him to the humiliation of being abducted by apes?'

Derek thought the man may have hit on an important point. The sultan would remember him for leading Doctor Grozny's creatures to cut the guy ropes of his tent and then carry him off as a pawn in a dangerous political game. He would never permit a military attack to recover a manager, particularly a functionary he had never asked for or ordered.

Derek did not want to hear any more. He laid his head again on the table hoping vaguely that everything would go away if he kept his eyes closed. It was no use; the ambassadors had ordered food and they made him eat his share, willing or no. The meat in a large bowl in the middle of the table may have been goat flesh; it may have been anything; he did not know and did not much care. It was heavily spiced and not to his taste but he had to eat it anyway. The ambassadors wanted to have him in a reasonable condition before he was presented to the Khan.

/The landlord of the inn had been ordered to send for the local healer and a woman came with a pot of ointment; she waited outside until called for.

After the troopers had eaten they laid Derek face down on a bed and pulled down his trousers so the woman could apply her ointment freely to his thighs and buttocks, which she then proceeded to massage. He was beyond embarrassment and fell asleep. When she finished the troopers threw a blanket over him, gave her a coin, and she went away.

He awoke hours later. The skin of his backside no longer burned, but he still had aches and pains, and his troubles were not ended. The ambassadors feared the Khan's anger, and were anxious to get on. He was made to ride once more. This time he was not tied on, but had a saddle, which was softened a little by a blanket taken from their lodgings. They did not fear him jumping or falling off. He was too far from the border to escape.

'You men,' said the first ambassador, addressing the troopers, 'Are to ride with us to the capital. We do not fear that an army will pursue us but some of his friends may be mad enough to do so. Any rescue attempts are to be dealt with mercilessly. Now, follow!'

The group rode off along the track that led to the capital and Derek's meeting with the Khan.

The older ambassador had gone. He had ridden on ahead, so Derek was informed by the younger man, who seemed a little friendlier now he was on his own. Derek was in a bad way, almost crippled by the effects of his long ride. It was decided that he could have another night of rest at a caravanserai.

This was an inn, but like all caravanserais it was surrounded by a high wall with plenty of space to hold many strings of camels going to, or coming from, the capital, and carrying goods. There were not so many camels nowadays but the inns were convenient for the twice weekly stage coaches that travelled between the two cities.

Derek slept many hours while he was there, and could feel his body starting to recover.

It took them two more days, riding easily, to reach New Carthage, the capital of the empire. The troopers took turns in leading his horse on a rope, with the others riding before and behind as bodyguard. The ambassador rode ahead. The reins on Derek's horse had been shortened and looped over its neck so all he had to do was to hang on to the pommel.

In spite of his troubles he could still see and think. They were passing through fertile countryside but the farms did not appear to prosper, and the buildings, farm-houses and the like, were poorly constructed cabins. Gradually, as they rode on, buildings and houses became more frequent and closer together, the horses' hoofs clattered over stony roads and at last they came to a gate set in the walls of a city. They had arrived at New Carthage.

Once in the city he was brought to a building in a narrow alley with horses tethered outside. They entered and climbed to the fourth floor, which was the top storey. From the window Derek could see over the city wall to a distant vista of mountains. Perhaps they were the ones he had come over.

'You will remain here until sent for', said the ambassador. 'You will not attempt to escape because two guards will be on duty at all times; one on the landing, the other with you in the room. Anything you need for your meeting with the Khan will be supplied.

The guard outside the door had a particularly nasty looking dagger, old, but sharpened to a killing point and edge. It was stuck in a leather sheath at his waist. He also had a bow and a bag full of arrows. This man, who stank of sweat and horse dung, glared at Derek as though it was his fault that it would be a long, cold night outside the door when he would have been happier riding his horse somewhere.

The trooper with Derek was similarly armed and prepared to stay on watch until he received further orders. He too seemed to regard Derek as not worth the loss of a night's sleep, and glared at him as though a quick knife stab between the ribs would rid the world of another encumbrance.

'There is a latrine downstairs,' said the ambassador. 'If you need to go these men will guard you. 'Don't try to escape, they may kill you. They are scarcely civilized yet and do not realize the punishments that befall anyone who kills or injures a guest of the Khan. The Khan has decreed that only he can order the torture or death of his guests.'

'Sleep well, tomorrow you must prepare yourself to meet him.'

The ambassador barked some order to the troopers in their own language and departed. Derek could hear his boots clumping down the uncarpeted stairs until he reached the ground floor and rode off with his escort.

Derek remained in the room, with the knowledge that soon he was to meet a royal despot who was a severe critic with unlimited access to a collection of instruments of torture and execution.

He sat on his bed for a while. It was made of wooden slats and covered by a thin mattress stuffed with hair. The blankets were thin also, and had not been cleaned lately. The smell in the room was strong but he had endured worse

The guard had a chair and they looked at one another, disliking what they saw, until Derek rose and went to the window. He pushed them open and looked out. The sun was setting and gilding the clouds in the western sky. The guard did not try to stop him from going to the window. They were four stories up; the outside wall was, made of rubble with rocks and bits of brick sticking out here and there through the roughly finished plaster. It never occurred to the man that Derek might consider a dive head first to the lane below would be better than meeting the Khan.

Derek looked down and went back to the bed; there was almost no other furniture in the room. He was sitting glumly on the side of the bed with his fists supporting his chin when the guard walked to the window and stared out at the city and the mountains.

It seemed he was there, looking out not more than five seconds when Derek glimpsed something that flashed for an instant in the sunlight. It came from below, past the window ledge, and he would have thought no more about it but for his jailer staggering back from the window and making strange mewling cries.

The man was pierced with an arrow. It came from below, had entered the abdomen under the edge of his sheepskin jacket and the point had come out somewhere between his shoulder blades.

Derek caught the guard as he fell and lowered him to the floor. The man stared into his face, mouth open in a soundless scream of agony. He lay on his side and blood welled from the wounds for a while then stopped and only occasional drops of blood ran along the arrow shaft and dripped to the floor.

Derek sat back on the bed and looked with horror at the body.

His next thought was that someone was climbing the wall and was just below the window. He could hear scuffing noises as though feet were scrabbling for footholds on the rubble wall. Derek thought a murderer was coming to kill him and was on the point of calling the other guard when a head of gold coloured hair appeared above the window ledge, then a familiar, though now red, face. With his help Shani tumbled through the window. This was the girl he had saved from death by hanging only a few days before. She rose panting, and took a coil of rope from her shoulder.

She stepped over the body on the floor, kissed Derek and said, 'You're good at tying knots, darling. Tie the end of the rope to the bed.'

Chapter Twenty Two

The Rescue Party

Derek, shocked by another brutal death, but comforted by the arrival of a friend, recovered enough to tie the rope to the leg of the bed. Shani threw the other end out of the window.

He looked at her and smiled for the first time since being kidnapped. 'How did you find me?'

She smiled back. 'I'll tell you later when Gus and Freddie get here.'

'Keep your voice down,' he said. 'There's a guard outside the door.'

'That's alright, we'll deal with him when the others arrive.'

The bed started to swivel across the room until it was stopped by the body of the guard.

'Sit on it, quick!'

They sat down. Derek turned sideways so as to not put his feet on the dead man

he rope was taut and pulling them bed, body, and all towards the window. Derek wondered how the guard on the other side of the door could not hear the noise and come to investigate.

When they were close enough they pushed their feet against the wall under the window. The bed stopped moving

'I'm glad you're here,' said Derek. 'But you took an awful risk climbing the wall, and you were making a target for whoever killed the guard.'

Shani hugged him. 'It wasn't too bad,' 'I've had harder climbs than that, but it was Frederika that did the guard in. She doesn't know much, but she's a dead shot with a bow and arrow. I had to talk her out of climbing the wall with me. She's still wearing armor, if she had fallen the crash would woken the whole street. We've been lucky so far, there's no one about.

Another face, red with the struggle of climbing appeared at the window. It was Gus who had climbed up with the aid of the rope, still carrying his pack. He had Frederika's spear stuck sideways through his shoulder straps. The spear stopped him from getting through the window so Derek had to free the weapon from the straps. Shani caught his collar and helped him into the room. He fell on the floor, panting.

'It's good to see your worship again,' he said after a while. 'When the Lady Frederika gets here we can start the rescue.'

'How did you find me?'

'We followed you every step of the way,' said Shani, 'But just out of sight. Your escort was too big to tackle so we decided to wait until you got to the city.'

The rope became taut again and they all sat on the bed. Frederika, defying gravity and the weight of sword and armor was climbing to the window.

'How did you get past the guards on the gate?'

'Gus and me were alright,' said Shani 'There's a festival on in town this week and we told the guards we came from the country to see it. Freddy was the problem, she had on her helmet, greaves, her mail shirt and was carrying a sword, shield and bow.'

They reckoned she was a bit overdressed for a festival, so she told them she had come to enlist in the Khan's bodyguard.'

'They let her through?'

'Yes, but they fell about laughing at the idea of a girl in the Khan's bodyguard.' She was sent off with a soldier, to make sure she didn't get lost on the way. I suppose they thought the guards at the palace deserved a laugh too.

Gus went after them while I followed the escort to see where they were taking you.

Derek looked at Gus, 'What happened?'

'No problems, Your Honor. When we got round the corner, out of sight I gave the soldier a little tap on the back of the head. He fell asleep straight away in the gutter. Then we went back to a place near the gate we'd agreed on and waited for Miss Shani to come and tell us where you were.'

Frederika appeared and they helped her through the window. She crashed on to the floor, and Derek thought the sentry on the other side of the door must be totally deaf.

'There's another guard outside the door,' Shani whispered to the others. 'We'll stand either side of the door and Derek can call him in.'

'Don't kill him,' said Derek. 'I'm sick of all these killings, I can't stand it. Knock him out, or something, if you have to, but no more murders.'

Shani protested. 'We didn't come here to play around. All our lives are in danger. You turn your back, or look out the window. Leave us to get on with it.'

'Not to worry, Your Worship,' said Gus. 'Get him in here. I'll put him to sleep, my uncle showed me the trick of it, and if I get it right they won't be able to wake him for hours.'

This sounded reasonable, but Derek saw that Shani had a knife in her hand. He frowned and shook his head, she sulkily put it away again.

They stood by the door while Derek shouted, 'Guard, come in here, you're wanted.'

The man pushed the door open and stepped into the room. His eyes widened in shock at the sight of a female warrior with a spear at his throat. Shani caught an arm and twisted it behind his back. She kicked the backs of his knees and he sank down. Gus flicked off his cap, it landed in a corner of the room. Seconds later the man was lying on the floor unconscious.

'Easy peasy your honor,' said Gus. 'We've got until the morning, after that there'll be hell to pay around here. What are your orders?'

'We're getting out of here,' said Derek. He didn't know where to go, or what to do, but anything was better than waiting for the enemy to call.

'Darling, you follow me,' said Shani. 'We'll take care of you.'

'He's not your darling, he's manager of Sultania, and you're just a peasant', said Frederika.

A sudden row was about to flare up. Derek had been delighted and relieved to see his friends but knew the women didn't like one another. He said, 'Shut up both of you. I'll follow Gus, and if we meet anyone on the stairs he can put them to sleep.'

'A knife's quicker and more certain,' muttered Shani.

'Not as good as a spear.'

'Be quiet, both of you,' said Derek. 'But if you absolutely have to kill anyone do it quietly.'

After peering both ways down the passage they headed for the stairs. Derek followed, dreading the dangers to come.

'None of them had been to New Carthage before, but Shani led along a curved, narrow alley, the opposite way to which they had come.

The alley was high walled either side with strong timber doors set in it here and there. They were all closed, except for one.

This door was open and above it, fastened to the wall, was a metal bracket from which hung some greenery. Derek recognized it as a sign. A hanging bush over the door informed people unable to read that the building was an inn.

They were about to pass by but Shani stopped. 'Inside, everyone!' she cried. 'Come on, quickly!'

They followed her to the furthest corner of the inn where a man wearing a turban was sitting alone at a long table with a cup and bottle in front of him. There was nowhere else so they sat at the same table. The man raised his glass to them, but did not speak.

'What the hell was that all about?' enquired Frederika. 'If you want a drink can't you wait until we're well away?'

'There was a patrol coming towards us. They were just around the next bend.'

'I didn't see any patrol. You got a strong imagination.'

'I didn't see them either, but I haven't got flannel ears. They were marching in step round the corner and coming towards us. We may have been seen.'

Derek was trying to quieten them when a group of soldiers appeared at the street door. A sergeant came in with four men, the rest of the patrol waited by the door. He looked round suspiciously and saw them in the corner.

Frederika moved her sword in its sheath, ready for action. Gus tensed as the soldiers approached. Shani's hand moved towards her breast where the knife was hidden in her jacket.

The sergeant stood over them. 'Why did you lot duck inside when you saw us coming? Are you trying to escape from the law?'

'No, we were thirsty. We've been looking for an inn, and this seemed as good as any.'

The sergeant was not satisfied with Derek's answer. 'You went into this place in a mighty hurry. I reckon you got something to hide. You better come along with us.'

The group around the table was tense and did not move.

'Get up! I order you lot in the Khan's name to come along a me or I'll put you under arrest.'

No one stirred.

The stranger, already sitting at the table when they came in, broke the tension.

'One moment Sergeant,' he said. 'I won't have you talking to my friends like this. They are here at my very special invitation. When I sent a servant to invite them to meet me here he was instructed that they were to make haste to come. Perhaps that may explain why they were walking so quickly.'

The sergeant seemed uncertain, he asked, 'And who might you be, sir?'

'I am Abdul Khayyam brother of the famous poet Omar Khayyam, who is the Great Khan's friend. The Khan would not be pleased if he heard that his soldiers were pestering guests, such as these, who honour the empire by their presence.'

The sergeant was alarmed. He touched his knuckles to the front of his helmet as a salute. 'Sorry, sir, only doin' me duty. We was ordered special to watch out for strangers, spies, and the like. Times are bad, you know, and the enemy's army is getting closer.'

'I understand,' responded the stranger. It is pleasing to know that our protectors are so alert and ready to deal with any emergencies. But you can leave my friends here with an easy mind. And Sergeant, if a dozen bottles of beer would be acceptable to the patrol, when you go off duty, collect them from the landlord.' He waved to the man behind the bar, pointed to the sergeant and held up his hands with fingers outspread, then his two thumbs.

The barman nodded and put out twelve bottles on the bar.

The patrol seemed pleased with this generous gift and withdrew after many thanks and much saluting.

'That was very kind of you,' said Derek. 'You saved us a lot of inconvenience. We would have had to produce our papers to say we had a right to be in New Carthage.'

The man smiled at him. 'Oh, I know all about you. You're the foreign magician they brought in today. I saw you in the street with the ambassador, and I heard all the talk about you. You must be a very clever young man to have escaped so soon, no doubt your friends aided you.'

The three fighters straightened up, ready to act.

The man held up his hands, palms forward. 'Fear nothing friends. Your secrets, such as I know of them, are safe with me. The Khan shall not learn about you from my lips. You must understand that in spite of what I said to the sergeant I am no friend of the Khan. He is a despot, a tyrant, and furthermore he has no understanding of poetry.'

'Do you write poetry, sir,' Derek was prepared to listen to poetry, or anything the man wanted to talk about.

The man straightened up in his seat. 'I am the greatest poet of the Carthaginian Empire yet The Khan favors my brother over me, my brother who steals my golden verses and turn them into trash. You shall judge for yourselves, listen to this!'

He recited:-

*'Wake all you sleepers, for rosy tipped dawn
Casts a curtain of blue before night's starry eyes.
She has lit the Khan's tower this morn,
Behold, she glows now as the sun doth arise.'*

'My own brother, Omar Khayyam, stole those lines, as he has done with so many others, and ruined them. Judge! Judge! How poorly they sound after his interference.'

*'Awake for morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the stone that puts the Stars to Flight,
And lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Khan's turret in a noose of light.'*

Gold changed to lead,' said Abdul Khayyam bitterly. 'Landlord!, cups for my friends and more of your best wine.' He turned to them. 'I have many more examples you will hear before we part of verses stolen and ruined. I would spit on the name Khayyam, were it not my own.'

More cups and bottles were placed on the table. Abdul Khayyam was about to continue when Derek nervously cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry, what you are saying is most interesting but we are in a hurry. We are actually on our way to Sultania and we must get on.'

'Well, I hope you have fast horses. You will be pursued, you know. You may not be aware but the Khan is very bad tempered and will regard your escape as a great insult. You would be brought back and handed over to his torturers. Perhaps I can assist. I have a house of moderate size. A poor thing but it suffices for me. You can lodge there and we can spend the time discussing poetry. When enough days have passed you can then make your way out of the city.'

'That is very kind of you.'

'It will be a pleasure to have you in my humble abode. You can see by his taste in poetry that the Khan is not a great ruler. His mind does not dwell long on one particular subject. But if you are taken and brought before him then he will remember, and in such an event I would sooner not have my name mentioned in his presence.'

'We could do worse,' said Frederika. 'Our horses are knocked up, and we have to get another one for you, manager. We will have to leave them in the livery stables for a while longer before they could outrun fresh horses.'

'At other times any statement by Frederika would be disputed by Shani, but she had to agree that Abdul Khayyam's offer of shelter was the best they would get that night.'

Derek accepted the poet's invitation. He did not care how humble the house was as long as it had comfortable beds. He had been dreading a race to the frontier and the possibility of being caught and taken back to the Khan's dungeons.

Frederika took off her helmet and clunked it down on the table. She shook her head and two shining, golden plaits of hair fell down while she reached inside the neck of her mail shirt to scratch.

Abdul Khayyam was astounded and delighted now her face was revealed without the helmet and nose guard. 'How beautiful is this warrior maiden,' he exclaimed. 'Her face how like unto a moon ripe and full. Oh moon of my delight who knows no wane, when shall I see thee rise again.'

Frederika stared at him.

The poet stood up, inspired. 'I shall now compose a poem dedicated to your beauty. Your loveliness shall be known to ages yet unborn. Poets, long after we two are dust, will be reciting my love lyrics to their sweethearts in memory of this night when we met eye to eye and love conquered all.'

'Oh shit,' said the subject of this sudden burst of poetry 'What's he on about?'

'That's enough!' said Derek. 'Mr. Khayyam is our host, and you'll be polite to him.' He was thinking of that bed and untroubled sleep.

Gus thought it time to change the subject. He sniffed, 'There's something good cooking in the kitchen, and I always fight better on a full stomach. Let's eat before we do anything else.'

Abdul Khayyam was lost in a burst of inspiration, barely aware of what was going on around him. 'I shall start my poem thus --

'Oh lovely woman from a foreign land

Let me hold thy tender hand.

You will be my blushing bride

To live with me side by side.'

Derek groaned inwardly. Frederika would not be attracted to either the man or his poetry. She had a direct way of showing disapproval, generally by hitting someone.

He could picture their visit to the Khayyam house ending in disaster. They would then be discovered as the fugitives and hauled off to the torture chambers.

His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of food and he suddenly discovered he was ravenous. The serving man made several trips to the table with plates and bowls of assorted dishes so that poetry and fear could be forgotten, at least for a time.

Their host and Gus drank freely. While eating each course they had two or three cups of wine. After the dishes were cleared away Abdul Khayyam was in an even more poetic mood than before. He held his cup aloft. 'A toast,' he cried, 'A toast to poets and poetry everywhere. He capped the toast with another burst of poetry.

*'Come fill the cup with joy, 'tis Spring,
Let us cease forever vain repentancing,
The bird of life flutters within our breast,
Too soon it will cease, and fold its wings to rest.'*

He burst into tears. 'Oh my friends, my friends, my ungrateful brother Omar, the son of my own father took that very verse, stole it, wrenched it out of shape and recited the parody to the Khan as his own. Listen to this example of ingratitude and atrocious poetry':-

*'Come fill the cup, and in the fire of Spring
The winter garment of repentance fling:
The bird of life has but a little way
to fly - and lo! The bird is on the wing.'*

He put his head down on the table and cried some more. 'I am a fount of poetry. I overflow with the music of words. You see one before you who will be an inspiration for generations and nations yet unborn, but sadly the Khan prefers the claptrap and rhyme of my brother.'

There were other customers in the tavern now, it was almost full, and they were listening with shocked attention to Abdul Khayyam's voice. It was a good voice for spouting poetry but not comfortable for those with him who did not want to be noticed or remembered.

People stared but they were shrinking away from the poet and his companions. Derek gathered that in New Carthage it was not a good idea to criticise the Khan in public, not with the torture chambers close at hand.

'Mr. Khayyam,' he said nervously. 'I really think we should leave now, we're tired and if you wish to recite poetry it would be better if we were all rested. We want to hear your poems and your views on modern verse when our minds are clear.'

The poet staggered to his feet. 'I live but to obey your commands.' He dropped some silver coins on the table which were taken up by the landlord, who bowed them out of the door.

'Come, my friends, hospitality awaits, follow me.' He led them through the door and Derek could hear an instant buzz of conversation from inside as people discussed the famous poet, who was taking some foreign guests to his home. The air outside seemed to affect Abdul Khayyam. He reeled towards the alley wall opposite, reached it and would have slid down to collapse on the cobblestones except for four men who had been sitting in the alley playing a game of knucklebones. They put the bones away the instant the poet appeared, picked up the poles of a palanquin and came up bearing it between them.

They put it down on the road. The poet who seemed accustomed to being met like this was laid on the cushions and began to snore. The bearers straightened their passenger out on his narrow couch, arranged a richly decorated rug over him, and taking a handle each, hoisted their burden to shoulder height and trotted off away from the inn.

'Come on,' said Derek. 'We have to get under cover for the night, maybe he'll wake up when he arrives home.'

Beyond the corner the street sloped upwards. It was steep and there were some steps to aid pedestrians. The bearers were equal to the task and the little group of strays toiled after them.

Derek glanced at Gus who was walking alongside. 'Are you alright?' he asked. 'You were matching Khayyam drink for drink.'

'Nothing to it, Your Worship.' said Gus. 'We dwarfs make a brew twice as strong as that stuff, drink twice as much, and come up smiling.'

After about half an hour the bearers stopped before a high wooden gate reinforced with steel straps. Someone rang a bell, the gate was opened and they passed inside. The door was being shut when our friends pushed back and found themselves in a green open space as the gate was barred behind them.

They were in a lush garden of pools and picturesque walks. Gentle fountains splashed water into the pools. Steps led from one level to another. Lotus flowers bobbed in clear water as they were brushed lightly by passing fish, fat and golden. Spread out and fastened to the walls were carefully tended espalier plants.

The men carrying Abdul Khayyam did not pause. They were receding along a path towards the house, then up steps to a pair of doors with colored glass panes. Both doors had been set with hundreds of these panes to represent male peacocks with outspread tails. When both doors were closed and lit from behind the birds appeared to bowing to each other.

The doors were opened by servants who touched their foreheads as the palanquin entered. They acknowledged the master but not the men carrying him. The bearers went inside.

Derek tried to follow but was stopped at the door, confronted by a woman with dyed black hair. She wore gold bangles and jewels, and had a number of pearls sewn into her hair.

She glared at Derek and his companions. 'And what might you be wanting?'

'The poet, Abdul Khayyam, he invited us to stay with him so he could read us some of his poetry.'

The bearers came out, she gave them some coins and they went away taking the palanquin with them.

She turned again on Derek.

'Did he now? Drunk as usual, I suppose. When he's drunk he's always inviting vagabonds and fellow drunks to come here and stay. I'm sick and tired of his ways.'

'No vagabond I.' said Frederika striding forward with her hand on her sword. 'I am Lady Frederika Hohenberger of Sultania and my family is as good as any in this country. You'll take that back!'

Derek thought it unwise to boast about being a subject of the Sultan when the police would be looking for them in the morning. But no one paid any attention, and certainly not the woman who gazed at Frederika. 'Take off your helmet,' she said.

For once Frederika did as he was told. She removed the helmet and the golden plaits of hair fell as far as her waist.

'H'mm, quite passable,' said the woman after a long glance.

'She's right,' thought Derek. Frederika was very good looking if one liked that kind of beauty, she was tough too.

The woman, having satisfied herself as to Frederika's appearance beckoned to Shani. The girl, whose hair was more golden than yellow stepped forward with a surprising degree of obedience and politeness. She was subjected to the same study. The woman seemed pleased with what she saw, but shrugged. 'Men are children, they like that kind of hair in this country, and you have the beauty of youth. I envy you. You two should do very well. You can stay here and I will have you taken to the women's quarters. You will be closely guarded from all harm, never fear.'

Gus was aghast. He stepped closer and whispered in Derek's ear, 'Your Honor I am afraid. I think she is the head wife and is looking for girls for the poet's harem. If they are taken away we may never see them again. She is going to put guards over them.'

'You may be right, Gus, but I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. I wouldn't like to be the guard that tried to keep those two anywhere they didn't want to be. I've never met women who needed less guarding, except from themselves, or each other.'

Mrs Khayyam, if that was who she was, summoned some servants who led Frederika and Shani away. Shani wanted to kiss Derek goodnight but he shook his head.

The woman looked sourly at Derek and Gus. She had no use for males except as servants, but the master of the house had probably invited them, as they said, and the customs of hospitality were strong.

'You will be given a room tonight, suitable for guests. Tomorrow we will see further what is to be done. It may be that the poet will not remember you, it sometimes happens on occasion, persons of no birth or breeding have imposed themselves on the house by taking advantage of his weakness and saying falsely they had been invited to stay. Before their deception is uncovered they draw very freely on our wine and food, and attempt to take advantage of the girl servants.'

I will send a jug of wine to your room, and some food. I hope you are not false guests. If you are the servants will beat you in the morning before you are thrown out.'

She seemed to have suspicions that they were the baser sort of freeloaders, but perhaps the poet really had invited them. It would be sorted out in the morning when he woke up.

Derek and Gus were shown to the guest room, it was spacious and quiet. Food and drink was brought to them as promised. After eating Derek lay down on a divan.

Dreamless sleep followed almost immediately.

Chapter Twenty Three

The Khan's prison

Derek was awakened while it was still dark. Gus was shaking his shoulder.

'Your Worship there is someone scratching at the door and asking us to open up.'

'I suppose it's one of those bloody women. They've escaped from the harem already. I can't stand all this in the middle of the night. Scratch on our side of the door and tell them to go away. Say I'm fast asleep and can't be disturbed.'

Gus did as he was told and came back in a moment. 'It's not the girls, it's a man and he says the Khan's soldiers know where we are and we have to let him in straight away before they get here.'

There were some soft thumps on the door to emphasize the point.

'Oh, alright then! Have your knife handy and only one in here at a time. If there are any more they'll have to wait in the passage.'

The door opened and a moment later a helmeted man with a black beard cut to a sharp point was by Derek's bed. He was armored with a steel breast-plate and carried a sword.

Derek gasped and rolled off the far side of the bed to stand with his back to the wall. Gus leapt on to the man's back and held a knife to his throat.

'Enough! Enough!' roared the stranger. 'I am a friend. I have come to warn you that you have only minutes left. That fool Abdul Khayyam drew everyone's attention to you and your friends at the Inn of Earthly Delights. The two sentries have been found and the Khan's men know already that you are here and they are at the gate now!'

Derek was aware that someone outside the house was hammering at the gate. It seemed he may have heard the sound in his sleep and it had been going on for some minutes. 'What's that noise?'

'They are here already!' cried the newcomer. 'They will break down the gate if no one comes to let them in. We have to be away by then. Put your clothes on now or carry them with you; there is no time to waste.'

Derek made a decision. 'Gus, get off him.' Gus reluctantly released the intruder but held his knife ready against any attack.

A fresh uproar broke out in the passage with a clash of swords, and shouting. The man ran out through the door. Derek could recognize two of the voices and he and Gus followed.

Derek's female supporters were out there battling with two men in the passage. Frederika's sword was driving one opponent before her while Shani was wielding another, more awkward sword, probably the property of a harem guard.

'Darling, are you alright?' cried Shani. 'We came as soon as we heard the noise at the gate.'

'Don't talk to the manager like that, he's not your darling,' was Frederika's contribution, between blows. 'Stand back, manager. We'll deal with these two. Gus, use your knife, man. Take care of the other fellow!'

'Hassan, these are houris from hell,' gasped one of the battling men. 'Should we kill them?'

'No! No! Stop! Everyone, stop fighting, it's a mistake. Freddy, Shani, cut it out! They've come to save us.'

The two women obeyed and stepped back reluctantly, though their swords were held at the ready.

'There is no time to talk,' said Hassan. 'We have to get out now before the Khan's men take you.'

'He would have said more but for the noise of booted feet and the appearance of armed men at both ends of the passage; they were trapped. A sergeant advanced on them, looking at Derek. 'You're the man who killed a guard. injured another and escaped from custody last night. You're under arrest.' He noticed Hassan. 'Sir, what are you doing here? If you have been associating with a fugitive from justice I will have to report the matter to my commanding officer.'

'Don't talk rubbish, man.' Retorted Hassan, slipping his sword back into its sheath. 'You're late, as usual, I had already detained the fugitive before you arrived. My lads and I turned out early to make sure he didn't escape again; he's too slippery for you lot.'

Shani suddenly screamed at the stranger and lashed out with her sword. 'Bastard!! I should have killed you when I had the chance!' Fortunately for Hassan rage had made her judgment astray, the tip of the sword skidded off his steel breastplate. He jumped back before she could strike again. Frederika was ready to take over where Shani had missed but the soldiers caught them both and they could only glare and spit.

Gus made an explosive effort to throw his knife but his arm was seized in time.

In a moment he too was secured and they were all captives. 'I've never seen such a bodyguard,' said Hassan cheerfully, picking up Gus' fallen knife and putting it in his pouch. 'Two hell maidens and a dwarf with muscles that bulge as though they are about to burst. I leave them to you, sergeant, but guard the prisoner better than they did last time; the ambassadors told me he was the cleverest man they had ever encountered. The Khan may have a use for him yet.'

He tapped Frederika playfully under the chin but withdrew quickly when she lunged out and tried to bite his hand.

'Under other circumstances I would say he was lucky to be guarded by such folk, but I think they would be just a little too blood-thirsty for me. Good luck, sergeant, watch over them well. If they escape again the Khan will have your head, as well as other parts of your anatomy.' He walked out of the room followed by his supporters.

Abdul Khayyam was in the courtyard to see the captives led away. His turban was on crooked and he seemed not to have recovered from the party of the previous evening.

'You will tell the Khan, will you not,' he said pleadingly, 'That I had never met you before last evening and had no idea that you were fugitives from his well deserved anger. I would be grateful if you would mention to him before you are handed over to the torturers that I am his most loyal subject and would never dream of uttering a word against his royal majesty.'

Derek was too concerned with his own problems to give much heed to the trembling little man. However, before he was led away, he heard Abdul Khayyam's promise that his death would be commemorated in a mighty poem that would ring through the ages. To earn such an honour he had only to put in a good word for the poet with the Khan before the end.

The prisoners were an object of much curiosity to passersby as they were marched through the streets under close guard. They were not taken to the same building as before, but one larger and more frightening. It was built like a fortress and after entering through a small door next to the huge main entrance, which was closed, they went through a number of barred gates. These were unlocked for them to pass through and locked again behind them. They went down steps and along corridors, past cells with floor to ceiling iron bars through which hands reached out and men shouted at them.

A few minutes later Derek and Gus were pushed into a large stone cell which, like the others had vertical bars from floor to ceiling, and dirty straw scattered on the stone floor. The girls were taken somewhere else.

About twenty or thirty men had just been evicted from this cell and were being moved into others that were already overcrowded. Their noisy complaints and curses against Derek and the jailers had just died away when one of the ambassadors appeared before the bars which separated them from the corridor. He was the older man who scarcely spoke, except to give disagreeable orders. He seemed to be in a bad mood and glared at Derek through the bars.

'You have caused a great deal of trouble,' he said. 'No one knows how you were able to kill one guard, disable the other, and escape from the house, or where your companions came from. I am told that one of the women applied earlier in the day for a post in the Imperial Guard. She then disappeared leaving her escort stunned and lying in the gutter.'

'The Khan was most displeased at your disappearance and in his anger he declared a competition amongst the city's torturers to see who can invent the most unpleasant death for you. The winner is to get a prize of fifty golden dinars, on top of the usual execution fee.'

Derek's legs would no longer support him. Gus helped him to a stone bench where he sat down, struck with horror at the ambassador's story. 'However, it may not come to that. I pointed out to his majesty that a man who could deal with two guards and escape from custody was a man to be

reckoned with. I also explained the series of masterstrokes by which you gained ascendancy over the Sultan and his ministers. I did not reveal that you had used a number of apes to capture the Sultan's royal person. The Khan would have been deeply shocked to hear such a thing, he regards all royal personages as sacred, even his enemy the Sultan. He believes that only a Khan has the right to kill or capture a fellow monarch, and he will do so at the first opportunity, but that privilege is not for a commoner.'

'What do you want? What am I supposed to do?'

'I told you before. We need an adviser of guile and intelligence to guide us through these difficult times. You will be useful both in government and war, and if satisfactory you may gain advancement. But first you have to pass a great test.'

'What test? What are you talking about?'

'It is unfortunate, but when we stayed at the inn I sent a messenger on ahead to advise the Khan of your arrival. In my dispatch I described you as like a wizard in the way you dealt with various emergencies. I am sorry to say the Khan took my fanciful description literally and decided that you were a real wizard and your first duty would be to provide a show of magic for the court, and a number of visitors. I tried to explain my error to the Khan, but it was too late. The invitations have been sent out and tonight you have to entertain the Khan and his court with magic tricks.

I can't do anything like that! Go back to the Khan and tell him you made a mistake. I'm not a wizard at all, and there's no way I can turn on a show of any kind.'

'This is most sad. When the Khan gets an idea into his head it is difficult to shift it. If you disappoint him he will be greatly upset, and the executioners are close by. They are very skilled at prolonging life while applying the maximum pain possible.'

Derek could say nothing. He trembled.

'I want you to succeed; if you fail we, the ambassadors, will lose face.

'The hell you are; I'm going to lose more than that. I keep telling you, I don't know any magic. I can't put on a magic show.'

'Well, I doubt that even I could save you if the Khan is dissatisfied with your performance. The guild of executioners is looking forward with great interest to the outcome of your appearance before the Khan. They expect a favourable result so that one of their number will win the prize as well as the executioner's fee. I believe there is to be a party afterwards and the winner will have to pay for the drinks.'

'Oh Gawd,' said Derek weakly, 'what sort of show can I do?'

'I don't know, I am not a magician. What you present to the Khan is your affair. It will have to be amusing, with plenty of magic tricks. But I warn you, make it simple. The Khan enjoys seeing people falling down on stage, or knocking one another over, or having the scenery fall on them; it makes him laugh very much. You will appear before the Khan tonight, after he has dined. You were given this larger cell so you can prepare for your appearance. If there is anything you require it will be brought to you.'

He went away. They heard the heavy, barred door round the corner open and clash shut again, drowning, for a moment, the miserable complaints of the other prisoners crammed into their cells.

Gus sat beside Derek on the stone bench. He whispered, 'If your honor could lure the jailer over here, and get him close to the bars I could cut him up and get his keys.'

'Gus, you don't have a knife. I saw that man pick yours up and put it in his bag.'

'Your Honor, I always have a knife. There is one hanging down between my shoulder blades at this very moment; a good throwing knife. Reach down past the back of my collar and you will feel the handle. Take it out carefully, it's very sharp.'

'You're going to kill the jailer?'

'Yes, if we can get him close enough. Then we'll go and find Lady Frederika, and Miss Shani, let them out, then let everyone out to cover our escape.'

It was a wild plan but Derek was so desperate he was ready to consider it. The jailer shuffled past, but too far away to be attacked. They heard the rattle of keys and a clanging noise as the gate opened again.

Then there was another noise. The most unlikely sound ever heard in that terrible place was coming from around the corner. A band was playing music. cheerful music. There was a banjo twanging, a fiddle, tambourines, and the low melodious insistence of a saxophone supporting it all. The melody did not match the surroundings. They were playing a tune totally out of place in this grim prison -- *'When the Saints Go Marching In.'* *'Oh Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.'*

The tune grew louder and a strange collection of people came round the corner, some playing musical instruments. The performers were dressed in outlandish clothes, multi-hued, garish garments which would have looked well before footlights, but were out of place in a dank, crowded prison.

The first to appear were two young and pretty girls led by the warder. They were dressed in costumes of silk, mostly patched. Their slippers were golden in color and had tiny bells on the curled up toes; these tinkled as they moved. They wore blouses red and blue, and harem pants with colored dominoes sewn to them, and they each wore a fez on their heads, one blue, one red, with long tassels on top which reached to the wearer's shoulders. The two girls stepped high along the corridor marching and twirling in time to the music. The warder stopped them in front of the cell, facing Derek and Gus. Each had a tambourine in her right hand. The girls opened their arms wide, curtsied, and acknowledged him with bowed heads and rattling tambourines as the music ceased.

The prisoners clapped, cheered, and whistled. The girls curtsied again to the plaudits up and down the corridor.

Four young men played musical instruments while a fifth person, a fat man, came panting behind them; he was carrying the saxophone. He stopped, leaned against the bars, and blew, puffing out his moustache which, apart from a red nose, was his most prominent feature.

He sagged 'I'm too old for this sort of caper', he muttered. 'Marchin' and blowin' inter this bloody thing at the same time is gettin' to be too much for me. I could use a gig in a real theater, somethin' like the old Lyric in Tottenham Court Road. Two or three munce'do, just so me bunions could settle down a bit.'

Like the girls and the other musicians he was dressed brightly, but his outfit was less fetching. The most notable feature of his costume was what appeared to be a huge diamond clasp fastened to the front of his turban. It secured a large feather which rose above the top of his head and trembled with every movement.

The stranger studied Derek through the bars. 'You the great Effendi Vortimer, trained in the colleges of the west in the arts of magic and war?' The members of his band were gathered behind him and looked curiously at the prisoners.

They ignored the other cells where the inmates were yelling and whistling, trying to attract the attention of the girls.

'Well, yes. I do have a degree.' In his present state Derek was not going to instruct a musician in the limitations of an MBA. He was more interested in the man's business there, and how he knew about Derek.

'Yair, well this bloke we met said we was to get up here toot sweet and help you with some sort of show you gotta put on tonight. Just go to the gate he says, and tell the screws you'd been sent to help Effendi Vortimer get ready. I don't like jails, it's easy to get in, but a helluva job getting out again. I been in 'em too often. We're picked up every now and then as vagrants, and get chucked in the slammer, but a gig's a gig, and the money he gave us was good.'

'Who was it? Who hired you?' Derek asked.

'Dunno! Never seen him before, but I can tell you he's a toff, and very glad we was to see the color of 'is money. Fifty gold dinars he give me, cash in hand. And we was in such a hurry to get here we forgot to ask what kind of audience we'll be playing to. By the way, me name's Bert, and what's this all about?'

'I have to appear tonight before the Khan, and I suppose his wives and court will be there too.'

'Good Gawd!!!' said Bert, 'Yer joking.' There was a combined shriek from the young women listening.

Oh, shuddup,' said Bert to the females. 'This lot, they're always thinkin' the big break's just around the corner. Well it's not! When I was their age I used to think talent and luck would get me into the big time; now here I am years later, old and clapped out, still blowin' on this damn saxophone, and what's it got me, nothin'? The missus and me should never've answered that bloody advertisement. It said, 'entertainers were wanted for the empire'. We thought they meant the Empire Music Hall, but it turned out to be the Carthaginian Empire. After that I don't even know 'ow we got 'ere from London. But that's not your problem.' He turned to the jailer. 'Just let us in, will yer, mate? We gotter get this show on the road.'

The jailer stepped forward with the key. He was much less grim now that some pretty girls and a band had appeared in his jail. He almost smiled as he opened the door so the troupe could file inside. A number of helpers who had been in the background stepped forward. They carried a collection of shabby articles and some wooden cases and planks bolted together which they stacked against the bench. Bert gave them a few coins and they left, happy to get out of jail.

'Do you really know the Khan?' asked a dark-haired girl dancer, she was the prettier of the two. She gazed appealingly up into Derek's eyes as though he held the key to a glittering career and the opportunity of appearing before the crowned heads of her world.

'E was jokin' ' said Bert, picking up his saxophone. He glanced around at the miserable place they were in. 'Why would the Khan put 'im in the nick if 'e was goin' t'invite 'im inter the palace? It stands ter reason; but that's not our problem. The bloke paid us to put on a show ter make Derek look good and that's what we're gunna do. I don't care who comes to see it.'

He looked keenly at Gus. 'Ello, oo's this. A mate o' yours.'

'I am his butler,' said Gus. 'I was told to guard his back in battle, and I shall do so; against the Khan himself if need be.'

'We might be able to use you,' remarked Bert. 'We'll need all the help we can get to put on a good show tonight. That bloke paid us to do the job, and it has to be our best show ever.'

'They say I have to do some magic tricks.'

'No problem,' said Bert, turning his attention from Gus. 'Ere, put on my coat.' It was an old tail-coat, black, but now shiny with age and wear. Dozens of diamond shaped colored patches had been sewn to it, almost concealing the original material. The multi-colored patches had been applied long ago, but they held the coat together and would show up well from a distance, and by the glow of footlights. Derek was not fat like Bert but it was not a bad fit. The pockets were soft and lumpy and appeared to be stuffed full of colored cloths.'

'Don't touch 'em yet!' said Bert, 'just start pulling 'em out on stage when I tell yer

Derek had to admit that he had never been on stage before and did not know much about the theatre; he had always preferred films. Bert scratched his head when he learned how ignorant his client was of any theatrical experience, but he brightened up.

'Don't you worry about it, we'll carry yer once you're up on the stage. Just take an interest in what we're doin', and smile a lot. That's the secret of this business yer gotter smile all the time. It doesn't matter what yer feelin' just keep smilin' --Gottit?? '

He fell into a vigorous argument with the others on how they were to present a full length show and how they could make Derek look good as the center of the presentation.

Derek could not dance and was unable to carry a tune and his smiles were scarcely more than forced grimaces because he was aware that the torture chambers were close by and the executioners of the guild were cheerfully waiting for him to fail.

'Yer don't throw knives do yer?' asked Bert. He was desperate to find something spectacular Derek could actually do. 'Lorenzo the Great got inter a fight and the beak give 'im six munce 'ard smashin' up rocks for the road workers. 'E's gunna follow after us when 'e gets out. 'E's the best knife thrower we've 'ad so far, but 'e's not much good to us in the clink. Silly cow!'

Pleased to be of assistance, Gus stepped forward. 'His Worship doesn't throw knives,' he said, 'but I can.' He showed them his knife.

'Look at that wooden post there,' said Gus. 'If you like I can show how good I am by throwing a knife at that.' The iron bars facing the corridor, which made up the fourth wall of the cell, were divided in two by a timber upright which anchored the whole thing and helped support the roof.

Gus stood well back and fixed his eye on the target. He raised the knife over his shoulder, ready to throw. If he missed he would probably skewer a prisoner in the cell opposite. They crowded at the bars opposite to see what was going on.

'Hang on, mate,' said Bert. 'Kate, you go and stand in front of the post, and mate, you hit the post about a hand-span over her head.'

Kate, was the dark-haired girl who had asked longingly about a possible appearance before the Khan. She objected loudly to standing still while someone they had met only minutes ago threw a knife as close as possible to her head.

Bert was annoyed. 'Look Kate, just for a change do what I tell yer. I never met a girl ter complain and bitch the way you do. You know how the audience likes ter see a man throwin' knives at a pretty girl; specially a dwarf knife thrower. I'll teach 'im to snarl a bit before 'e does it and laugh, sinister like. We gotter put on a good show, you know that! If only yer mum was 'ere she'd know 'ow to deal with yer.'

'Mum wouldn't put up with a stranger throwing knives at me. You stand in front of the post if you're that sure of him.'

Bert was about to make a heated reply, but was interrupted; Gus pointed at a name which some forgotten prisoner had carved on the post, about halfway up.

'See the O in the middle of the name?' They looked. His arm moved, a silver streak flashed from his hand and the knife was quivering, with the point stuck deep in the wood, on the exact spot Gus had pointed to.'

Bert was most impressed by this display of skill. 'Look, mate, when you get out of 'ere come and see us. We could use a knife thrower like you. Eh, Kate, it'd look good on the posters, wouldn't it? "The dwarf knife thrower", with a pitcher of 'im throwin' knives atcha. I can always spot talent. As soon as I saw 'im I thought, 'there's talent there'. We'll get rid of Lorenzo. 'E was getting' onter the slops too much and startin' fights wherever 'e went. I'll be glad ter see the back of 'im.'

'Only if the master comes too,' said Gus.'

'You mean yer mate? Well, I dunno. 'E can't sing, 'e can't act, 'e can't dance, and 'is smiles is 'orrible. Sorry, I just can't use 'im; not even as a tent 'and. Everyone 'as to do two jobs, y'see. They

'elp set up the tent or the 'all, and then, durin' the show they 'ave to do an act. We don't carry no passengers, not unless someone pays.'

'I say we take him,' interposed Kate. 'I don't think he can smile right now because there's a lot on his mind. But he's good looking and young, and he can be taught the business, just the same as everyone else.'

'Wait on!' said Derek, 'Forget all that. We appear before the Khan tonight and somehow you lot have to make me look good. This show you're going to do has to be professional, well presented, and funny, with lots of magic tricks, and if you can't stop talking and arguing and just settle down it'll be a flop and I won't be going anywhere.' He could have added, 'except to execution', but did not.

Kate eyed him thoughtfully, a glance not unmixed with admiration, for this second mention of the Khan. Clearly she did not know whether to believe him or not. Bert had no doubts.

'Stop goin' on about the bleedin' Khan. This is the sort of audience we're goin' ter get.' He indicated the prisoners who were whistling at the girls. They're better than some we've had, and at least they can't walk out on us. Right, now let's put yer through some dance steps.'

They tried for some time to teach Derek some basic dancing with Kate on one side and the girl named, Marcia, on the other, and the men playing instruments. Derek gathered that they were sisters and the musicians were brothers and Bert was father of them all.

'E can't dance either,' said Bert after a while. 'E's got two left feet. You girls'll 'ave ter waggle yer bums a bit more so the audience'll be lookin' at you instead of 'im. The men will, anyway; and you boys'll 'ave ter dance as well as play. We'll all 'ave ter clown it up a bit so the audience won't notice 'im too much.

'Ere, Gus, we'll try you in the front line, in front of Derek, you'll be a bit of a novelty, if you get me drift. We never 'ad a dancin' dwarf before and we'll see 'ow yer go. I'll be there too, playin' and dancin', though it might kill me. Right, magic tricks next.'

Derek soon discovered meters of colored bunting in the pockets of Bert's coat and bunches of paper flowers; Bert showed him how to open them one-handed as they came out of the pockets of the coat, but he was not satisfied.

'Ave we got any smoke left,' he said. 'We can't let the audience get a really good view of him while 'e's doin' the tricks; they'll be onter 'im in a minute. 'He's got no more idea than a babby 'ow to work an audience. Right, we'll need plenty of smoke and everyone'll 'ave to rush round, fallin' down, or over things; and you girls'll 'ave to shake everything you got so they don't look at 'im. It's the only way we're goin' to get away with this.'

The troupe had brought two boxes and stands to carry them and they were pushed together end to end. From a distance they appeared to be brilliantly painted, but up close Derek could see how knocked about and shabby they were. 'Now', said Bert. 'I'm gunna show yer how ter saw a woman in half. Marcia, get the saw!'. Marcia produced an old cross-cut saw about six feet long with jagged teeth. There was handle at either end so two people could use the saw to cut through heavy logs.

'Right, we're getting' this sorted out. Now, you and Gus can take an 'andle each. Derek, you face the audience and Gus can stand with 'is back to it. I like Gus, at least he can dance a few steps and be really useful. Now, Derek, I'll let yer know when it's on but before yer come on for the 'sorin' a woman in 'alf trick' the girls'll be out front doin' a dance routine and I'll do yer face over with dead-white pancake make-up and a big black moustache to go with yer hair and you'll come out lookin' like 'ell. Now, Gus, we'll dress him up in a black cloak and an 'ood, and a mask, so he looks like an executioner. 'Ang on, Gus's no good as a stage name. What say we call 'im Theodore? That's it! We'll bill you two for tonight as Derek the Magician and Theodore 'is faithful dwarf servant. When you two start cuttin' Kate in half she's gunna scream a lot, and you laugh, evil like. It'll be a sensation.' He indicated the boxes. 'Now, y'can see they're quite separate but you and Theodore've gotter pretend it's one box about the size of a coffin and make as though yer slicing it in half with a saw. I'll be with yer, don't worry, and the boys'll be 'oldin' the boxes so they don't come apart too easy.'

They worked through the afternoon, sweating, and desperately rehearsing as Derek tried to curb a growing fear and horror of what was to come.

They were still working after lamp lighting time when a file of soldiers came to take them away.

Chapter Twenty Four

The Khan's Entertainment

Derek refused to go anywhere unless Frederika and Shani came too

'That is not my concern,' retorted the jailer. Those females gave a great deal of trouble. They tried to cause a riot among the women prisoners, and were insolent to the other jailers.' To Derek and Gus this sounded about right

'However,' the jailer continued, 'We were ordered that, they were not to be punished. I was glad to get rid of them and they have gone ahead with a separate escort.'

'Alright,' said Derek, 'But the show will not go on if they are not there, and the Khan will be very angry.'

Some of the soldiers were ordered to carry the gear and props needed for the show. They swore and complained, but not loud enough for the officer to hear. As the prison doors clashed shut behind them a corporal held up a lantern to light the group through the dark city.

After a long walk they turned into a street closed in on either side by more walls without openings. The street was partly lit by oil lamps set high over closed and barred entrances. The tread of the marching soldiers echoed from the walls and filled, the street with noise. until they came to an open space, a public garden with paths among the trees and a few more lights mounted on poles to ward off the darkness.

Their officer led the group on to a gravelled drive past carefully tended masses of flowers which lined the path. He halted them before a decorated, wrought iron gate, topped with spikes, and big enough for carriages to pass through. They waited while he went forward and muttered something to the guards. The gate swung open.

Bert was awe-struck. 'Blimey, this isn't really the Khan's palace, is it?'

Derek could not reply. He felt as though the gates of hell were opening. Would he fail here and go straight to the dungeons?

'I told you,' said Kate. 'There's more to Derek than you think.' Her sister nodded. The players suddenly buzzed with excitement. 'Jeez, mate', asked Bert, 'How d'jer land this gig?'

They were at the rear of the palace and they marched through a garden area for another five minutes towards a door which opened for them and they filed into a brightly lit passage. where they encountered a palace official.

He was shocked at their appearance and called for a scented napkin which he. held to his nose as he surveyed them and the equipment which the soldiers were stacking against the wall of the passage.

'Is this the magician and his party,' he enquired, in a high, voice. 'How can they appear before the Khan in these ghastly clothes?'

The officer shrugged. 'It certainly is his party, and I don't dress them, I just deliver them. They're all yours until I'm told to take them away. I'll be at the guardhouse.' He led his men outside.

The official clapped his hands over his mouth. 'You ragamuffins have to appear before the Khan. I can't present you in this condition. What shall I do-?'

He was interrupted by a shriek from Marcia and Kate. They were clutching one another, jumping up and down and screaming with delight. Even Bert was impressed at last. All he could say was, 'Gor blimey, the Khan, we're goin' ter appear in front of the Khan.'

'Be silent!' cried the man, trying to stop the noise from the troupe. 'This is most unseemly. If I had not received orders from the Lord Chancellor himself I would have you all whipped and thrown out of the palace. And what are these disgusting articles the soldiers have brought in and dumped here?'

'They're our props,' Bert said. 'And if we don't have 'em we can't go on.'

The official, in despair, put his hand over his forehead. 'I am lost. A gang of scarecrows bring equipment that should be burned and I have to present them to the great Khan. I will be thrown into the black pits.'

'Chief Steward.' A servant made a deep bow. 'This is a task for the Master and Mistress of the Wardrobe. Send for them at once. Nothing can be done about the gear they have brought with them, but at least they can be clothed properly'

The Chief Steward made no acknowledgement of the suggestion but cried out, 'I know what to do. It has just come to mind. I will send for the Master and Mistress of the Wardrobe. Tell them they

are to come instantly or they will answer to me. Run and do it now. Why do I have to think of everything?' The servant hurried from the room.

The Chief Steward turned again to his visitors. 'Can anyone inform me about two young women who were brought here earlier, apparently to join your party. They caused a great deal of trouble on the way, and also here in the palace.'

Derek said nothing, but knew his problems were about to increase.

The Chief Steward continued. 'They claimed to know nothing about a troupe of actors but were particularly concerned about the welfare of a person whose name is, Derek, or Manager, or perhaps both.'

Derek reluctantly put up his hand. 'I think they were asking about me.'

The Chief Steward glared at Derek as though he would rather not see him at all.

He was not worth looking at. The suit given to him by Doctor Grozny was now dirty and torn, but he had not encountered any menswear shops in his travels, in fact no shops of any kind; and he needed a shave.

'You appear to be very young, though, if they are your wives my man, you should keep them in better order. However, if you guarantee their good conduct in future, I will release them to you.'

'I can't guarantee anything about those two,' muttered Derek, but the Chief Steward did not hear him.

Frederika and Shani arrived about the same time as the wardrobe master and mistress returned with servants carrying clothes. The group was separated into two rooms for male and female fittings.

Even Gus was fitted out. There were several dwarfs at court and they took a friendly interest in dressing him in the very best for the honor of their race. He insisted on his leather shorts, jacket, boots and socks being tied in a bundle so he could carry them away.

Derek did not care for his baggy red pants, or his slippers, or his white jacket with lots of gold braid and lavishly sprinkled with sewn on glittering beads. His taste ran more to a business suit with pin stripes, a pastel shirt, a colorful tie, perhaps even a sharp hat. Instead, after being shaved and combed by the court barber, he was fitted with a turban. The junior barbers did the same for Bert and his sons and tried to smarten Gus' appearance also.

Bert refused to let them cut Gus' hair. He wanted him looking as savage as possible when he threw knives at Kate, and helped saw a girl in half. The barbers gave up in despair when they broke their combs on his hair and beard.

When the troupe came together again the girls looked gorgeous. They were dressed in shimmering colors and had carefully applied make-up and beautiful hair-styles. Frederika's plaits had been teased out and the hair piled on her head. Shani's hair had been bobbed, and the two show girls were made up and groomed as never before. They all had flowers worked into their hair. Most of the company could not tear themselves away from the full length mirrors fastened to the walls.

The double doors at the end of the room were thrown back, and a brilliantly dressed obese individual, entered carrying a staff decorated with jewels. He wheezed and gazed at them all contemptuously. A servant handed him a handkerchief, which he held to his nose.

'These are the entertainers?', he asked, as though expecting to see something better.

'Yes Lord Chamberlain.' The Chief Steward bowed. 'I have done the best I could, but these were impossible. 'He pointed to the equipment brought in by the soldiers. They say they cannot proceed without those strange looking articles. What the Khan will make of all this I shudder to think'

Well, if all goes wrong we can blame the ambassadors; it was their idea. Order the servants to take it all into the hall. Whatever happens we cannot be held at fault.' The Lord Chamberlain raised his staff and pointed it towards the double door.

It was opened for him yet again and the grandee stalked out, leading the troupe and the servants carrying their equipment. Derek, white faced and shaking, marched with them.

The Lord Chamberlain did not look at the troupe but walked in front of them while holding to his nose a silk handkerchief adorned with lace, he seemed unwilling to breathe the same air as those behind him.

He still did not look as, with a wave of his hand, he consigned the group to another official, a herald with a gilded wooden staff.

The Herald led them on to a stage with the curtain still down. They could hear the quiet murmur of an audience waiting for the show to start. Behind them was another curtain where their equipment was hidden. Bert instructed the man in what introduction he wanted.

Bert guided Derek to stand alongside him behind the closed curtains. The boy musicians stood two on either side. They had a collection of instruments on stage including cymbals, guitar, flute, clarinet, trumpet, fiddle, pan-pipes, banjo, ukulele, wash-board, tin-whistle a stone jug, and a kazoo.

The herald stood in front of the curtain. He thumped the butt of his staff three times on the floor. 'Your gracious majesty, lords, ladies, and commoners. The wizard, Effendi Vortimer, from a far country, will now entertain you in a show of mystery, magic, and mirth.' He bowed and walked off. No one applauded as the curtains opened. 'Smile!' said Bert, 'A big cheesy grin.' Derek bared his teeth at the audience. It was the best he could do.

The cymbals clashed and the band burst out, playing a cheerful tune.

They were in a small luxurious theatre adorned with gold silver and crimson, but without seats. Members of the audience sat, sprawled, or lay on large, brightly colored cushions. Many smoked hookahs, which were water cooled pipes. Servants moved around putting food and drinks on low tables within easy reach.

At the back was a raised platform the width of the hall and, in the middle, seated on a throne, was the Khan himself. At every movement a flash of light reflected from his diamonds. Bert's hands shook slightly, but he was still master of himself, never in his life had there been such an opportunity to impress an audience of nobles

The musicians played on, changing from one instrument to another. There was a box in front of them and each made a little pantomime of putting an instrument in and taking another out. The others continued pausing only to listen to the new instrument play a few bars, then they joined in the melody. Sometimes the two would change with one another and play on.

Bert took a brief moment from his saxophone and spoke to Derek out of the side of his mouth. 'The curtains behind us open in the middle. When I say Go!, then go as quick as you can and disappear. Be ready!' Derek nodded.

Without a pause they changed into a new tune, It was the one Derek had heard first in the prison. *When the Saints Go Marching in -- Oh Lord, I want to be in that number ---'*

Kate and Marcia came on from either side, stepping high and pirouetting in time to the music. They held their tambourines and rattled them as the music died, and then curtsied to the Khan

One of their brothers leaned down to put an instrument into the box, there was a sudden, huge puff of smoke in his face, it filled the stage adding to the already smoky atmosphere in the hall. He reeled back, the girls caught and held him as he swayed.

When the smoke was at its thickest, and everyone was watching the girls supporting their brother, Bert turned to Derek and said one word, 'Go!'

Derek ran and disappeared behind the curtain to find Frederika and Shani waiting.

On stage Bert was saying, 'You were all watching and saw the great wizard disappear in a puff of smoke. But he will return to amaze and delight you with his magic powers. I wish now to introduce you to the latest member of our company, Theodore the Mighty Dwarf. Theodore come forward!'

Gus came on to the stage. While hidden behind the curtain he had changed back into his leather shorts and jacket, and was wearing socks and his heavy boots.

Bert was not expecting this but took it in his stride.' Theodore has amazing strength, he is probably the strongest person alive today, but he has a sad history. He fell under the spell of an evil magician who locked him in a cave and forced him to dig out diamonds which the evil magician then took for himself.'

People stopped smoking and drinking to stare at Gus.

'While locked in the cave he wore those very clothes you see today. He was let out only when his services were needed. Once to kill a many-headed beast that ravaged the countryside and killed thousands. Another time he was needed to battle with a huge boar with tusks like razors. It killed all the hunters who went up against it until it met Theodore, who strangled it with his bare hands. Theodore, show them your muscles.'

Gus was enjoying this. He stood in the glow of the candle-lit footlights and slowly slipped off his jacket which he threw to one side. Then he clenched his fists, tensed his biceps to make them bulge and snarled at the audience. The Khan started clapping, everyone clapped and cheered.

Bert let them go for a little while then raised his hands. 'Theodore laboured for many years in the cave, to be let out only when some terrible danger threatened the country. But that great wizard,

the Honorable Effendi Vortimer heard about his plight and released him after a ghastly battle with the evil magician. They have roamed the world together ever since.'

Gus nodded, flexed his muscles, and snarled again.

'But, unfortunately, his long imprisonment turned him from a nice young fellow into a raging fury.'

Gus did not know what was coming next but snarled, and laughed evilly.

'I warn you good folk, do not provoke him or you might suffer the same fate as the giant boar, or the many-headed monster. When angered he can be controlled only by Effendi Vortimer who is, fortunately, close at hand. And now I will let you into a secret, there is one other way of controlling his fearful rage.'

Bert paused for effect, holding the audience spellbound. Gus, breathing heavily, glared, turning his head to stare at everyone in the hall, except the Khan.

'The secret is this,' cried Bert. 'His anger can be quietened by a pure young maiden. and we will now demonstrate that strange effect for you. Maidens, come forth.'

Kate and Marcia appeared from opposite wings of the stage, each led another maiden. The two extra maidens were Frederika and Shani. Frederika had found her sword, breastplate, spear and helmet stacked behind the curtain, she was now fully armed, except for the helmet which she left off, it would spoil her new hair-do.

The Khan applauded their entrance, so everyone did the same.

'Now watch,' cried Bert As the clapping died away, 'He will kneel before them. Not one of us has such an effect on him, except Effendi Vortimer. Theodore, stretch your arms out sideways'

Gus knelt as instructed, and extended his arms. 'Maidens Kate and Marcia sit on his shoulders, hold tight to one another! The other two maidens, hold him round the neck.' Frederika put her spear and shield down on the stage.' Then she and Shani did as they were told.

'Now Theodore, stand up.' That part was easy, Gus was shorter than any of them.

'Theodore loves nothing better than to dance with pretty maidens, especially four at once, so ladies, hang on to him but lift your feet clear of the floor. Gentlemen of the band, a jig, if you please.'

Gus got a full round of applause, led by the Khan, who roared laughing at Gus prancing round the stage and spinning with the girls hanging on.

They stopped at last. Shani was inspired. 'I know a good trick. Tell Gus to stand over there with his back to me.' She pointed to one side of the stage. Bert had no idea what she intended but had to go along.

'This maiden from the snowy northern plains of the empire will now show you a trick never seen before. Theodore, stand over there with your back to us.' He held up his hand to restrain Shani. 'Wait for the drum roll to finish, my dear.'

One of the boy musicians seized a kettle-drum and rattled out a tattoo.

Shani ran from the other side of the stage, made a complete somersault, and sprang up to stand on Gus' shoulders. She teetered as Gus shuffled round to face the audience but managed to stay there for a few seconds before jumping off.

'I used to practise that trick with my Dad,' she said.

The Khan was really getting into the swing of things now. He laughed shrilly, and Bert told her to do it again. This time Marcia and Kate stood either side to steady Gus.

During the drum roll Bert told Frederika to stand at the corner of the stage with her spear, looking beautiful and noble, as though on guard.

Shani ran, somersaulted, and leaped to land on Gus' shoulders as before. The girls held him as she stood up straight and steady. They went round the stage, while Shani waved, and the audience clapped in time to a marching tune.

They went off, leaving Marcia behind. Bert called her to him and laid his hand on her shoulder.

'Your majesty, lords, ladies, and commoners, behold this young lady. To you she seems well and healthy, but she has a secret sorrow. The doctors say that in spite of her appearance she has not long to live.'

There was a gasp from the audience, Marcia put her hands to her face and wept.

'I know your hearts go out to this brave young woman and so I will explain her problem, and also tell of our hopes that a cure may be at hand. When young she accidentally swallowed some reels of her mother's dressmaking ribbons and has suffered bad 'ealth ever since.'

Marcia continued sobbing.

'But assistance may be at hand. Effendi Vortimer is a wizard of great renown and it is possible he can cure this poor suffering girl'.

Marcia raised her head, looked upwards and clasped her hands together as though praying.

'Mighty wizard, Effendi Vortimer, come out and save this poor girl from death'.

Derek came on to the stage. He glanced nervously at the Khan.

'Geat Lord of wisdom, can you help this unhappy maiden?' Bert turned away so the audience could not see his face. 'Nod, nod!' he whispered, barely moving his mouth. '

Put a 'and on 'er 'ead.' Derek nodded and put his left hand on Marcia's head. 'Now your other 'and, put the pointy finger to the side of your forehead. Close yer eyes, and think! think!'

'Derek thought hard, he was wondering what the Khan would make of all this nonsense.

'Now look up at the sky and move your lips as if yer prayin'. Let the audience see yer face.'

Derek looked up at the painted ceiling. 'God help me I'm in a madhouse,' he mouthed silently.

'Put yer hands on either side of her face and gaze into her eyes. Take yer time! Take yer time. Let the audience see what you're doing.' Marcia sank to her knees.

Derek gazed deeply into Marcia's blue eyes. He noticed a tiny scrap of orange ribbon showing between her lips.

'Finger and thumb,' whispered Bert. 'Catch the end and start to draw it out gently. That's it. Now start raisin' yer hand slowly as it comes out so everyone can see. Higher, higher. Now your other hand. Don't drop the end. Just add to it'.

Derek concentrated on drawing the ribbon from Marcia's mouth. There was a slow drum-roll, the ribbon seemed endless.

'This wonderful man 'as started the process of curing 'is patient. It remains to be seen, Your Majesty, Lords, Ladies, and Commoners, if he can get the other tapes out of her system. If he is successful today she can look forward to a long and healthy life.'

Someone started to clap in time with Derek's hand movements. The audience joined in and continued clapping until the end of the tape appeared.

Bert took the bunch and waved it in the air. The Khan. and then the audience, applauded. again. The boys moved in front of them and played a lively tune.

Kate grabbed Gus and they pranced across the stage as Kate cried out that the great magician was curing her sister. While all eyes were on this activity Bert passed another ribbon to Marcia who popped it in her mouth, and dropped the empty reel into his hand.

This one was green, and they went through the same nonsense as before Derek drew it out slowly. When it was all out another burst of activity distracted the audience while Marcia was given a third tape.

'It's a miracle,' cried Bert. A combination of science and magic. If only this great wizard can extract the last of her troubles she will be restored to 'ealth. Master, Vortimer, will you do that one more time?'

Derek agreed to another operation, and it was a great success. This time it was a yellow ribbon.

Bert waved the ribbons over his head. 'By a wonderful coincidence these are the colors of our glorious Carthaginian Empire, orange, green, and yellow. Who could have believed such a thing?'

The musicians, and Bert, with his saxophone, broke out in the Carthaginian national anthem and everyone sang it with them.

At interval they were all excited. 'You got a job fer life, mate,' said Bert to Gus. 'You're a natural. I never seen anyone take to the stage the way you did. And we can work on your act. You'll be a sensation.'

He looked at Shani. 'Great work, kid. You're a born athlete. We'll get up some routines for you too.'

'We don't need her,' said Kate, but with some work Derek could fit in.

'Yer dreamin', Kate. She'd be good, and she can marry one of the boys, so the troupe's got a future.'

After that Kate seemed to think better of the idea. The audience was getting restless and they had to go on again.

The knife throwing act was a sensation. The backboard was brought out with a female figure painted on it and it faced the audience. Gus came on with a dozen knives which he dropped with a clatter on a low table set to one side.

'Before we ask one of our maidens to stand in front of the board The great Theodore will demonstrate his amazing skill and accuracy. A drum roll please and would all be silent so as not to distract his aim.'

His accuracy seemed to have deserted him. The first knife thumped into the board where the girl's head would be. The second would have pinned her to the board with a knife through the heart. Every shot was wrong. A human target would have been stuck all over.'

'The master knife thrower seems a little off target tonight,' cried Bert, as Gus went across snarling to recover his missiles. 'He'll do better this time. Kate, go and stand in front of the board and Theodore will outline your shape with flying knives.'

'No,no!' cried Kate. 'Don't make me stand there tonight. Theodore must be unwell, his aim is terrible, and I'm too young to die.'

'Don't argue, young lady! The first law of show business is - 'The Show Must Go On'. Now remember the honor of our great profession, and stand in front of the board.'

Gus was standing, arms crossed with a knife in either hand. He growled deep in his chest. Everyone in the hall heard it. He frowned and gestured Kate towards her doom.

She wept and sadly approached the board.

Frederika was an irritated observer of all this. She could not believe that any woman could be such a coward. Besides, she wanted some part in the show. 'I'll take her place,' she said. 'Let him do his worst.' She walked across and stood in front of the target holding her spear upright alongside her, and gazed calmly at the audience.

Everyone was astonished, but Bert recovered and said, 'This noble warrior maiden has offered herself as a sacrifice to the Khan. She is ready to lay down her life to guard him and defend his empire. Let us hope her mail coat and breast plate will be enough to ward off Theodore's knives. A big round of applause please, for a brave maiden.'

Frederika got her applause, but it was brief. Everyone was tense, watching Frederika, and hoping Gus' aim would improve.

He moved moodily round the stage, picking up a knife or two and putting them down again, as though undecided. He appeared to suddenly make up his mind. He picked up four knives in one hand and another in his throwing hand. He walked to the footlights and held them up, his hands were shaking. Some of the audience gasped and covered their eyes.

'Total quiet please,' cried 'Bert. This young girl's life may depend on your co-operation. Don't blink, don't move a muscle.' The audience was transfixed and silent.

Gus laughed. A terrible, evil laugh that resounded through the hall making the weaker members shudder and cringe.

He turned to face Frederika. He drew his throwing arm back over his shoulder, but stopped. He shook his head as though to clear it, and wiped his eyes.

'Is all well, Theodore?'

'A little dizzy, and I can't see properly at the moment. Tell me again, where is the girl?'

'Why, she's straight in front of you.'

'Oh, now I see her.' He threw the knife hard. Someone screamed, but the knife thudded into the board close to Frederika's right ear.

'Did I miss?'

'Yes, but not by much.'

He threw another knife which landed by her left ear. He threw them all, hard and accurately, one after the other. One over her head, one between the spear and her body, the rest very close. He took Frederika by the hand, led her to the footlights, and they bowed to a standing ovation.

As they left the stage one of the boys, Tom, appeared. He was equipped as a one man band. A bass drum was strapped to his back, and the hammer was driven by a cord tied to his elbow. A mouth organ mounted on rods was just in front of his lips. A pair of cymbals were mounted on top of the drum to be clashed together by a cord attached to his other elbow. In his hands was a piano accordion and he could play this while using the other instruments.

Behind the curtain Kate was arguing with her father. 'I can't get into that box anymore,' she said. 'I keep telling you I'm too big, and it gives me the cramp.'

'Alright, maybe the new girl can do it? She's smaller than you.'

Shani was happy to help out. She was enjoying her introduction to show-business and climbed into the box and doubled up. Her feet stuck out through holes in the end. Marcia got into the other box. She had to double up too, but her head stuck out of the end and rested on a pad. The two stands on which the boxes rested were on wheels and were pushed together so it appeared to be one box about the length of a coffin. Marcia's head and Shani's feet were visible at either end.

The coffin appeared through the curtains as Gus was parading around the stage and holding up the two handed saw so everyone could get a good look, and practising his evil laugh routine.

'Is the saw sharp, Theodore? Will it cut through flesh and bone as easily as through wood?'

Gus nodded, grinned, and held the blade over his head. He shook it so it made a noise like a wobble board.

'Very well, we commence. Your majesty, lords, ladies, and commoners, this is the most perilous part of the evening. The wizard, the great Effendi Vortimer, and his faithful servant Theodore will take an end each of this incredibly sharp saw and cut a maiden in half. However, you need fear nothing. By his art and skill the great wizard will restore her to perfect health, a cure which you will see with your own eyes.'

'I'm afraid,' cried Marcia. 'I don't want to be cut in half. And Theodore frightens me too. He's so ugly and wicked.'

Gus raised the saw again and sneered at the audience.

'Have you no faith in the greatest wizard of the universe? Just lie back my dear, and enjoy the experience.'

Gus passed the saw over the box while holding the handle at his end. Derek took the other handle. They started to saw back and forth on the line separating the two boxes.

Marcia screamed and Derek nearly dropped his end of the saw. 'It hurts! It hurts,! she cried.

'Calm yourself, my dear. It will soon be over and the all-seeing Effendi Vortimer will make you as good as new.'

Aware of cramp problems in the box Derek and Gus sawed through it in no time and Derek quickly made Marcia whole again.

'He's done it!' cried Bert. Another wonderful example of the work of the great magician, Effendi Vortimer.

'Bring the modesty screen. You understand that while climbing out of the box Marcia may accidentally show her legs. Not a fit sight for gentlemen to see. The Lady Frederika and Kate will hold up the screen to preserve her modesty. Gentlemen kindly look away, in case the screen slips.'

It seemed there were no gentlemen in the audience because they all looked at the sheet as Marcia climbed out of her box. As she was getting out Kate seemed to slip on the floor and dropped her end of the sheet. The non-gentlemen in the audience got an excellent view of Marcia's legs. Marcia smiled at Derek, took his hand and led him once again to the footlights, though her legs were no longer on view.

They bowed while the audience clapped and stared at Marcia looking for signs of injury. 'My hero,' she cried, holding out her hands and kissing Derek. He got a round of applause all to himself.

Behind the curtain Bert stripped Derek of his jacket and put the old coat on him instead. Everyone else sang and danced as he pulled paper bouquets from the pockets and threw them to ladies in the audience, while Shani reprised her trick of jumping on to Gus' shoulders.

The curtain closed on them at last.

The Lord Chamberlain reappeared as the audience was dispersing. He handed Bert a small bag with coins in it. 'The Khan was pleased with your performance,' he said. 'You are to come, same evening, same time, next week to entertain us again.' Bert was unable to speak.

The Lord Chamberlain turned to Derek. 'The Khan was most impressed with the cures you performed this evening. He is considering appointing you as the court medical officer,' he said.

Derek, like Bert, was dumbfounded. The Khan had actually been taken in by all that foolery. He would discover that Derek knew nothing about medicine and magic and would be sent to the torture chambers for sure.

The players were in the hall mingling with the departing crowd and soliciting tips. Money was clinking into their tambourines and collection cups.

Derek was shocked to see in the crowd a dark complexioned man with a short black beard cut to a point. This was the man who had abandoned them to the Khan's soldiers in the house of Abdul Khayyam.

Bert saw him at the same moment. His face lit up. He cried, 'Look Derek, there's the toff what give us fifty dinars to get you out of the mess you was in.'

Chapter Twenty Five

Lord Hassan

Hassan, the unknown friend who had, saved him from the anger of the Khan, was the same Hassan who had turned his back on them only that morning, and left them to be taken by the Khan's men.

Frederika, Shani, and Gus gathered around Derek and eyed Hassan with hostility. Gus had one of the throwing knives ready and Shani fingered her concealed knife.

Hassan seemed amused at his reception. 'I wish I had a bodyguard as faithful as yours, Mr. Vortimer. With these Amazons to protect me, and a dwarf with amazing skill as a knife thrower and strong man I would not hesitate to go into the depths of the Souk.'

'You betrayed us!' said Frederika. It was an unknighly thing to do. No gentleman would sheathe his sword and walk away. It was pitiful, the Khan's men were only four or five to one at the most'

'Forgive me, beautiful lady, you must understand I am a diplomat as well as a soldier, and thought it better to walk away rather than endanger my position at court'.

'However I had a two pronged strategy. The first worked; that is I paid a troupe of strolling players who got Effendi Vortimer through the night with some credit, and the Khan is pleased with him, at least for the time being. The second prong was to have him rescued from public execution; a less satisfactory solution though my men would have had the satisfaction of cutting the throats of any torturers they could catch.'

Hassan could say all this because the Khan, with his wives and courtiers had disappeared through a door behind the throne and everyone else was chatting and moving towards the exit.

Hassan was interrupted before they could talk further.

A dark-haired young woman appeared at his elbow, it was Lady Cicely Smedhurst. With her was a man, obviously a noble of the court..

She addressed Derek coldly. 'I had come to think of you as something better than a mere manager,' she said. 'I see that I was wrong. No gentleman would appear on the stage like that and take part in a number of tawdry acts, even if it was to please the Khan. How could you bear to be with these common people?

'They're good people,' retorted Derek

'I was never so shocked in all my life as when I saw you up on the stage playing silly tricks with paper flowers and pretending to saw a girl in half.'

Derek did not care about Lady Cicely's opinion, he would rather not have known her, nor did her cousin Frederika, but she took this criticism very much amiss and a quarrel would have broken out except that Hassan intervened. He spoke to the man with Cicely.

'Viscount Magenta, I believe this young lady is your niece, the daughter of Lord Smedhurst, your elder brother. Am I correct?'

The Viscount nodded. 'Lord Hassan, may I present my niece Lady Cicely Smedhurst. Cicely, this is Lord Hassan Aquila an advisor to the Khan, and commander of his cavalry.'

Lord Hassan bowed and Lady Cicely curtsied. She seemed most impressed with her new acquaintance.

Lord Hassan said 'I heard that you had come to visit your uncle until certain problems had settled down at home. And I was anxious to meet you because reports of your beauty had reached us even here in New Carthage.'

Lady Cicely seemed even more pleased to have met Lord Hassan.

'The reports did not do you justice.'

Lady Cicely was entranced.

Hassan said, 'Lady Cicely, before you find fault with Effendi Vortimer you must know about my part in this evening's entertainment.'

Cicely sniffed, but appeared ready to listen.

Lord Hassan continued, 'Your uncle will explain the circumstances that brought him here, but he was in danger of a painful death if he did not please the Khan, and it was I who hired the players to help him, so you can see I was at fault, can you forgive me?'

After hearing Lord Hassan's flattery Cicely would have forgiven him of anything, but, she held her ground.

'Well, Lord Hassan,' she said, 'Perhaps you may be right, but I think it would be better to suffer torture and death than to lower oneself by appearing on the stage with such vulgar people. I except Frederika of course, she is of high birth, but a total disgrace to the von Hohenbergers, an ancient and noble family.'

Her uncle shrugged and smiled apologetically at Frederika.

'Instead of taking her proper place in society she became an imitation female warrior and associated with the lowest class of soldiers. Very well; I accept Lord Hassan's explanation, though I find it difficult, and I will forgive this unfortunate lapse provided it is never repeated'

She ignored Frederika and said, 'Effendi Vortimer, I will be at home at the embassy between three and five tomorrow afternoon. I Presume you have better clothes in your wardrobe, if so please wear them. I shall tell the officials to expect you. Goodbye Lord Hassan; it was so nice to meet you. Perhaps you might care to call tomorrow afternoon also. Don't forget, between three and five.'

Lady Cicely left, followed by her uncle who was Sultania's ambassador to the court of the Khan.

It was just as well they left. Frederika made some remarks about her that showed Cicely to be right, Lady Frederika had been associating with some very low class soldiers indeed.

Shani took advantage of Frederika's outburst to warn Derek, quietly but firmly, that he was not to go near the embassy the next afternoon, or any other time. She said even clever men needed protection from the likes of Cicely.

Bert had been talking to some admirers and supervising his family which had reaped a harvest of coins from the departing guests..

Seeing Lady Cicely had gone he came across to speak to them. 'Grub's up,' he said. 'There was thirty golden dinars in that bag the big feller with the wand give me, and we're to come back same time next week for another show. And we're to be fed downstairs in the servants dinin' 'all.

Derek realized he was hungry. The enormous weight of fear had gone, at least for a while, and he was ready to eat. He turned to Hassan.

'I'm sorry, I have to go, perhaps we could meet tomorrow and I can thank you properly for saving me.'

'No need,' said Hassan. 'Do you think you could pass me off as one of the troupe I have never set foot in a servants' dining hall before but if I sit with you and Shani and the Lady Frederika they will feed me. We will see how the lower classes eat.'

They turned to leave but found the poet, Abdul Khayyam waiting.

He salaamed and bowed. Effendi Vortimer,' he said. 'May I offer my congratulations for your success tonight before the Khan and the aristocratic audience. It was a great triumph supported on a very slender thread. I feared for you when you first made your entrance but took comfort when your uneducated friend carried the presentation so lacking in substance so beautifully. If you can spare just a little of your precious time I will recite the first verses of a poem I am now composing to celebrate your great triumph.'

He started on his poem before they could stop him -

"Oh wanderer from a foreign land

Accept from us friendship's hand.

Though death tonight was at your side

Its dagger could not prick your hide.'

Hassan held up his hand and the poet stopped.

'Friend Abdul, how many verses are in your poem, and is it all written down?'

'Seventeen verses are in my head and thirty three are still to be composed. I will recite the seventeen, and the Honorable Effendi Vortimer is welcome to dwell in my house and he can hear the other thirty three at leisure.'

'I am sure Effendi Vortimer would rather hear all fifty verses at once, rather than listening to your poem bit by bit. Write it down and when the opportunity arises he will hear it all in one sitting. In the meantime he will be staying at a house I know of because we have much business to discuss. I advise you to go home and put pen to paper while it is still fresh in your mind so that when your collected works are published it can be included.'

The poet, understanding that no more of his masterpiece would be heard that night, withdrew after many declarations of happiness to think that Derek had pleased the Khan. He repeated several times his invitation to come and stay in his house so they could discuss modern poetry at length.

In the servant's dining hall the troupe was happy, talking about their triumph before the Khan, and, sitting cross legged, as was the custom, on cushions at a long low table.

The two men sat together but Hassan made sure that Frederika sat with him on his left, while Shani was next to Derek, on the other side. Gus was opposite. Bowls of water and towels were set on the table so the diners could wash their hands before eating.

Hassan turned to Frederika who had not worn her helmet since her hair had been combed and set by the court hairdressers. 'Superb!' he said. 'You are the loveliest woman in the empire.' He smiled. Even my friend, Abdul Khayyam, with all his poetry could not do you justice.'

'He was going to,' said Derek, 'He got as far as the first verse, before he was too drunk to go on.'

'Well, Lady Frederika, please don't wear the helmet again, it conceals your true beauty, and also that mail armor should come off, so we can see your figure which, I am sure, is as magnificent as the rest of you.'

Frederika blushed at these compliments and, for the first time, Derek saw her smile.

'You never say things like that to me,' whispered Shani into his ear.

Derek thought it best not to reply.

The washing bowls were taken away and the attendants tied extra large napkins around their necks, these were big enough to reach down and cover their laps as well.

The first bowl of food was put in front of each couple. Hassan reached in with his fingers and popped a morsel into Frederika's mouth. She was surprised but ate it.

'Your turn,' whispered Shani. 'You do it for me.'

'It's unhygienic, you could pass germs that way.'

'Just shut up and do it.'

Derek shrugged and reached into their bowl. Shani got some gravy on her chin when he fed her but an attentive servant was giving out hand towels and Derek wiped the stuff away.

Frederika was now feeding Hassan.

'My turn, and lick my fingers, I don't want gravy all over them.'

'Shani, I don't want to. You could spread all sorts of sicknesses if you eat like this. Besides we don't know what's in the food. We could be eating anything'

'Derek Vortimer, you worry too much. If this is the custom between people who love each other, let's do it, and we can talk while we eat.'

They did not have to do it again. Derek noticed that after Frederika and Hassan had fed one another once, that was it. There were spoons at hand and they ate with their heads close together. Hassan whispered into Frederika's ear the whole time, and Shani noticed that she liked what she was hearing.

After they had eaten their way through several courses Hassan insisted on Derek going with him to meet some mysterious person of high rank. Frederika, Shani, and Gus were coming too. They were not going to expose Derek, on his own, to the dangers of this strange city. Frederika may have had another motive. They had to bid goodbye to their friends in the troupe. Bert had been drinking a lot and was teary and sentimental when it was time to part. He shook Derek's hand, assuring him that there would always be a place for him, Shani, and Gus in their travelling show. He particularly asked if Gus and Shani would be available for the show next week in front of the Khan.'

'It depends on his worship,' said Gus. 'If we are still here, and he lets me come I will be happy to join you, Miss Shani may come too. I travelled once for six months with a show like yours. The miners and their women who made up most of our audiences pelted us with bottles or gold nuggets. It depended how drunk they were.' Kate and Marcia kissed both Gus and Derek goodbye. Then they parted.

'Come!'. Hassan led them outside. He uttered a single password to the guards and the outer gate opened to let them through. A man waited outside in the gardens with some donkeys. They got on. The girls rode side on behind their men, Gus and the owner of the beasts had a donkey each to themselves.

The little party turned away from the palace, and rode into a suburb like the others with high walls and solidly made and barred wooden gates.

Scarcely more than a mile away, after following the windings of the narrow street, they came to a gate where the watchman had been looking out for them.

He opened up straight away and Hassan led them into the courtyard. The donkey man received a few coins, which seemed to satisfy him. He tied his donkeys in a line and rode out through the gate.

Hassan led the party up some steps to the front door where a man was waiting to greet them.

Derek shrank back as he, and Frederika, recognized the person by the door, it was the younger ambassador.

He had not been seen since they entered the city, though the older man visited Derek in prison. This one held out his hand and Derek took it reluctantly, fresh in his mind was the memory of pain, exhaustion, and fear during the hours he was tied to the back of a galloping horse.

'Ah, Mr.. Vortimer, I hope you feel better than when we parted. I apologize for the ordeal you were subjected to, and for which I was partly responsible. I must say your activities over the past few hours have been most interesting and have not diminished the regard in which I hold you.'

The ambassador turned to Hassan. 'Bring your party inside, for refreshments and then rest. After all the activities and strain over the last few days Mr. Vortimer may be in need of a bath and a comfortable bed. I see that he is taken aback at the sight of me. Introduce us please.'

'Derek, my friend,' said Hassan. Your host is Lord Hannibal, descendant of Hannibal the Great, conqueror of Rome, and founder of the Carthaginian Empire.

This did not sound like the history Derek had learned at school. He remembered Mr Codd telling him that, history was turned on its head in this reality and that the Carthage, wherever that was had won the war against Rome.

Hassan also named the two women and Gus. Prince Hannibal bowed to each of them.

'I'm in another universe.' Derek thought; not for the first time. 'This empire of theirs and Sultania doesn't exist in my world.' There was a mystery here that he could not solve.

In the house their host led them to a room with dozens of cushions scattered around and heated by warm air drifting through vents in the wall. On a low table in the center of the room was a selection of food and drink. Servants loaded up trays and brought them to the guests.

'Your career during your short stay in Sultania could be described as meteoric,' said Lord Hannibal. 'You were presented with a succession of near impossible problems and you solved each with forethought and quick action. One could say, brilliantly!'

'Luck,' said Derek, 'Just blind luck.'

'I think not,' retorted Hannibal. Luck may have played a part, but then soldiers like serving under a lucky general, who is also good at solving military problems. We will discuss this over lunch, tomorrow. but I must tell you that the Carthaginian Empire is in trouble. We have battles and defeats, more battles more defeats. Taxes that go to feed the extravagance of the Khan and the

nobility. Sons of the poor are forced into the army, sons of the rich escape. Our doom is very close and it is not surprising that we kidnapped you when we realized your quality.

Derek yawned and this was instantly noticed by his host. 'You are worn out my friend, not surprising is it? What a strain you have been under! The servants are preparing a bath for you right now and a comfortable bed awaits.'

Lord Hannibal smiled. 'Good night Mr.. Vortimer, and sleep well, we will meet at lunch tomorrow.' He gestured to a servant who ushered Derek through corridors to a magnificent bathroom with tiled fresco walls and a huge tub into which the bather could climb by means of a short set of steps with handrails. Wisps of steam drifted from the surface of the water. When he stepped in it was up to his knees. He took another step, fell off a ledge and tumbled in; now the water was up to his chest.

Another surprise followed, a young woman he had not noticed before climbed in with him. He soon learned that her duty was to massage his back and soap him as required. What other services she may have supplied, he did not ask.

The servant had taken his clothes away but came back presently with towels, and a nightgown

After drifting dreamingly in the soothing warmth of his bath he felt his eyes closing then the girl helped him out and dried him with a heated towel. The man servant drew a night gown over his head and tied it at the neck with a neat bow.

'Will you require the young woman as a sleeping companion, sir? He asked.

Derek shook his head. He was tired. Sleep was his first priority.

The man's final service was to lead him to a room fit for an honoured guest. It held a large bed, with a canopy just below the ceiling, and side drapes which could surround the bed if required. The girl had disappeared and the manservant turned down the covers. Derek rolled into bed and was asleep almost immediately. The servant's last duty was to blow out the light and tiptoe from the room.

Chapter Twenty Six

Shani

Derek slept soundly all night until something woke him when, as his poet friend would have said, *dawn's left hand was in the sky*. He lay comfortably on his side gazing at the growing light beyond a window which opened on to a court, some painted columns could be seen outside.

He would have drifted off to sleep again but was startled to hear the rustle of bed-clothes and feel a kiss on the back of his neck. He spun round and found Shani in bed alongside him, her head resting on his pillow, she was smiling.

'What are you doing here?'

'Let's start again, say 'Good morning Shani, dear.' '

'OK: Good morning Shani, dear; what the hell are you doing here?'

'Good morning darling. I asked a servant which was your room, and said we always slept together. I don't know if he believed me but let me in anyway. I wanted to make sure you were alright. I don't trust Hassan and Prince Whatsisname. It was cold so I got in to bed too; but I'm nice and warm now.'

'How long have you been here?'

'Hours! You've been snoring. It's terrible for a girl considering marriage to find that her possible future husband snores like a pig. I'm glad I heard it before our wedding night. It won't be such a shock now.'

'What do you mean, 'wedding night'? I haven't proposed to you.'

Shani stretched luxuriously. 'Oh, you will, it's only a matter of time. Then I can decide whether or not to accept you, when you beg me to marry you. This is the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in, plenty of room for two. If we marry we must get one like this. Only don't propose now, I have to make up my mind. Though I must say hearing you snoring so loudly was very upsetting.'

'You can go back to your own bed if you don't like it here, and you made up this story about me snoring, didn't you?'

'Did'nt! But I'm not going back to my own bed, it's cold and lonely there, and I like it here with you. You know, I've been thinking, when you're ready to propose marriage you can ask Lord Whatsisname for a private dining room somewhere with a nice supper. I'll let you propose to me then, and I can make up my mind whether or not I'll have you.'

'If my mother was here she would call you a forward young woman, perhaps worse. Why are so sure I want to marry you?'

'Women's intuition of course. We've known one another for weeks now, plenty of time to make up our minds. You know, when you propose, I might even say yes, but you'll have to wait and see, and you'll do it properly, too. Down on one knee, at least.'

'I'm not going marry you.'

She ignored this statement and said, 'I'd like to meet your mother and father so I can tell them what a good son they made.'

She was picking at the bow that fastened the neck of his night gown. It had been carefully tied by the servant the evening before. 'Why are you wearing this silly thing? People don't dress up to go to sleep.'

'I do, I always wear pyjamas to bed at home; I have ever since I was a little boy.'

'I don't! -- look at this!' She threw back the blankets to show her slim, young body. She had nothing on. 'Ow! Isn't it cold!'

She quickly covered herself again and moved closer to Derek. 'Come on, let's get this off you; this old pyjamas, or whatever you call it. If we get married you won't be wearing any silly clothes like this in bed. How could you hold me properly if you had clothes on and I didn't?'

'It's not just you, I can't marry anyone. You know my position, I'm a prisoner here, even though they don't say so, and they want me to fight their battles for them, and I don't know how. I could be dead within weeks, days perhaps.'

'Stop arguing and help me untie this knot.'

After a struggle they got the night-gown off and Shani threw it over the edge of the bed, they rolled even closer together.

Derek couldn't stop thinking ahead. 'What's Frederika going to do when she finds out about all this?'

'You're a very clever man. I think you're the cleverest man in the world, but you're only a man after all, and women see things that men miss, even if it's going on under their noses. Don't you worry about Frederika, we were supposed to share a room but she didn't come to her bed last night, and I'm sure she's with Hassan.'

Derek was surprised at this. He hadn't thought about it before, nor the possibility of Shani getting into his bed.

'I know I say some harsh things about Freddy, and I still think she's none too bright, but she'll be good for Hassan. Seems to me he's a cutthroat and adventurer and he needs an honorable, upright woman like Freddy to keep an eye on him. Besides, she'll take to him with a sword if he cheats.'

Derek was silent.

Shani looked at him severely. 'You're thinking again, aren't you? You're always thinking, and I can see it in your face. Now, stop it at once and put your arms around me, tightly. Let's see what it feels like to be really married, it will help me make my decision.'

'I can't marry you, Shani. You might be a widow any time.'

'Stop worrying about the future. What we've got is today. Think about me and just do what you're told.'

He obliged and took her in his arms. They kissed. 'You know what happens next, don't you?'

'Of course I do. That's why I'm here. You're not getting out of this bed before we make love. I won't let you go.'

'What if you have a baby, what happens then?'

'You'll look after both of us; I know you will; you're that kind of man. Besides, if I agree to marry we're going to have lots of babies. I have been thinking about it and I've come to a decision. I've decided that the girls will have dark hair like their father, that's you, and the boys will have gold colored hair like me.'

Derek was amused at this. 'Now, hang on. If I'm to have daughters I want at least one with golden hair who looks like her mother; otherwise it's all off; I won't propose at all unless you can guarantee a golden headed daughter.'

'Oh, alright, she said. If you're going to be difficult; I suppose it can be arranged.

If it can't be arranged this whole marriage business is off. Do you want that in writing?'

She kissed him affectionately. 'Very well, dear; if you say so, a golden haired girl it is. No need to write it down; I'll remember that very well. But the other girls are to have dark hair like you.' She rubbed his head. 'I like your hair. I suppose it will go grey some day, but I won't let you dye it. We'll grow old gracefully together. That is if I accept your proposal.'

'Don't bank on it. I've no plans to marry anyone, not even to father a golden haired daughter.'

'That means I won't have to put up with your snoring.'

'You were probably asleep and dreamed I was snoring.'

'Was not! You did snore; and very loudly, too. If I decide to marry you we'll go back to my village for the ceremony and I'll ask the married women there how to cure you. They'll know. They're very wise people.'

Derek was amused again. 'What are the odds of you accepting me? Can I lay out any money on the bet?

'I don't know what that means. I think you are making fun of me, and that's another black mark against you. Though I don't mind really because most of the time you're too serious. If we marry you will have to learn to laugh. The children and I will see to it. Apart from that and the snoring you have done very well so far, but there is another test to go.'

'Another test, what is it this time?'

'Guess! Feel my nipples. Gently! Gently! They're firm aren't they? That's a sign that I'm ready; I can feel that you're ready too, but be gentle; we'll do it easily and quietly. She snuggled into the bed and pulled his head down to kiss him again.

'No commitments, I can't guarantee to be alive in a month.'

'Talk, talk, talk! Let's have some action.'

He took her gently.

A moment later she uttered a suppressed scream that startled Derek. 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing, it's alright, that part's over now. I'm just glad that you were the one that did it.'

'Did what?'

'None of your business. Don't stop.'

They entered a lovers' heaven and melded together. Both were panting, and Shani moaned as the joy went on and on. A memory forever, a climax of heights they would never scale again. The culmination was so exquisite it was almost painful.

After ecstasy ebbed away they still clung together. They kissed and smiled, even laughed until the laughter was smothered by more kisses.

Later, she took his arm, laid her head on his shoulder and nuzzled up to his chest. She said, 'You smell funny.'

'Thanks very much.'

'No, no, it's nice. I like it. It's a mixture of scent and sweat.'

'Well you caused the sweat, but the scent is from my bath last night. It was lovely, a nice looking girl soaped me all over, and afterwards she dried me with a towel.'

Shani glared at him, suddenly alert. 'Did she; the young hussy! Well, that's the last time that happens. You had better behave yourself, Derek Vortimer, or I'll marry someone else, and no decent woman will have you, and you'll never see this golden haired daughter you've been talking about.'

'Whoever you marry, he'll have to be good to live up to my performance this morning.'

She pulled out one of his chest hairs as punishment. 'That's for boasting. Don't you forget, I had something to do with it.'

'Well, how did I rate?'

'Not bad, I'll give you a pass for that test.'

He chuckled, 'You were fantastic, magnificent! Maybe someday I will ask you to marry me.'

'Of course you will, just keep working on that thought.'

'I know where the bathroom is. If you want to we'll go there and have a bath together. There's plenty of room and we can soap and dry one another.'

'Yes, that sounds nice, but we'll do it later, not yet. We're going to stay in bed for a while because the next test is to find out all about you.'

'Such as?'

'Well, I want to hear about your family, for a start. If I decide to marry you they'll be relatives of mine, and I need to know all about them before we visit. And I want to hear all about where you come from, and what your country is like, and everything you've ever done since you were a baby.'

'This is going to take a long time.'

'Never mind, it will be good for you to own up to all the bad things you've done. I won't be too hard on you, but I must know everything in order to form a proper judgment.'

'What about breakfast?'

'Yes, it's important, but more important is for me to assess your character before I make what could be a fatal mistake. When the servant arrives tell him we are to have breakfast in bed, and he's not to come back after that for at least two hours, maybe three.'

'I'm still a free agent. I don't have to ask you to marry me if I don't want to.'

'You'd better; and you'll do it properly too, otherwise you'll be in the worst trouble you were ever in your life. Before I'd finished you would go back to the Khan and ask to be locked up in one of his dungeons for safety.'

He pulled her closer and they made love once more.

'You're a greedy boy,' she said, 'But I still love you.'

The servant came shortly afterwards and found them tangled together in bed, asleep. He pulled a curtain across the window, tip toed out and shut the door quietly.

Derek was woken about an hour or so later by someone near and dear to him poking his ribs hard and kissing him. 'That hurts,' he said, referring to his ribs, and I can still feel where you pulled out the hair'.

'You deserved it. You're a terrible man. You were supposed to confess all your sins and instead you fell asleep. What sort of behavior is that? How could I possibly marry someone who falls asleep while he's talking to me?'

'I didn't. I was telling you lots of interesting things about my life until I looked down and saw you were fast asleep and snoring --'

'Liar! I was not snoring! You'll take that back or I'll pull out some more hair.'

'How do you know you weren't snoring, you were asleep and I was awake.'

'Women don't snore.'

'Perhaps they just breathe noisily.' He saw there was more trouble coming.

'Alright, ' you were sleeping quietly, so I thought I would have a little nap too.'

'Did you kiss me when I was asleep?'

'Yes.'

'That's alright then, I forgive you, and I really would like some breakfast now. How do we call the servant?'

'Like this.' He pulled a tasselled cord which he had noticed hanging by the bed-head and was rewarded by the sound of a distant bell.

Shani lay back happily and pulled the bedclothes up to her chin. 'I think we'll go out after we've had breakfast and a bath and buy an engagement ring.'

'An engagement ring! I keep telling you, it's not on, and I'd be stuck with an expensive engagement ring I can't use. '

'You'll find a use for it. You are going to change your mind very soon. You'll be glad of it then.'

'In my country it's not the custom to buy a ring until after the girl has said yes.'

'We're not in your country, not yet, and I'll make the rules around here. No man proposes to me unless he has an engagement ring with him, and if he's lucky, and I accept, he can give it to me straight away. We buy the ring today.'

'I haven't any money; no one's paid me yet. Well, I have a little Australian money, but it wouldn't be much use around here.'

'I don't see any problem. After our bath you can go straight to Lord Whatsisname and ask for a cash advance. They must value your services after all the trouble they took to get you here and then save your life.'

The servant appeared and salaamed at the foot of the bed.

'We will have breakfast in bed this morning,' said Shani, 'And then a bath. After that we want to go out and buy a ring. Are there any good jewelers around here?'

The man salaamed again. 'This is a lucky day for you, madam. It so happens that my cousin Abou Ben Adhem has a jeweller's shop of excellent reputation in the Grand Bazaar, not far from here. Seeing that you are honored guests in this house the master may give me leave to guide you there so you may be protected from other shopkeepers who, unlike my worthy cousin, are not to be trusted.'

'Very well, Effendi Vortimer has to speak to your master before we go, but first breakfast and a bath would be nice.'

'Many of our honoured guests enjoy eating in the bath-house. They can eat and bathe by turns; it is considered most agreeable.'

'That sounds good to us too,' said Derek. 'Very well, a poolside breakfast; and where are my clothes?'

'They have been cleaned sir, and I shall bring them to the bath for you.' He picked up the discarded night-shirt together with Shani's clothes. Before getting into bed she had laid them on a night table.

'I will give orders for the bath to be heated, and for breakfast. I will return shortly with robes for you and madam. I assume, sir, you will not require the presence of the young person who attended you last night?'

'He certainly does not. She's not to come anywhere near him again.'

The man bowed his head. 'Very good madam, I shall return presently with your robes.' He left.

'That was good,' said Shani. 'All I need now is your faithful promise that you will never look at or have anything to do with that so called young person again.'

'I don't know about that. What if I was mad enough to ask you to marry and you refused? I would be free then and could make an offer to any other girl I liked. Why not her? She may be easier to get on with than you, and would like an engagement ring.'

'What? You'd give my ring to some young floozy you met naked in a bath. You're a typical, horrible man,' cried Shani.

'Well, if you don't like the girl in the bath, what about Cicely? She might have me.'

'You're a devil; you deserve to be punished again.' She tried to pull out more hairs, and he had to hold her wrists. They wrestled for a while, laughing, though they had to restrain themselves, the servant would be back at any minute.

Shani approved of bath and breakfast and they frolicked in the water for a while until Derek had to dress and go to see Prince Hannibal. He came back shortly after with a bag which contained gold coins.

'It was easy,' he said, tipping the coins out in the middle of the bed. 'I just told him we wanted some spending money and wouldn't be joining him for lunch, and he said the second hour of the afternoon would do very well, and he ordered a servant to give me five hundred dinars. He said that I was to wish you good morning on his behalf.'

'The servant must have told him about me being here.' She felt the weight of the bag. 'It's all too easy, if you ask me. I don't trust this lot, not any way at all.'

'Well, you told me to get some money. There it is; stop complaining.'

'I don't think money interests them, they're after power. It makes me afraid for you.'

'Shall we go and spend some of it. That should take your mind off your worries. The servant's name is Haddam, he's coming with us. If anything needs to be carried he can hire porters in the bazaar, oh, and a soldier has been assigned to guard us and the money. He'll be there too.'

'A guard, is he? I think his job is to guard you and make sure you don't run away, now you have five hundred dinars.'

'Oh, come on. Let's go to the bazaar.'**{ 27 } The Grand Bazaar**

The Grand Bazaar covered a large area, and was roofed. One could stroll for hours along the alleyways inside. Each alley was closely crowded with colorful shops and their mostly hand-made wares which spilled out into the walkways.

The entrance they used was crowded with touts who assured passersby that they would escort them to the best, the cheapest, the most honorable shopkeepers in the whole market.

Hawkers of cheap articles from stalls set up on the pavement clutched at those entering the bazaar and implored them to stop and buy. Old women thrust out bunches of flowers and demanded money. Beggars sat on the ground or crawled about with hand or cup held up to receive alms as they muttered about their sorrows and desperate hunger.

Haddam the servant, and their soldier escort, saw to it that the young people were not molested and safely made it past the guards who were posted at the entrance to keep out beggars and thieves.

Haddam led them to the shop of his cousin, Abou Ben Adhem, the jeweler. If he had not told them the man was a respectable shopkeeper they would have thought him a bandit. He had a wild beard streaked with grey, a black eye patch, and a fez which, though made of felt, looked like a red flower pot turned upside down on his head. He was seated behind his counter studying some gems on a tray with the aid of a jeweler's glass screwed into his good eye. When the young couple entered the glass fell from his eye, the tray of gems disappeared under the counter and he leapt to his feet. He looked at Shani and his eye glittered.

'At last,' he cried, 'Beauty has entered my shop. See with what grace she moves, like a gazelle in the dewy morning time. Her radiance lights up my shop. Oh happy day, welcome, welcome to my humble premises.'

He turned to Derek. 'And this young man, is he a prince of royal blood, blessed by fortune with wealth and a face handsome enough to shake the heart of any maiden? As honored guests of our great lord, Prince Hannibal, they must be of high birth.'

Shani had never entered a shop before so she was unaware that such a welcome might, in other countries, be considered over the top.

'We want to buy a diamond ring,' said Shani.'

'Ah, a diamond ring. I see that my cousin Haddam has shown his usual good sense in bringing you to me, the only shop in the Grand Bazaar where quality goods and low prices are combined to benefit the customer. It causes me pain to speak ill of my neighbors but some are not to be trusted, they will palm off second rate goods for high prices, but here you are safe from such cheats and will be treated justly.'

'We came to buy a ring', said Derek

'Of course, and you shall select of my best. A ring to seal love for eternity, a ring to mark a lifetime of undying affection. How beautiful is your intended. Were I but forty years younger, unmarried, had your classical good looks, and two good eyes I would steal her away from you with the power of my words.'

He was busy getting out trays of rings and found time to scold his assistants to make them hurry to bring even more.

'But alas, I am old, my wife too is old. I will go home tonight and tell her that the most beautiful woman in the empire came into my shop today to buy a ring. But she does not care for beauty. Instead she will scold me for not charging enough for my rings and being poor, when I could be like the other jewelers and put up my prices and be rich.' He picked out a ring with a large glittering stone and showed it to Shani. 'A great tribute to your beauty, my dear.'

She looked at it and pulled a face. 'No it isn't, it's ugly and clunky, put it away.'

Abou Ben Adhem addressed Derek, while keeping his one eye on the rings.. 'You are indeed fortunate, young sir; this maiden you have chosen has a true eye. She passed my little test instantly and now I will show her only rings of great beauty and tastefulness. All made by my sons, whom I have trained myself, and when God wills it so, no doubt they will take over the business. But when I go to my heavenly reward I will know that mine is still the best jeweler's shop in the Grand Bazaar.'

He clapped his hands. 'Bring coffee for my honored guests.'

Three cups of hot, black liquid were brought almost straight away.

'This is the best coffee produced in the lands of Araby,' he said, sipping the brew loudly and smacking his lips. 'I buy it from another honest trader, my friend Jacob, the coffee dealer. It is offered only to special customers of the highest class.'

Though the man talked constantly, and drank his coffee, his one eye had not moved from the trays of rings from which Shani made several selections. They were assembled on another tray while the unwanted rings were whisked out of sight. He gave her a jeweler's glass and showed her how to use it. 'Look closely,' he said. 'Take your time, my dear, the ring you choose will be yours forever.'

At last, after much hesitation, Shani found a ring that satisfied her. The mount was in the shape of a heart with a brilliant diamond set inside it; there were smaller diamonds outlining the heart.'

'Excellent!' said Abou Ben Adhem, 'Excellent! I knew the maiden had a true eye, but she has surpassed herself. What joy this ring will bring you, and may God bless your union with many tall sons and fair daughters.'

'How much?' asked Derek.

Shani handed back the ring to be closely examined once more. 'This is by far the best ring in the shop, worth one hundred and fifty dinars at the lowest valuation. My wife will beat me when I tell her that I parted with it for only one hundred dinars because I had developed a hopeless love for the most beautiful client ever to walk into my humble shop. One hundred dinars, my dear, and it's yours; but every time you look at it you must remember Abou Ben Adhem the jeweler who is poor because he lets his heart rule his head.'

'Is that what you want? Will I pay him?' inquired Derek.

'You certainly will not. That's three times its value. Give him forty dinars, that's more than enough.'

At these words Abou Ben Adhem's face lit up in a huge smile. He shook his finger at Derek. 'You doubly fortunate man. Not only has this maid surpassing beauty that would make the houris of paradise mad with jealousy, she will also make you rich. When she goes to the market to buy for your household she will be the bane of poor shopkeepers like me trying to gain a living by honest toil, but for you she will be a jewel bringing home quality goods after she has ground the vendors into the dust. Now, we all know that I could not possibly sell this valuable ring for forty dinars. What would I say to my sons who labored to make it, to my wife if I had to go home and say I had made a loss for the week because of one ring and I could buy no more clothes for her back, to my

children who could no longer go to school because I could not pay their teacher; and all this because of one beautiful woman who walked in here and stole my heart.'

He paused for thought and then continued. 'However, as beauty rules my heart, instead of the promptings of my poor head I will sell this valuable ring for a mere seventy dinars. To take less would be a betrayal of myself and a treachery to my sons who labored to create such a masterpiece of the goldsmith's art.'

'Even if you said fifty dinars it would be too much,' retorted Shani. 'If you can't do better for guests of your great lord I will tell him your cousin, Haddam, is not to bring anyone else to your shop.'

'The son of my aunt not to come here anymore! I would be desolated at such an outcome. To ward off this tragedy I will make another offer that can never be repeated. Now it is clear to me that this young man must marry you very soon before another handsome young fellow steals you away from him, and you will shortly be in need of a wedding ring. My fear is that instead of coming back to me you will go to another merchant and be robbed. To make sure this tragedy does not befall you I am prepared to offer you a wedding ring of the highest quality and a fine gold chain so that the young man can wear it round his neck with the ring near his heart until he is ready to put it on your finger at the wedding service. And what about a ring for the groom; it is very fashionable for men to wear wedding rings nowadays; a client of mine has one for each of his four wives. All the rings were made in my workshop for this man who loves women and understands the value of gold. Come, a fine chain to match your beauty and you can carry his ring, and he yours, until you are ready to exchange them at the ceremony. All this and a lifetime of love and happiness for a mere ninety five dinars.'

'It's far too much, but make it sixty and we'll buy.'

The merchant laid a knife on the counter. 'There, stab me to the heart! Twist the knife in the wound, it would be kinder than the pain you inflict on me. When I came to business today I did not know that beauty and cruelty would drive me to the edge of despair; but sooner than have you leave my shop I will approach the edge of bankruptcy. eighty dinars and I can go no lower; you have driven me into a corner.'

'Sixty, and that's my final offer, otherwise we will go to another shop.'

Oh, the Khan's torturers could not put me to torment as cruel as this. Spare me a little, out of charity if naught else, make it seventy. Let me have a little to take home to my wife and family.'

'Oh, very well, against my better judgment we will make it sixty five.'

'The merchant slapped his hand on the counter. 'Sixty five dinars -- done! But I must warn you, if ever you come to my house do not mention to my wife or family the price you paid for these beautiful rings and chains; they would lose all respect for my business judgment.'

Derek counted sixty five golden dinars from his bag down on to the counter. They were inspected and counted by Abou Ben Adhem and instantly swept out of sight.

After much thought Shani selected two wedding rings, making sure they would both fit. The jeweller slipped the rings on to delicate gold chains and hung them around their necks. Under

Shani's keen scrutiny he put her engagement ring into pretty little box decorated with hearts and flowers, which he wrapped and handed to Derek.

Derek was doubtful. 'Don't you think you should hold it?' he said.

'No, it's your job to put it on my finger when and if we become engaged. If you lose my ring you will have a short and miserable life because I will kill you myself.'

Abou Ben Adhem was entranced. 'What, you are not yet betrothed. There is hope for me yet. Say the word, sweet lady, and I will go home this very minute and divorce my wife to marry you. You would be a treasure in this shop and would soon change my poor state to one of wealth, and besides, the rings and chains would be an investment rather than a great loss.'

'Well, not today, thank you. The young man I have with me is enough trouble without changing to another.'

Abou Ben Adhem pretended great sorrow at hearing these words, but he bore up bravely.

'When your daughters and sons are old enough for marriage remember the splendid bargains you got at the shop of Abou Ben Adhem, and send them here. God may have taken me before that blessed day but my sons will be in my place and I have trained them to deliver the same service, quality, and low prices that have made my shop famous. Farewell.'

They left with Derek weighed down with this new responsibility of guarding Shani's ring. It was secure in the inmost pocket of his garments and Shani had supervised its placement with threats of what would happen if he were to lose her property.

Haddam, the servant, much impressed with what he had seen, led them to the shop of another relative of his. This was New Carthage's version of a gents' outfitter; not of the type to which Derek was accustomed. There were racks and shelves of caftans and loose fitting garments, baggy pants and coats secured at the waist with tasseled, silk belts. Bright colors seemed to be in that year and the whole of the merchant's stock glimmered with the lights of the rainbow. His customers were not surprised to learn from the proprietor himself that his shop was the best and most value packed establishment in the whole of New Samarkand. Haddam's relative did not wish to speak ill of his competitors but mentioned that it would be unwise to patronize these other businesses because they lacked the virtues of cheapness, quality, and service that so distinguished his shop.

Shani paid little attention to all this but proceeded, with the assistance of the shop keeper, to select clothes for her beloved. Derek was made to try on various garments which were closely inspected as to fit and style. He had a minor, advisory role but most of his suggestions were overruled or ignored.

He did not like any of the clothing presented to him. His taste ran to dark, pin striped business suits, to colorful ties that highlighted white or pastel shirts. He wanted dark socks with comfortable, slip-on, black shoes. None of these was in stock, and neither the shopkeeper, nor Shani, had ever heard of or seen such things. What he saw among this display of vivid hues was what he was going to get.

He came away dressed entirely in his new wardrobe. Shani did not care for the second-hand clothes he had been given in the Khan's palace and they were bundled together and presented to their soldier escort, who seemed pleased enough to get them.

She proudly took Derek's arm when they left the outfitter's shop and proceeded to their next destination. By a happy coincidence Haddam had another cousin who was a shop-keeper in the bazaar and his specialty was female clothing.

This man raised his hands and cried out in delight when Shani walked into his shop. He was entranced at the sight of her golden hair. Such hair was almost unknown in New Carthage, except for a few Barbarians from the north.

'My dear! My dear!' He cried. 'Wait 'til I get my hands on you. You will be a living, walking treasure. We must dress you in clothes to remind us of the snows and steppes of your homeland. Peasant clothing I think, transmuted to high fashion by the best dressmakers in the city.'

He gazed at her with his left hand supporting his elbow and the right hand fingers lightly tapping his cheek. Inspiration came to him, he raised both hands. 'Girls! Girls!' he called out. 'Come quickly there is work to be done; we have a masterpiece to create.'

The staff clustered round Shani. Derek was really on the outer. He would not be required until it was time to pay, and meanwhile his advice would be ignored. He decided to step out into the alleyway.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Mr Codd and Lord Hannibal

Derek waited in the alley way for over an hour and passed the time studying the neighboring shops and their displays of stock until a girl came and said Effendi Vortimer's presence was required.

He went in to a glad welcome from the staff, so pleased at what they had done with the treasure he had brought them. She was swathed in a creation of gold and black. The proprietor said the gold was to match her hair and the black to emphasize the gold.

Other colourful garments were held up momentarily for him to inspect before they were folded in tissue and carefully placed in baskets for transport to Lord Hannibal's house. The bag of dinars was sadly depleted by the time Derek paid the bill.

She was magnificent, and on a high of delight at what had happened to her.

She was also skilfully made-up so that Derek almost regretted his decision not to marry her, at least not yet. But he steeled himself with the thought that soon he would be forced to fight in deadly battles to prop up a failing empire.

Haddam, the servant, recruited some porters and they were loaded with baskets and packets. He salaamed to Derek and Shani as before, and led the porters away.

Derek and Shani came out of the shop hand in hand. She was blazing with happiness, and conscious that everyone passing by was admiring her.

As soon as they appeared a fat European man dressed in a summery white suit, and wearing a panama hat with the brim turned up all round stepped forward to meet them. He took off his hat and held it over his heart as he spoke.

He said, 'Good morning Miss Shani, I hope you are well. I must say the new clothes suit you marvellously. Shani stared at him and said, 'I'm well, thank you.' She had no memory of meeting him before.

He turned to Derek. 'My boy you are in grave danger, I must warn you that even now there are assassins who are plotting your death.'

Shani's face went white with shock and she clutched Derek's arm as though she could drag him away from this strange man.

'You're Mr. Codd! exclaimed Derek. 'How did you get here? When I saw you last you were lying on the ground and, after that I couldn't come back I was kidnapped.

'Your memory is exactly correct and I apologise humbly for not being present when you were abducted. I would certainly have put a stop to it. I should never have approached Doctor Grozny when he was working himself into a frenzy. But knocks of that kind do not long trouble members of my family, and I was able to ride with the rescue party even though Miss Shani does not remember me.'

'Everyone's going to notice you in that outfit.'

'Your guard over there,' Mr. Codd indicated the escort soldier who was intently studying a display of confectionery in the shop next door. 'Will not see me or stop looking at the goods on display until I decide otherwise, before that he will not notice me. In fact no one can see me except you and Miss Shani.'

'Who is this man, and what is he talking about?' asked Shani. She was terrified by his warning, and had heard little else.

'Shani, this is Mr. Codd. He got me into all this trouble in the first place.

'Then he shouldn't say terrible things like that, I'm frightened for you.' She was still trying to drag him away.

Forgive me, Miss Shani, but if I hadn't interfered in his life you never would have met one another

He turned again to Derek. 'You may be the victim either of success or failure. If you win battles Lord Hannibal will eventually dispose of you and claim the victories as his own. If you fail he will get rid of you and try again. I doubt that you will survive long in his service whatever the outcome.'

'Well, I don't want to complain Mr Codd, but you haven't been a great deal of help' so far. You have been absent or unconscious at critical occasions during my stay here, you have been AWL.'

'Absent without leave, yes, I know all about that. You have my unreserved apology. From now on I will concentrate solely on your safety and welfare and ignore anything else.'

'Yes, that sounds good, and include Shani in any protection you can give her.'

It shall be done because both Sultania and the Empire need the changes you can bring about

'I'm safe enough for a while. There have been no battles yet, and I'll be having a briefing this afternoon. We'll just have to play it as we go, but I won't be out of danger, even if we get back to Sultania.'

'It would be safer for you there than here. Sir Humphrey and Lord Ramses won their battle easily. and they have the sultan well guarded. Grausam and Smedhurst returned to their castles to prepare for a siege.'

'What about the laboratory folk?'

'They went home. Now they're trying to turn themselves into farmers.'

'Let's go back to Sultania, now!' cried Shani. She looked up and down the colourful alleyway, fearful of assassins.

Derek handed her the bag of money with its remaining dinars.

'We can't go and leave Gus and Frederika here, besides we're bound to be caught if we try to get away. You keep the money safe, if there comes a chance to do a runner it might be very handy.'

She took the bag miserably, all the pleasure of her visit to the bazaar had disappeared.

'Hide it somewhere and if anybody asks say we spent it all.'

When they arrived back at the house Gus met them at the door.

'He drew himself to his full height, which wasn't much. He said, 'Your Worship and Miss Shani should never have left the house without me. This city is full of plots and schemes. Law and order is breaking down as the enemy army gets closer. I am here to protect you, but I can't do it if I don't know where you are.'

'We went shopping in the Grand Bazaar,' said Shani. 'Do you like our new clothes?'

If she was looking for compliments she was talking to the wrong person. Gus asked, 'Do you have your knife with you?'

She shook her head.

The dwarf was disgusted. 'You went into the bazaar without protection at all. I searched the place looking for you, but it is far too big for one person to cover all of it. You could be dead by now.'

'We had a soldier to guard us,' said Shani.

Gus shook his head. 'A fat lot of use he'd be. Look, Miss Shani, if his honour will not carry a weapon to defend himself you have to do it. Go get your knife quickly. Lord Hannibal wants to see the master as soon as possible.'

Shani ran off, close to tears.

Derek laid his hand on Gus' shoulder. 'Sorry to upset you Gus. I suppose we were rash going off like that without telling you, but we're alright, and I won't do it again.'

'Hmph!!' said Gus.

When Shani, Gus, and Derek arrived in the conference room Lord Hannibal and Hassan rose to greet them.

'My servant, Haddam, told me of your visit to the bazaar', said Lord Hannibal. 'I can see that my money was well spent. He told me how you, Miss Shani, got the better of that old scoundrel Abou Ben Adhem. And I hear you also chose the clothes for Mr. Vortimer, as well as your own, well done. But I must tell you, Mr. Vortimer, that when Miss Shani is in the room no one would even look at you, no matter how well dressed you may be.'

Frederika was sitting alongside Hassan, but without her usual armor. She did not seem pleased to hear Lord Lord Hannibal's remarks, but said nothing.

Lord Hannibal did not see her expression. He continued 'I am proud that our merchants can transform visitors so wonderfully, I congratulate Miss Shani on her taste in clothing, and is it possible to see Abou Ben Adhem's ring?'

Shani was not taken in by Lord Hannibal's flattery. She still mistrusted him, but smiled to acknowledge his words and then nodded to Derek to produce the ring.

He fumbled through his unfamiliar clothing to find the box and its contents.

The two men, but not Frederika, inspected the ring and congratulated Shani.

Frederika glanced at it, then sniffed and stared stony faced, without looking at anyone.

'A good choice,' said Lord Hannibal, handing the ring back to Derek. 'Yet we did not bring you here to talk about rings and clothes. Our meeting has far graver matters to discuss. I think the ladies and Master Gus should leave us at this point so we can discuss affairs of state and consider our strategy.'

'I'm not leaving this room without him!' Shani folded her arms and could feel the dagger concealed under her clothes.

'Me too,' said Gus. 'I am his honour's butler and it is my duty to watch his back. How can I protect him if we are in different rooms?'

'Well,' said Frederika. 'If they stay I stay too. Which one of you bully boys is going to put us out?'

'I am not accustomed to being disobeyed and it is no longer request, it is an order. We cannot discuss affairs of state and the great business of government with women present, let alone a dwarf.'

'I don't know about your business,' said Shani, 'But Mr. Vortimer is my business and I am not leaving this room without him.'

'We're not going to hurt the man, not after all the trouble we went through to get him here.'

'Shani's arms were still folded. she was determined to stay.'

'No one is leaving,' said Derek. 'Lady Frederika, Miss Shani and Gus are my friends and advisors, and they have stood by me since we met one another. Consider the state of your empire, Lord Hannibal, its ruin is approaching. If New Carthage is lost, the empire is lost. You need all the advice you can get, but I tell you this, if they go I go.'

Hassan was laughing. 'Congratulations Lord Hannibal,' he said, 'You've got four for the price of one. A general for your armies and three advisors who will also act as a splendid bodyguard for the general.'

'It's unheard of,' complained Lord Hannibal. 'Women don't go to war. They must stay here, safe in my household. No harm will come to them, and we will supply his bodyguard.'

'You want hostages for my good behavior, don't you,' said Derek. 'If Shani and Frederika are safely locked up in the women's quarters, and I'm away with the army, you know I won't run back to Sultania.'

'No, no, my friend. You misunderstand me. My only concern is for their safety, if they are with us in the middle of a battle they might come to harm.'

'Your guards will come to harm if you try to lock up these two.'

'But women have never been invited to the councils of the great.'

'Perhaps that's why you are in so much trouble. You may get a pleasant surprise out of all this.'

Lord Hannibal, who had been sitting upright, slumped against the back of his chair and Derek changed the subject.

'What size is your army?'

'Approximately a hundred thousand men.' said Hassan. 'In the old days our ancestors could raise half a million or more. But now wealthy families can buy their sons out of the service or pay some poor devil to take his place. Deserters clear off all the time and are hard to find and bring back. Lord Hannibal, what's your opinion?'

Lord Hannibal had recovered his composure. 'I think we could rely on about half of them to actually stand and fight, though which half I couldn't say.'

'It doesn't matter which half fights,' said Hassan, 'We have no choice but to meet the enemy. I have notified all commanders to be ready to march at one hour before sunrise tomorrow morning. The troops fronting the enemy will have to hold them as best they can until we arrive.'

Chapter Twenty Eight

The trap

Two days later they were riding along a forest road seeking the enemy with ten thousand soldiers following in a long tail. Derek did not want to find the enemy any more than he wanted to ride a horse, though Shani cut up a blanket from Lord Hannibal's house and folded it on his saddle. That was better, but he still hated riding horses, and did not want to command an army.

Shani and Frederika were present. Derek had forbidden both to come but they came anyway. Frederika was in mail armor again and her hair was hidden by a helmet. Shani had left her new clothes back at Lord Hannibal's house. For the campaign she was wearing her village cured leather jacket and pants, with a homespun blouse.

His officers were not keen either on having him as a leader. Derek was not from one of the noble families of the empire, and they did not know him. They had suffered too many defeats, lost too many men and too much territory. Their only hope was that this young general brought in from foreign parts might be better than the old ones. Another cause of uneasiness was the presence of women. It was bad luck to have women with the army.

Derek had seen roads like this before in Sultania. It was just a track through the forest which had been cut back on either side so that his soldiers marched eight abreast. Any wider and the men on the wings would be wading through forest regrowth.

Derek was surrounded by his bodyguard, and staff officers including Hassan and Lord Hannibal. Mr. Codd had mysteriously reappeared and was part of the bodyguard, though no one seemed to notice him, except Derek.

Hassan led the cavalry. A scout came back along the road in front of them at full gallop and pulled up with a slither of hoofs and creaking leather. He reported to Hassan who, after hearing what the man said, swung his horse around to lay it alongside those of Derek and Lord Hannibal.

'There's a Barbarian army waiting for us beyond the edge of the forest,' he said. 'When we get out into the open they'll take us on.'

'How many?'

'Hundreds of mounted warriors and an army of spearmen about a mile further back. The mounted men will retreat and try and lure us into attacking the spears head on. Then they'll close in on us. The Barbarians don't like this forest country, where we are now.' Hassan explained. 'Not with trees everywhere. They want to get us out in the open because that's where they're best. Our lads could bring them down with pikes, but they never come close enough for that. They keep their horses moving all the time while they shoot at us. They launch arrows from horseback at full gallop, and they're dead shots.'

'How far is it to the end of the forest, and what's it like after that?'

'This road leaves the forest about a mile from here, and after that it's flat country, just open empty grasslands, mile after mile. The scout was sure they know we're here and are waiting for us.'

'They must have known we would use this road,' said Lord Hannibal. 'Those damned women have been talking. I told you not to say anything in front of them!'

Both women were enraged at this remark. 'You'll take that back,' said Shani. 'We haven't told anyone anything. Besides you never said which road the army would take, not in front of us, anyway.'

Frederika, to prove that women could keep a secret as well as, or better, than men, challenged him to a duel on the spot, sword, against sword, fighting from horseback.'

'Be quiet,' ordered Derek. 'There must be plenty of spies in the city, perhaps even in your own house. Just hold the argument until after the battle I want to think.'

A plan was forming in his mind. He rode silently as he went over the outline in his mind until it was complete.

'Alright,' said Derek. 'We'll have to bring them here. For now we're going to march on until we're near the edge of the forest, then we stop, out of sight. I want about two hundred archers at the head of the line and an equal number of pikemen.'

'That won't be enough to fight them,' said Lord Hannibal as the bowmen and pikemen filed past them to the front. 'Hassan should go first with his horses to attack, and we'll follow him.'

'Not this time,' retorted Derek, 'That's how you lose battles. We'll try my way first.'

It was clear in his mind now, he knew exactly what needed to be done.

He issued a series of orders to the staff officers who galloped away to carry his instructions to the officers in charge of different units of the army.

Twenty minutes later the scouts warned they were nearly at the edge of the forest, but still hidden from the riders out on the plain.

Derek halted the leading files. As other units of the army caught up they were ordered by Derek's staff officers to hide in the forest on either side of the road.

The archers he had ordered forward were stationed out of sight in the trees, they were closer to the end of the forest than the rest of the Carthaginian army. Another company of archers were assigned to Lord Hannibal who commanded the pikemen

'You're the bait,' Derek said to Hassan. 'I guess those horse riders waiting for us out there would be young men, or boys who want to brag about all the Carthaginians they killed. Their general may not be able to hold them if they see a chance for a quick, easy victory, with lots of scalps to impress the girls back home.'

'Hassan, you will lead your men as close as you dare to the Barbarians and if they don't charge straight away have a fake conference with your officers. They're all to look scared and shake their heads a lot, then turn about and race back the way they came. Scream after them, call them cowards, then take off after them. With luck the Barbarians will be on your heels.'

'You and your men will ride hell for leather along the road with the Barbarians after you. At least I hope so! By that time, they will be totally out of control. '

'Hassan, I'm coming with you.' Frederika rode to Hassan's side.

'No you're not! Stay here!'

'I'm coming!'

'Alright, whatever.' cried Derek. 'Don't waste time, go! go!'

When they left Derek turned to Lord Hannibal. 'You know what to do, do it now!' Lord Hannibal turned his horse and rode, followed by his archers and pikemen to set up a trap.

The road appeared to be deserted. Derek's army was hiding in the trees either side of the road. Twenty minutes later a drumming tattoo of hoofs was heard. Derek ordered everyone in his party to move off the road, into the trees to wait behind the men hidden in the margin.

Hassan and his troop were coming back, driving their horses as fast as they could. They were followed by a screaming, whooping horde of young men riding ponies and shooting wildly with their bows and arrows. Some had caught up with their quarry and the Carthaginian cavalrymen were hammering at them with swords as they galloped side by side in this narrow way.

Among the tail-enders were Frederika and Hassan. Hassan had been wounded and Frederika steadied him in the saddle while his men fended off the enemy riders.

The watchers saw this for only a moment as the cavalcade swept by, racing along the road, keeping ahead of their pursuers.

Derek knew his plan was working when he saw the riders pulling back on the reins. Suddenly there was a traffic jam of horses in front of them. The leading horsemen had crashed around a bend into a four deep barrier of pikemen that Derek had ordered across the road.

The trumpeter put the instrument to his lips. Derek raised a hand to push it away from his mouth. He could hear the thunder of hoofs as more warriors flung themselves into the trap. Lord Hannibal was still letting them in. He was a poor general but an excellent officer.

The fighting raged on in the distance and the oncoming warriors started to rein in their horses because those in front had stopped. Within minutes the road was crowded, nose to tail, side by side, with horses and riders.

It was time to act. Derek nodded to the trumpeter. 'Now!' The young man drew in his breath and blew a mighty blast on the horn. Up and down the road other trumpeters heard the harsh note and joined in. It was the signal for the Carthaginians to burst out of hiding and attack.

The Barbarians, too late, realized what they had done. Soldiers erupted out of the forest on either side and started hauling warriors off their horses and stabbing them on the ground. For the first time ever the horsemen could not ride away when the pikemen went after them. The soldiers dragged their enemies down by reaching with their poleaxes and hauling back so the axe-head would catch neck or shoulder and drag the man off his horse. In this wild brawl there was no escape for the riders.

Their comrades, still outside the trap, could hear screams, the noise of ambush and battle. The Barbarian commander charged in with his men to do what he could for those caught in the killing zone.

Lord Hannibal had positioned his men on the road as instructed, after letting a few more Barbarians in soon after the trumpets sounded.

The Barbarian commander realized what was happening and led his remaining horsemen to rescue those who had fallen into the trap. His party was confronted by solid ranks of pikemen stretching across the road and into the trees on either side. The front rank kneeled and presented their poleaxes so the spike on top would pierce the chest of a charging horse. The archers loosed arrows over the heads of the kneeling men. Horses whinnied and baulked at the sight of the row of spikes ready to impale them, and the archers did their deadly work.

The Barbarian commander knew he could not break that line with charging horses, and time was running out for the trapped warriors. He pulled his men back beyond the reach of the pikes and ordered them to shoot down their opponents.

Lord Hannibal obeyed the orders Derek had given him and stopped the pikemen from going after the enemy. He knew what was to happen next.

As the Barbarians drew off and regrouped they themselves were caught in a storm of arrows. To their front the archers, standing behind kneeling pikemen, were shooting steadily and bringing down horses and riders. From their left, where Derek had stationed a whole company of archers among the trees, came a deadly, stinging crossfire. The Carthaginian war bows were bigger and heavier than those of the Barbarians, and their arrows had a longer range.

The Barbarians had no armour except for the occasional rider wearing a helmet or breast plate that had been plucked from dead Carthaginian soldiers, but they were of little use against heavy arrows shot from longbows.

The torrent of missiles from front and side was whittling away their numbers until their commander turned right and led his men to plunge after him into the forest. It was a desperate attempt to get round Lord Hannibal's line and break it from the side.

As soon as the horsemen disappeared into the forest the captain of the bowmen led half of his men across the road to follow and harass the enemy.

They came running with arrows on the string ready to shoot the instant a target presented itself. The half company of men remaining spread out in the forest searching for stragglers.

The first part of the Barbarian commander's gamble paid off. He managed to bring his mounted warriors round Lord Hannibal's line to attack it from the side but was overwhelmed by soldiers appearing from the forest. They swarmed around the rescuers, hauling them off their horses, hacking, stabbing.

The riders who had been trapped earlier realized the dreadful plight they were in and those that could still ride and fight came tearing back in a panicked attempt to escape.

Lord Hannibal, cool under pressure, about-faced the back ranks to meet this challenge while the archers, as before, loosed off their arrows and scarcely one missed its mark.

The first frantic riders were unable to break through Lord Hannibal's line and were cut down. Those following were confronted by fallen warriors and dazed horses where a violent mêlée was raging across the road.

All the time more Carthaginian soldiers were running from their hiding places, eager to find enemies to kill.

While the battle flooded along the road the archers in the forest were also reaping a grim harvest of death, hunting down horsemen who had escaped the first onslaught. Blundering among trees and bushes, trying to avoid massacre, desperate to break out into open country, they made easy targets for the arrows of their enemies.

The fight along the road died away, the trapped warriors and their rescuers had all been killed. Troops of trembling horses were standing above their masters, who all lay still, disfigured with deadly wounds

Carthaginian soldiers running along the road looking for new enemies to fight waved weapons and shouted joyfully at this sudden and unexpected victory. After so many defeats it was difficult to realize that, from start to finish, they had destroyed part of the Barbarian army in less than an hour with almost no loss to themselves.

Derek decided it was safe for him and his party to come out into the open. He was appalled at what he had done.

Fallen young men lay everywhere, bloodied and still, while frightened, horses, crowded in groups, waiting for their dead masters to get up and ride again.

Their shock was made worse by crowds of shouting, cheering soldiers, and the horses huddled together, heads hanging down. There was nowhere they could run

The soldiers saw Derek and rushed towards him in an ecstasy of noise. They knew who had organized their battle, who had given them victory after a long tale of defeats. They were ready to follow him anywhere, obey every command.

Derek looked at the red, screaming faces around him, and beyond them were young, dead bodies lying all over the road. He felt sick.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The Phalanx

Frederika forced her horse through the jubilant crowd surrounding Derek and his party. 'Is Hassan alright?' Derek shouted as she approached.

She grinned. 'He'll get over it. He was shot in the bum while fleeing from the enemy. I won't let him forget that in a hurry, and it's not a battle wound he can show his friends. The doctors got the arrow out and they're looking after him.'

'Tell them to wash his wound in clean, hot water, and to use clean fresh bandages.'

Frederika stared. 'Why would they have to do all that? Hassan'll be alright unless the wound goes bad.'

'I know about wounds festering if they're not treated properly, and it's dirt that causes it.'

Derek turned to a staff officer. 'You heard what I said. Go to the medicos and give them these orders, "Wash your hands between each patient, bathe and clean the injuries with hot water, and use new bandages". If they disobey these instructions they will be punished. Repeat what I said and then go.'

Everyone present thought he was being fussy with all this bother about water, and being clean. But he had just won the Carthaginians a quick and easy victory and no one was about to challenge his authority.

'Who's in charge of the cavalry now,' he asked as the officer galloped off to carry his orders to the medicos.

'I am,' Frederika was grinning again 'Hassan can't lead his men into battle unless he lies on his belly across the saddle. I told the men that you ordered me to take command if anything happened to Hassan.'

'Did they believe you?'

'I said I had my orders from you and if anyone didn't like them they'd be on a charge to appear before a court martial.'

Derek didn't remember giving any such order, but there was another battle to fight and probably she was as good a commander as the cavalry would get.

Someone else pushed through the throng to speak to Derek. It was Lord Hannibal, and his horse was followed by a group of pikemen surrounding a tall blonde man, a bearded man with long, greasy hair. He was wounded and bruised, but still defying his captors, and stood a head taller than any of the men guarding him.

'This is the commander of the Barbarian horse fighters,' said Lord Hannibal. 'He killed three of my men before he went down, and he asked us not kill him before he saw the general who destroyed his command.'

'Don't kill him,' said Derek. 'Make him a prisoner of war.'

'These Barbarians don't surrender, they prefer death to being a prisoner.'

The big man had been pushing step by step against his guards. At each step he was closer to Derek, drawing his guard with him. A sudden movement and a knife appeared in his hand. He roared and lunged at Derek pushing aside the men in front.

Mr. Codd was ready, and quicker. His Colt "Peacemaker" was aimed at the man and he pulled the trigger as the Barbarian struggled closer, striving to stab at Derek.

The bullet crashed through the Barbarian's face and out the back of his head, showering the pikemen with brain tissue and splintered bone.

The crowd around Derek was instantly silenced, and everyone heard the thump of the big man's body hitting the ground, they saw smoke drifting away from the revolver.

Mr. Codd spoke calmly to Lord Hannibal. 'I should kill you too,' he said, 'And I will if you do anything like that again. My actions, and my misjudgment brought him here, and I will defend him as long as I am able.'

'Lord Hannibal said nothing, but his face was set in anger. He wheeled his horse to gallop away, and took no notice of those who were nearly run down as he left.

Mr. Codd put the gun back in his pocket before anyone could crowd even closer. The hardened soldiers wanted to see this small weapon up close, one that could destroy a warrior with a loud noise and a little smoke.

Shani was trembling and clinging to Derek, white-faced from shock and fright. Her own reaction had been too slow. She had snatched for her knife as the Barbarian chief lunged forward, but knew that it would have been too late.

Their horses were side by side and she clutched his hand. 'I thought I was going to lose you. Please hold me.'

He put an arm around her and kissed the top of her head. The gesture was for his comfort as much as hers. He was a far grimmer man now after a battle and attempted murder. He hated war and needless deaths, but had set his hand to the plough and would not turn back.

Gus had drawn his sword but he too knew that he would not have saved Derek. He was deeply ashamed of his failure.

'Your worship,' he said, 'I failed you, say the word and I will kill myself.'

Derek smiled a little. 'Not now, Gus. Don't do that. I'd miss all the stories you tell us. Save me another time and then you'll feel better.'

Derek turned in the saddle. 'Thank you for that, Mr. Codd. I could have been dead now if you hadn't acted so quickly.'

'My dear boy, I'm so thankful I was here to do it. And watch Lord Hannibal all the time. I believe he brought that savage here because he thought the man might make a fatal attack. He's jealous because you're doing what he couldn't do.'

'Well, whatever happens we have another battle to fight. The sooner we start the sooner it'll be over.'

Derek sent scouts ahead to see what the enemy army in the open was doing.

'My compliments to Lord Hannibal,' he told an officer. 'Tell him to march his pikemen out into the open and form them up for battle, but he is not to engage the enemy until I give the order.'

An officer came up and saluted. 'Sir, the Barbarians are all dead. We have three hundred and twenty horses, and the archers are bringing more in from the forest all the time. What do you want done with them?'

'Give them to the archers, they can ride instead of walking.'

'That's no good,' said Frederika. There's not a saddle among the lot of them.' She too had a guilty conscience because she had not been quick enough to defend Derek and was glad to talk about something else. 'Besides, the archers are not trained to ride and shoot at the same time.'

'They won't have to,' retorted Derek.

He turned to the officer. 'Give all the horses we have to the archers Make sure they have a commanding officer and a second in command riding with them. Do it now.' The officer saluted and left.

Frederika persisted. 'You're making a mistake. They couldn't shoot an arrow into a haystack, not while riding a horse and trying not to fall off. Besides their war bows are long and could get mixed up with the horses legs and bring them down.'

'Freddie, your job, leading the cavalry, is to protect the mounted archers, the ones that are not riding can stay with us and walk as they always do. Now go and see to it. I'll explain later.'

Frederika sniffed discontentedly and went away. Lord Hannibal rode past leading his pike men, and a company of archers. He did not look at Derek or his party which followed him protected by the marching soldiers.

Derek gave orders that the army was to come into the open and form up in battle order.

Once away from the forest they were joined again by Frederika at the head of the cavalry which was escorting over three hundred archers riding uncomfortably on captured horses and having some trouble with their bows.

'Well, I've got them here,' said Frederika crossly. What am I supposed to do now?' She was accompanied on horseback by the officer leading the archers.

'See that lot?' said Derek, pointing to the army of spearmen marching towards them. That's a phalanx. I've seen them at home on television, on the History Channel.'

No one present knew what television was, or what he was talking about.

'They're armed with spears and swords,' he continued. 'The guys at the back have spears, up to eighteen feet long. The ones in the front have the shortest, and all the spears face forward. That formation in front of us is nearly half a mile wide, and seems to be about four ranks deep. There are a lot of men there.'

'It's no good charging them sir.' advised the officer, the long spears used by the men at the back are just as dangerous as the shorter one's in the front rank.'

'You are not going to a frontal charge. The cavalry, under Lady Frederika, will escort you round the side of their formation and protect you from the Barbarian horsemen. When you are behind the enemy and within bowshot you can order your men to get off and start shooting. Off you go!

'The officer saluted. Frederika laughed. They both saw the simplicity and genius of his plan. Moments later the host of fighters was galloping away towards the right hand side of the enemy line.

The remaining Barbarian mounted warriors were assembled to protect the ends and back of the phalanx. There were not enough of them after their losses in the ambush and they had no commander. They were swept away by Frederika's cavalry. The Carthaginians turned left round the edge of the formation as the Barbarian riders scattered and then they were in position behind the enemy.

Their commander ordered the archers off their horses and the men ran to form a ragged line from where they poured a storm of arrows on the rear of the phalanx.

There was not enough of them to attack the whole of the formation so he concentrated on the half that was nearest.

The men in the phalanx were not used to an attack from behind. It was the job of their cavalry, clustered on either wing to stop that disaster from happening. Now, with over a hundred and twenty archers behind them, equipped with heavy war bows, backed by their own cavalry, spears were useless. Man after man was falling as the heavy arrows thudded home.

A Barbarian officer led his men in the rear ranks to turn and charge with spears and swords against the deadly archers.

The archers did not try and meet them, instead they were ordered to mount their horses and ride away, but turned as they gained enough ground, got off, and started shooting again.

Frederika launched her cavalry at the running men, cutting them down until many threw down their spears and surrendered. She ignored the fugitives after that and led her men and horses in a thunderous charge against that part of the phalanx which was now fatally weakened. They burst through and the line was smashed and scattered.

Derek knew a military disaster when he saw one. He sent Lord Hannibal, with the pikemen and the walking archers to where the rest of the formation had been untouched by the disaster on their left. The officers of the surviving wing, with enemies before and behind, were stunned by the tragedies unfolding around them. They were unable to give orders that would save the situation.

Derek's orders were to attack at the point where the formation had broken, and roll up the yet untouched section of the line.

He sent orders to Frederika to hold back while the archers did their work. That was to destroy the still standing remainder of the phalanx.

Within minutes the remaining part of the line was under attack from both sides. Lord Hannibal and Frederika obeyed orders and held their troops back while the archers softened up the lines of men still cowering in the formation that had let them down so badly.

Derek was watching closely. He could almost smell the fear of the men standing in line, unable to advance or retreat while flights of arrows descended on them, and they were out on a grassy plain with nowhere to hide.

It was then he ordered the trumpets to sound. The hail of arrows stopped. The trumpets roared again and that was signal to the pikemen and cavalry. Frederika, riding in front, hurled her cavalry against the appalled ranks of the phalanx.

On their front Lord Hannibal sent in the pikemen while Frederika's horsemen tore in from the rear.

The line broke and groups of enemy soldiers formed together in the chaos of a lost battle to make a fighting retreat towards the cover of the forest.

They were attacked all the way by Carthaginians to stop them reaching the shelter of the trees. Each group of retreating Barbarian soldiers left a trail of bodies and blood on the grass.

It was the archers who did the most damage. Each man from the phalanx carried a round shield and could ward off sword blows, but they were little protection against the heavy arrows that brought down man after man.

At last fewer than five hundred soldiers from the phalanx reached the forest and turned, with their surviving horsemen, ready to fight to the end.

Derek called off his troops. They didn't want to stop. They wanted to finish off this remnant of the phalanx, but his authority now was absolute. Not one officer or soldier would question the orders of their young, magic commander who had given them such outstanding victories, and at so little cost.

He sent a unit that had arrived too late for the battle to watch the edge of the trees to make sure no one escaped. To evade their enemies the refugees would have to go deeper into the forest.

A supply train of pack-horses and carts was seized also. The guards ran away and hid in the forest when the phalanx broke. Derek sent another unit to guard it against looting so the food it carried would be distributed fairly to his men.

Lord Hannibal came to him after it was all over. Shani, Gus, and Mr. Codd sat very still on their horses as he approached, and fingered their weapons. Hannibal paid no attention to them and said, 'We were right in choosing to make you the general of our armies, no one could have done it better, and I salute you.' He saluted. 'I wish to beg your forgiveness for endangering your life. Your bodyguard accused me plotting to kill you. Not so, I want you alive to gain more victories for the empire. I was wrong, and put you in mortal danger, but it was not an act of treachery.'

Derek thought Mr. Codd may have been on to something, but he had no proof that Lord Hannibal wanted him dead. He said, 'Thank you for that. And thank you for your services today, you made a great contribution to our success. As for the remarks made by my bodyguard, don't worry about it. He had just saved my life and was overwrought. I must tell you Lord Hannibal, you have my highest regard. The only observation I would make is that in future you should search and disarm any captive before presenting him to your commanding officer.'

Hannibal saluted again and went away.

Shani, Gus, and Mr. Codd relaxed a little as he departed, but were still wary. Shani was gazing at Derek adoringly, still afraid of the dangers surrounding her beloved, but easier in her mind now the fighting had stopped.

'I haven't trusted that man from the moment I first saw him,' she said.

Gus nodded. 'I think, your worship, that I should sleep in your room until we are out of this,' he said.

'You can take the single bed,' suggested Shani, referring to a second bed that had been brought into the bedroom at Derek's orders.

His conscience had troubled him again and he insisted on sleeping in the new bed in spite of Shani's pleas and complaints that she was lonely in the double bed, and it was cold with only one person in it.

'I can sleep in the passage outside your door,' said Gus.

'No, an assassin might come through the window, your bed can be directly beneath it, and we'll bar the door. '

'Shani turned to Derek. 'You should be with me,' she said. 'I'll sleep with the knife under my pillow in case anyone broke in.'

He smiled. 'Oh yes, and what if you have a nightmare and think I'm a murderer? You could puncture me with that knife before you woke up.'

'Don't tease me! You're the most aggravating man I've ever met. If you're going to make a fuss, we can put it under your pillow.'

'No, I'm not going to bed with a knife, especially one that sharp. You can have the double bed, I'll sleep single.'

'Alright Mr Hard to Get Along With, you take the double bed, and I'll sleep single!'

He grinned at her. 'Cunning aren't you. You'll wait until you hear snoring and then sneak in beside me. It's not on, how many more battles can we survive?''

Shani gritted her teeth and made an angry face at him, but he was unmoved.

'In any case we're going back to Hannibal's house. I am not convinced that he is treacherous, but we can still move, if necessary, and stay at an inn.'

'Hassan's alright,' said Lady Frederika as she rode up. The messenger told me that the medicos gave him something made from poppy juice and it put him to sleep. He'll be annoyed when he wakes up and finds out we've won a battle without him, and that I've been leading the cavalry.'

'Will he be taken home now?'

'Yes they have carts and stretchers for the wounded. He can go that way, or face down across the saddle, it's up to him.'

She turned to go. 'Oh, by the way, thanks for giving me the chance to lead the cavalry, I enjoyed that. And all the men think you're the greatest general the empire has ever had, so do I.' She nodded and rode away.

Chapter Thirty

The Lord Chamberlain

Two days later they were to ride in triumph through the streets of New Carthage. Derek had put aside fear of treachery by Lord Hannibal. All he had heard so far were rumors and guesses but his friends were more suspicious than him and were keyed up, ready for anything.

The Khan had decreed that the city gates should be opened for their entrance, with trumpets sounding, and fanfares of music.

This was all show. They would spend a night in Hannibal's house, rise early to be let out of a smaller gate in the morning to come in again at the time, and through the gate nominated by the Khan.

The evening before the planned procession they had been visited by an official from the court. It was the Lord Chamberlain whom they had met before the concert. He was also Master of Ceremonies, organizer of street parades and chief greeter of high foreign dignitaries and ambassadors. At least he had these titles, others did the work, he took the credit.

He appeared before the house in a gilded, decorated coach drawn by four horses and was accompanied by two servants who helped him out of his coach and stood at attention in the background, or followed him.

The grandee came inside puffing after the exertion of walking from the coach.

On arrival he bowed as low as his stomach would allow to Lord Hannibal and Derek, but struggled for breath after that and merely inclined his head to Hassan who lay face down upon a couch and was covered, up to his shoulders, by a rug.

A servant came into the room with a tray of drinks. He went first to the chamberlain who took a glass of wine and drank it straight down, then took another. One of his body servants handed him a silk handkerchief which he used to wipe his lips and chin. Another handkerchief he put to his nose and kept it there during the interview.

He glanced at the other people in the room but, but after that, ignored them.

'I bring greetings from the Khan,' he said, when he could speak. 'He will be happy to welcome his brothers in arms at the city gates tomorrow. I am authorized to tell you, General Vortimer, that tomorrow the Khan will make you Lord of Clusium, a position which has become available since the death of the last descendant of Lars Porsena, who was the first lord of that province.'

'What's Clusium,' asked Derek. He had never heard of the place, and he had not thought of being a lord, not since Lady Cicely had mentioned the possibility.

'It is in Italy, sir,' replied the Lord Chamberlain. 'A fertile province centred around the remains of the ancient city of Rome which was captured and destroyed by the first Lord Hannibal. It was awarded to Lars Porsena for his assistance in rallying the local tribes against the Romans. The last of his line has died and tomorrow you, sir, will be possessor of Clusium, and all its wealth.'

There was a murmur of congratulations from the small group in the room. Shani clutched his arm and laid her head on his shoulder.

The Lord Chamberlain continued. 'The Khan himself will greet you when you enter through the gates. He will ride at the head of the procession, followed by Lord Hannibal and General Vortimer. You will pass through a number of streets so the people of New Carthage can get a good look at their Khan, his generals, and his valiant soldiers. The procession will end at the royal palace where the Khan will invite you to join him at a banquet.'

'The Lady Frederika should ride with them,' said Hassan. 'I was injured as you know, and she led the cavalry during the battle.'

The Lord High Chamberlain shook his head. 'You are mistaken general. It was the Khan himself who led the great charge that broke the enemy phalanx.'

Derek and the girls stared at one another, astonished by this item of news.

'He wasn't there!' exclaimed Derek. 'I should know. I was in charge!'

The Chamberlain raised his hand to stop him saying anything further.

'Be careful general. No one can contradict the Khan. If he says he was there, then he was there. If he says he led the cavalry to break the enemy lines, then he did as he said, and broke them.'

Derek was about to protest, but was silenced by Hannibal. He said, 'My friend, take care. It is the Khan's privilege to believe anything he wants to believe. When the history of our battle is written no doubt we will be given an honorable mention, but his magnificent speech that so heartened the troops before it started, will be printed in full, and the book will tell of his courage in the battle when he led his army to smash the Barbarian battle lines.'

'What magnificent speech?' asked Derek. 'I didn't hear any speeches.'

'It is not yet written, but will be included in the history books. Only those who were at the battle will know he is deluding himself, but they would be wise not to insist on telling the truth.'

Derek threw up a hand and then let it fall on the table. 'So this is how history is made?'

'Exactly so,' said the chamberlain addressing Derek. 'The Khan is all powerful and you will agree with any statements he cares to make. Remember, if you argue or contradict him he may change his mind about awarding you the province of Clusium. I hope, for your own sake, that when you meet his majesty you will congratulate him on his great victory.'

He raised his eyebrows and gazed down his nose at Derek.

Derek glared back then shrugged his shoulders. 'Alright, if you say so, I'll butter him up like everyone else.'

The chamberlain nodded stiffly. 'There is one other matter I must mention, a report has come to the palace that during the battle your bodyguard consisted of two women, and a dwarf. This is quite unacceptable. You will be protected by members of the Khan's Imperial Guard. The two women and the dwarf will not be permitted to join the triumphal parade.'

He glanced for just one moment at Frederika, Shani and Gus, then looked away.

Shani was about to give the man a blast but Frederika got in first. 'That bunch of toy soldiers you call the Imperial Guard' she said, 'Are not worth a pinch of shit.'

The chamberlain was dumbstruck, he had never heard such plain speaking in all his life, it was talk not proper for a great man to hear, nor for a woman to say.

Frederika continued, 'If I had a dozen of the cavalymen I led the other day we could drive the whole of the guard clear out of the city. If anyone was to try and assassinate the general with that lot around he'd get away with it and be long gone before they'd even have their lances at the ready.'

Shani was about to abuse the chamberlain when Derek stopped her. 'That's enough,' he said. 'The Khan has spoken and the Lord Chamberlain has made his orders known. You are not to ride with us, neither of you.'

Shani was turning scarlet with rage but Derek refused to let her speak.

He addressed the chamberlain. 'You are wrong about the dwarf, he is not my guard, but a servant. His duty will be to remind me during the procession, that I am only a man, that I am being cheered and applauded, not for anything I have done, but because I am a servant of the Khan, and I must humbly remember all the great things he has done for the empire.'

The chamberlain seemed to consider this a reasonable request. He knew the Khan did not like his generals to become too successful and proud, they might present a danger to his reign. 'Very well, you may have the dwarf, but he is to ride between you and Lord Hannibal on a small horse so he will not be noticeable to the onlookers.'

'Thank you,' said Derek. 'You are very understanding, but I have one last request.'

The chamberlain sighed and was given a fresh handkerchief. He gazed over Derek's shoulder, anxious to leave. 'Yes, what is it?'

'Lord Hannibal and I will need a pageboy each to ride behind our horses, and to attend us at table.'

Hannibal said nothing, but seemed surprised at this request.

The chamberlain considered the matter. He said. 'I see no reason why not. Tomorrow you will become a noble and will be in need of servants. Very well, two pageboys it will be, and as your body servants they will be permitted to enter the palace to wait on you and Lord Hannibal.'

Shani could contain herself no longer. 'Pageboys,' she cried. 'What use are they? Who's going to protect him, you? You great, fat, useless slob?'

'Shani, stop that! Apologize to the Lord Chamberlain at once!'

'I won't!' said Shani.

'I have no further business here,' said the chamberlain, 'drawing on a pair of gloves handed to him by the second servant. 'And I will not bandy words with members of the lower classes. But I trust these insolent young women will be thoroughly whipped to teach them better manners.' He bowed again to Lord Hannibal and nodded briefly to Derek and Hassan.

'What's wrong with you?' demanded Shani as the chamberlain left the room accompanied by Lord Hannibal. 'Don't you care about your life? Page boys!! You're mad! Anyway, I'm coming. His lord high slobbiness can say what he likes, you're not going without me.'

'If she comes I come too,' said Frederika. 'I'm entitled to ride in that parade, and I'm going to do it.'

'You don't care about your life, do you,' said Shani. 'You won't carry a weapon to defend yourself, and you talk about having page boys to protect you. They can't do that they're just kids.'

'The page boys that will ride in the procession are horribly bloodthirsty, and hard to get on with, but they'll look after me.'

Hannibal returned after seeing the two servants struggle to get their master into his coach, they succeeded and the coach was gone.

'What are you talking about?' said Shani, the only servants you've met here are Haddam and that girl who was in the bath with you. She won't help you, and you don't know any page boys.'

There was a sudden rise in attention when she mentioned the girl in the bath.

Derek ignored this and said I know two pageboys, they're quarrelsome and bad tempered but they're the ones I'll take. He turned to Hannibal. 'I guess you have page boys on the staff here, would you lend us two outfits so the girls can ride with us in the procession? They can come as pages if they have caps to cover their hair.'

'You think you're smart, don't you,' said Frederika, relieved and grinning.

'Yes, I do, rather,' he replied, though indistinctly, because Shani was hugging him round the neck and kissing him.'

'Wait, wait!' said Hannibal. 'What you are proposing is directly against the Khan's orders. We have pages in this house and I suppose there are spare uniforms, but I cannot let you have them. That would be defying the Khan.'

'You'll get them back,' said Shani. 'We won't want them after tomorrow.'

'I'm sure I would, but that is not the point. I should not be asked to disobey the orders of the Khan.' He looked at the disappointment showing in their faces.

'However, if you were to make the same request to Haddam, my servant, I am sure he would help you, providing I know nothing about it, and if your little plot is found out I hope you will say the same.

Shani and Frederika kissed them all round and went off at once to find Haddam, leaving the men to talk

About an hour later two page boys, wearing caps that barely contained their hair, entered the room looking for compliments. Derek inwardly groaned, wondering how they were going to get away with this deception. The pageboy outfits were not a good fit. They were too tight, and seemed to emphasise the curves of the wearers. If the unlikely appearance of two young women masquerading as boys was not enough to give them away the wind might do it by blowing the caps off to reveal their hair.

Everyone except Derek applauded their appearance, but then he was a natural pessimist, and was rarely disappointed.

Gus, as usual, had a plan. He said 'If anyone notices they're women and starts calling out, I'll get a fight going or do something to make people look at me instead of the girls. I was very good at that when I was a professional wrestler so I'll think of something.'

This offer did not set Derek's mind at rest. The last thing he wanted was for a brawl to break out during the procession. However that was tomorrow, and they might get through it safely, as they usually did.

He decided to ask Mr. Codd for advice and an explanation of how the Roman Empire could disappear and there be a Carthaginian Empire in its place.

Mr. Codd had been sitting quietly in the room listening to the Lord High Chamberlain and the discussions that followed his departure. No one seemed to notice him, and he didn't speak, but Derek was aware of his presence the whole time.

Mr. Codd must have had an aura because, when Derek sat next to him, the noise of the others talking was damped down. He could still hear them but as though they were at a distance. They seemed not to notice Derek either, at least not while he was sitting with Mr. Codd.

'I have been waiting for you to come and talk to me,' said that gentleman. 'The visit of the chamberlain was most interesting. I was delighted at the way you persuaded him to permit Gus to ride with you. Did you know that that was a Roman custom adopted by the Carthaginians. When a general rode in a victory procession through the streets of Carthage a slave or servant was in the chariot with him whispering that he was only a man and this glory would pass away.'

'I'll tell Gus to keep reminding me tomorrow.'

My boy, I was proud of the way you handled the chamberlain, and I think the young women can get away with deceiving all those people who will see you tomorrow, at least as long I am nearby.'

'What I want to know is what happened to the Roman Empire, I thought the Romans captured Carthage and tore it down, I don't even know where it was, but I know Rome is in Italy.'

'Quite right. In your reality it happened just as you said. But now you are in another reality, and in this one Carthage was the victor.

'So Rome got the chop.'

'In effect, yes. Lord Hannibal's ancestor invaded Italy and defeated Rome's armies but he never attacked the city until his brother, Hasdrubel, persuaded him to it, and he called on the local tribes led by Lars Porsena. The attack succeeded and that was the end of Rome. Centuries later an English poet, Lord Macauley, composed a poem about the earlier struggles of Rome which may or may not be fiction. It starts like this, -

*"Lars Porsena of Clusium, by the nine gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin should suffer wrong no more.
By the nine gods he swore it, and named a trysting day
Bade his messengers ride forth South, East, West, and North
To summon his array."*

"However his attack on Rome failed because Horatius and two others held the enemy at the bridge over the Tiber river They stopped Lars Porsena's army long enough for the townspeople behind them to bring down the bridge.'

'How did Horatius get back if the bridge was down?'

'He swam, even though he was wearing armor. The enemy saw him being helped up the far bank, and Macauley wrote, *"Even the ranks of Tuscany could scarce forbear to cheer."*

'My friend, Abdul Khayyam, would be proud if he was able to write a poem like that,' said Derek. 'But is it true?'

'No one knows, all records were lost when the city burned.'

'Anyway Lars Porsena had a second go and that time he won, is that right?'

'Not quite. It was a long time before Hannibal invaded Italy and was aided by a descendant of Lars Porsena to capture Rome.'

But never mind all that, my first priority is to return you to Sultania where your talents will be invaluable.'

'I would sooner go back home to Melbourne.'

'You would find Melbourne boring after all you have been through.'

'Being bored is good. Our problems are settled by arguing, not fighting. I'll take Shani with me, though she may not like all the peace and quiet.'

'My office will be open if you both find it boring.'

'You should start a travel agency. Lots of people would like to visit another reality.'

'I will think about it, but in the meantime go back to your friends, and do not trust Hannibal, he puts on a mask of friendship, but it is a disguise for treachery.'

Chapter Thirty One

The Triumph

Derek's party rose in the city before dawn, had breakfast, and were let out through a small outer gate.

Shani wanted to continue riding and make dash for the border of Sultania. She had not been easy since hearing Mr Codd's warning about assassins planning an attempt on Derek's life. Gus would have gone along with her idea, because of his former trade of smuggling goods between the empire and Sultania.

'I know every pass through the mountains,' he said. 'And I know what they're like at any time of the year. No worries, I'll get you through.'

Frederika didn't like his idea, she wanted to ride in the parade.

Mr Codd advised Derek against an escape attempt at this time. 'It is a hundred miles to the frontier,' he said. 'I suppose Gus could lead us through the mountains once we reach them, but they're still a hundred miles distant, and we have no guarantee of getting fresh horses on the way. If we were caught the Khan, would be very angry at having his victory parade ruined, he might have us all executed - painfully.'

Derek agreed. He did not want to ride galloping horses for a hundred miles under any circumstances, particularly not when they were in danger of capture and execution.

Instead of trying to flee they rode round the city to the gate where they had first entered New Carthage. All the way, they were overlooked from the city walls. These grim bastions were today decorated with colourful flags and pennons fluttering in the morning breeze.

The party was cheered from the battlements as they passed. People waved more flags and held their screaming, clapping children so they would not fall over. The whole scene was tinged with gold from the light of the rising sun.

The outer gates had been swung back before they arrived and the heavy iron portcullis raised for their entry. They rode into the echoing interior of the barbican.

No missiles rained down, from the arrow slits in wall and roof. Nor were any rocks or boiling liquids dropped from above as would happen to enemies if they had forced their way this far. Instead hankies were waved at them through the arrow slits and flower petals rained down from the larger holes.

All the sound and echoes in this stone chamber could not block out the noise of a large and impatient crowd waiting on the other side of the inner door.

This lasted for about twenty minutes. Then it was time. The soldiers on the other side were heard to lift the locking bar and put it out of the way, the inner doors creaked open.

The noise was overwhelming. The people of New Carthage were cheering their magic young general who, in one day's fighting, had destroyed a barbarian army menacing their city.

The other armies were retreating, perhaps they would be back, but if they did, the new general would beat them yet again.

They shouted their relief and joy when he entered with Lord Hannibal. Some of the crowd caught a glimpse of a dwarf riding a pony between Lord Hannibal and the general, but it did not matter. Their cheers and shouting were for the dark-haired, handsome young man who was followed by two page boy attendants. It was he who had led their soldiers to victory.

A band added to the noise. It was playing the Carthaginian national anthem, but was scarcely heard amidst the roars of the crowd.

And here was the Khan mounted on a white horse, waiting to greet them. He was dressed as a general, as a leader of armies should be. He was clad in a uniform he had not worn before, because there had been no victories. The golden braid on his uniform and epaulettes glittered in the morning sunshine, as befitted a generalissimo of forces triumphant over a barbarous foe. The medals on his chest, all self awarded, testified to his bravery, his ability to hearten his men to inspire them before leading them to smashing victories.

Four attendants dressed in the royal livery were holding the Khan's horse by gold coloured cords so it could not move or bolt with him aboard.

He was surrounded by the Imperial Guard whose armour, polished and scoured, reflected the sunlight. They were all mounted on superb horses and every helmet bore the crest of a noble house. Their lances were held upright, the butt resting on the mailed foot of the man holding it. From each lance tip fluttered a small pennon, all bearing different designs.

Still the people cheered the young man who had no braid sewn to his clothes, no medals, not even a small one. They flocked round and shouted their admiration and thanks, almost ignoring their Khan.

Derek had not wanted any of this. He did not like to be the centre of attention, and was not proud of the hundreds of deaths that could be laid at his door. He was more embarrassed than anything else, and stared straight ahead. He wished they would all go home and that the parade was over.

Hannibal was better at public relations than Derek. He saluted the Khan and waved grandly, pointed in mock surprise at faces that he recognized in the throng and grinned to give them the thumbs up.

The Khan was put out at being almost ignored by the crowd. After all he had made a magnificent speech before the battle. The first draft of what he might have said if he had been there read very well, and he was pleased with it. He remembered delivering that inspiring oration before his

troops, and how they cheered until the enemy was half defeated, even before he turned his horse to lead them in an earth shaking charge that broke the enemy to smithereens.

The speech was to be carved in marble and set up in the city square for all to read. It was he, the Khan, who had scattered the enemy and routed his army, it was not fair that everyone should pay so much attention to a minor officer who was not even a member of the nobility.

He made a mental note to instruct the royal biographers to belittle even further General Vortimer's part in the fighting. All the histories would show that the Khan's conduct on the field of battle played a vital part in rescuing the empire from disaster.

The four attendants led his horse forward to face the two officers. He smiled to show he was above any petty jealousy. The crowd quietened to hear what was said.

'Welcome to my comrades in arms,' he cried. After that he seemed unsure of what to say next until a servant darted forward and held a scroll under his nose. The scroll was hand-written and decorated with the royal crest in red and gold.

'We met last on the field of battle,' he read. He seemed to have difficulty reading and bent over, close to the page. Only those nearby could hear his speech. 'Now we have come together in peace to celebrate our great achievement. As commander in chief I must praise the faithful service of Lord Hannibal in carrying out my orders, and General Vortimer, third in command, also did good service.'

At this point General Vortimer had difficulty quelling his pageboys, they wanted to fight the Khan.

'Shut up, you two,' he ordered. 'Show some respect! The Khan can say what he likes. If you can't behave yourselves leave the parade.'

The Khan had lost his place and was unable to find it again. He glared blackly at General Vortimer and his unruly followers. He abandoned his attempt to make a speech and tossed the scroll to one side. It was caught just in time by an attendant.

He gestured to have his horse turned round and was led through the ranks of the Imperial Guard.

Hannibal knew the protocol. He followed the Khan's horse and motioned for Derek to do the same. When they had passed through the guards they fell in behind the Khan as the procession moved off. The pageboys followed, they were not about to be left in the street.

The procession lengthened as they went forward. First the cavalry appeared from both sides of a cross street and swarmed around Derek roaring their approval until their officers managed to get them to form up at the rear.

The bowmen and pikemen joined at another intersection. Before their officers could get them into their place in the parade they too noisily demonstrated their belief that it was Derek and no one else who had led them to victory.

Another touch was added to this display when about twenty or thirty of the young horses captured in the ambush were also brought out, still ridden uncertainly by the bowmen. They were to be paraded as "trophies of war".

The horses were disoriented and afraid. Everything had changed. Their masters were dead. and they could no longer gallop towards the horizon on endless grassy plains, instead they were surrounded by screaming mobs in a narrow street.

Someone ran out of the throng and blew a trumpet in a horses ear. It reared high, and its rider slipped off. The horse stampeded, running blindly down the centre of the road. Other horses, equally spooked, burst away and followed, then every horse was running. Some bowmen fell off, some stayed on clutching the manes of their horses. Not one had the aid of saddle and stirrups.

The horses were at the tail of the procession, but soon got to the front. They ran down either side in the narrow space between the parading soldiers and the onlookers.

Those who were not knocked down or injured by the runaways thought the whole thing was hilarious and the laughter of the crowd frightened the stampeding horses to gallop faster.

The cavalry officers ordered their men to catch the fleeing animals, but this made matters worse as a new set of riders joined the chase.

The procession really started to unravel when two of the servants controlling the Khan's horse were knocked over. A cavalryman trying to avoid bodies sprawled on the road pulled left and cannoned into the Khan's horse. It bounded forward so suddenly the Khan was saved from falling backwards only by his high backed saddle. The other two minders still had hold of their ropes and clung on as they were dragged along the road. but only for a few minutes. They let go and the Khan was having a hair raising ride bumping up and down in the saddle, with the cavalry and Imperial Guard in pursuit.

He fell off in the main square in front of the palace where the Lord Chamberlain and other officers of the court were waiting on the steps to escort him inside.

They hurried down thinking he had been killed by the fall and the two servants lowered the chamberlain so he could kneel by the Khan

'Oh, Your Majesty!'

'I'm not dead,' said the Khan, struggling to rise. 'I could have been, it was all part of a plot to kill me. Vortimer and his people planned all this. I suspected him from the beginning, but no one would listen to me. I want the whole crew of traitors arrested and thrown into jail.'

The servants hauled the Lord Chamberlain to his feet.

Hannibal slid off his horse alongside them. 'Your majesty, are you all right?'

The Khan was standing up and swaying, though supported by his servants.

'Lord Hannibal,' he said. 'This was an attempted assassination, and I know who was responsible, it was Vortimer. I order you to arrest him at once, together with his group and they are to be tortured until they confess everything.'

Hannibal knew that Derek had done nothing to cause the horses to stampede, but he said, 'It shall be as you say, your majesty. 'Tonight they will be in jail and tomorrow morning the torturers will be called in to question them very severely, until we get to the truth.'

Derek had been as startled as everyone else when he was arrested, but did not resist.

The girls would have, but he ordered them to go quietly. Gus was taken too, and they were escorted to jail and put in the same cell as before after the occupants had been turned out and accommodated elsewhere.

Lord Hannibal, the officer in charge, did not look at or speak to them on the way, or while they were waiting for their cell to be cleared of other prisoners. He did not point out that the page boys were actually girls and should be imprisoned elsewhere. The soldiers had noticed that they were females but, apart from winks and grins when Hannibal was not watching, nothing was said.

After the cell was cleared Derek and his friends were ushered in and the door shut behind them. Without speaking Hannibal led his men away. Walls around them echoed the noise of metal shod marching feet, of iron doors being unlocked, opened, and then noisily slammed shut behind the departing troop.

Chapter Thirty Two

In Prison

The light inside was dim but they could see because of small, cobwebbed skylights set high in the roof over the central passage.

The floor of their cage was still covered by a thick layer of straw. Gus sniffed and said, 'It's the same straw as when we were here last time.'

Derek agreed, and pulled a face. 'If it is the same straw it smells worse than when we were tenants here.'

No one wanted to lie down on the straw so they crowded together on to the stone bench and sat with their backs against the wall.

'I didn't trust that Hannibal, not one bit, not for a moment,' said Shani.

'You were right!' For the first time since they met Frederika agreed with her. 'The rotten mongrel wouldn't look us in the eye, and he couldn't get out of here quick enough.'

The prisoners opposite, interested in the new arrivals, lined up to watch them through the bars. 'There's only four of you,' one called out. 'What did you lot do to get this kind of service?'

'We've been accused of trying to kill the Khan.'

The others laughed. 'You should'a made a proper job of it,' sang out one. 'There'll be plenty of guys wanting the job. God rot them.'

Another, a tall man, was hanging on to the bars. 'General, I was with the cavalry under Lord Hassan,' he called out. 'I seen what you done and we all admired you for the way you handled the

battle. And I see Lady Frederika's in the slammer with you too. She's a born cavalry leader, and locking you up like this is black ingratitude.'

'Alright soldier, you've heard why we're here. What have you been up to?'

'I was drunk, sir, and got into a fight with some pikemen, they was drunk too, and, we're in here together. Boys, salute the general.'

Frederika was pleased to hear what was said about her, she and Derek saluted back.'

The soldier continued. 'Sir, there's something you and the Lady Frederika can do for us. You can tell these thick headed, rat ugly pikemen here that we run away under the general's direct orders so the Barbarians would follow us into the trap.'

'Quite right,' replied Frederika. 'The cavalry is the first into a battle and the last out, and we wouldn't have turned and run except we were obeying the general's orders to draw the Barbarians on, and even your thick headed pikemen have to admit it worked beautifully.'

'We shouldn't be here long, sir. The charge was just drunk and disorderly, and they need us more in the army than in the slammer. When we get out we'll be ready to follow you again, won't we, boys?'

They heard a growl of assent and knew that the army was still with them.

Outside the grim walls the day was sunny and warm but the prison itself never varied; it was always cold. They had not dressed to be ready for a night, in a frigid stone cell.

It was a long dreary day to be locked in a drab, smelly cell. The night was worse. They were brought some cooked offal as the light from above began to fade. They knew how bad the jail fare was even before it arrived. They could tell by the complaints and groans of their neighbors in the cell opposite .

'Pity all that stuff had to happen before the banquet. If we'd had a decent feed we wouldn't be so hungry now.' Frederika enjoyed food but Derek had to coax her to eat anything.

'Tomorrow we're going to meet more trouble,' he said. You have to be ready for whatever happens We know this stuff tastes awful -

'You can say that again!'

'But we need food inside us so can run or fight, we may have to do both.'

After this they pulled faces as they spooned down their food, but no one argued with his logic.

When it was gone and the jail filled with the darkness of night they groped back to their stone bench. The hospitality in this place did not extend to blankets, and no visitor came to bring warm clothes. No one yet was willing to lie down on the straw to get what warmth they could. Most of the men opposite had been in prison long enough to nest down anywhere they could. Straw was heard rustling as they lay down to sleep with the prospect of another miserable day tomorrow.

'You should have let us fight them,' said Shani, for about the fortieth time.

Derek did not reply, he had used up all his counter arguments hours ago, and was thinking he may have been wrong anyway.

Derek suggested they could warm up by running on the spot, or flapping their arms vigorously around their bodies.

'It's a good idea,' said Gus. 'when we were carrying contraband goods in the high passes, in a blizzard, and waiting for the smugglers coming up the other side to change loads we used to do that sort of thing. You try it, you'll feel a lot better.'

The girls would have nothing to do with exercises. They were bad tempered because Derek had surrendered them to this cold, hard prison without a fight.

He knew it would have been hopeless. They would have ended up within a few minutes being beaten and perhaps injured.

They gave up talking and tried to sleep.

Gus, whose legs were shorter than theirs, could not brace them against the floor and he fell forward off the bench several times during the night when he dozed off. At last he gave up and slept soundly, snoring in a nest of straw. While their only relief was sitting side by side and sharing the warmth of their bodies.

Derek was nearly dozing off when he heard someone whisper his name.

He straightened up to see a shadowy figure on the other side of the bars. He thought it was a warder doing the rounds then realized Mr Codd had somehow broken in to visit them.

Derek's companions became quiet and slept when Mr Codd appeared. Derek rose to meet him.

'I slipped in past the soldiers as they left,' said Mr Codd, 'And the locked doors gave me some problems, but I got here at last.' He handed in through the bars a key ring with some keys on it.

'Thank you for that, and you were right about Hannibal,' said Derek. 'He's not much of a general, so I'm told, and he's treacherous besides. He didn't tell the Khan that the stampede wasn't my fault.'

If anyone's to blame it's the chamberlain, said Mr Codd. 'He shouldn't have let them bring in those frightened horses for the parade. Anyway, it was Lord Hannibal who arrested you and brought you here.'

'You should have shot him straight after you killed the Barbarian general.'

Mr Codd shook his head. 'That's unlike you,' he said. 'Don't give way to bitterness, even in this terrible place.'

I have to organize some way of getting you out of here for good. But for now I will leave you these too, they may come in handy.

He handed in through the bars a small but heavy canvas bag. 'I'm sorry I didn't bring any blankets, but it's too late now, I'll be busy all night. If all else fails the keys can get you out of here. But I wouldn't advise a jail break at this time. It's still a hundred miles to the frontier, and I have to make sure there will be fresh horses along the way'

'Is the Khan going to put me on trial?'

'I don't know. He couldn't have a public trial. The city is buzzing with excitement, and no one can understand why you were arrested just because the Khan fell off his horse. They're all witnesses and they know you had nothing to do with his accident.'

He turned to go. 'I'll be up all night making arrangements to get you out.' He left.

The others stirred as Derek emptied the bag on to the bench. What came out were knives of various sizes and shapes. His friends grasped them eagerly.

'Look, this is a first class throwing knife,' said Gus, 'Where did you get them?'

Eight knives had fallen out of the bag and no one argued because they were all well balanced and extremely sharp. Gus got a throwing knife because that was his specialty. They were all in leather sheaths with belts attached so they could strap them round their waists. Frederika fastened one of hers above the ankle where it was hidden by her page boy trousers.

These weapons gave them fresh heart, but they were curious, where did they come from?'

'A visitor came and gave them to me' said Derek. You were tired so I didn't wake you.'

'We didn't see any visitor.'

'Of course you didn't, you were all fast asleep.'

They looked at him suspiciously. 'There were some visitors here hours ago, but visiting hours are long over. How did he get in?'

They questioned him for some time, but he evaded answering them. Mr Codd was his secret, and if he had told the truth they wouldn't have believed him anyway

In the morning they were roused by the sound of tramping feet and the noise of doors opening and closing. Echoes that ran through the building. About a dozen men, conducted by a warder, appeared on the other side of the bars.

They were dressed in monk-like black clothes but with head cowls thrown back. Their heads were all shaved to baldness.

They stood close to the bars with an audience behind them in the other cell.

'We have come,' said one of them, 'To make enquiries about your plot to assassinate the Khan.'

'We haven't plotted to murder anyone,' said Derek.

The man who had spoken raised his eyebrows and shook his head in disbelief. He turned to his companions and beckoned with a finger.

One man stepped forward and showed them a curious steel implement that had two large wingnuts on either side.

'This is a thumbscrew and it crushes fingers very painfully.'

There were murmurs of horror from the onlookers opposite who were now three deep and looking at what was going on.

The man spoke as though delivering an interesting lecture to a class of dull students, and had done so many times before.

'It is handy for informal interrogations such as this. And I will demonstrate how well it works on one of you. If his screams and the sight of his agony will not be enough to make you confess you will all be escorted to the torture chamber downstairs where the real pain will commence.'

The prisoners were making a huge noise screaming hatred and shaking the bars and the door of the cell as they tried to get at the torturers.

The man was nervous but ignored the racket. He turned to the warder who was standing by with his keys.

'Open the door, we will start with one of the young ones. We will see if they confess when he starts screaming for mercy.'

'I'll go,' said Frederika, 'Take me first.'

The torturers were astonished. No one had ever before volunteered like this.

The onlookers roared at her not to do it, to stand fast.'

The warder unlocked the door and those in the cell moved towards it as the men approached. The two groups met. There was a flash of steel and a cry of agony. One of the torturers fell back spouting blood.

Shani and Gus were next out, their knives at the ready as the torturers fled in opposite directions along the passage.

The witnesses were now laughing and cheering, a noise which suddenly stilled as they saw Derek pick up keys and ring from the straw underfoot. He had not mentioned them to the others because he did not want a premature jail break.

They watched quietly until he found the right key and let them out.

The warder had run away too, but not far. Gus's throwing knife was sticking out of his back. Gus went forward to where he lay on the floor groaning, and picked up the man's keys, and the knife.

Derek and Gus spent time unlocking every cell door they could find. Soon the passage was filled with a hundred or more prisoners, male and female, exulting and screaming at their sudden freedom, limited though it was.

The three soldiers came to Derek and saluted smartly once again. 'Me name's Bendel, sir,' said the cavalryman, 'and these ugly specimens are Spud and Carrot. The two men seemed embarrassed at being introduced to such a high ranking officer as General Vortimer. They shuffled their feet and glanced at each other shyly. Carrot had flaming red hair, so that explained his nickname. Spud was lumpy, perhaps potato shaped, and he appeared to Derek to be particularly strong.

Bendel was not embarrassed. 'What are your orders, sir?'

'We're leaving, unless you like it here and want to stay.' He pointed at the warder who was lying on the ground moaning. 'Get his keys, the ones we have now may not unlock the front door.'

'Bendel grinned and saluted again.' Lead on sir, we're with you.'

Derek did not know what had happened to the torturers, except for one who Frederika bashed over the head with his own thumbscrew. They may have been hiding, or dead. He did not much care.

Shani appeared beside him. 'Are you alright darling?' She had already wiped the blood from her blade with straw. At this time she did not want to hear a lecture about needless deaths, even of torturers.

There was no lecture, instead, in a surge of relief and passion, he put an arm around the girl, pulled her close, and kissed her on the lips. She was startled but delighted by this show of affection.

So were all the witnesses to this act, they clapped.

'Shani,' said Derek, 'We've lived through another night. And to hell with them, we're going to live through a lot more. Come on we're out of here.'

'Well, kiss me again first.' He did so and said, 'If we get out of all this I might marry you some day,'

More cheers and applause from the rapt audience.

You'll have to ask me properly, not in the middle of a nasty, dirty old prison. and I still haven't made up my mind. But you look after my ring or you'll know what real trouble is like.'

What, worse than being thrown into jail and tortured?'

'Yes, much worse.'

He patted his clothes and could feel the shape of a small decorated box in an inner pocket.

'The box is still there, and I guess the ring is still inside.'

'It had better be there when you ask me to marry you, or you'll never hear the end of it.'

Gus and Frederika came from the other end of the passage followed by more white-faced shambling prisoners.

'I think we got them all out now,' said Frederika. This lot haven't seen daylight for weeks.'

They had found a tinderbox somewhere and Frederika was setting wisps of straw on fire, which Gus threw into the cells.

'You can't burn down the jail that way, it's all stone.'

'It's worth trying, at least they'll have to get in fresh straw.'

'Well, let's get out of here. Come on everyone, we're leaving,' Derek cried. If anyone wants to stay they can go back to their cell and wait.'

For the first time in ages some of them laughed.

Chapter Thirty Three

The Great Jail Break

Hundreds of anxious, worried people were roaming the streets that morning, desperate for news, any kind of news, but it was all bad.

Rumors spread to every part of the city that their young general was dead. Hundreds had seen him and his followers arrested and marched through the streets to jail.

Some said he had died under torture and that the news had already reached the Barbarians. It was rumored that their leaders had sworn to avenge the defeat inflicted by General Vortimer. They would destroy the city, and kill all who lived in it. Citizens of the city trembled when they heard this. There was no longer a brilliant young captain to lead the defence, no one to protect them from hordes of bloodthirsty warriors sweeping in from the north.

New stories flared up like fireworks becoming, all the time, more horrific until their currency was ended, then they were followed by something worse. Another rumour told that the Khan was mad and raving, that the Imperial Guard had locked him up before he could order the death of anyone else.

A later tale held that the guard had rebelled in earnest and stabbed him to death with their lances.

A crowd was demonstrating in Hasdrubel Square, in front of the palace, demanding an end to the Khan's reign. No troops came to clear the square, and the brass-bound doors, decorated with scenes of battles long past, were closed after a disastrous night. For some reason the square, and portico, were decorated with sleeping, snoring soldiers laid out in rows. They would wake up suffering terrible hangovers.'

While this was the scene in front of the palace those in the street outside the prison beheld a miracle. The great iron barred gate, which had not been opened for generations was unlocked and pushed outwards from within by a crowd of men and women, unwashed, smelly, with straw in their beards and hair; blinking after the dark of the prison, but happy to be in the open with a blue sky and sunshine overhead.

With them, leading them, was the man who had not only beaten the Barbarians but had also foiled the Khan's plot of revenge and torture.

He came out into sunlight to be greeted by people who roared their delight at seeing him alive and well, the saviour of their city, the saviour of them all.

Waiting opposite the prison gates was a man on a horse. A pillow had been tied over his saddle, but he was standing in the stirrups with his knees clamped to hold him from falling while the crowd surged round him, jostling the horse. He was white faced and there was blood on the pillow.

They ran towards him while Frederika screamed, 'You idiot, Hassan, what are you doing? You should be home in bed.'

Bendel, the cavalryman, helped Derek get Hassan, who was nearly fainting, off his mount and they stood either side, drawing his arms over their shoulders. so he wouldn't fall. Their arms were around his waist,

'What the hell do you think you're doing, riding around with a wounded behind? You'll make it worse, can't I leave you for five minutes?'

Frederika turned to Gus. 'Get that pillow off, and throw it away. We're going to need the horse.'

'Sorry Freddie,' Hassan mumbled. 'When I woke up this morning they told me you were all in jail and had an appointment with the torturers. I sent a message to my regiment that there was work to be done. We had to get you all out, and they were to meet me here. They should have been along by now.'

Frederika's mood softened when she heard this. She kissed him and he groaned, not because of the kiss but because she had put her arms round his neck and hugged him tight. A stab of agony from the injury had burst through his body.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I love you for thinking of us, and standing all that pain to come to our rescue, but you'll have to leave the rest to us. We'll get some stretcher bearers to take you home.'

A clatter of hoofs announced that the cavalry was coming, and then they appeared round the corner. They were not looking as smart as they did when last seen during the parade.

They had had an eventful day and night. After the carefully composed program of greetings, speeches, ceremonies, awards and eating collapsed they got drunk earlier than expected. There were the usual fights to decide which unit of the army was superior to all the others. Then a terrific brawl took place because the cavalrymen were accused of running away and leading the Barbarians into the trap by accident.

After that fight died away someone mentioned that there was an uneaten banquet that should be sampled before any undeserving persons who had never fought for their country should eat it first.

A rabble of drunken soldiery invaded the palace and ate up the feast in no time. The servants were stopped from removing wine and spirits from the tables and threatened until they raided the Khan's cellars and brought up a lot more, as well as more food.

Horried at this debauchery amidst the luxury of the palace and the loss of all that food and vintage wine the Lord Chamberlain sent for the commander of the Imperial Guard and ordered him to drive out the intruders.

The commander declined to do so.

He was a realist. He knew that lances would be useless in a brawl, as would the young aristocrats he commanded. They were for show, not for fighting, and would be no match for the veterans, no matter how drunk the trespassers might be.'

'You are not an officer of the army and cannot order us to do anything,' he said.

'But His Imperial Majesty, the Khan, is in danger from these drunken louts who have invaded the palace, it is your duty to protect him.'

'His Imperial Majesty is protected already. He saw the rioters from the bedroom window and his servant told us he is now hiding under his bed. It is impossible for anyone to climb to his window and the Imperial Guard is stationed in the passage outside the bedroom door. His Majesty is quite safe.'

'But what about all these screaming, fighting vandals in the palace? They have eaten the banquet, they are making a shocking mess everywhere and they have drunk thousands of dinars worth of the Khan's best wine and spirits. What are you going to do about them?'

'Nothing! When they fall asleep the servants can carry them outside and leave them in the square or under the portico. After you have got rid of them shut and bar the doors so they can't come back in again.'

The squadron of cavalry, those that could still stay on their horses and ride as far as the jail looked and felt dreadful. They had slept on the cobblestones of the square or the marble floor of the portico and when, in the morning, they were woken up by the chanting crowd they were cold, stiff, and suffering from raging headaches.

Through the haze of pain and nausea they heard a messenger say they were needed at the jail to rescue the general, and that was where most of the troop, those that could still ride their horses, finally arrived.

Frederika, who was now on Hassan's horse, took one look and screamed at them to go away. She ordered them back to barracks, to tidy themselves up, to groom their horses, and to be ready for a general inspection at six o'clock the following morning. Any trooper who did not pass muster would be sentenced to fourteen, or even, perhaps, twenty eight days field punishment.

She said a lot more that cannot be repeated in this story, the reader would find it most shocking. Her rebuke to the troops showed once again that she had been associating with soldiers for a long time.

By the time she finished and the cavalry had slunk away back to barracks the street had filled with people who had come to see for themselves that their general was safe. Some came armed, ready to storm the jail and get him out.

To add to the interest of the day the jail seemed to be on fire, smoke was pouring out of it, and flames could be seen lighting the dim interior.

No one was fighting the blaze and the crowd was more interested in gathering around to look at their hero than watching an old prison burn down.

Derek and Frederika were discussing what to do with Hassan, and how to get him home when a small, fat man started shouting and forcing his way through the mass of people. He was assisted to get to Derek by four taller men carrying what appeared to be wooden poles. They used them freely to clear a path to Derek.

Derek recognized them, they were the bearers who had carried Abdul Khayyam, the poet, from the Inn of Earthly Delights to his home only a few nights ago. The small man, struggling through the

crowd, was Abdul Khayyam himself. 'Effendi Vortimer,' he said, puffing. 'A thousand greetings and a thousand thanks for the mighty victories that have brought undying fame to your name.'

He took a tablet out of his pocket and wrote two words on it. "Fame and name," , 'Two excellent words for my next poem which will be cherished through the ages. People will remember forever my great words and the valiant deeds you performed to save the empire.'

'Thank you, Mr Khayyam, I look forward to reading it. Have you brought these men to carry Lord Hassan home?'

'Exactly so. I heard in the streets that you were in need of stretcher bearers and immediately sent for them. Give them his address and he shall be carried there with all speed.'

A problem arose here. No one knew where he lived, and Hassan himself was asleep or unconscious. After the Khan's entertainment he had taken them to Hannibal's house, and there was no way they would send him back there, perhaps to be a victim of more treachery.

'No need for concern,' said Abdul Khayyam. 'The Lord Hassan Suleyman can come to my humble home. My doctor will attend him, and when he feels better I will read him my poems to help pass the time.'

This did not sound like an ideal convalescence for Hassan, but until they found out where he lived it was the best they could do.

The litter bearers were concerned about Hassan's blood staining their decorated rug, but Abdul Khayyam silenced them angrily and said it was the blood of a hero, even that of a martyr. If he died he, Abdul Kayyam, would buy them a new rug and keep the blood-stained one as a relic of the great battle.

The bearers being satisfied Hassan was laid face down on the litter and carefully covered by the rug. The men hoisted him up and rested the four handles on their shoulders.

'My number one wife will complain as usual,' said Abdul Khayyam. 'Ignore her and take Lord Hassan straight to the best guest room. Tell her that those were my orders.' He gave some coins to one of the men. The man nodded and they trotted off bearing Hassan to the poet's house.

'What are we going to do now?' enquired Shani.

'I think we'll go to the palace. We missed out on the banquet yesterday so they can give us breakfast. I want to have a word with the Khan, too.'

'I told you before General, he is a very poor judge of poetry. He prefers my brother's verse to mine.'

'We won't be discussing poetry. but you can come if you wish.'

'Thank you, no. I shall go home and write an ode to our greatest general. You shall have two copies in the morning. Keep one for yourself, sign the other and return it with the messenger; it will be my greatest treasure.'

Frederika was tired of poetry already, she ignored Abdul Khayyam and said, 'I'll let you have the horse. It will look better if you arrive on horseback.'

'I don't care what impression I make, and I'm not riding a horse unless I absolutely have to, it's Hassan's horse, you ride it! Now which way is it to the palace?'

Bendel had a sword he had taken from someone, he saluted with it. He said, 'General, if you want to go to the palace we'll escort you there, and if the Khan doesn't want to see you, we'll convince him to, even if we have to take on the Imperial Guard. Spud and Carrot are coming with us. They're not that bright but you couldn't get better men than them on your side in a brawl.'

They set off to walk to the palace accompanied by hundreds of people. Frederika rode the horse, she said that on horseback she could better see any threatening behavior in the crowd.

More armed men had appeared and appointed themselves as extra bodyguards. Derek's arrival at the palace would not go unnoticed.'

Chapter Thirty Four

Visiting the Palace

From prison to palace was not a long walk for the enthusiastic crowd marching with Derek and his friends.

Perhaps he would overthrow the Khan and take his throne. They seemed ready to applaud any such move, and were looking for some spectacular deed from their young captain.

Mr Codd had made a mysterious return and was walking alongside Derek. 'You were in no real danger from the torturers,' he said.

'They looked pretty dangerous to me, especially when they showed us that thumbscrew thing and threatened us with a visit to the torture chamber. We were lucky you gave me those knives, thank you for that.'

'All part of the Codd service, dear boy. Though I should address you more respectfully now that you are a great and famous general, as well as being out of jail.'

When they arrived at Hasdrubel Square, in front of the palace. it seemed a visit to the Khan might be more difficult than they thought. The tall bronze doors were still shut, blocking all visitors.

Bendel ran up the steps and started hammering on the doors with the butt of his sword. Other enthusiasts joined in, pounding away with weapons and some with cobblestones from the square.

They were making little impression, except flattening some of the battle scenes in bronze bas relief, put there by the master artist who had designed the door.

After a while they stopped. Movement and shouting could be heard on the other side. It seemed someone was struggling with the locking bar until they heard it lifted and dropped on the floor.

One of the double doors opened and an angry figure appeared.

'What the hell's going on?' It roared. 'Can't a man get a bit of sleep round here?' Whoever it was realized he was shouting at General Vortimer. He sprang to attention and saluted. 'Sorry sir, come on in.'

'Hey, it's Eggy,' said Bendel. 'He's a horseboy like me, sir. Egbert's his name, and we ride together in column. Eggy, what are you doing in the palace?'

Egbert was flustered at meeting the great general face to face. 'He stayed strictly at attention.

'Sir,' he said, looking at a point somewhere over Derek's head, 'I have to report that after the parade broke up we was invited to come to the palace and eat the banquet what no one else wanted.'

Derek doubted that. He could not see Eggy and his friends getting an invitation to come to the palace and eat a feast, whether it was abandoned or not.

Eggy continued. 'Well, they give us a lot to eat and drink and I must have got a bit sleepy cos I woke up under a table a while ago with a thumping headache and heard Bendel here and his mates bashing on the door.'

'Very well Trooper Egbert you can explain all that to your commanding officer. You will have to face a general inspection at six tomorrow morning, and she won't be in the mood to put up with indiscipline or slackness.'

Trooper Egbert looked past Derek to Frederika, who had ridden her horse up the steps to the front door.

He said, 'The Lady Frederika is a blood-- Beg pardon, sir, she's a very good commander of cavalry and we'll follow wherever she wants to lead us.'

'Don't you try that with me,' said Frederika. 'You'll front up at six o'clock tomorrow in parade order, horse groomed, uniform cleaned, and weapons in perfect order, otherwise you'll go down for field punishment.'

Derek took over. 'Now, have you seen any palace servants since you woke up?'

'No sir, but I heard someone scream when I crawled out from under the table.'

'Well, that's a start.' He turned to Bendel. 'Trooper Bendel, anyone that is armed can stay here in case we have trouble. My friends are to stay. Everyone else is to wait outside.' He did not want to negotiate while there was a horde of people in the palace.

Bendel and the other soldiers bundled all bystanders and inquisitives out into the portico, except for a few armed men, and quoted Derek's authority if anyone tried to argue. They shut the doors in the face of the crowd and dropped the locking bar back into place.

A trembling manservant came forward and confronted Derek. Sir, General Vortimer,' he said, 'I have been instructed to ask you to leave. Both His Majesty the Khan, and the Lord Chamberlain are indisposed and unable to see anyone. Perhaps if you could come back tomorrow?'

'I'll see the Khan this morning. But first we want breakfast for, I think, twenty.'

The servant sucked in a breath and put a hand to cover his mouth. He looked at Derek with a face of horror. 'This is not an inn, sir, and besides most of our food was eaten yesterday by the soldiers that forced their way into the palace.'

'So they didn't eat everything. Trooper Bendel, go with this man and see what food they have left, we're not fussy, we're hungry. Rouse out some servants to set the tables properly and take Trooper Egbert with you. If there is not enough food find out what has been put aside for the Lord Chamberlain and the Khan; we'll have some of that. There will be no argument, I want breakfast on the table in twenty minutes.'

Trooper Egbert saluted. 'You should try the wine, sir. It's not too bad a drop. Beer's better, but some wine should go down nicely with breakfast.'

'Alright, wine too, and see if they have any coffee.'

Bendel must have stirred up the palace staff. The visitors were soon ushered into a large room which was known as the Smaller Dining Room and seated only forty people. Servants were putting out table-cloths, napkins in serviette rings, silverware cutlery and gold rimmed plates.

The table was long enough to seat twenty on each side and the butler soon sized up the quality of his guests. Derek and his circle of friends were seated at one end of the table while the other end was occupied by soldiers and the armed volunteers.

It was Derek's group that got the nice dinnerware and silver cutlery. The soldiers and other riff raff got plates, knives and forks brought up from the servants' dining hall.

The soldiers were awed by the magnificence of the room and the novelty of eating from the same table as their general, and Lady Frederika, their cavalry commander. She had left her horse outside, tied to some railing.

Breakfast arrived within a reasonable time, though it was difficult to measure twenty minutes in New Carthage. They had sundials and hourglasses, and one huge clock which was prized by the city. It had no clock face as we know it but it chimed the hour and half hour and was wound up every Monday by two strong men using an iron crank.

Cups with steam rising from them were put on the table. Shani tasted hers and cried out, 'This is the same drink as we were given in Abou ben Adhem's shop.'

Derek nodded, 'You're drinking coffee, It's good, isn't it?'

'Do you have coffee like this in your country?'

'Oh, yes. Any sort you like.'

'When you go home I'm coming with you!' A servant refilled her cup.

'You'll have to ask me first. I may not want to take you.'

'I'm not going to ask you, I'm coming! You think you're smart, but you're not, and you're dumb enough to fall for some man hungry woman unless I'm there to keep an eye on you.'

'The girl I met in the bath was very nice. I liked her.'

'Shut up, you talk too much!'

Derek took her advice and did not answer back, Shani was up for an argument, but he wasn't. Besides it would be bad for discipline if they had this sort of tiff in front of the men.

Bread rolls piled on silver dishes in front of them were fresh, and still warm from the palace ovens. Plenty of butter to spread on them together with olives and cheese, more coffee, and wine. At the end of breakfast they were served a foamy, scented, milky liquid in crystal cups. Derek was told it was milk drawn from mares and later fermented. The only barbarian refreshment that had become popular in the empire.

Derek politely drank it and then called for one last coffee to wash away the taste.

The group at the other end of the table approved of the mares' milk and loudly demanded more, and some more wine.

'You have had enough.' Derek said. 'Breakfast is finished, and I don't want anyone drunk on duty.' He beckoned with his finger to the butler, the man came and leaned over his shoulder.

'It's time I saw the Khan. We will meet him here, or go to his office, whichever he prefers.'

'I'm sorry General Vortimer, but the Khan is indisposed. He will not rise today and is taking breakfast in bed.'

'If the man still has an appetite then he is well enough to meet me, you can show us the way.'

The butler was shocked once more. 'Sir, the Khan does not receive anyone in his bedroom and it is impossible to see him without an appointment.'

'The Lord Chamberlain had no appointment when His Imperial Majesty sent the man to see me, now I'm returning the favor. Just take us to his door. If you don't tell him you showed us the way we won't tell him either.'

It was useless arguing. The butler gave in and led them along several handsome passages to a broad corridor with an arched ceiling. Painted on the ceiling was an angel, with wide spread wings. It presided over a bearded Khan seated on his throne and directing a battle. Strange mystical figures, part of his forces, and armed warriors contended against a Barbarian army. Presumably the Carthaginians had won this battle without Derek's help.

The corridor ended at a heavily carved panel, it curved at the top to match ceiling. A large double door had been set in the panel and carved to match. Between the intruders and the door was a company of the Imperial Guard.

The soldiers of the guard seemed startled at the appearance of Derek and the rag-tag group of supporters with him. After a moment's confusion, and some shouted orders they brought their lances down to the ready position as though prepared to repel a charge.

'Chocolate soldiers, sir.' said Bendel. He pointed with his sword. 'They look pretty on parade with their flags and polished armor, but they won't stand up in a brawl. Just say the word and we'll take them on.'

'No,' said Frederika as she watched the guard form up into fighting order. The general won't want to do that. They're bottled up in the corridor at the moment, and the only way out is through us. They might be tougher than you think.'

'You're right Freddie,' commented Derek. 'We'll talk first before the fighting starts.'

The butler pointed at another doorway half way down the corridor and mouthed the words, 'In there. - The Lord Chamberlain.' He appeared terrified at the thought of disturbing these great men.

Derek had no business with the chamberlain and waved the butler away. He ran tip-toe down the corridor and disappeared around a corner.

Derek nodded pleasantly to the captain of the guard just as the door that had been indicated by the butler opened. A servant they had encountered before with the Lord Chamberlain must have heard noises in the corridor. He was taken aback at the sight of the visitors. He retreated and slammed the door.

Derek ignored this and turned to meet the captain of the guard who had stepped forward to confront him.

He said 'General Vortimer, I must ask you to leave, persons without authority are not permitted here.'

'But I have authority! As commander of the army I won a battle that saved New Carthage, perhaps the empire itself. In view of my services I believe I deserve a short interview to ask a favor of the Khan

'You can't see him now, all requests and petitions directed to the Khan must be made out in triplicate and directed to the office of the Lord Chamberlain. They will be considered in due course.'

'Well, the chamberlain is behind that door. I'll send someone to get him. That should cut out a lot of paper work.'

There was no need to send for the Lord Chamberlain. The man himself appeared in a silk dressing gown with scarlet lapels. The color of the lapels nearly matched the red of his angry face.

'What are you doing here, general' he enquired. You were sent to prison because you were accused of plotting against His Imperial Majesty, Khan of the Carthaginian Empire.'

I haven't plotted against anyone so we decided to leave prison and approach his majesty directly. I am sorry to say that some of your torturers died unexpectedly as we left.'

'So, as well as plotting to assassinate His Imperial Majesty, you have also brought about the deaths of some of his servants. For that crime alone you will be taken straight back to prison. '

'That's not going to happen. The people of this city know that it was me, not the Khan who saved them. If you try and put me, and my friends, back in jail you'll have a revolution on your hands. No one is going to grieve over losing some torturers when we decided to leave.'

'This is monstrous! Are you turning the people against the Khan?'

'No, not me, he's doing it himself. Find a window that looks down on the square and you'll see hundreds of people waiting for me to come out alive and unharmed.'

'I will order the Imperial Guard to arrest you.'

'That should be interesting, a battle outside the Khan's bedroom door. The veterans who are here to defend me are of the opinion that the Imperial Guard couldn't fight a cream puff. We could go in and drag him out from under the bed, or wherever he is. Now, Lord Chamberlain, stop threatening me and let's talk sensibly.'

The captain of the guard thumped the butt of his lance on the floor to protest at Derek's words.

Derek looked at him, his face was nearly as red as the chamberlain's.'

'Sorry captain, what I meant to say is that my men think they can beat you if it comes to that. But all I want is a friendly chat with His Majesty. I don't want to fight anyone. I never did.'

'Let's go in and see the Khan,' exclaimed Frederika. 'Once we get past the spear tips of these guys there's nothing to it.'

'You can do that, Frederika,' said Shani, if you want to. The general is not going to charge their spears, or lances, or whatever you call them. Derek Vortimer you stand well back from the fighting. You're not a warrior, you're a general.'

'I'm not here to throw myself on anyone's spears. I came to talk, not fight.' Derek turned to the chamberlain. 'My lord, will you go into the Khan and tell him I have no intention of killing him or anyone else. All I want is an order, signed by himself, giving me and my companions free passage out of your country to Sultania.'

The Lord Chamberlain frowned. 'What? You want to leave us? What if the Barbarians attack again?'

'Make up your mind, my lord. A minute ago you wanted to throw me into jail as an assassin. Now you want me back as general of your armies.'

The Lord Chamberlain shrugged his shoulders. 'Well I am a diplomat, and we diplomats must adjust ourselves to the circumstances of the time.'

'And that includes throwing innocent people into jail. If the torturers had stretched me on the rack, or whatever they were going to do, I would not have been much use afterwards to the army, or anyone else.'

The Lord Chamberlain cleared his throat. 'Very well I will talk to the Khan this afternoon and discuss this document you require.'

'You will go in and talk to him now. He's probably listening at the door, trying to hear what we're saying. Tell him I want it within the hour. Also I want my pay and a bonus for winning the battle. Lady Frederika deserves a reward too. No matter what the Khan says it was she and her cavalry that broke the Barbarian battle line.

, 'And the pikemen!' Roared Carrot. Making his views known for the first time.

'And the archers,' said another. 'General, we didn't need the pikies, we could have done it our own.'

The cavalymen were making their own claim to have won the battle when Derek ordered them to shut up.

In the silence that followed The Lord Chamberlain was heard to sigh. and say to his servants, who were listening through the half open door. 'One of you go and find the Royal Scribe. We may need him to write a document.'

'We're not leaving the palace until we get the pass and our back pay, and this back pay demand includes the whole army. I know they haven't been paid for months, and every man is to receive his money in full.'

This last statement brought on a burst of cheering from his followers.

'I would like to speak to His Majesty, but if he is afraid to meet me we can talk through you.'

'Have you any other demands to make before I see His Imperial Majesty?'

'Yes. We will have to change horses several times on the way and the permit will include the right to hire the horses we need at every staging post until we reach the border.

This statement gave Gus an idea, he said, 'I know how your worship hates riding horses, I suggest we borrow a coach and four to take you as far as the border. I can drive four horse coaches, I used to be coachman for that nobleman I told you about once, and I was his assistant during boar hunts.'

'I'll come with you, if I can get leave,' said Bendel. 'I could ride up on the front with Gus and be an extra bodyguard, and bring the coach back after you've finished with it.

'Is this the end of your list of demands?' enquired the Lord Chancellor. 'I remind you that His Imperial Majesty is all powerful. He is not used to petitioners demanding that he do various things. Some petitioners have been executed because they demanded rather than requested.'

'These are requests, not demands, though if he rejects my reasonable requests I fear what the consequences may be.'

'Well,' responded the Lord Chancellor, 'There is no need to trouble the Khan, I can authorize your requests, as you call them, and a four horse coach will be put at your disposal, but payment of back wages to the soldiery will be a great strain on the treasury.'

'It is the most important of my moderate requests, and the soldiers heard us, so if the money is not paid you risk an army mutiny and the very throne itself would be in grave danger.'

The chancellor had a fair idea of the chances of the Imperial Guard if there was to be a stand up fight with the army. He decided not to risk it. 'Very well, I will instruct Treasury to release enough money to cover all arrears of pay.'

At these words cheering broke out among the soldiers, and the Imperial Guard joined in.

'Excellent, and we'll wait in the dining room until the document that is to be our pass is signed by you, as well as a document stating that all soldiers will be paid in full up to the present time.

As they walked back to the dining room Derek turned to Gus and said, 'Tell me again about your employer whose hobby was hunting boars?'

'He enjoyed hunting but one day he was too slow and the boar gutted him, it nearly got me too. The family blamed me, but I told them, I said, "If you hunt boars long enough one of them is bound to get you in the end," and I was right.'

Chapter Thirty Five

The Travellers

The following morning a four horse coach did appear at the inn where they were staying. It showed that the chamberlain was honouring the first of his promises.

Bendel had leave from Frederika to go as far as he was needed and was in the box seat which was on the roof of the coach, right at the front where he could see over the backs of the horses, and everything on the road ahead. Bendel cracked his whip and drove the big vehicle into the inn yard, Gus sat alongside him. They were to take turns in driving, a stage at a time.

The two alighted to collect the luggage that was being brought to the inn door. It was not much, mainly clothes that had been bought at the bazaar with Lord Hannibal's money.

Shani's horse was waiting, saddled. She intended to ride but would not stray far from the coach while Derek was a passenger. Another horse had been reserved for Mr Codd, though no one, except Derek remembered him, or why he was coming.

Frederika, all smiles, had come to the inn yard to say goodbye. 'I'd love to go with you, but Hassan made his wound worse when he tried to rescue us from jail, silly twit,' she said fondly. 'And what with the wound, and missing the battle, he's not in the best of moods. He told me to say goodbye and to thank you, and you're to come back if the Barbarians start playing up again. He wants to serve under you in another battle to make up for the one he missed.'

While they were talking another four-horse coach rolled into the inn yard. It was loaded heavily with trunks and cases on top, and in the boot. Three people in the newly arrived coach alighted to greet Derek.

One was Lady Cicely Smedhurst. She came to Derek, smiling, 'General Vortimer,'.She was accompanied by a man whom Derek recognized and a severe looking woman dressed wholly in

black.' The woman wore a large bonnet, also black and decorated with ribbons of the same to keep the bonnet from blowing away. Completing her outfit was a large, fat umbrella with a crooked handle, the umbrella too was completely black.

Lady Cicely ignored Frederika but curtsied to Derek. 'You did not come to my "At Home" reception the other day, but I forgive you. No doubt you were busy planning and preparing for the great battle. Still, an apology and explanation would have been nice.'

Derek forced a smile at the sight of the trio, nodded and looked at the inn door, hoping Shani would appear and they could make a quick getaway.'

Lady Cicely indicated the courtly man beside her. 'You remember my uncle, Viscount Magenta, Sultania's ambassador to the Carthaginian Empire. You met him after the finish of that common, vulgar entertainment in which you were forced to take part. It was very coarse, though the Khan seemed to find it amusing.'

Viscount Magenta appeared pained and cleared his throat loudly to drown out any more of his nieces' remarks. They shook hands. 'Glad to meet you again General, and my congratulations for your wonderful success in the battle. Now, seeing you are going home to Sultania, Lady Cicely and I thought you would enjoy some company. My niece has finished her stay in New Carthage and is willing to ride with you in your coach to keep you from being bored.'

Derek turned pale with shock.

'Uncle,' she said, 'Tell the servants to transfer my trunks to the general's carriage in case we become separated. The general appears to have little luggage so that should work out nicely.'

Derek was desperate and said, 'Surely it would be a scandal to ride together in a coach all that distance, people will talk. I would hate to compromise your reputation.'

She smiled at him. 'I'm glad you think of such things but there will be no gossip because my chaperone, Mrs Grundy, will ride in the coach too, and she will sit between us.'

The lady in black appeared to be Mrs Grundy for, on hearing her name, she glared at Derek as though she knew the evil that lives in the hearts of men and would protect her charge from unwanted attentions.

If Derek had to choose between a long distance ride with Cicely and Mrs Grundy or having teeth extracted he would head for the dentist every time. He had been looking forward to travelling on his own.

'The coach will be overloaded, Shani's luggage and mine is being put on it now.'

Lady Cicely raised her eyebrows. 'Shani?? Surely that is the peasant girl I saved from hanging. Still pushing herself forward, and annoying you, is she? I'll soon put a stop to that. Point out her luggage and I will have the servants remove it.'

'No you won't!' Frederika had recovered from her astonishment at Cicely's brazen attempt to insert herself into Derek's coach. 'You're not back home in Castle Smedhurst now Cis, walking all

over people, calling on Daddy to have them flogged or thrown into the dungeons if they even look sideways at you.'

'Eh, steady on Frederika!' Cried Viscount Magenta. 'Nobles of the realm don't talk to one another like that! There are common people around and they'll hear you.'

Cecily frowned and shook her head. 'I saved that peasant girl, and now I'm sorry. I should have let them hang her.'

'You saved her because Derek told you to. Then he explained how you were to do it, because you didn't have the brains to work it out for yourself.'

Lady Cicely drew herself up to her full height, though she was still shorter than Frederika and the two men. 'I wish Daddy were here, he'd protect me from the likes of you, Frederika.'

'What makes you think you'd be welcome in the general's coach?'

'He will need me when we get back to Sultania. I can introduce him to the best people. He should be a member of the nobility, and Daddy said that if he knew the right people, and with his war record, he could be an earl, at the very least, and head of the armed forces.'

'Oh, is that what you're on about! Do I hear wedding bells in the distance. Forget it Cis, he's not so hard up that he'd marry you.'

'That's a horrible thing to say. I am thinking only of his future. He needs cultured friends, not persons like yourself, and that peasant girl. I will see that he meets people of rank and distinction.'

'You mean those titled gangsters that infest our country?'

The quarrel would have continued but was interrupted by Derek who said, 'Lady Cicely can have the coach. I'll ride a horse.'

'No you won't, you hate horses. It's about a hundred miles to the border and another forty or fifty to Sultanopolis. It'll kill you!'

'The fresh air will do me good.'

'You wouldn't ride to the palace yesterday. You don't move properly in the saddle when you're riding and you'll be red raw by the time you get to Sultanopolis, besides wrecking a few horses. Of course you can always go to Castle Smedhurst and be treated there, but that's just as far.'

Shani came out of the inn door and saw Cicely. She bristled and marched over to confront the enemy. 'What's she doing here?'

'She's trying to muscle her way into the manager's coach, and this old biddy, Mrs Grundy is going to come too and keep an eye on them both, to make sure there's no hanky panky.'

Some servants were following instructions and bringing Cicely's luggage across to load on Derek's coach.

'Drop that!!' Roared Frederika, in her best parade ground voice.

The servants put the cases on the ground and looked to Cicely for orders.

Shani was enraged. 'She is not getting into your coach!'

'This is insolence,' said Viscount Magenta. 'You're a commoner, a peasant, and you do not give orders to members of the nobility. Apologize to Lady Cicely at once!'

Shani ignored him.

Derek hated quarrels. 'I don't want to argue. Tell the inn keeper we'll need another horse. I'll ride it there.'

'What, you on a horse! Forget it! You're going by coach, and these females here are not sharing with you. I'll give up my horse and ride in the coach instead.'

Lady Cicely started crying. 'Why is everything so hard? He shouldn't associate with peasants and people like Frederika, and that horrible dwarf. I think I'll come back and stay with you again uncle, until I feel better.'

Viscount Magenta began to panic at the thought of having to spend more time in his niece's company. He had been counting the days to when she would leave.

'My dear,' he said, 'You are a noblewoman and must make sacrifices for your country. It needs you now to smooth the way of General Vortimer into society. I will send a letter to your father and he can invite the general to stay at the castle where you can talk quietly to one another with no one around to make hurtful remarks. Now get into your coach, and all will be well, when you arrive in Sultania.'

Gus had been listening to this conversation and studying Lord Magenta's coach. He said, 'Your lordship, I know those mountain passes, and your coach is way overloaded, the horses won't be able to drag it uphill as far as the frontier. You'll need another four horse coach to share the load between them, or at least a cart to carry the luggage.'

Viscount Magenta pretended not to hear, and turned his back. An aristocrat did not accept advice from a low born dwarf. Besides, he was a desperate man, his wife had threatened to leave home if he brought Cicely and Mrs Grundy back to the embassy.

Derek was about to enter his coach when he saw some mounted newcomers approaching. Their steeds looked familiar, they were riding three of the ponies captured from the Barbarians.

Bendel gave over inspecting the harness of the horses that were to take them on the first stage. He saluted. 'There's Eggy, sir,' he said. 'He's a horseboy and an Angellander like me. The other two, you met as well are Spud and Carrot. I wouldn't compliment them sir by saying they're ugly, they're beyond that, but the three of them want to come and serve your interests.'

'In what way can they serve my interests?'

'Bodyguard, sir! Miss Shani's worried sick about you, so they decided to help.'

'Are they deserting the army and have they stolen the horses to get away?'

Bendel stood at attention and gazed at a point about six inches above Derek's head.

'No sir, not stolen sir. 'Those are the very horses that bolted during the parade and tipped the Khan off his horse, and he ordered that they were all to be put down, every one. Not stolen sir, saved!

'If they come with me to Sultania they will be posted as deserters and if they later decide to go home they will be heavily punished.

'What you're saying doesn't worry us, sir. We served under you in battle and we seen the way you talked to the Lord Chamberlain, and if you're going to Sultania we want to go too.'

Spud and Carrot made affirmative noises.

Shani joined the discussion. 'Stop thinking about others and think about yourself for a change. You need a bodyguard because you won't carry knife or sword, and I'll feel a lot easier if there are trained and armed soldiers around to look after you.'

'She's right, sir. Trained and armed, that's us.'

Derek knew when he was outnumbered and outflanked so he shrugged his shoulders. 'Alright, they can come but I can't guarantee anything when we get to Sultania, and I've told them what will happen if they go back. If they still want to follow they can.

Shortly afterwards two coaches left the inn yard and turned on to the road to Sultania.

Chapter Thirty Six

On to Sultanopolis

Derek had been looking forward to his ride but the argument in the inn yard before their departure had upset him. He did not like Lady Cicely, not one bit, but he was uneasy at the way Shani and Frederika had dealt with her when she attempted to grab places in his coach for herself and Mrs Grundy.

Mr Codd had arrived mysteriously, as usual, and was riding alongside. It was a comfort to have him there and he would go to the man for advice, when they changed horses at the end of the first stage.

Two stage coaches worked the route leaving New Carthage on Mondays and Thursdays. Private coaches such as his and Lady Cicely's were accommodated, also and there was enough traffic at each stop to justify keeping horses to haul the extra vehicles.

Lady Cicely's coach was falling behind being, as Gus had said, more heavily laden with passengers and their luggage. Derek hoped they would reach the end of the first stage, change horses, and be away before the other coach appeared. He did not want to hear Cicely's complaints or suggestions that she would be more comfortable riding with him.

This made Derek a fugitive. He was fleeing from the determined young woman, from her conversation, her opinions, her intention to introduce him into society, and above all her marriage plans as discovered by Frederika.

They easily raced the rival coach to the end of the first stage where Bendel, Spud, Carrot Gus and Egbert had a refreshing drink or two at the inn while the horses were being taken to the stables and changed for another team.

Mr Codd calmed Derek's concerns. 'No trouble, my boy. I shall slow them down a little while you make your escape.'

'I hope so,' said Derek. 'I don't want to see Cicely or talk to her, she'll be complaining, and wanting a seat in my coach for herself and Mrs Grundy.'

'And you, being a gentleman, and a kind hearted one, would probably give in. Though that would bring on a terrible quarrel with Shani, not to mention Gus, he dislikes Cicely nearly as much as Shani does. Apart from any other consideration, if you rode a horse, you would arrive with a very sore behind and have to go to bed for a few days.'

The fresh horses had been buckled into their harness, the drinkers came running from the bar. Everyone wanted to be on the next stage of the journey before Lady Cicely arrived.

As the coach jerked into action Derek looked through the rear window and saw Mr Codd waiting calmly. The vehicle then swung out on to the road. Gus, who was driving, shook the reins as a signal to the horses to increase their pace and Derek could see Lady Cicely's carriage. It was almost half a mile behind them. So far, so good.

When Cicely's coach creaked to a halt Mr Codd was waiting. He opened the door and offered his hand for support as she climbed out.

'Lady Cicely,' he said, 'How nice to meet you on the road. Your uncle told me you would be travelling to Sultania, and I was hoping to greet you at one of the stops. This is very pleasant.'

Cicely stared at him but nodded politely.

He offered his hand to Mrs Grundy as she too alighted in the inn yard. She eyed him suspiciously and fended off his hand with her umbrella.

He helped the two maids the same way as they stepped out. 'Let me conduct you and your party inside while they change the horses,' he said to Cicely.

She frowned. 'Do I know you, sir?'

'Alas no, but I am your uncle's secretary and advisor. Today I am a courier carrying important dispatches to our foreign minister. I have seen you at the embassy, but, to my regret, you have not noticed me. My name is Codd. I am sorry we were not formally introduced, but your uncle asked me to watch out for you on the road.'

Cicely seemed satisfied with this. He was obviously low born, but worked at the embassy, and could be useful on the way. She decided not to crush him with rudeness.

He led them to the family room and ordered light ale all round. Ladies did not drink wine and spirits and water was unsafe, it sometimes caused illnesses. Ale was safe and acceptable to all.

'Travelling is very tedious,' said Lady Cicely 'And the general's coach seems to be faster than ours. Should we, perhaps, hire more horses and catch up?'

Mr Codd's mission was to stop her overtaking Derek so he said, 'It could be done, but it is most dangerous. The horses they are harnessing up now know every twist and turn of the road. They might gallop several times a day between here and the next stop, pulling coaches and wagons back and forth, in fact they could probably do it without a driver. But if you add another two horses at the front they could become unmanageable, and lead to an accident, unless you have someone very skilful holding the reins.'

'Well, what are we to do?'

'For the next two stages, nothing, after that the road becomes quite steep in parts, and stage coaches, from then on, are drawn by teams of six. I shall go on ahead and see if these teams are available for you, and also a skilled driver. Never fear, Lady Cicely, I will be watching over you and I hope you will put in a good word for me when you write to your uncle announcing your safe arrival.'

He left after vowing undying interest in her safety and convenience and covered the miles of that stage to arrive just as the hostlers were walking out the next lot of horses to harness on to Derek's coach

By early afternoon Derek was tired he had been bounced and jounced around inside his coach on the roads which had received little attention from a large and ramshackle empire.

They had not long begun a new stage of the journey, and in spite of the swaying and rattling of his vehicle, he fell asleep into a land of chaotic dreams. In one he thought he was living in a large unstable box. and people outside were hammering to get in. The dreams fled when he awoke to find the coach had stopped in the middle of the road, and was creaking as the horses moved impatiently or shook their heads. He blinked awake and saw that Mr Codd was at the door of the coach and turning the handle. It was he who had been hammering at the window, riding alongside and hitting it with his riding crop.

Derek thought he might be falling into another dream until he realized that Mr Codd was really there and wanted to talk to him. He seemed agitated.

Shani, who had been riding ahead, came back to see what was going on. The bodyguard trotted up on their tireless ponies. The window slid down into the door as Derek released a strap holding it in place. 'What's wrong?'

Mr Codd said 'I had a feeling that something bad had happened, so I rode back and found Lady Cicely's driver lying on the side of the road. He told me a band of armed men had attacked them and dragged him out of his seat to throw him off the coach. I think he had a broken arm. I told him to stay there while I went for help.'

'I'll get out, said Derek. 'Bendel, turn the coach around, we're going back! Did you tell anyone else about this?'

The road was too narrow to turn around a coach and four, everyone dismounted to unhitch the horses and reverse the coach by hand. Derek wanted to help and had his shoulder to the wheel when Bendel noticed what he doing.

'Beggin' your pardon, sir,' he said, saluting. 'This work's not for you. You're our general, our commander, your job's to issue orders and we'll do the heavy lifting and the fighting. Now, if you'll be kind enough to stand back we'll turn this thing around according to your orders.'

'Leave it,' cried Shani to Derek. 'Don't bother. Let them have her. Her Daddy's rich, he can pay the ransom. You're just getting yourself into trouble if you try a rescue. You could be hurt, they're bound to have weapons, and they'll know how to use them.'

Derek looked at her once. 'Take Mr Codd's horse he can ride with me.' He turned his back, and gestured for the crew to continue their work so the coach was soon facing the way they had come. The horse team was attached to the carriage with a speed and skill equal to that of the hostlers who did it every day.

'They were about a mile short of the last inn we passed through when they were attacked,' said Mr Codd. He was sitting with Derek and raised his voice to be heard over the noise as their coach rattled off on the way they had come. 'I stopped by to tell them what had happened and the landlord was going to send people to look after the driver and bring him in.'

'Did the driver recognize anyone? 'He must live around here and driven the stage every day.'

'He said not, but the road forks not far on from where he was thrown off.

He told me that if you leave the main road and turn on to the fork you will soon be in a sort of wilderness and there's plenty of room to hide a coach there. Poor fellow, he was worrying about his arm, if it doesn't knit properly he will never be able to drive a four horse team again.

'We'll call at the inn for a few minutes to see if anyone can add to what we know already. Bendel and the others can talk to the staff while you have a word with the coachman. I'll speak to the landlord.'

Mr Codd nodded. 'I have a feeling about that fork in the road. We should go that way. The bandits wouldn't be mad enough to drive along the main road with a coach full of kidnapped women.'

'Right! The inn first, then we'll follow your instincts and go down the road less travelled.'

Derek remembered the inn well. It was where he had been lifted off a horse for the first time after being kidnapped by the ambassadors from the Carthaginian Empire. It was where his red raw bottom had been smeared with ointment and massaged by a woman he never saw because he was lying face down on a bed, unable to move. He did not relate this experience to any of his companions.

No one at the inn gave any sign of remembering Derek. This confident young man, master of armies, and attended by a bodyguard, had no resemblance to the miserable captive they had seen before. They had little to add about the raid and kidnap, but were all agreed that the bandits would have got off the main road and taken the other way instead. They probably had a base there from

which they operated. Robberies and thefts had increased recently, and they thought an organized team was responsible.

The landlord's son Hans was not a hero but his father made him volunteer to go with the rescuers to make sure the inn got its horses back, and he was equipped with an old bow and some arrows. The rest of Derek's party had a mismatched collection of knives and swords, except for Mr Codd who had, instead, his "Peacemaker" Colt revolver. Even Derek had armed himself. He was carrying a knobby stick that belonged in his coach. It was used to knock on the underside of the coach roof so the driver would bring the vehicle to a halt. Shani strongly disapproved, she thought he might become involved in any fighting and could be injured.

The coach was left at the inn, and Derek hired a horse instead, which Gus helped him to mount. They all tried to talk him out of that idea as well as his insistence in carrying the stick which was almost a club. He was determined to take part in the rescue, and they moved off to search for bandits, and the lost women.

There were clear wheel and hoof marks to show that a large horse- drawn vehicle had turned from the high road on to the secondary track, for it was hardly more than that. Whether the marks were those of Lady Cicely's coach no one could say.

They pressed on and Derek had them spread wide so as to not miss any traces of the captives being taken across country, and away from the road. What they did find, half a mile in, was the coach itself abandoned on the road with the horses gone. It was tilted to one side because a wheel had smashed against a rock and broken, and there, standing alongside the marooned vehicle, was Mrs Grundy, Lady Cicely's chaperone. She stood in their way and waved her umbrella at them.

'It took you long enough to get here,' she said. 'Lollygagging as usual I suppose, while my mistress is in danger.' She addressed Derek. 'You, young man, I hold you responsible for this distressing affair. If you had been gentleman enough to allow Lady Cicely and I to ride in your coach this never would have happened.'

Derek was not prepared to enter a futile argument about who was at fault he said, 'Which way did they go?'

She pointed with her umbrella. 'The cowardly wretches fled that way. I struck them repeatedly with my umbrella and not one was man enough to stand up to me.'

'How many of them are there?'

'Four. They took the coach horses in addition to their own, then forced milady and her maids to get up behind them and rode away. I bruised a few, but they escaped. Now where is your coach? We will follow the miscreants and bring them to justice.'

'It's back at the inn, we're better on horseback for this kind of work.'

'No coach? I have never heard of such a thing. How will you carry the ladies when we find them? Do you never think ahead?'

G'I didn't know their coach would be damaged. Besides, we have to find them first before we can take them anywhere. Do you want to wait here until we get back?'

'Certainly not, my charge is in danger and you need someone of reasonable intelligence to accompany you to help locate her. Not only are you no gentleman, you are also incompetent. You should have brought the coach. Milady's father, Lord Smedhurst, shall hear of this.' She clutched her umbrella, which was the biggest Derek had ever seen, clearly a formidable weapon. He was glad the woman was no closer.

'Alright, you can ride behind Shani.'

'Shani? Is that the young woman who were so grossly insolent to Milady back in the inn yard, and you were too weak, too cowardly to stop her?'

'Yes, they put her in her place alright, and her place wasn't in my coach.'

'So, those are the sort of women with whom you associate. I will not ride with her. No lady would have anything to do with such a person!'

Shani was about to say something insulting back to Mrs Grundy but Derek raised his hand to stop her.

'Alright, you can go with Gus, and that's our last offer. If you won't ride with him you can stay here until we come back. No one else would want you.'

'Hmph!!' Mrs Grundy soon found out which was Gus' pony and strode across. There was no difficulty getting on because her feet almost touched the ground when she was sitting sideways behind Gus. She shuddered and put an arm round his waist.

'Shani, Bendel and Egbert to the front, you three have the keenest eyes, I think. Can you see hoof prints leading away from here?'

'Yessir, the ground's soft and the prints are quite clear so far.'

'These three are our trackers, no one is to get ahead of them, if you do you'll confuse the trail. Shani, you ride in the middle, the other two on either side, and out a bit so the search is as wide as possible. If you lose the trail stop and say so, then we'll decide what's to be done next.'

'I should be in the lead,' said Mrs Grundy. 'My eyes are as good as anyone's here.'

'There will be no change. We can't afford to waste time, it's late afternoon and the light will fail soon. That means we may have to spend the night out here. If we don't find anything in the next hour I'll send someone back to the inn to get food.'

'Hopeless ninny,' said Mrs Grundy. In a voice meant to be heard. 'He caused the problem in the first place, now he doesn't know how to organize a search properly. He is no gentleman, you can be sure of that.'

'No one answered and they moved off at a walking pace.'

They had no trouble following the the track. Trees had closed in on either side cutting down the afternoon light but they could still see the way clearly as it wound the forest.

After a while Derek said, 'Keep a sharp lookout everyone. Watch out for a house or shed where we can take shelter for the night, if we have to.'

Mrs Grundy was tired. She had surrendered to the rhythm of the pony's walk and closed her eyes. On hearing these words they flashed open. 'I will not spend a night in the temporary lodgings you describe unless the bed sheets have been properly aired and ironed and the place thoroughly fumigated. I will demand that the same conditions apply for Lady Cicely also, when she is found.'

Everyone was quiet for another three quarters of an hour and Mrs Grundy fell asleep. Gus had to struggle to stop her from falling off his pony, but managed by hanging on to the arm she had put round his waist.

Later Mr Codd urged his horse forward and tapped Derek on the arm. 'They're over there,' he said, pointing to a clump of trees.

Derek couldn't see any people among the trees. 'How do you know?' He ordered the little procession to halt, and everyone looked though the light was beginning to fade

'There is a hollow in that copse big enough to hide their party, and someone has lit a fire in it. They think they're well concealed.

By this time the air was misty because of the cold of the coming night. It could have been partly smoke, but no one was sure.

'Look! Said Mr Codd, there is no wind. The trees are not moving and the leaves are still except on one tree, and its leaves are quivering on the left side only. A column of hot air rising from a fire is making them move. The people we are looking for must be down there.'

Everyone stared trying to make out which was the tree in question and after much pointing everyone could see that the leaves, particularly on one side of the tree were moving more than the others.

Mrs Grundy woke up with a start and enquired loudly why they had stopped.

'We think there is hollow ground among the trees over there, and they're hiding in it We're going to work our way through the trees and take them by surprise.'

'A surprise eh? Screamed Mrs Grundy as she slid off. I'll give them a surprise. She ignored calls to come back and ran towards the trees with her umbrella at the ready.

Derek knew there was no time for cunning plans now, no quiet infiltration. Mrs Grundy would get among them like a tornado. He roared, 'Follow her, follow!'

Their startled horses were suddenly stirred into action and they chased after Mrs Grundy, but none could catch her in that short distance.

There was a hollow among the trees, as Mr Codd had said, it was basin shaped. Mrs Grundy appeared on the edge of the basin like an avenging spirit and ran down.

The rest of the party rode their horses down to the bottom where Mrs Grundy was screaming and using her umbrella like a club to strike down her enemies.

They may have fought back, but were horrified at the sight of riders armed with clubs and swords coming down the slope towards them. They limped or ran away pursued by a female fury who whacked them again and again as they fled.

The three abducted girls were sitting close together on the ground near the fire. They were bemused by captivity and by the suddenness and violence of their rescue.

Derek climbed down awkwardly from his horse and walked over to see if they were alright.

Lady Cicely rose to her feet, ran and threw herself into his arms. 'Darling! she cried, 'Darling! I knew you would come. I knew you would save me. Yes, I will marry you, my brave boy.'

Derek looked helplessly over the top of Cicely's head at Shani, and could see signs of astonishment and rage gathering in her face.

Mrs Grundy returned panting and summed up the situation in an instant. 'Take your hands off Lady Cicely,' she cried, 'Or I will strike you down.' She presented the umbrella as evidence of her intentions. 'If you were a decent man you would go first to her father and ask his permission to marry her, instead of trying to lead an innocent young girl astray. But until that happens, you will not lay a finger on her. If you do I shall take extreme measures.'

She forced her umbrella between the two bodies and levered them apart.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Back at the inn

It was fully dark when the party arrived at the inn. Lady Cicely and Mrs Grundy had been given a saddle horse each, formerly the property of the kidnappers.

When they arrived Mrs Grundy demanded their very best rooms and led Cicely away before she could be contaminated by Derek's evil intentions. She could be heard for a while complaining about the condition of the rooms they were shown. Everyone else was accommodated without trouble.

Derek was in his bedroom when someone came knocking at the door. He thought it may have been more trouble but opened the door anyway. His callers were Troopers Bendel and Egbert, who saluted. They were accompanied by two young women whom he recognized as Lady Cicely's maids.

Bendel spoke first, 'Can we come in for a minute, Sir? We need your help.'

Derek stood back and held the door open. The four of them entered.

The two maids and Trooper Egbert seemed uneasy at being in the presence of authority. They grouped together near the door, but Bendel was cheerful and confident, as usual. He said, 'Sir, Trooper Egbert you know, but these young ladies are' - He paused, seeming to have forgotten their names.

'Winifred and Daisy,sir,' said one of them. They both curtsied to Derek.

'Pleased to meet you.' Derek nodded. 'How can I help?'

The door opened behind them and Shani came in.

'Sir, me and Eggy want you to marry us to these here girls. Winnie for me and Daisy for him.'

Despite the variety and dangers of his recent experiences Derek had never been confronted with a request of this kind. He didn't know what to say.

Shani spoke for him. 'That's a lovely idea', she cried. Since meeting Derek she had believed in encouraging matrimony, especially if it was with him.

Derek recovered a little. 'This is not how you should start a marriage. You've only known one another two and a half hours at the most! Trooper Bendel couldn't even remember their names.'

'It's true love, sir, we'll have plenty of time to remember their names after we're married. And we've noticed them, sir, as soon as they turned up in the inn yard with Lady Cicely.

'And we noticed them too,' said Winifred. 'And that's a lot more than two and a half hours, sir.'

'Are you sure they're not married already, to someone else?'

'I was,' said Bendel, 'But it was a long time ago, sir. I haven't seen her lately, and I don't think we're wed anymore. And besides, she lives in another country. Eggy hasn't been married at all, no woman would have him until now.'

'That's enough for me,' said Shani. 'They're not married at all. Generals can marry people between wars. Go on, marry them both, I'll be bridesmaid!'

'I can't! Everyone calls me 'General', but I'm not. I'm not even a member of the Carthaginian army anymore. I'm not licensed to marry anyone. There's another thing to think about. You two haven't got any money, perhaps you could join the Sultanian army, that might work out, then they can live on your pay.'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but we do have money. Eggy and me have two thousand dinars each. That's four thousand between us.'

'Good Lord! Where did you two get four thousand dinars?'

'We can't quite remember, sir. It's a long and boring story of private enterprise at work, and I'm sure you wouldn't want to hear it. As a matter of fact Eggy and I are thinking of buying an inn when we get to Sultania, and the girls can serve in the bar. They say it would be better than putting up with Cicely. If it's an inn like this Eggy and me can look after the horses.'

'No wonder you were in a hurry to get out of New Carthage. But what am I supposed to say when I'm called on to testify at your trials?

'Ah, you'll come through with flying colours, sir, you always do. You're the great general that saved the empire. If you spoke up for us any court in the land would let us off.'

He would have said more but there was a sudden tattoo of knocks on the door as though someone in the passage outside was hitting it with the handle of an umbrella.

'Let her in.'

The door was opened and Mrs Grundy stalked in holding her umbrella like a sword. ready for action.

The two girls cowered behind their men who stood warily, waiting on events and on orders from their commander.

'So this is where you are!' She pointed her weapon at the girls. 'Go to your mistress at once. She is gravely upset because a certain individual I will not name has cruelly rejected her. She is so distraught she doesn't know how to undress and put herself to bed. Go now!' She shook her umbrella at them. Tell her General Vortimer has changed his mind and will be along presently to ask her forgiveness for the way he treated her. I will see to that.'

'No he won't!' said Derek, Not now, not ever, and these girls remain here, unless they want to go back and look after Lady Cicely, if not they stay with their men.'

'You monster!' Exclaimed Mrs Grundy. 'You betrayer of innocent young women.'

'Stop waving that umbrella at me! Take it away from her.'

After a short tussle Mrs Grundy lost her umbrella and Eggy had it instead.

Mrs Grundy. seemed shrunken after losing her weapon. Her fighting hand opened and closed several times but there was nothing to hold on to. She looked about as though wondering where she was.

'Mrs G's an Anglander like Eggy and me,' said Bendel. 'As a race we may not be too bright, but by Zeus you don't want to pick on us. We're a stubborn lot, the Carthaginians tried twice to take us over as part of the empire but they went away twice with a bloody nose. Now they recruit us as soldiers to fight in their wars.'

'That's all very well, but I want to make it clear to you, Mrs Grundy, that I have never talked about marriage with Lady Cicely and I don't want to marry her because I don't want to be in her company. I did not hug her when you chased the bandits away, she jumped up and hugged me. Girls, wasn't that so?'

The young women nodded. 'We seen that, Mrs Grundy. She put her arms round his neck, sudden like and said she'd marry him. He was surprised and tried to pull away. But you come back before she would let go.'

The spirit seemed to have left Mrs Grundy at the same time as her umbrella. She was silent for a moment and said, 'So you Winnie, and you Daisy are going to marry these men I see here before me. Is that right?'

'Yes, Mrs Grundy,' they answered together.

'Mr Grundy, my late husband, broke his heart and ruined his fortune trying to pump water out of a mine in Cornwall. Then he died. I don't know what he was mining for but all he got out of it was water. I suppose it's still there, and I've been on my own ever since, and sometimes it's lonely being a widow.' She looked at the two men. 'Husbands eh? I suppose they could have done worse '

She thought some more. 'General, out of the men you brought with you Winnie and Daisy got a husband each and there are two left over. Who are they?'

'They're called Spud and Carrot. Don't ask me their proper names, that's all I know.'

'Spud and Carrot, eh? strange names. I'll look them over in the morning, see which I like best. General, can I please have my umbrella back?'

'No not tonight. That umbrella has a bad influence on you, and I prefer you as you are now. I'll return it in the morning after you've finished inspecting Spud and Carrot. You go back and see if you can get Lady Cicely into bed. Tell her she will have to hire new maids.' Mrs Grundy accepted his decision and left quietly.

When she had gone Derek said, 'Alright you men, these girls are dependent on you because you've caused them to lose their employment, and I suspect they haven't any money, while you have. I know you've never been to Sultanopolis before and I'll give you three days to find a priest, an imam, a judge, or a marriage celebrant. You will marry these girls within three days, that's an order.'

As Derek spoke they stiffened to attention. 'That's alright sir, we was going to marry them anyway. This'll just speed things up.'

'Good! But If you fail to do so I will get my friends in the military to, put you on a charge of disobeying a lawful order, and the punishment could be death. On the other hand, if you succeed in tying the knot in time, you can invite Miss Shani and me to the weddings. Do I make myself clear?'

The girls clutched their men. 'If they don't marry us we're to report to you, is that right, sir?'

'Yes you do. You men, it's marry or hang. I repeat, do I make myself clear?'

The men, still at attention, saluted. 'Yessir, very clear.'

'Good! Dismissed!'

As they left Winnie asked, 'Does this mean we're as good as married?'

'You better believe it love!' Before the door closed behind them Bendel grinned and winked hideously at Derek.

'There's only me left,' said Shani, as the door closed. 'Is that bed comfortable?'

'I don't know, I haven't tried it yet.'

'Well, we'll soon find out, won't we.'

'Aren't you going to your own room?'

'No I can't, it's in use. While you were talking to Mrs Grundy I whispered to Winnie the number of my room and said she could have it for tonight. I even slipped her the key when you weren't watching.'

'I'll sleep on the floor.'

'You will not! You will sleep with me like a good boy, and marry me within three days. That's an order. If you disobey my orders you will be punished, possibly with death. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes Ma'am, very clear.'

'Is my engagement ring still safe?'

'Yes, it's in my pocket, still in the little box the man gave me'

'Good! If it wasn't I'd force you to sleep on the floor. Now put it on the bedside table. When you propose to me I may accept and if I do you can slip it on my third finger left hand

'What if I don't propose?'

'You'd better, otherwise I'll give Mrs Grundy her umbrella back and tell her that you lured me into your bed, and then refused to marry me. She knows how to deal with men like you.'

'All else has failed so you're going to use Mrs Grundy as a match maker?'

'Yes, I'll encourage her to set up in business as a marriage consultant.'

Alright, I give in. Which side of the bed do you want to sleep on?'

'The same side as you. Come on darling, it's past our bedtime.'



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