

Chapter 28.

A servant shot out of Radwulf's chamber in a whirl of flailing arms and legs, slammed the door behind him, and bolted down the corridor like a rabbit for its hole. Ten seconds later, something smashed against the other side of the door. Anred, the steward, winced. Whatever that was, it sounded expensive.

"In a good mood," said the other occupant of the antechamber, without irony. "He let the servant get out first."

"He's mad," Anred said, voicing the thought shared by everyone in Mickleburg.

"Yes," Frealaf of Higher Sutton agreed. "Are you going to tell him so?"

Anred glared across at him. He had always disliked Frealaf, and latterly he had come to fear him too.

Frealaf stretched and yawned.

"Enough to drive anyone mad, all this waiting. He wants to fight. As do we all! Except *you!*"

"Someone needs sense, in this den of hotheads," Anred retorted. "There is no *need* to fight! Those savages will quarrel among themselves, and the rebellion will fall to pieces."

"You said that six months ago."

"That woman is cleverer than I gave her credit for," Anred conceded, grudgingly. "If only we could get rid of her! They would collapse in hours."

"If only, if only," Frealaf mocked. "I believe in action, not wishes. We should fight! What have the Lords of Carlundy to fear from a rabble of bog-trotters led by a whore?"

"Who have beaten every force we sent against them."

"Oh, puny armies led by half-wits!"

"Ten thousand men under your brother," Anred reminded him, and Frealaf swore savagely.

"Miserable turncoat! He was always sweet on that bitch. No doubt she has added him to the stud by now."

"On that I could not comment," Anred said smoothly. "But that is not what the survivors said. Guthrum was beaten in the field before he turned his coat. Bog-trotters they may be, but someone among them knows how to fight."

"Not against our full strength! Not against the King himself!" Frealaf drove his fist into his palm. "We could crush them like a snail underfoot!"

“Always the direct approach,” Anred sneered. “Has it not occurred to you that that is what they want? Even a king can be slain by a stray arrow. Think of that!”

Frealaf turned away before Anred could see the secret flame kindling in his eyes. He *had* thought of that. Radwulf, with his moods that flickered between maudlin infatuation and black fury, was a nuisance and an embarrassment. Frealaf had his own ideas on who should be King of Carlundy.

Anred thought Frealaf had conceded the point. “While the King stays here, they cannot win without storming the castle. *This* castle! If they try, they will be wrecked like a ship on the rocks.”

“Aye, and we will all be too old to do more than watch from our armchairs,” Frealaf snorted. “I warn you, Anred, we will not stay much longer in idleness.”

“Idleness?” said Anred, stung. “I am not idle merely because I decline to strut with a sword.”

Frealaf whipped back, with the lightning speed of a cat at a mousehole.

“Indeed? I hope His Majesty is fully aware of your activities, Anred. You know how he dislikes secrets. Remember poor Ligulf? I do hope your head will not soon be keeping his company over the gate.” He smiled like a wolf. “Pretty Alina would be so disappointed, when finally she returns from the country -”

As luck would have it, the sergeant of the guard chose that moment to stump into the room, towing a young man in travelling clothes, dust-covered and weary from a long ride.

“Messenger for you, Lord Anred, sir!” boomed the sergeant, saluting. “All t’way from Higher Shipton, sir! Any orders?”

“No, sergeant,” Anred said, with a cautious glance at the door to Radwulf’s chamber. “No orders. You may go.”

The messenger stumbled forward. “Sir -” he began urgently, but the steward cut him off with a gesture.

“Not here. Come -”

“Secrets, Anred?” bellowed Frealaf at the top of his voice, also casting a sly glance at the closed door. “The rebels are in Higher Shipton!” He drew a deep breath, and extracted another few decibels. “Why would you be receiving a message from the rebels?”

Anred glared at the drooping courier, to no effect. The young man was too exhausted to pay attention to anything other than delivering his message.

“Sir, my lord - it failed -”

“What failed?” bawled Frealaf, getting hoarse. “What are you plotting, Anred? Treachery -?”

He stopped, coughing, but he had his reward. The inner door opened and Radwulf appeared in the frame. His clothes were disordered and his face flushed, but he was not yet drunk. His gaze swept the antechamber like a searchlight, and fastened on the luckless courier.

“Who comes here disturbing us at this time of night? You, boy! Who are you?”

“A courier of no importance,” interposed Anred smoothly, “misdirected by the guard. I will take him away. Come on, boy -”

“A courier of no importance from rebel territory,” Frealaf croaked, undeterred by Anred’s venomous glare. “From Higher Shipton, Sire.”

Radwulf’s blue eyes kindled to a steady flame, and at that moment Anred knew he had lost.

“Indeed?” Radwulf said. “Here, boy, look at me! What is your message?”

The young courier swayed, thinking: I knew I’d drawn the short straw, but I didn’t know it was as short as this.

“Er - it was for L-Lord Anred, Your Majesty -” he began, sensing something amiss.

“I am sure Lord Anred has no secrets from me,” Radwulf said, smiling with his mouth but not his eyes. “Tell me, boy! Anred, be silent! Let him speak for himself.”

The messenger was a simple youth, unaccustomed to intrigue. He knew he could not make up a cover story and stick to it under even gentle questioning. And there was something hypnotic about the stare of those blue eyes. He suddenly saw a vision of his future stretching out ahead of him. It did not stretch very far, and contained a lot of sharp steel things and a view from the battlements. He gulped.

“The - the assassination failed,” he said, mechanically. “He - he missed. Struck the leader, the one they call Gyrdan -”

“That might do as well,” muttered the steward. “He is the brains of the rabble. Was he slain?”

“No, my lord. Hurt, and carried into the hall. But he was seen walking on the walls in the evening, and rode on with them the next morning. Sir - the assassin - he was caught. And hanged.”

“Serves him right for incompetence,” Anred muttered.

“Planned with your usual skill, I see,” Frealaf declared, to no-one in particular.

Radwulf’s words were coated in ice.

“Who was the intended target?”

The courier looked puzzled. Anred shut his eyes.

“Th-the Lady, Your Majesty -”

The messenger’s knees suddenly gave way beneath him. Radwulf’s expression was to rage what rage is to mild annoyance.

“My wife!” Radwulf thundered. He advanced on Anred, ignoring the quaking messenger, who took the opportunity to flee. “You tried to murder my wife!”

“For you, Sire! She is the keystone of the revolt -”

“I wanted her captured!” Radwulf roared. “Captured and returned to me! Not slain! Not murdered!”

“We tried. But she is too closely guarded. And they will not take bribes. It was the only way -”

“Guards! Seize him!”

Anred knew it was futile and undignified to struggle, and did not try.

Radwulf drew a dagger from his belt and held it poised lightly in his hand.

“So,” he said. His voice was deadly calm now, but he was breathing hard. “So. This is what you do. You counsel me to hide here like a coward, for the whole country to laugh at. And behind my back, you plot to murder my wife! My loving wife -!”

Here we go, Anred thought, behind his terror. The maudlin fool, can he really not see that the woman hates him, always has and always will?

The dagger was at his throat now. He felt it prick the skin, felt the tickle of blood - or was it sweat? - running down inside his collar.

“You disobeyed my orders,” Radwulf said, conversationally. “I could kill you. Now.”

Whatever Anred’s faults, cowardice was not among them.

“You can, Sire. No-one can stop you.”

“Go on, Sire,” Frealaf urged, his eyes alight with triumph. “Kill him! He is a coward and a fool and he has held you up to ridicule -”

He broke off, and backed away.

“Hold your tongue,” Radwulf advised, “if you want to keep it. No-one tells me what to do! No-one!”

He jerked the dagger away from Anred’s throat. “I do not choose to kill you - yet. You may be useful.” He sheathed the dagger and turned away. The sudden rage was gone and now he was cool, calculating, decisive. “Couriers. To every vassal in the Lowlands. Within the hour. Summon a full muster. In six days we ride to war.”

Anred stood on the castle battlements, gazing northwards. Untroubled by war, driven by the implacable force of nature, the country was blossoming into the rich beauty of summer. The fragrance of lilac and honeysuckle hung heavy on the still air. Trees sprouted thick with new green. In the water meadows, fat brown cows plundered the lush grass and their awkward calves butted against their warm flanks. Mickleburg Lake lay blue and unruffled as a piece of fallen sky. The silver ribbon of the river and the brown ribbon of the Road twined together like amorous snakes, and far in the distance reared the mountains of Darain, dark violet against the cloudless sky.

Anred paid no attention to natural loveliness. He was staring at the Road, watching for the slightest sign of movement. It was the last day of May, and Radwulf had been gone for four days. No news had come since. The battle might have been won, or lost, or broken off without decision, or not yet fought. He had no way of knowing.

His own fate was likely to be unpleasant whatever the outcome. Over the years, he had given Irinya many reasons to hate him, of which the attempt on her life was but the latest and the least. He expected no mercy from that quarter. And if Radwulf was victorious, he could expect little better. He had been left to hold the castle not as a mark of respect, but to point him out as one who could not be trusted, who had lost Radwulf's favour. Such people did not have a long life expectancy.

He wondered about handing over the castle to the rebels as the price of his life. Yet if they got this far south, it would be because Radwulf was defeated, and then they would have no need to bargain for the castle. They could merely wait for the garrison to starve and surrender. That was no way out, as Radwulf had known well when he left Anred in charge. Radwulf might be mad, but that did not make him a fool.

Anred began to pace, his mind following the well-worn thoughts like a donkey on a treadmill. He could flee. That would be easy. No soldier would oppose him - they had long learned that the safest way to live in the orbit of a violent and unpredictable lord was to obey every order to the letter and do nothing unless they were told to. Anred sometimes wondered if they had to be ordered to breathe. So - he could flee the country. There were horses stabled in the town. As steward he had the keys of the armoury and treasury. Even the portable goods - coins, plate, jewellery - would add up to enough to keep him in style for some time.

He paced faster, clenching and unclenching his fists. Alina. He would not go without her. She had left court suddenly at the end of last summer, so Radwulf said, and in some sort of disgrace. No further information had been forthcoming, and it was made clear that enquiries would not be tolerated. Anred had not been overly worried. Radwulf often tired of his women and sent them away, sometimes recalling them in equal haste a few weeks or months later, sometimes forgetting all about them. As time went on, it had seemed likely that Alina was in the latter category. Anred hoped so. He was married to a woman ten years older than himself and of even greater bulk, and had fallen hopelessly in love with Alina almost on sight. He knew she was silly and shallow and empty-headed, but he was not the kind of man who chose a woman for her brains. Alina was beautiful, in an uncomplicated way that made steam come out of his ears at the thought of her. Life in some foreign city, with pretty Alina and Radwulf's money, could be very sweet.

As on scores of previous occasions, he came to the brink of decision, and swerved away again. Life might be sweet, but it would undoubtedly be short. Assassins respected no borders, were bound by no laws. Radwulf had had Eormenric of Buchart murdered almost in his own territory. Hygaran of Darain too, according to rumour. If such great lords could be killed at the height of their power, in the midst of their own people, what hope for an exile who had stolen Radwulf's money and his mistress into the bargain?

He started on another circuit of the tower, and then paused in mid-stride. A trick of the light? No, there it was again. Sunlight on steel, unmistakable.

Another flash, a long way from the first, and another, in between. Anred's heart pounded in his breast. Armoured men, and either a long way separated or in a column over half a mile long. And riding not on the Giants' Road, as would any victorious army, but on a lane in woodland, secretly. It was only his great elevation, here on the highest tower, that had enabled him to see those brief flashes of armour through the thick wall of new leaves.

Anred's mouth dried, and his palms began to sweat. Here was a chance to prove himself. This must be the rebel army, or at least a large part of it, come to try to capture the castle. No doubt they thought to find it unguarded, with Radwulf and the army away. They would not know of the reserve regiment stationed near the town. For once, their damned clever commander had over-reached himself. Well, he would get an unwelcome surprise. Let him think the castle half-empty and the town unprotected. Let him try his luck. There were over three thousand men in the castle and around the town, all armed and ready, enough to make the area a killing ground.

From the castle battlements, archers could rake the bridge and the lake shore with a storm of arrows, deadly longbow-shafts that could pierce mail as though it were soft linen. There would be no escape by water, for if his armour did not drown a swimmer, the weeds certainly would. Nor would there be escape by land, for there were far more than sufficient soldiers to pen the attackers in the town and against the shore, and drive them back into the lethal hail of arrows. Mickleburg had never changed hands by storm. It was not going to this time, either.

Anred saw the future opening bright before him. With a substantial part of their force destroyed, the rebels could not hope to defeat Radwulf in battle. And Radwulf would know who to thank for the victory. Anred saw none of the complications - what if Radwulf were killed, what if he remained implacable? All he saw was himself, hailed as a hero, being showered with gifts and office, and beautiful, desirable Alina his at last -

He raced down the tower stairway, shouting for the sergeants.

“Open the gates! Stand the men to arms! Hurry!”

Later that same day, but forty-five miles to the north, Gyrdan came running up to the crest of a low ridge. Ever mindful of concealment, he dropped to the ground below the skyline and crawled the rest of the way. Everard, who had taken on the role of a kind of junior staff officer, followed suit. Only when safely hidden behind a clump of hawthorn did they raise their heads and peer down the other side.

“*Shit*,” breathed Everard.

Gyrdan did not correct him. The Giants’ Road was filled from edge to edge with a torrent of men and horses, winding off into the distance almost as far as they could see. It was moving slowly - so large a host could hardly do otherwise - yet with an inexorable purpose.

“It’s a tiger we’ve caught, not a mouse!” Everard whispered.

“It is a wolf,” Gyrdan answered dryly. “What did you expect?”

“Not so many,” Everard said frankly. “He must have emptied the Lowlands!”

“I hope so.” Gyrdan shaded his eyes with his hand. “But I wonder.”

“He must have! There are millions of them!”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Gyrdan said impatiently. “I deal in hard facts, not frightened fancy! How many?”

Everard bit his lip at the rebuke, and tried to make a sensible estimate.

“They march eight or nine abreast, so if we judge how far they stretch - we can work it out -” his lips moved in calculation, “- allow extra for the horses - er - about twenty-four or twenty-five thousand?”

“Something like that.”

And they had rather over sixteen thousand, about half of them Hygurd’s men and therefore, in Everard’s view, of doubtful allegiance. And not all of them were here.

Gyrdan was not looking at the marching column now, but searching the surrounding countryside. This was lowland country and their ridge was raised only a little, but they could see far enough to know that no other host of soldiers was approaching.

“Where the hell is Fastred?” Gyrdan muttered to himself.

Everard did not try to answer. Indeed, no-one could answer that question except Fastred himself, if he were still alive. Three days ago, Fastred and Guthrum and rather over two thousand picked cavalymen had departed at nightfall. Relying on their own speed and the assumption that Radwulf would have depleted Errendale of almost all its soldiers, they were to ride swiftly south, not by the Giants’ Road but by a series of parallel lanes and tracks. They would pass Radwulf’s army, making lumbering progress up the Road, turn across its rear without detection, and follow its track swiftly back north, arriving on Gyrdan’s chosen battlefield at almost the same hour as Radwulf himself - but behind him. Well-placed cavalry, expertly commanded - and there was no doubt of Fastred’s ability in that quarter - could cut a far larger body of infantry to pieces in minutes, particularly if the infantry were sullen conscripts. At one stroke their numerical disadvantage would be annulled.

Such at least was the plan. It was risky but, as Gyrdan and Fastred said, probably less risky than doing nothing. It had taken months to tempt Radwulf out of Mickleburg, and at all costs he must be prevented from returning there. With Fastred’s cavalry across the Road and his retreat blocked, Radwulf would have to fight or die. There was no possibility of a stalemate. The battle would be decisive.

Unfortunately, Everard reflected, there was no guarantee it would come to the right decision.

He thought back to that long and stormy council of war. Hygurd had wanted to fall back to the mountains, where Radwulf would not or could not follow, but Irinya had been against that, as had all the Highland chiefs. They were growing bored and restless, and if they did not fight soon, they said, they were going home. At the time, Everard had also been in favour of a battle - was that not the purpose of the exercise? But now, looking down on the reality of twenty-five thousand men, he began to

wonder if Hygurd might not have had a point. He was also, though he was not going to admit it, wondering if the decision to split their forces might not have been a little too bold, a little too clever. Fastred had taken all their best cavalry, leaving only a scant eight hundred or so, and those on mountain ponies. For endurance and ability to travel long distances, for cleverness at finding food, even for fighting on steep or slippery terrain, the tough, shaggy ponies of the Black Hills had no equal. But on flat, firm ground they were no match for the taller Lowland horses, whose longer legs gave them greater speed and the men on their backs greater reach.

Thirteen thousand infantry and a thousand inferior cavalry, against about fifteen thousand infantry and ten thousand heavy cavalry. How was Gyrdan going to turn that to his advantage, if Fastred failed to appear?

Everard glanced confidently at his commander, waiting for the decision and the cool flow of orders. He got a second shock. Gyrdan was still staring moodily out over the scene, his teeth tearing at the remains of a ravaged fingernail. His brows were drawn together in a frown that might have been concentration, or might have been worry and the knowledge of impending defeat. Everard felt his mouth go dry. His limbs seemed suddenly heavy, pressed against the warm earth as if gravity had doubled in strength. For the first time he realised the weight of responsibility Gyrdan was carrying, had been carrying for months. All of them, from the great lords to the common soldiers, trusted him to lead them to victory, whatever the odds. Because he had achieved the seemingly impossible once, against Herulf of Oxley - and what a trivial scrap that seemed now - he had been expected to achieve it again at the Black Pass. Again he had not let them down, and again they had rewarded him by expecting another miracle, here behind Highbury Hill. Gyrdan bore the hopes and dreams of an entire army, no, an entire people, on his shoulders, and the burden must be a crushing one.

Everard found he was chewing his own nails, and clasped his hands together under his chin. His eyes searched the landscape avidly again. Still no sign of Fastred.

“What can have happened to them?” he muttered.

“Any number of things,” Gyrdan said, on a sigh. “Sickness. Injury. Losing their way - I sent Guthrum, but a man may miss his way even in his own country if he is worried or weary. A bad road or a bad river crossing. Radwulf may have sent scouts out from the main column and found them. Or there may be a reserve force hidden away south that we know nothing of.” He rubbed his bitten fingernail on his shirt, leaving a slight smudge of blood. “That is most likely. I am sure Radwulf should have more soldiers left to him than we see here. I know they are not in the vicinity,

or our scouts would have seen them. I very much fear that Fastred may have run into a battle somewhere, Everard.”

“What shall we do? He may come very late -”

“He may not come at all,” Gyrdan said, sombrely.

The birds did not stop singing, and the sun shone down unconcernedly, but to Everard it was as if a shadow fell over the world. He shivered. Gyrdan went on staring, and said nothing.

It might be said that the true test of greatness comes in failure. As he left the ridge, Everard following anxiously behind, Gyrdan knew he was looking defeat in the eye. He had gambled, and he had lost. Believing his force too weak to achieve victory, he had tried to gain advantage by an unexpected manoeuvre, and had succeeded only in weakening his position further. If they had been unable to withstand Radwulf before, they were still less able to now. Yet it was too late to change tack. They could not retreat to the mountains, for the host would disintegrate on the march. They could not shift to another battle site, for the one he had chosen was the best available for miles. They could not sue for peace, for Radwulf, from a position of strength, would be unlikely to accept anything less than unconditional surrender. But if they fought, they faced defeat.

For himself, Gyrdan cared nothing. But for the others -! The leaders hanged, the men imprisoned, or put to forced labour, or slaughtered. Lands ravaged, families left homeless and without livelihood. Diribel and her children watching Buchart burn. Castle Caradon falling to the enemy, Tyria and her unborn child captured, at Radwulf’s mercy. And Irinya, the woman he loved - he could imagine what would happen to her. All his fault. They had trusted him, and he had judged wrongly, and now they stood on the brink of disaster. It was no use cursing Fastred for failing to arrive. The decision had been his and his alone, and the burden of failure must also be borne alone.

Everard watched him with silent sympathy, not speaking. He too had borne sole command, if on a small scale, and he knew what it was to be responsible for the lives of others. He knew how severe a blow was the loss - he was already thinking of it in those terms - of Fastred and the cavalry. To fight now would be ordering men to near-certain death. He knew quite well that he could not bear the responsibility of issuing that order, and neither would he have blamed Gyrdan for shying away from

it. As they rode back in silence to their own lines, he was already visualising the retreat.

Gyrdan was smiling as they returned. For the sentry's benefit, Everard thought, and did his best to put on a brave face himself.

Two hillmen came up to take their ponies, and Gyrdan said something to them in Arderin and raised a laugh. Then he turned to Everard.

“Get all the commanders together. Now. Hurry up! Radwulf will be up to us in a few hours. There is no time to lose.”

Everard blinked. The air of confidence and cheerfulness was not for the sentry's benefit after all. In the twenty minutes it had taken them to get back from the ridge, while he had been wallowing in despair, Gyrdan had accepted the situation, assessed it, and formed a plan. He felt his own heart lift. With a commander like this, what could they not achieve?

“Yes, sir!” he cried, and ran.

Late afternoon. Still no sign of Fastred, nor any word from him. Gyrdan knew for certain now that no miracle was going to intervene. Yet the despondency had lifted from him. Perhaps it was the effect of forcing himself to appear cheerful in front of the men. Perhaps he was in turn picking up hope from his soldiers, who trusted him implicitly and simply did not believe that he could fail. Perhaps it was simply the relief of strain, the knowledge that he had done all that could possibly be done.

He surveyed the lines again, seeking any unnoticed weakness. It was a strong position, considering. They were drawn up on a shallow slope, facing a little east of due south. Behind them, the slope continued gently rising to reach a plateau, only two hundred feet or so above the plain, but high ground by the local standards. In front, the slope levelled out to a wide grassy plain which stretched for about a mile before rising again to a ridge. This was the ridge from which he and Everard had watched Radwulf's army approach, only a narrow hog-back of high ground dotted with scrubby hawthorn. With its usual disdain for topography, the Giants' Road climbed straight over this ridge, dipped to the plain, and climbed up again to disappear over the skyline beside the slight hump of Highbury Manor about a mile to their left, without deviating an inch from its course.

On the right, they were protected by a thick and tangled wood which consisted, according to the scratched and disgusted reconnaissance party, entirely of thorn trees and brambles. It extended all the way up to the plateau behind, and right across the plain to the foot of the opposite ridge. Near the edge of this wood, a grassy bluff

reared out of the otherwise regular slope, shading into the plateau at the back and ringed on its other sides by little crags and steep, broken ground.

On the left, about half a mile from the wood, the slope was broken by a deep stream channel. It was this that made the position defensible, though it had taken Gyrdan's experienced eye to recognise it. This stream, the River Darent, drained most of the plateau behind, and was a substantial watercourse even in summer. In the slope it had cut itself a gully, full of clutching brambles and with steep eroded sides. On reaching the plain it meandered sluggishly east along the foot of the ridge, in a channel silted deep with mud washed in from the surrounding fields and half-choked with reeds and weeds. It was too wide for a horse to jump, especially one cumbered by the weight of an armed man, and for most of its course it would be a problem to wade. The water ran about three feet deep, but the mud at the bottom was soft and sticky and probably doubled the depth. Men trying to cross that, with the far bank held by determined enemies, would be cut down in droves.

So, with the wood on the right and the river gully on their left, and the slope in front tending to slow down any attackers, their position was secure on the small scale. On the larger scale, it was less comfortable. The wood extended a long way back over the plateau, but the gully petered out near the skyline. A large force of cavalry, if it could cross the River Darent on the plain, could climb the slope on the far side of the gully - where they would themselves be secure from attack - circle around its head, and fall on Gyrdan's men from behind. If that happened, they were irredeemably lost, and all they could hope for would be to die bravely. At all costs, Radwulf must not cross that river.

There were two safe crossing places. One was by the bridge which carried the Road, a handsome stone construction of great antiquity. Breaking it down had been an act of pure vandalism, and Gyrdan had offered a silent apology to the long-dead engineer as he gave the order, followed by a curse as he was forced to join the sweating men at the crowbars.

The other was a ford, near the bottom of the slope. Here stones washing down the gully had formed a firm gravelly bed. Judging from the churned-up mud on either side, it was a favourite crossing-point for cattle, and men and horses would cross it just as easily. It had proved impossible to spoil or block in the limited time available - especially with so many men needed to demolish the annoyingly well-built bridge - and in the end Gyrdan had had to leave it, hoping that Radwulf would not know of its existence.

At least there were no animals left to give them away. The country was empty except for the waiting army. The sheep and cattle which normally pastured there had been moved days ago, as had all other livestock, food, goods and people in the vicinity. If Radwulf was expecting to feed his army off the country, he was going to be sorely disappointed, unless his soldiers could eat grass.

Gyrdan's soldiers were ranged across the slope between the wood and the gully, a front that they could hold in sufficient depth to withstand a direct attack, especially as the attackers would have the disadvantage of labouring uphill. The slope was steep enough to take most of the impetus out of a charge, either by foot or horse. The few archers they had, a little over a hundred, were gathered on the grassy bluff near the wood. All ex-smugglers, they were under Everard's command. Kerian, now recovered from his wound, held the right flank with his Gragarain. Next to them stood the Bucharain, under Eomer and Eomund, and then the Mortachain under Firdan. In the centre, under Gyrdan's command, were Wootton's Lowland regiment, those of Guthrum's men who had not joined the ill-fated cavalry ride south, and the men of Lanthart and Islanart. Malise of Lanthart freely admitted he was no fighter and was happy to take orders from Gyrdan, and Gartravain of Islanart was young and untried. On the left, the most vulnerable point if the enemy realised the weakness of the ford, was Hygurd and his vast private army.

There had been much opposition to giving Hygurd such a position of responsibility, arising partly from jealousy and partly from the deep-seated mistrust that still prevailed. Gyrdan himself had been in two minds, but in truth he had had little choice. He had to take the centre, where the main attack would fall, and only Hygurd commanded sufficient men to have a chance of holding that vital left flank if the worst should happen. More than this, he knew that in battle you must trust your allies completely or not at all. He had decided to trust Hygurd completely, and could only hope that it would prove a better decision than the one to send Fastred south.

A banner appeared over the skyline of the opposite ridge, the black wolf's head on a scarlet ground. Beneath it appeared a group of horsemen, riding at ease all over the road and apparently chaffing one another and sharing some joke.

"Sloppy beggars," commented an unknown soldier nearby, with the disdain possessed only by those who used to be even sloppier themselves. A ripple of laughter ran through the ranks, and Gyrdan smiled to himself. The men were in good heart. He had reviewed them all earlier, with Irinya at his side. Outrageous, to have a woman on a battlefield, unprecedented even in his wide experience, and yet it had

seemed strangely fitting. She was, after all, the reason they were all there. Some were fighting for liberty, and some for the rule of law, and some for a chance of plunder, and some for a romantic view of history, and some because their lords had told them to, and some because Radwulf had stolen their property or injured their families, but ultimately, it was Irinya who had given all those grievances something to crystallise around, had drawn them all together and woven them into one cause.

They had not sought to give false hope or false comfort. The battle ahead would be a terrible one, and many of these laughing, eager young men would be dead or maimed before its end. But it would be the last battle. Hitherto, all engagements had been decisive in one direction only. If they lost, they were finished, but if Radwulf lost, he could regroup, throw in reserves, and try again. The army marshalling now on the opposite ridge was Radwulf's last army. Radwulf himself was leading it, having no commander he trusted. If they won, Radwulf's power would be broken for good. And they had a chance of winning. They were outnumbered, yes, but Gyrdan had fought vast hordes in the swamps and forests east of Billand and knew well that numbers count for far less than determination and skill. Radwulf's soldiers were all conscripts, fighting without choice or understanding, led by lords who had never fought a battle against equals. Terrorising bewildered peasants was hardly adequate practice for war. They would be tired, having marched forty-five miles from Mickleburg in three or four days, and many would be hungry. Radwulf had not bothered to organise a supply train, and though he would undoubtedly eat well, many of his soldiers must have gone short - especially as the peasants in the army's track had fled as far away as they could, taking with them everything that could walk or be carried. Whereas their men were fed and rested, following leaders they trusted and fighting for a cause they believed in. Any who wished to leave could do so now, without penalty, since she would compel no man to fight and die against his will. And moreover, they were commanded by a man whose reputation as a strategist was legendary, and whose valour in combat was without equal.

It had been all Gyrdan could do not to blush when Irinya said that, considering the predicament his miscalculation had got them into today. But the men had cheered and shouted and banged on their shields, and he had had to concede that they at least believed her.

He could see her now, up on the bluff with the archers, a curious mixture of courage and fragility with a mail shirt over her dress and a sword at her waist, her long hair pouring down her back. Rosie was at Highbury Manor, well out of the way, and Corin was with her (probably by force), but Irinya had refused to leave the

field. That had probably done more for morale than anything else, the sight of their Lady sharing the danger of battle, ready to fight and fall beside them.

Radwulf had got most of his cavalry into fighting formation now. They were a formidable array, occupying more ground than the tightly packed infantry facing them, and still their foot-soldiers were pouring over the ridge. Gyrdan glanced up at the sun, which seemed to his impatient eyes to have stopped its journey westwards and to be hanging about to see the show. He cursed, under his breath. Radwulf had time to attack. He could use only the cavalry, for the infantry were still arriving and hopelessly disorganised. But cavalry might be all that was needed.

Radwulf, it seemed, thought so too. Or perhaps it was only impatience.

A trumpet sounded. Slowly to start with but gathering speed, like a wave rushing in towards the shore, the long line of horsemen set off down the ridge. Radwulf's own banner flew in the centre, as Gyrdan had expected, and out on the enemy right, near the stream, that of Frealaf of Higher Sutton. It was perhaps a mercy that Guthrum was not here, to be spared the agony of fighting his own brother.

On they came and on, the thunder of hooves setting the earth a-tremble. Ranked six deep, shoulder to shoulder, the waiting men gripped their spears and set the butt-ends into the earth. A glittering frieze of steel spikes now guarded the front of the line, like a long and very formidable hedgehog.

The charging mass reached the mile of level plain and thundered across it, still gaining speed. They were near enough now to appear as individual men, not merely as a brightly-coloured blur.

On they came, at a gallop by the time they reached the end of the plain. But now the slope was telling against them. Some horses were out of condition. Some had been galloped too fast over the plain and were getting winded. All had carried the weight of men in armour for most of a day. They began to slow down. They saw the barrier ahead, bristling with steel. Some tried to pull up. Some tried to shy sideways - for a horse will not willingly gallop at a barrier it cannot jump or see a way through. Their riders had to curse and kick and force them on.

Now the charge was within bowshot. A hundred archers was too few to have much effect on so many horsemen, and their range covered only the right of the line. They could not break the charge, but they could frighten it, and to an unlucky few they were lethal. Men and horses began to fall before they even reached the waiting line. But still they came on.

The spearmen adjusted their grasp on their spears, lowered their heads, took a deep breath, and braced themselves for the impact. All along the line, Gyrdan could see others doing the same, and in that moment his heart lifted and he was proud of his men, for he knew this was a contest of wills and he knew theirs would not break.

Impact. The horrible scream of a wounded horse. The snap of breaking bones as men in the front rank fell, crushed by the momentum of dead horses and falling riders, or thrown bodily to the ground as their spears were dragged from their hands. A few attackers made it through breaches in the front row, but those behind made short and merciless work of them. This was no time to take prisoners.

Gyrdan heard his own voice shouting orders, but there was little need. The tactics were simplicity itself. There were two rules: Don't let go, and Don't break ranks. As long as a man gripped his spear, there was a spear's length between him and any enemy caught on it. No sword or mace or axe could possibly reach that far. Death was only a spear's length away, but it could come no nearer. As long as the men either side of him also held firm, no enemy could come at him from the sides either. As men in the first rank fell, those in the second stepped up to fill the gaps. And those in the third, and so on, until either the enemy gave up or until no more men were left. Only archery made much headway against really determined spearmen, and if Radwulf had any archers he was too cocksure or careless to use them. That was one thing at least on which Gyrdan had been proved right.

The line held. Its fringe of spears was complete again, if a little uneven. A second charge developed and was repulsed, and a third. Many of the cavalry would not even have come into contact the first time, of course, and would be eager to have a go until the grisly barrier building up in front of the spears convinced them it was a profitless exercise.

After the third attempt, the attacks hardly justified the term "charge" any more. Here and there some captain or lord would rally a score or two and hurl them hard against the line, but the efforts were local and piecemeal. In a few places they were effective, and the line sagged and lost its shape. Gyrdan seemed to be everywhere, spotting these weak spots as they developed, moving men to stiffen them, joining the defence himself where the fighting had changed character and developed into a hand-to-hand tussle.

Still the line held, ragged now but unbroken. The attacks became less frequent and more half-hearted, partly because a ghastly barrier of dead and wounded blocked access, partly because sensible men were concluding that this was no sort of way to get killed. Gyrdan had leisure to look round for a moment, leaning on his

bloodstained sword. On the right, the enemy had drawn off altogether and the archers, lacking targets within range, had stopped shooting. Over the rest of the plain and the lower slope, horsemen milled about uncertainly, reluctant to retreat but still more reluctant to attack again. Radwulf's banner flew still, at the bottom of the slope, and men were slowly coalescing around it. Give Radwulf a few minutes to rally his men, and there would be another serious attack.

Something caught his eye, and even before he saw clearly what it was, some instinct set his stomach churning and his fingertips pricking. Frealaf's banner, surrounded by a large company of horsemen, detached from the main body and moving swiftly over the plain.

They were heading straight for the ford.

Gyrdan did not swear, because no curse even in his extensive vocabulary was equal to the occasion. He must send men to hold the ford, at all costs. But what men? The archers could not get there fast enough, and in any case they were too few to hold back a determined charge. He looked up the line, more in hope than expectation, and the situation there was all too clear. He had lost relatively few men, but there had been none too many to start with. Any worthwhile number sent to hold the ford would leave the line dangerously thin, and there was Radwulf preparing another charge. If the line broke, they were lost. Yet if Frealaf gained the ford, they were lost.

He craned his neck, trying to see over the heads of the men around him. Hygurd could do it, if he had not taken heavy losses. But the line had sagged out of shape, and he could not see Hygurd's sector. It had not broken, since there were no enemy riders streaming up the slope, but it might be as thin as the battered centre. Hygurd himself might be dead. In any case there was no time to send a message to him. At a fast trot, Frealaf would reach the ford in a few minutes. It was too late, too late.

In desperation, Gyrdan ran a few yards higher up the slope, careful not to turn his back in case someone glimpsed him and thought he was running away. Now at last he could see, although a change in gradient hid part of the flat ground at the bottom of the slope. Hygurd's end of the line seemed to have suffered comparatively little. Probably the attackers had veered away from the stream gully, probably Radwulf had, as was usual, thrown his main weight against the centre. Frealaf's squadron seemed to have slowed down, probably to allow the straggling tail it had developed to catch up. As he watched, helpless, it picked up speed again, still spurring straight for the ford.

And then, oh glorious sight, a company of foot soldiers emerging from the strip of hidden ground, also racing for the ford. They had not cumbered themselves with banners, but several wore the vivid black and gold surcoats that marked them as Hygurd's men. And at their head, a tall leaping figure in black mail and ornate helmet, sword in hand. Hygurd himself was leading them. He had seen the danger, grasped their peril, and acted without hesitation. He had justified Gyrdan's trust, and more.

It was a race, between riders and runners. Frealaf's men kicked in their spurs. But their horses were tired and frightened, and the men of the Black Hills were long in the leg and formidably fit. They covered the distance like sprinters, seeming hardly to touch the ground.

They were going to make it. They *had* made it. They formed up into a square with the speed of a dancing team, one side anchored on the ford, the other three bristling with steel teeth.

Frealaf should have drawn off, pulled his men into formation, given them and their horses a chance to draw breath. He did not. Ever the fire-eater, he was shouting and waving his men on. They crashed against the square like a wave against a cliff, eddied around it, and drew back, leaving a few of their number stranded, dying or dead.

The square wavered a little, then held firm.

Frealaf wheeled his horse, yelled encouragement or curses, and hurtled in again, this time leading from the front. The square buckled under the force of the onslaught. Men stumbled into the mud, or reeled back into the river. Almost the square broke into two.

Almost, but not quite. Frealaf's horse stumbled, probably hamstrung by a swift dagger-stroke, and went down. Frealaf pitched over its head and disappeared in a sea of enemies. Around him, other riders suffered likewise. A few made it through or round the battered defenders, but even as they spurred their weary horses into the water, a score of Hygurd's men came leaping after them, kicking up fountains of spray. One by one the riders went down, dragged out of the saddle or falling as their horses were killed under them. A semi-aquatic fight developed in the middle of the river, in a chaos of screaming wounded horses and drenched, struggling men. For a few desperate minutes it was impossible to judge what was happening.

The struggle in the river lurched to a halt, as if all the combatants had run out of energy to fight. Those who remained standing came reeling up out of the shallows, and without exception it was to Hygurd's side of the ford that they came. Out in the

middle, two men still grappled feebly, and then one got the upper hand, forced his opponent under the surface and held him there. A minute or so, and then he too staggered to his feet and came splashing out to join his compatriots, leaving the limp body to drift away on the sluggish current. Not one man had crossed.

The square re-formed, wet, bedraggled and in a most peculiar shape, but still intact and still anchored on the ford. The remaining horsemen swirled around it, leaderless now and uncertain, only waiting for an excuse to withdraw.

Gyrdan shouted aloud in his relief. He flung his sword in the air, glittering red in the sun, and caught it again by the hilt. All weariness seemed to have fallen from him.

The ford was held.

Radwulf must have seen something to show him the attack had failed, either Frealaf's advance checked at the ford, or Gyrdan's jubilation up on the ridge. The threatened charge did not materialise. Instead, all over the littered field, trumpets sounded the retreat. The cavalry rejoined their infantry on the opposite slope. The sun was already a ball of liquid flame balanced on the horizon, and there was no possibility of a further attack that day. Slowly, the vast host spread out over the ridge, seeking places to camp for the night.

The rebel forces cheered and jeered and shouted insults, but they all knew this was no victory. Radwulf had been repelled, not crushed. This was a postponement of decision, that was all. Yet even that was something to be profoundly grateful for.

Hygurd, soaking wet and splattered in mud, looked up coldly as Gyrdan pushed his way through the excited throng at the ford to greet him. Some commanders would have ostentatiously praised him for following non-existent orders, or would have criticised him for acting too soon or too late, or would have proudly claimed it as "our" victory. Gyrdan was too generous and too honest for any such low trick. Ignoring Hygurd's haughty expression, he grabbed his hand and wrung it heartily.

"Bravely done!" he cried. "Bravely done! You saved us there, at risk and cost to yourself, and every man here is in your debt. Myself most of all! I am ashamed to say I have doubted you. But I doubt no longer."

Hygurd's face broke into a brilliant smile, the first genuine pleasure they had seen him display. He clasped Gyrdan's hand with almost equal fervour.

"Hygurd of Darain is vassal to no-one," he said. "But against the Wolf I am your true ally. I will stand by you unto death."

“I believe it.”

“I am glad we understand one another,” Hygurd said sincerely. “You are a man I should be proud to call friend.”

He cleared his throat, slightly embarrassed, and gestured with his free hand. “We have a prize ”

At his gesture, a warrior twitched back the cloak covering a body sprawled on the ground.

“Frealaf himself!”

“Aye,” Hygurd said wryly. “I meant to keep him for the ransom, but he *would* fight. I am a little sorry, in a way. He was a fool, but at the last, a brave fool.”

“That may give Guthrum some little comfort,” Gyrdan said soberly. “Poor Guthrum! It is maybe as well he was not here to see his brother fall. But the rest of us have cause to be grateful to you, Hygurd. You have saved us.”

“For the moment,” Hygurd answered, in a low voice. “But this was a skirmish, not a battle. In the morning we must fight again. And next time we will not be saved so easily.”

The last drop of sun drained over the horizon, and shadows began swiftly to fall. There would be no more fighting until dawn. But Radwulf’s army was upon them, and Fastred had not come.

Chapter 29.

Gyrdan lay on his back beside a camp-fire, his arms behind his head, staring up at the dark sky with its scattering of stars. Irinya sat on the other side of the fire, gazing into it absently. Neither had spoken for an hour or more. They were not really alone, for the whole hillside whispered with movement and hushed voices, but by some unspoken agreement they were left undisturbed. Beside other fires men slept, or ate, or talked, or gazed silently into the night, watching the innumerable points of light that marked the frightening extent of Radwulf's army.

"Do you think Radwulf would accept a challenge to single combat?"

Irinya jumped at the abrupt question, startled out of her thoughts.

"Who from?"

"Me, of course." Gyrdan sounded a trifle pained.

He was still gazing up at the sky, and the dancing flames and the shadows made it difficult for her to see his face. She said, carefully,

"It would be a terrible risk. Radwulf is a very, very fine swordsman."

"So am I."

There was no boastfulness in the words. It was merely a statement of fact, much as he might say that he was tall or had dark hair.

"You forget that Radwulf will have the sword that nothing can withstand and the shield that no enemy can pierce."

He went on looking at the darkness overhead. It was a while before he spoke.

"I told you my opinion of magic weapons a long while ago. And also - I remember that your family has no true right to those weapons. It is through shameful deeds that they are in Radwulf's possession. A daughter stealing from her father, a husband betraying his wife. Dwarves are strange folk, harsh and cruel in many ways, but they do not tolerate broken promises. Their magic, *if* it exists, would mirror its creators."

"Would you hazard your life on that?"

"On less, if I need to."

"But he would show no mercy. You might be killed. I - I would not wish that -"

"Better that one man should fall than many. The decision was mine, and I should bear its consequences. Would he accept a challenge?"

There was a certain urgency in his tone that raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

"Is our situation that desperate?"

“Yes,” he said, flatly.

She hunched her shoulders and hugged her arms closer around her knees.

“Then no, he would not accept. If he has the advantage, he will not throw it away to fight on equal terms.” She sighed, and added quietly, “And if I were in his position, neither would I.”

“I see.”

Silence fell again. A branch in the fire split and cracked, sending up a fountain of sparks. Somewhere in the shadows near at hand there was a rustle in the grass and a small, vague shape approached, registered Irinya’s presence, and backed away. Neither noticed it.

“Tell me truly,” Irinya said in a low voice, after a long time. “Have we any hope?”

“Always there is hope. But if you mean have we any realistic chance of survival, the answer is no. It was nightfall that saved us today. Tomorrow he will try the ford again, and though I can slow him down, I cannot stop him. And once they win behind us, we are doomed.”

He sighed, more in frustration than in fear. “If he uses his archers and cavalry well, a couple of hours will finish it. If he does not, we might stand until noon.”

“Radwulf is not your equal as a general.”

“No,” he said bitterly. “Radwulf has not lost his entire cavalry on a fool’s errand.”

“You do not know that you have. What if Fastred comes after all?”

“If he comes in time, then all is changed. But it is a frail hope, lady.”

She brushed the caveat aside. “You mean, Radwulf could not prevail if Fastred were here? Treat it as a hypothetical question,” she added, as he hesitated.

“Oh, a hypothetical question. Very well. No, he could not. He has moved most of his army onto the plain to camp, where there is water for the horses. You can see that from the watch-fires. With our cavalry in possession of the ridge his position would be untenable.”

“Would he know that?”

“He is not a fool.”

“Then,” she persisted, “he does not know that Fastred is behind him.”

“Or he knows that Fastred is destroyed.”

“If he knew that he would have told us so,” she said, with decision. “I know that much of his character. He never misses an opportunity to triumph over others. So -”

Gyrdan turned his face toward her.

“Go on.”

“Well - I know nothing of military theory, you understand. But it seems that much depends on what the commanders think, not what is necessarily true. You tricked Guthrum at the Black Pass, and Herulf in the Valley of Pigs. Fastred tricked the commander at Eagle Crag. So - is it not possible that the *threat* of Fastred might be as much use as the reality? If Radwulf believed Fastred was approaching, might he not move to another position? Or at least wait before attacking us? It might give us time, at the least -”

Her voice trailed off as the brief light of interest in Gyrdan’s eyes flickered out.

“You mean someone to tell Radwulf that reinforcements are coming and this is all a cunning plan to draw him into a trap? A helpful deserter, or a captured scout who’ll obligingly crack under interrogation. It is a good idea, lady.” He heaved a sigh. “Fastred and I pulled it off once, a long time ago, when some imbecile in high command managed to get us cut off in enemy territory with the nearest reinforcements a hundred miles away. Unfortunately, it has one flaw. The messenger has to be someone the enemy will believe. It worked last time because I was only a scout serving for pay, and so they weren’t surprised when my loyalty proved easy to break. But this time? Would Radwulf really believe anyone offering to desert from you to him?” A little snort of bitter amusement. “Not often that extreme loyalty is a disadvantage, is it? But I can’t think of anyone in the host that Radwulf would trust to betray you.”

He ran a hand through his hair, and went back to staring into the darkness. “I am sorry, lady. I have failed you, and all these others. I have thought and thought and I can see no way out. I am afraid all we can do is pray for a miracle.”

After a long time, she said, “Whatever happens tomorrow, I do not think you have failed us, Gyrdan.”

There was no answer. Looking across at him, she saw that his eyes had closed and he was sleeping, the deep, drugged sleep of exhaustion. She had watched him sleep like that once before, in the cave above Mickleburg town, and now she saw that more grey had come in his hair and his face was stamped with anxiety and care even in repose. On an impulse, knowing he would not wake, she went to him and folded the blanket around him, drawing it close under his chin to keep out the night chill. His face was warm under her hand, and she felt a sudden, transient desire to kiss him - but old fears were too strong and she shrank back. Instead she sat down quietly beside him, to watch, and wait for the hopeless dawn.

In the shadows outside the circle of firelight, a small dark figure crept away, unseen.

At another, much larger, fire almost at the bottom of the slope, Everard was not sleeping. He was officer of the watch, for two anxious hours responsible for the camp's safety. Half a mile away across the plain, a line of bonfires marked the frontier of Radwulf's camp, and every now and then dark figures would pass to and fro across the light. It was quite clear that neither side was contemplating a night attack, but nevertheless Everard was on edge, cold, tired and worried.

"Everard?" said Rosie's unmistakable voice behind him. "I brung you a drink. Is that allowed? Bein' as you're on duty, I mean?"

"I don't know about being allowed, but it's very welcome." He took the proffered tankard. "Oh, it's hot! What is it?"

"Mulled ale."

"That was very kind of you, to go to all the trouble of making it and bringing it out here. Thank you."

"It's cold out 'ere. Anyway, it weren't no trouble."

He took a deep swallow, feeling the warmth flow down to his toes and then start rising again as a delicious cloud of comfort.

"Marvellous," he said, sincerely.

"I brung mine too. Can I stay?"

"Well, that isn't really allowed. But I'd like it if you did."

They sat side by side in silence for a while, watching the fire. A couple of sentries loomed up, reported that all was well, and melted back into the shadows.

Presently, Rosie picked up the two empty tankards and put them back on the tray. But she did not rise to go.

"You got a rip in your sleeve," she reproved him. "I said it needed mendin', an' now it's got twice the size it were before."

"I forgot about it."

"I'd of done it for you, if you'd said."

"It's not right you should do my mending. It's not as if -"

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "Never mind."

Another long silence, heavy with unspoken hopes. Rosie broke it.

"There's goin' to be a battle tomorrow, ain't there?"

"Yes."

"Will it be a bad one? As bad as today?"

"Worse. Probably much worse."

“Oh. Oh, dear.” A pause, and then, “Ave I got to stay at the ‘ouse again? Can’t I stay ‘ere?”

“Good grief, no! You might get hurt!”

“I don’t care.”

“You don’t know what it is you’re saying, Rose. A battlefield is a terrible place.”

“It can’t be no worse than the waitin’. You dunno what it’s like. Bein’ lonely an’ scared an’ feelin’ so *useless*, an’ - what’s worst of all - not knowin’. We could ‘ear a bit, but we couldn’t see nothin’, couldn’t tell what was goin’ on. An’ Corin kept whinin’ an’ snivellin’, an’ I told ‘im it were all ‘is fault for bein’ a sneak, an’ ‘e cried an’ cried. I wished I’d not said it, but it were too late. An’ then it all went quiet an’ dark, an’ we still didn’t know what ‘ad ‘appened, but we durstn’t go outside to see. An’ then they started fetchin’ in those what were ‘urt - screamin’ an’ groanin’ an’ covered in blood - an’ every time I could ‘ardly bear to look in case it were you - an’ it were ages afore Miss sent someone to say you was all right, an’ - oh, *Briar!* I were so *scared* -!”

She burst into tears, scrabbling in her sleeve for a handkerchief.

“Oh, poor Rose,” Everard said, helplessly. He put a tentative hand on her shoulder, and got a lot more than he bargained for. With a convulsive movement she turned to him and buried her face against his chest, sobbing as if her heart would break.

A sentry came up to report, and discreetly withdrew.

“Shh,” Everard whispered. He slipped his arms round her and drew her close, torn between embarrassment and delight. “Don’t cry, Rose, don’t cry. It’s over.”

“No, it ain’t,” she wept, incoherently. “There’ll be another fight tomorrow. An’ - an’ - an’ - Oh, *Briar!* ‘Ave - ‘ave you got to be in it?”

Everard’s heart hammered in his breast. Not a general abstract fear after all, but a real and personal one. All this concern was not to be thinly spread among thousands, but given, whole and complete, to him alone. It was a gift he would never have dared to hope for, given him freely and unasked. He held her tighter, feeling the warmth of her body, the roughness of her dress under his hands, her hair soft as silk against his face.

“Oh, Rose,” he murmured. “Oh, *Rose* -”

He was not aware that she had moved, but somehow she must have because suddenly he was kissing her, her lips soft and warm under his, salt-tasting from her tears, and her arms were around him, hugging him close, as though she wished never to let him go.

He came up for air, gazing on her lovely tear-stained face as a man crossing a desert might gaze on an oasis.

“Sweet,” he said, through a sudden constriction in his throat. “Do you - do you like me a little? Do you - could you come to care for me, in time? I - I can’t offer you very much, Rose - I mean, the estate’s nearly derelict, and the house is falling down, and - and I know I’m not all that much to look at, and you’re so beautiful - but there’s the cottage, we could live there for a year or two, and if things really do come right, like the Lady says, the land is good, and in a few years I might earn enough to repair the hall - and - and - oh, what’s the *use*? Rose, you’re so lovely. You could have nearly any man in this country - men with land and money and servants, who’ll give you jewels and fancy clothes, and I can’t offer you anything like that - but I love you, Rose. I love you so *much*. Look - I don’t want you to make any promises now - not until after tomorrow - but if - if we get out of this alive, Rose - will you marry me?”

She was laughing and crying together. “Oh, Briar,” she sobbed. “Oh, Briar! I thought you’d never ask!”

Corin stumbled with a splash into one of the innumerable tiny streams that meandered across the plain, landing on his hands and knees in mud and shallow water. A surprised duck flew up, quacking, and Corin hurled a handful of mud after it, trying not to cry. This had seemed such a good idea at the time, as he had lain near Gyrdan’s camp-fire waiting for Irinya to go away and listening to their talk. Someone was needed to go and warn Radwulf that Fastred was approaching with two thousand heavy cavalry. Someone that Radwulf would trust. Just the job for Corin the Cunning, Hero of the Age. After all, he had betrayed Irinya to Radwulf once already. He would go and say he had been brought as a servant, that Irinya had been unkind to him and he hated her, and that as a servant he’d heard the officers talking at dinner. He would say that he hadn’t understood everything - which was quite true - but that reinforcements were coming and Radwulf was in a trap. This would frighten Radwulf into going away - Corin didn’t quite see how, but he was willing to take Gyrdan’s word for it. He would have saved the day, and perhaps Irinya would forgive him for the first betrayal, and Gyrdan would be nice to him again. And Rosie would have to stop scolding him about it. It had seemed so easy.

But somehow he hadn’t thought of the problems of walking half a mile in the dark across country. He kept falling over things or getting caught on things. There was a rip in his trousers and a graze on his knee, he’d hurt his wrist somehow, and now he

was wet and muddy and cold into the bargain. The watch fires of his own side seemed a very long way behind, and the watch fires of Radwulf's army still seemed a very long way ahead.

He struggled up out of the stream. His shoes were full of squishy mud, and his socks were sliding down under the weight of water in them. He sneezed, and thought longingly of a fire and Rosie telling him off for getting dirty.

Then he squared his shoulders and stuck out his chin. Corin the Cunning wouldn't be put off by a bit of mud! He squelched on.

"Gorrit!"

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder and knocked him flat to the ground, and something came down hard on his back, winding him. He lay crushed under the weight, sobbing with shock.

"Wor' is it?"

"Don't rightly know. Hal! Shine a light, will tha?"

A bright light and the choking smell of resinous smoke. Corin tried to cough, not easy with fourteen stone of sentry sitting between his shoulder-blades.

"A lad!" said an incredulous voice. "Nowt but a lad! Let him up."

The weight lifted off Corin's back, and a hand grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up, roughly but not unkindly. The three men gathered round, staring at the woebegone little figure with its wet clothes and dirty, tear-streaked face.

"What's he doing here?" wondered the one called Hal, waving the torch.

"What do we do wi' him?"

"Spank him and send him back to his Mam," suggested the third man, a kindly looking fellow who probably had children of his own. "Lad can't do no harm. Let him go."

"Sarge said, all strangers to be reported," said Hal, doubtfully. "Don't want to get into no trouble."

"Nay, let t'lad go -"

"Please sir," Corin said, trying to stop his voice shaking. "Please sir, I don't want to go. I want to see the King. I - I got somethin' to tell 'im."

Birds started singing. A thin ribbon of pink appeared in the eastern sky. Slowly, the darkness got less thick. One by one, the stars winked out.

Now there was enough light for men to see the faces of their fellows. Each man looked, and looked away, wondering if his own face bore the same ashen fear of swift-approaching doom. For Fastred had not come, and all knew it.

Gyrdan had been up and about for hours. He organised a hot breakfast all round, then had the fires extinguished. He made all the sergeants go round checking weapons and replacing them while there was still time. He set men to move all spare food and gear up close behind the line, so if by some chance they were surrounded but not overwhelmed they would have supplies to hand. He checked the casualty lists and redeployed men to fill in gaps and reinforce weak spots. He split their handful of cavalry in two, sending half to each flank where it might be used to some, limited, effect against unprotected infantry. He called a council of war involving every commander, great and small, and reminded them again that no situation is hopeless unless men believe it so. He moved among the troops, exchanging a word here, cracking a joke there, seeking by his own example to convince them to fight to the best of their ability and the end of their strength. Irinya, too, contrived to speak to almost every man in the host during that anxious period. And they responded, standing a little straighter, holding their heads a little higher, trusting in their commander to lead them to another victory. In his heart Gyrdan hated himself for this deception but, as they must fight, he was determined they would fight well.

By first light all were in position, ready and waiting. Hygurd and a strong detachment held the ford. The archers and the two women were up on the knoll. The remainder were strung between wood and gully again. Nobody had noticed Corin's absence, and few would have given it much thought if they had.

The sky turned slowly from black to cobalt to sapphire to azure. The sun came up, a ball of scarlet flame, and the last stars, low in the west, fled before it. Light flooded the land. All eyes turned, in fear and hope, down to the plain.

Radwulf's army was still there. Not all of it had troubled to rise early, but the infantry were drawn up in good order, rank upon rank of them. Fresh from a night's sleep, having fought no battle the previous day, these alone outnumbered the defenders. And behind them, still scattered around their camp-fires, insouciantly declining to hurry, sprawled the cavalry. The lower slope was still littered with yesterday's casualties, but these were a few leaves in a forest, a few pebbles on a mountain.

Every heart sank. Even the most stupid or the most hopeful realised in that moment the desperation of their plight. The grass took on a fresher green, the sky a more brilliant blue, the sunlight a brighter warmth, the air a new softness. All became suddenly, intensely, aware of the beating of their own hearts, the surge of their own blood, the sigh of their own breathing. All knew that by nightfall their

own bodies, now so warm and strong and alive, might be lying here mutilated and cooling under the uncaring sky.

For a fraction of a second the dread lasted, for the space between two heartbeats, or the time it takes to blink an eye. Then men gripped their weapons, and set their teeth, and waited. Not so much from any high principle as from sheer cussedness. If Radwulf wanted them off this hill, he would have to force them off. They were damned if they were going to oblige him by going quietly.

A deep and ominous silence fell over the waiting men, electric with stored energy, like the oppressive stillness that comes before a thunderstorm.

It was broken by a woman's cry.

"Look!" Rosie shrieked. "Oh, look! look! look!"

High on the opposite ridge stood the figure of a single horseman, his mail and helm shining silver in the new sun. Another joined him. And another. And then many more, singly or in little groups, until the whole ridge was capped with a band of silver.

Radwulf's men were looking over their shoulders, mouths agape. And then their astonishment turned to disbelief, and then to terror. For in the centre of the horsemen a banner unfurled, soaring triumphant in the hilltop breeze. Scarlet on white it glowed, so bright it hurt the eye to gaze upon it. The emblem of the rising sun.

A great, simultaneous cheer went up from the assembled defenders, rolling heavenwards in a huge shout of joy and relief.

"Fastred!" Gyrdan muttered. "Twelve bloody hours late! I'll court-martial him! I'll flog him round the regiment! I'll reduce him to the ranks! I'll - I'll -"

And then he started cheering too.

Fastred's arrival threw Radwulf's camp into a turmoil of confusion. Men were marched hither and thither, disbanded, reformed, disbanded again. A hurried council-of-war developed. It was quite clear that no action could be expected from that quarter for an hour at least.

Up on the ridge, Fastred had evidently reached the same conclusion. Riders were still arriving, obviously the stragglers from a very attenuated column, and with a weary look to them that suggested a desperate ride. But they were evidently not going to have to fight quite yet, and Fastred was using the time well. They marshalled into groups, each under its own sergeant or captain. Turn by turn, under armed escort, they started to disappear back over the ridge, to water their horses at

the streams on the far side. Some lay down to snatch a little sleep. Food was fished out of saddlebags. The horses started cropping grass where they stood.

Presently, Fastred and Guthrum left the ridge with a small escort, crossed Hygurd's ford and came galloping up. The horses were tired and dull with sweat, and the men were all coated in dust, yawning and red-eyed after riding all night. But they were grinning all over their faces like schoolboys unexpectedly let out of lessons.

Gyrdan greeted Fastred with the mixture of conflicting emotions that makes a mother first hug her straying child and then box its ears.

"Where in hell have you *been*, Fastred? You were supposed to be here hours ago!"

"We were," Fastred said jauntily. "Didn't you see us? Up on the skyline, shining in the sun. Very dramatic, I thought."

"I meant in fighting trim and proper formation! Not scattered over miles, men exhausted and horses blown after a night ride!"

"Well, you should have said so, then." He tutted under his breath. "Inadequate briefing. Shocking."

"I expect you to use your brains! If you have any! What in hell were you playing at, Fastred? You couldn't have fought Radwulf if he'd been awake enough to make a battle of it."

"Ah, but *he* didn't know that. I say, is that bacon I can smell? I hoped we'd be in time for breakfast."

"It could have been a disaster!"

"Now, now!" Fastred wagged an admonitory finger. "Play fair, my friend. It could have, but it wasn't. First rule of warfare. What counts is the result." His grin widened, if that were possible. "And we have quite a result for you, haven't we, Guthrum? *Quite* a result. But you haven't even asked me why we were late."

Gyrdan gave up. It was impossible to be angry with Fastred in this mood.

"I asked you where you'd been, and didn't get an answer," he said, beginning to relax for the first time in days. He sat down suddenly on the grass, as if some invisible string had been cut, and ran a hand through his hair. "Go on, then, tell us."

"Three guesses."

"*Fastred.*"

"Oh, all right. Show them, Guthrum. They ought by rights to be presented on a red velvet cushion with gold tassels on the corners," he added, as Guthrum produced

a bunch of huge keys from his pocket, beaming like a child bringing flowers for its mother. “But we haven’t really had time for the formalities.”

He took the keys from Guthrum, bowed theatrically, and offered them to Irinya.

“May I present to you, lady, the keys of Mickleburg Castle!”

Irinya seemed stunned. She took the keys disbelievingly, weighing them in her hand, and looked from Fastred to Guthrum and back to the keys again.

“How did you get these?” she asked, astonished. “Did you steal them somehow?”

“Took the castle.”

“*What?*”

“You took the castle -?” Gyrdan repeated. “*That* castle! Is this some sort of joke?”

“It’d be in very poor taste if it was,” Fastred said virtuously. “Honestly. The castle is yours, lady. Garrisoned by our men - that’s why we’re a few short - and with Hedric as captain.”

“How -?”

“Well, I don’t quite understand it myself,” Fastred admitted frankly. “And we didn’t intend to -”

“You were specifically told not to!” Gyrdan interrupted. “Don’t you listen to orders? No distractions, I said. Get yourself here as fast as possible, I said. And come what may, get here by last night. A child could have understood!”

“Local initiative,” Fastred said, unabashed. “Seize the opportunity. You’re always telling me a good officer thinks for himself. So I did. As we rode past the castle - and we had to ride right past, you understand, because of the roads -”

“You could have got on to the Giants’ Road a good eight miles north of Mickleburg!”

“Could we?” said Fastred innocently. “Must have missed the turn. Anyway -”

“Accidentally on purpose,” Gyrdan fumed. “Fastred, this is the *last* time I *ever* trust you with anything important -”

“Am I telling you the story or not? *Anyway*, as we rode past, we saw the gate was still open -”

“And there were hardly any soldiers about on the walls,” Guthrum added. “You know how unusual that is, lady. And they must have had warning of our approach, because you can see for miles from the battlements.”

“Guthrum was for sticking to orders and riding on,” Fastred continued. “So when you court-martial me for insubordination, Gyrdan, make sure you leave him out of it. But I thought it looked worth investigating. So I hailed the watch.”

“From a safe distance,” Guthrum said with a smile. “I never heard anyone shout so loud.”

“And one sleepy sentry stuck his head out of a window and hailed back,” Fastred said incredulously. “Nothing else. The whole place looked like the castle in that fairy tale -”

“Except it wasn’t covered in thorns,” said Guthrum, who was a stickler for accuracy.

“Well, apart from that -”

“And we’d already rescued the princess out of it.”

“Yes, all right -”

“And this one’s in the middle of a lake.”

“Some people are so literal-minded,” Fastred complained. “*Anyway*, what I mean is, it looked utterly asleep. So we stationed guards in the town and on the bridge and rode right in -”

Gyrdan groaned.

“Honestly, you don’t know what it was like unless you were there. I really thought there was some spell on the place. It didn’t seem there was any risk at all. And we might never get such a chance again.”

“And the sergeant of the watch came staggering out of the guardroom and stared at us,” Guthrum went on, eager to tell part of the tale. “We - I mean, Lord Fastred - shouted at him for being sloppy and badly turned out -”

“Gravy all down his tunic and rust on his spear,” Fastred said disapprovingly. “Wootton would’ve had a pink fit.”

“- and said we were taking the castle over on behalf of the Lady of Carlundy. And the sergeant stood up straight and saluted us and said ‘Yessir!’” Guthrum finished.

“He’d never had orders to the contrary,” Fastred explained. “Nobody had told him what to do. He didn’t much like that. He was a lot happier when we turned up and started ordering him about again.”

“Sergeant Treowin,” Irinya said, with a half-smile of recognition. “Loyal as a carthorse and about as bright. But still I do not understand. What had happened to Anred the steward? He would surely not have fled from you?”

Guthrum looked troubled. “No, lady. He had not fled.” He drew a deep breath. “We asked the sergeant where his lord was. And it seemed he had had word of our approach an hour or two before, and had gone rushing down to the armoury for weapons -”

“Thinking to attack us, I suppose. But he never came back.”

Guthrum swallowed. “The - the sergeant said the armoury was haunted. He said demons had driven Lord Anred mad. They had heard screams - terrible screams - echoing up the stairs. And they thought of the old curse, and none dared to go down and find out what had become of him.”

“Except you two, of course,” Gyrdan said.

Fastred shrugged irreverently. “Curses, curses. Heard one, heard ‘em all. Though I thought there was something in it at first, I don’t mind telling you. He seemed to have been spirited away altogether.”

“Then we saw a little thin trail of blood,” Guthrum said, his voice wavering a little. “And deep in the shadows at the back of the armoury, we - we found Lord Anred -”

Irinya turned a white face to him. “Dead?”

“Yes, lady. He - he - he - had fallen on his sword.”

“Poor fellow,” Gyrdan said softly. “*Poor* fellow. To die by his own hand!”

Irinya sighed. “He was ever my enemy, but such a fate I would not have wished him.”

“At least,” Fastred said, sombre for once, “at least it had obviously been quick.”

“But why? What could possibly drive a man like Anred to such despair?”

“The sergeant said he was in disgrace,” Fastred suggested. “He was a bit vague as to what for, but they were all expecting him to be put on trial as soon as Radwulf got back.”

“I see. But even so - Anred is a survivor. I cannot see him committing suicide for that alone.”

Guthrum looked very ill now. “There - there was -” his voice faded away.

“There was another body,” Fastred finished for him. “Or the remains of one, anyway. It had fallen out of a sort of cupboard, hidden in the wall. A woman. Dead for quite a while, I would say.”

“A woman? Who?”

“I don’t know, lady. I don’t think anyone would have recognised her by then. But she was wearing this.” Fastred produced a ring from deep in his jacket, and handed it to Irinya, who took it sadly.

“Poor girl,” she murmured. “Poor, stupid girl! What a fate!”

“You know her? Who was she?”

“One of Radwulf’s mistresses. Poor, pretty, silly Alina! Perhaps she would not go quietly when he was tired of her.” She closed her hand over the ring. “Anred the steward was waiting for her. Had been for years, for Radwulf does not tolerate

competition. I never liked him. A hard, cruel man. But he truly loved poor Lady Alina.”

Chapter 30.

“Radwulf is beaten now, isn’t he?” Guthrum said eagerly, breaking the quiet. “With the castle in our hands he has no stronghold to retire to. His reserve regiment surrendered to us, too -”

“What reserve?” Gyrdan asked.

“You did not know of it?”

“I guessed, but I could not be sure. How many?”

“About three thousand. But they hadn’t had any orders either, so they were still in camp. It was hardly even a scrap.”

“See what happens when your officers *don’t* think for themselves,” Fastred put in.

Gyrdan laughed. “All right, all right! I take the point. You get off being court-martialled. But, Fastred - don’t ever do that to me again!”

“With any luck I won’t have the opportunity.” He peered down at Radwulf’s camp. “Sloppy-looking blighters, aren’t they? Hey, look there! Somebody’s coming!”

“A couple of heralds and their escort,” Guthrum said, studying the group of horsemen making their circumspect way across the half-mile of plain between Radwulf’s camp and the bottom of the slope. “Radwulf seeks a parley.”

“He’s going to surrender!” Fastred exclaimed gleefully.

Irinya laughed hollowly and got to her feet. “Radwulf surrender? I know him better than that. He comes to bargain.”

“Bargain? What has he got left to bargain with?”

She began walking slowly downhill, her skirts dragging in the grass. “I fear we shall soon find out.”

It took some little time to agree terms for a parley, as neither side trusted the other. Eventually, they met midway between the two armies, out of bowshot from either side. Radwulf was attended by a gaggle of Lowland barons, Irinya by the hill chiefs and officers. Both armies were thus temporarily deprived of effective command.

Radwulf’s lords looked decidedly unhappy at the unexpected appearance of Fastred’s troop, and would fain have begged for honourable terms. Radwulf himself seemed unconcerned. He received them with cool hauteur, as though they were a band of defeated renegades to whom he had graciously granted audience. He had even gone so far as to make a pair of sweating soldiers carry out a grand chair for him.

“Greetings, fair lady,” he said. “We meet again at last. I trust I find you in a better temper today. Last time you were so unreasonably intransigent.”

“Come to the point,” she answered. “You asked for this parley. I chose to grant it, but I will not waste my time. What is your request?”

“Request?” Radwulf repeated, in honeyed tones. “Choose your words more carefully, fair cousin. I do not request. I offer.”

“I chose the word advisedly, Radwulf. For once, I hold the advantage. What is your request?”

Radwulf realised that being the only one seated had its problems. He had meant to play the part of a king receiving supplicants. This had failed. Irinya had not kept a timid distance as he expected but stood only just beyond a sword’s reach, and because she was tall and held herself proudly erect, he was having to look up at her. The fury that was now always so close to the surface boiled up within him. Damn the woman, damn her stubbornness and her insolence and her courage! Everyone else obeyed him. He would make her obey him, or crush her in the process.

His glance flickered past Irinya to the semicircle of supporters ranged behind, and his lip curled in scorn.

“Is this the best you can manage, fair lady? A gang of desperadoes, still filthy from their forest dens?”

The sneer told. Radwulf and his lords were sleek as well-fed cats, immaculately groomed and outfitted in magnificent armour. At his waist Radwulf bore the black sword, the huge ruby glowing with malevolent fire, and behind him a servitor carried the shield, gleaming like polished silver in the sun.

Only Hygurd came anywhere near competing with this splendour. Fastred and Guthrum were both plastered in dust and sweat, and trying not to spoil the gravity of the occasion by falling asleep on their feet. Everard’s mail-shirt had evidently had many careless owners in the course of an eventful life, and had also been made for someone several sizes bigger. Even the Highland chiefs were looking a little the worse for wear, after months of fighting. And Gyrdan wore the plain gear of a common soldier, displaying neither badge nor token nor any symbol of rank.

Radwulf’s lords sniggered, and Radwulf looked from Guthrum to Hygurd.

“I see there are a couple of rats among the hedge-pigs,” he jibed. “Have a care, my clever lady, lest they break faith with you also. He who turns his coat once may do so again.”

“Radwulf, I did not grant this meeting to listen to cheap taunts,” Irinya said, wearily. “You are on the brink of defeat, and you know it well. If you wish to treat for terms, do so.”

“Ha! Treat for terms! It is you should be begging mercy from me. Think you this is my only army? It is but a tithe of my power! I have reserves in the South awaiting my call. In a day I can return to Mickleburg and summon them -”

“With all due respect, Radwulf, you cannot. Your reserves have surrendered, and Mickleburg Castle has fallen. The men you have here are all that remain to you.”

Radwulf’s barons exchanged glances, aghast.

“Bluff!” Radwulf sneered. “Do you think I will fall for a child’s trick?”

“I do not make empty threats, Radwulf, as you well know.” She brought the keys out from a fold of her gown and held them up. “This should be sufficient proof -”

She took a swift step back as Radwulf lunged for the keys.

“Do not even think of it, Radwulf,” she advised. “It is bad luck to offer violence during a parley.”

Behind her, steel screeched as her commanders half-drew their swords.

“Mickleburg Castle is in my hands,” she repeated. “Surrendered to Lords Fastred and Guthrum yesterday.”

Radwulf returned to his chair, his face twisting into a grimace of fury.

“So Anred turns his coat too! I will kill him for that.”

“He has saved you the trouble.” She returned the keys to her pocket, and folded her arms. “Murder will out, so they say. Had you forgotten, Radwulf, that Anred loved poor Lady Alina?”

Radwulf filled in the rest of the events for himself, and snarled. “Milksop! Coward!”

“Empty words, Radwulf. Has this changed what you wished to say to me?”

“No, by all the gods, it has not!”

He switched his attention back to her following.

“I suppose you think yourselves very clever? Fools! You would have been better employed at home protecting your own womenfolk than chasing after mine. Like a flock of hens after a goodwife!” His voice swelled in volume, exultant in cruelty. “One of you at least will have good reason to mourn when he gets home and finds his nest empty!”

It would have taken more than human resolution not to waver. Radwulf saw every man think of his home and family, and wonder whether it could be them. He smiled wolfishly.

“Castle Caradon has fallen,” he announced.

Gyrdan’s hand closed on Fastred’s wrist. All the others involuntarily relaxed, then remembered to fix their expressions back into steely resolution again, several seconds too late.

“Tyria of Caradon was captured trying to flee,” Radwulf went on, conversationally. “I fear she suffered some - ah - rough handling. Though I must say it has not marred her beauty. I look forward to the pleasure of her company tonight -”

“No!”

Fastred sprang forward, hand on sword hilt, his face working.

Gyrdan’s grip on his wrist changed from support to coercion, and Fastred fell back, gasping.

“Very sensible,” Radwulf said, unmoved. “Do try to keep your rabble under better control, fair cousin. Well, it seems your excitable servant cares a little for his pretty wife. I am a merciful man. You can have her back, more or less unharmed, when my army marches off this field.”

Irynya met his eyes. “No.”

“Irynya -!” Fastred cried.

She ignored him, her gaze locked on Radwulf’s. “You are lying,” she told him quietly. “Castle Caradon has not fallen, and Tyria is safe within it.”

“I say it has fallen, fair lady.”

“Prove it.”

“You prove it has not.”

“I need to prove nothing,” she told him. “I decline to believe you. And therefore your threat is worthless. Have you anything else to say?”

Radwulf gazed at her in silence.

“You have grown wise, my fair lady,” he said, after a while. “But you are still a woman, with a woman’s soft heart. Could you bear to see a child suffer? I think not.”

At his gesture, a couple of burly soldiers dragged forward a bundle muffled in coarse sacking, and dropped it at Radwulf’s feet. Radwulf kicked it, and elicited a shrill whimper. With a flourish, he leaned down and snatched away the sack.

“Corin!” Everard choked.

The boy was in a pitiful state. He was naked, quivering from head to foot, and literally terrified out of his wits. He kept his eyes screwed shut and his thin shoulders hunched, pathetic defences against whatever was to be done to him next.

His pale shrinking flesh was marred with ugly purple bruises, and a long angry red weal curled across his back and ribs, speckled with blood where the lash had bitten deep. He was weeping, quietly and hopelessly.

“Oh, for pity’s sake -” Fastred gasped, appalled, and the same sentiment was echoed by all present. Except Irinya, who stared straight at Radwulf, unmoved. If anything, her expression hardened.

“What is this brat to me?”

“You tell me, clever lady. It was you who sent him into my camp as a spy.” He grabbed a handful of Corin’s hair and jerked the boy’s drooping head up. Corin cringed away, and Radwulf cuffed him twice across his already swollen face. “Silly - boy! I think he is dear to you, my fair lady, or he would not be with your host.” Another slap. “He is not much use as a spy, I fear. He talked very easily.”

“The boy is a servant of no importance,” Gyrdan said. “Whatever he did, it was without our knowledge or consent. Let him go.”

“Someone pleads for him, fair cousin. Will you?”

“One beggarly brat for a whole army seems a poor exchange.”

“But such a charming boy,” Radwulf mused. “They breed their children fat and fair in the South. Look at this smooth, tender flesh.” He pinched it up between his fingers. “Such a soft, white back. You know what the lash would do to it, my fair lady. You have seen. It would bite to the bone. See the mark we raised with only the buckle-end of a belt.” He ran a finger down the weal, and Corin’s whole body convulsed. He screamed wordlessly, like an animal in a trap.

“Stop it!” Fastred shouted. “Stop it! He’s only a kid -! Leave him alone!”

Every sword on Radwulf’s side flashed from its sheath.

“It is bad luck to offer violence during a parley,” Radwulf said silkily. “The child is a spy. He is my prisoner. I will do what I like with him. Unless, my lady, *you* wish otherwise.”

Irinya’s tone was hard-edged, every word diamond-cut in its clarity. “You mistake me, Radwulf. And still more you mistake your hostage. Did you think I did not know? This is the brat who betrayed me. Whatever suffering your inventive mind can contrive, it cannot be worse than he deserves.”

The men behind her grimaced in dismay and disgust. Some turned away. Only Gyrdan, who knew Irinya very well, made no sign.

Radwulf drew in his breath sharply. “Is that so?” he hissed. He gripped Corin between his knees, and seized the boy’s slender arm either side of the elbow. “Such light, delicate bones,” he said. “It seems almost a pity -”

He twisted. Corin screamed as the joint reached the limit of its tolerance. Radwulf kept his eyes fixed on Irinya, who looked straight back without flinching.

“Go on,” she said. “It is nothing to the pain he caused me.”

Radwulf swore, and threw Corin aside like a rag doll. He fell face down, whimpering, and one of Radwulf’s soldiers, bolder or more humane than the others, ran forward and snatched him up.

“Your heart is of flint, my fair lady,” Radwulf said.

“It was you who made it so. Now come to the point, Radwulf. You did not expect me tamely to give in just to save one life, however dear. What do you really want?”

He sat forward.

“Single combat. We must fight, it seems, to settle this quarrel. But there is no need for all men to fight. We will decide the issue by a duel between champions. On foot, with sword and shield, and to the death. As is the ancient way.”

“No. Here we have the upper hand, hard-won by toil and peril. You are caught in a trap and you know it. Your army is tired, hungry, and frightened. It will disintegrate before us. I will not jeopardise all we have fought for by throwing that advantage away.”

Radwulf’s voice was arrogant, mocking, as a master chess player who looks two moves ahead and sees his strategy ripening.

“With all due respect, my clever lady, I think you will. I have a hostage you cannot forbear to ransom. Because you, fair lady, for some reason I cannot fathom, care about this wretched country and its ungrateful peasants. I do not. You can have this worthless land. But I will make you wade through blood to get it.”

It was essential that she answer. But she could not speak.

Radwulf smiled like a shark. He had the advantage now, and he knew it.

“My army will fight to the last man. For my officers have orders to slay any man trying to flee or surrender. And their families also, on our return.”

Irinya’s voice was cracked and strained. “If enough flee, we shall prevail and you will not return to carry out your threat.”

Radwulf’s smile broadened. “Try explaining that to a cretinous peasant. High principle may be a powerful motivator, my lady. But I think you will find that fear of death is stronger.”

The chieftains snarled their contempt. A lord’s duty was to be a father to his people and keep them from harm.

“I would not have thought this possible,” Irinya said dully. “Not even from you.”

“I am gratified to find I can still surprise you, clever lady. There is my offer. Single combat, or a bloody battle. Your answer?”

“No.” Her voice broke on the word. She recovered herself and went on. “No. I still refuse. If I risk losing Carlundy now, I betray all those who have already fought and died. I will not accept.”

Radwulf’s stare held her as in a vice. He made his last move.

“You misunderstand my terms. I have said, I do not care a damn for this miserable country. You can rule it whatever the outcome, however you please. But if I win, my fair lady, you will accept me as your consort.”

She caught her breath. All the colour drained from her face, and she reeled back a step as if struck. Radwulf’s expression was smug with cruel satisfaction, like a cat playing with a trapped mouse.

“There are my terms, fair cousin. See how simple it becomes. Two stallions fighting over a mare in heat.”

“If you - if you win, you will not seek to interfere in the government of the land?”

Radwulf leered. “I trust my sweet wife will keep me entertained in other ways.”

She hunched her shoulders and folded her arms across her breast. “You swear it?”

“I swear it. By any oath you like.”

“And if you lose?”

“If I lose, I shall be dead. I shall not care what happens.”

“No battle?”

“No battle. After all, I will not be here to give the order, will I?”

The chieftains exploded into fury. They had thought they hated Radwulf before, but in comparison with what they felt now that was merely mild dislike. Even his own soldiers looked away, sickened.

Irina closed her eyes. She had said, *If Radwulf would rule this land fairly, I would cease this war and its killing and go back to him tomorrow.* There comes a moment when the cat tires of play and the exhausted mouse knows it can do nothing but accept the crushing final blow. She gathered together all her courage.

Gyrdan saw she was going to accept. He knew why, and he knew she had no choice, but calculated logic abruptly deserted him. All he saw was the woman he loved stepping into hell.

“No!” he cried. “Irina, no! Are you to risk going back to this - this monster?”

She did not look at him. Her voice was toneless, defeated.

“Am I to ask thousands of men to risk their lives for my honour?”

Radwulf gloated in demonic triumph. For he was a master swordsman, and he had a shield no enemy could pierce and a sword nothing could withstand. He had spoken of these to no other. Irinya had not mentioned them, and he was therefore sure she knew nothing of them. The fight would be a formality, and his victory was assured. And he knew his wife would keep her word, even though he had no intention of keeping his. Oaths were for little men.

“Choose your champion, lady. If any of this motley crew is worthy of the name.”

He surveyed his opponents, his lip curling. Fastred and Guthrum were near exhaustion from a long ride. Eomer was too slight of build, and Everard too short. Eomund was too slow and stupid. Malise of Lanthart was no warrior. Gartravain was little more than a boy. Firdan of Mortach was immensely fat, too bulky to survive single combat on foot. Hygurd and Kerian, although both good fighters, were still no match for Radwulf and were hampered by slight wounds sustained the previous day. He could make mincemeat of any of them.

“I am the leader of this host,” Gyrdan said quietly. “I will fight you.”

Radwulf cast a contemptuous eye over his patched cloak and weather-stained mail, and laughed out loud. “The King of Carlundy will not fight a low-born brigand!”

“You mean you won’t fight the one man here who is your match!” Everard snapped, stung. “Coward!”

Radwulf ignored the comment, and the mutter of agreement.

“My birth is unknown, not necessarily low,” Gyrdan answered calmly. “And I am more closely concerned than any other. I love your wife, and your wife loves me. For that you must fight me, Radwulf.”

“You mistake me.” Radwulf’s eyes flared blue, and his voice sank to a sibilant whisper. “For that I will kill you. But not honourably. I will kill you slowly and with pain, with shame and with every possible indignity. For every moment of pleasure you have stolen in her arms, I will make you pay ten years in agony. You will come to yearn for nothing beyond a swift death, and when I relent and grant it, even your mistress will shrink from your violated corpse.”

“Fine words. But first you must vanquish me. Are you afraid, Radwulf?”

“I fear no man. You I despise. When last I saw you, you lay huddled on my floor, screaming as my soldiers thrashed you within an inch of your miserable life. And now you, a common criminal, think to challenge me! I would not sully my hands with your base blood!” He rounded on Irinya. “Enough of this! Choose you a champion, my fair lady. One who is worthy of my steel.”

Quiet fell. All the chieftains felt they ought to volunteer, and all flinched from it. Radwulf was more than a match for any, and they all knew it. The love of life surged up in all of them like a great flame. All stayed silent, hoping someone else would accept.

Gyrdan's voice cut like a lash.

"You will fight me, Radwulf! Me, and no other! You have no choice. For you are sworn to fight me, though you know it not."

Radwulf rocked on his heels, and laughed in Gyrdan's face.

"Sworn to fight you! Do you think me a fool? What have I to do with a common peasant? Have I sworn vengeance on you for shooting a rabbit on my land? For stealing a turnip?"

"No," Gyrdan said, quietly. "For the murder of your father."

Radwulf's mocking laughter faded. His florid face blanched. He moistened dry lips with his tongue. When he spoke his voice was cracked, and without assurance.

"You lie!"

"I do not lie."

A recent memory stirred in Radwulf's mind.

"Prove it! Ha! Prove it!"

"Very well. The circumstances of his death are not widely known. But you know, Radwulf, for you made very close enquiries."

Gyrdan closed his eyes, as if visualising the scene. "It was the thirteenth day of July, thirteen years ago next month. It was a hot, still day, with the threat of thunder, as I remember. No doubt it was for that reason that your father had chosen not to wear mail. He was hunting, with five companions, in the shade of the Badgers' Wood, on his manor of Norton Bassett. The companions were his neighbour Hubert, Hubert's squire, and three of your father's servitors whose names I do not know." He looked at Radwulf and drew a breath. "They had had little luck, and they were growing tired and cross. At two hours after noon, they paused by the Willow Brook, where it spreads out to form a pool in the shade of an oak tree. They let the horses drink, and for themselves they had brought wine. They talked of the old Lord's illness. Your father thought he would recover. Hubert believed him dying. They wrangled over it, and your father laid a wager of three gold crowns that Ingeld Ingeldson would be alive at the November quarter-day. You look surprised, Radwulf? I know these things because I lay on a branch of that oak tree, close enough to throw acorns at their heads had I wished. Shall I go on?"

Radwulf did not answer. His face was tense and pale.

“Very well, if you are not yet convinced. When they had rested, they turned for home. They followed the bank of the stream, and then struck off into a ride. I followed, sometimes in the trees, sometimes on the ground. They neither saw nor heard me. Rather over an hour later, they came near the edge of the woods. I was anxious, I remember, in case I lost the chance. But they halted. Your father was pointing something out to Hubert - I do not know what, perhaps the extent of his lands. He was outlined against the bright light beyond the woods, a perfect target. I shot.

“The arrow struck him in the back, just left of the spine, between the shoulder blades. It transfixed him, and the point came out through his left breast. I saw it as he toppled from his horse. The arrow was of cornel-wood, a yard long. As he fell, the shaft was splintered off a few inches from his back. It was flighted with black feathers, taken from a raven. And coiled around the shaft was a long lock of golden hair. Shall I go on? Shall I describe the clothes they wore, the horses they rode, the food they ate?”

Radwulf shook his head, once. He seemed incapable of speech.

“You were distraught at his death,” Gyrdan went on, tonelessly. “You made exhaustive inquiries into every detail. And you swore to hunt down the murderer and kill him yourself - swore it by the Great Oath of Ardern.”

Radwulf’s face twisted into a bitter smile. “Aye, I did.” He looked searchingly at Gyrdan. “Why? What had my father to do with such as you?”

“The lock of hair should have told you that. But perhaps you had forgotten. It would be a trivial incident to you. Do you remember, three-and-twenty years ago, another summer day, a farm on your father’s estate, and a maiden called Algiva the Fair?”

“Is that all? You murdered my father for a farmer’s pretty daughter? After ten years?” He laughed. “You have a taste for other men’s women, it seems. Was she also your mistress?”

Gyrdan’s face contorted briefly into a mask of hate.

“Must your kind cheapen everything? She was dearer to me than a sister. She was sweet, and loving, and kind, and she brought happiness to all around her. Until your father came -!” He broke off, and his knuckles showed white as he fought for control. “I swore vengeance on the man who destroyed her, even as you swore vengeance on your father’s murderer. I kept my oath, Radwulf son of Radwald. Now you keep yours. *If* you can.”

Iryna was the only one to watch Radwulf go. All the others were staring at Gyrdan, aghast.

“Murder,” Fastred said unsteadily, dry-mouthed. “You don’t really mean murder, do you? You mean homicide.”

Gyrdan was very pale, and a nerve was twitching high in his temple. But he looked his friend straight in the eye, too proud to offer excuses.

“I mean murder,” he said levelly.

“By accident -” Fastred suggested, desperately.

“I attacked him. I meant to kill.”

“In the heat of the moment -”

“I stalked him for over a year.”

“In fair fight -!”

“I shot him from behind a tree. He never even saw me.”

Fastred’s handsome face was a picture of misery.

“No,” he said, brokenly. “No. I looked up to you -! Admired you -! Honoured you -!”

Gyrdan took an involuntary step towards him, holding out his hand. “Fastred -”

Fastred recoiled, and turned his back.

Gyrdan let his hand drop to his side. “I had rather you had twisted a knife in my heart,” he said sadly.

He looked around at the others.

“I am committed to fight,” he said. “A sword I have. Will any here lend me a shield?”

But they saw him now in a new light, no longer as their leader, no longer even as a brave soldier. Now, on his own confession, he was a murderer. A cowardly, despicable assassin. One by one, they dropped their gaze or turned away. Gyrdan found himself alone in the centre of a slowly widening circle, shunned by his former friends as they might shun a leper. He made no move and spoke no word, but the pain and shame he bore were plain for all to see.

“Very well,” he said at last. He drew himself up and shook back his hair, acquiring a curious dignity. “I cannot blame you, lords. Fare you well. I go to do my duty.”

Hygurd found his voice.

“Take my shield, lord.” He stepped forward, holding it out before him. “It is an heirloom of my house. Some say it came from the forges of the Mountain, long ago

in the great days. I know not whether that is true, but it has never failed us yet. Take it. Please.”

Tears started in Gyrdan’s grey eyes as he took the shield. “You do me great honour, lord. I thank you.”

“The honour is mine,” Hygurd answered. “I have no right to condemn you.”

“Nor I,” Everard said, coming up on Gyrdan’s right hand. “You will need a second, sir. Will you have me?”

“Gladly.” He gripped Everard’s shoulder. “Gladly.”

No others came. Gyrdan paused before Irinya, and raised his eyes to hers.

“Have I forfeited your regard also, lady?”

“Never that,” she answered. “This is no tourney, for you to bear my token. But all the love of my heart goes with you.”

Radwulf’s men had marked out a crude arena, on a flat area roughly mid-way between the two armies. At one end, an army of squires and armourers were helping Radwulf to select and don a chain-mail shirt, chain-mail leggings, and a steel helmet with nose- and cheek-guards, engraved with gold. At the other, Gyrdan, Hygurd and Everard stood, having no such elaborate preparations to make. Gyrdan wore the mail shirt and plain steel helm that he had taken from Fastred’s armoury months ago. His sword was as familiar to him as an extension of his own arm, and Hygurd’s shield was both light and strong, free of foolish embellishments and amazingly easy to wield.

“It might have been made for you,” Hygurd said, admiringly. “I suppose we are of similar height and build. Still, it is remarkable.”

“Why do you do this, Hygurd? When no other would?”

“Because what I saw was a man throwing away the good opinion of his fellows to fight for something he believed in. I count that as truly honourable.”

Sudden understanding dawned in Gyrdan’s eyes.

“I suppose you did the same thing yourself. I had not thought of it like that before.”

“No,” Hygurd agreed, with a wry smile. “No-one ever does.”

Radwulf was emerging from the cluster of attendants, like a liner from an escort of tugs.

“I think he may be ready,” Everard said, and Gyrdan nodded.

“Yes. It is time. Listen - I know it is traditional for the supporters to stand by, but I ask you not to. Go back to your commands, and make sure all others do likewise. And keep the men armed and ready.”

“Ah,” nodded Hygurd. “We are of one mind. I do not entirely trust Radwulf either.”

“He may keep his word. Even Radwulf must have a little good in him, somewhere.” He looked at them intensely. “But if he plays false, then never mind me, understand? Your first care must be for the battle. Is that quite clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Everard said. “Er - good luck sir - I mean -”

“I know what you mean, and I thank you. Give my regards to Rosie, and ask her to remember me kindly. I hope you will be happy together.”

“I will not wish you luck,” Hygurd said slowly, “because I am not sure what I would mean by it. But may death and damnation take Radwulf!”

The crowd around the arena was thinning out. The servants and attendants were dispersing. The nobility of both sides were inspecting the field, now in a single group - no-one expected treachery now, for single combat was too old and too sacred a tradition for foul play. The two seconds took up position in the centre of the lists. The two combatants stood alone, at either end.

Radwulf gazed at Irinya as the group of lords and chieftains passed him. The madness had faded from his eyes, and in its place was a terrible pleading.

“Why, Irinya? Why? Why would you not love me? I would have given you anything -! *Why?*”

She paused, looking at him as if from a great distance, and her voice was laden now with sorrow and with disappointment.

“Aye, why indeed? I was young. I had not given my heart to another. After my father’s death I stood in terrible need of comfort. Who knows what might have been, Radwulf, had you treated me with even a little kindness? If you had coaxed me, wooed me, instead of seeking to force me? But you must drive, and I will not be driven, and therein lies our tragedy. My greatest sorrow is that so many others have been forced to share it.”

Radwulf watched her ride back to a safe distance, Kerian at her side, and then turned to stare down the arena to his opponent, rage boiling up in him. How dared the fellow look so cool and so unafraid? Had he no fear of death? For death was

coming to him that day, swifter and more honourably than Radwulf would have wished, but death just the same.

He hefted the shield on his wrist and swung the sword in his hand. The weapons seemed uncomfortable, heavy and yet oddly restless - but that was surely no more than unfamiliarity and the fact that he was sweating slightly. Though the old curse followed always at the borders of his thought, like a black dog, today it could not touch him. Today he was invincible. Only one life now stood between him and his wife. One life to take - only one more - and then Irinya would be his. Truly his. And then he would have nothing more to fear, and he would not have to kill, and the ghosts would leave him in peace at night. Just one more life.

Irinya watched them stride out into the arena. She felt numb, beyond all feeling. She was hardly aware of the horse under her, or of Kerian mounted on his own horse beside her, or of the dozen or so cavalymen gathered behind, or even of the small group of Radwulf's soldiers a few yards away, their captain holding Corin head-down across his saddlebow. The boy was quiet now, unmoving. With luck he had passed out.

The seconds withdrew. The two men reached the centre of the lists. Kerian shook his head and sucked his teeth.

And indeed, they did not look evenly matched. Gyrdan wore only an ordinary mail shirt and a plain steel helmet. The shirt was a little short for him and ended slightly above the knees, and below it he wore ordinary trousers and his old leather boots. His face, neck and hands were entirely unprotected. By contrast, Radwulf was clad from chin to ankle in chain-mail, supplemented by a heavy helmet, mail gauntlets and thick leather boots. Only small parts of his face remained unprotected. An inch or two less in height, he was much broader and heavier in build. Beside him Gyrdan looked slender, even slight, and woefully under-equipped.

"Disaster," Kerian muttered. "What possessed us?"

Irinya's voice seemed to come from a long way away. "You forget, they fight to the death. And in such a contest, Gyrdan has one great advantage."

"He is fighting for love, you mean?" Kerian asked doubtfully.

She gave him a peculiar look. "Radwulf," she said slowly, "wants to be alive at the end."

The duel lived long in saga and legend, and epic poets wrote of it for years afterward. Radwulf was widely recognised as the finest swordsman in Carlundy, but

it soon became clear even to his own side that the commoner was at least his equal. For even the best sword in the world cannot wound if it fails to connect, and the best shield is of no protection unless it intercepts the blow. Time after time Radwulf thrust or slashed, and time after time Gyrdan dodged the stroke, or parried it, or caught it on his shield. He himself played a defensive strategy, hoping to wear Radwulf down. His lighter armour gave him freedom of movement, and his lean wiry body was capable of great endurance and moved with the light grace of a dancer.

At the end of an hour, Radwulf was panting, sweating profusely and cursing. He had failed to draw blood - though Gyrdan's shield was covered in dents - and he was beginning to tire. He was also getting very angry, and anger had made him careless. Twice now Gyrdan had not merely side-stepped a lunge, but had darted in swiftly while Radwulf was still off-balance and landed a blow of his own. One had left a shallow cut on Radwulf's cheek, the other had struck the muscle of the left arm-pit. Radwulf thought it had not penetrated the mail, though with the sweat pouring down his chest under the cumbersome armour it was difficult to tell. It certainly hurt every time he raised the shield, and the repeated shock of impact was numbing his arm. The muscles of his right arm ached, and the sword seemed to be made of solid lead. Thirst was also starting to play its part, for the sun was high now and the day hot.

Gyrdan, too, was pouring with sweat, but still seemed depressingly fresh. Radwulf knew he had taken several hits, each with enough power behind it to bruise badly, but they seemed to have had little effect. Gyrdan, of course, was a soldier by trade, and his life had hardened him to endure pain and fatigue and thirst and hunger in a way Radwulf never could.

Radwulf aimed another savage swipe, missed again, and staggered under a return blow that shivered his shield-arm to the shoulder. For a second he feared a broken bone. He gave back, twisted with pain, and the two men circled warily. Radwulf swore to himself. This could not go on.

He dodged one blow, and parried another. But it was too late to try wearing Gyrdan out. He seemed perfectly willing to fight all day, and probably all night if necessary.

Gyrdan struck again, and this time Radwulf could not lift the shield fast enough. The point of the sword skidded on his mail, caught, and rent a gap across his breast. He felt a burning pain and the warm trickle of blood.

He staggered back, dropping his shield, jabbing vainly with his sword. Gyrdan avoided it with ease, and closed in for the kill.

Radwulf dropped his sword and threw himself on his face.

“I yield!” he howled. “I yield!”

The rebel army broke into cheering and jubilation. Radwulf’s commanders eyed one another shiftily.

Gyrdan paused, arresting the blow he had been about to deal. In a fight to the death, neither party was strictly allowed to yield. Yet he could not in cold blood kill a man begging for mercy. He hesitated.

Radwulf saw the point of Gyrdan’s sword descend and lodge itself in the turf a few inches from his nose. He heard Gyrdan’s voice, murmuring something about sparing his life on condition of exile, but paid no attention to the words. Words mattered nothing now. He had got Gyrdan off-guard, leaning on his sword, only a foot or so away.

Radwulf grabbed his own sword, rolled, and lunged upward with the speed and the venom of a striking snake. No metallic clang this time, no shock of metal on metal, but a damp, elastic resistance, the slicing sound of steel in flesh, and a cry of agony.

Gyrdan fell backwards, sprawling. He thrust out his right hand to save himself, dropping his sword as he did so. Blood was pouring from a wound deep into his thigh.

Jeers, catcalls and vociferous cries of “Shame!” erupted from both armies.

“Fool!” Radwulf roared, and brought his sword down in a slashing stroke intended to sever Gyrdan’s unprotected neck.

Gyrdan thrust up his shield, still secured on his left arm by the wrist strap, just in time. The force of the blow knocked him flat to the ground, but he heard the blade screech harmlessly across the steel shield, a horrible noise that set his teeth on edge. Through a red mist of pain, he remembered to shove upwards and sideways with as much strength as he could muster. Radwulf stumbled, pushed off-balance.

Gyrdan tried to rise, but his torn thigh muscles would not work. Again Radwulf lunged, himself hampered by the flesh wound across his chest, and again Gyrdan fended him off with the shield. His right hand scrabbled frantically for his sword. The fingers connected, but even as he got a grip, Radwulf was on him again, his face contorted with effort and fury, his sword coming down in a slashing and wholly unscientific stroke that reminded Gyrdan of a particularly splenetic forester attacking tree-roots with a mattock.

He rolled sideways, hysterical laughter bubbling up, and was rewarded by seeing Radwulf sink his sword deep into the turf exactly where his face had just been. He tried again to rise, and this time he struggled as far as a kneeling position, leaning on

his shield. The pain was stunning. Iridescent dots swirled across his vision. Fear closed a cold hand on his heart - fear not of death, but of losing the bout.

Radwulf wrenched his sword out of the ground, scattering earth and grass. Gyrdan measured his chances, made a decision. He flung his shield as hard as he could into Radwulf's face. Radwulf ducked instinctively, giving Gyrdan a few seconds' grace. Using his sword as a crutch, he levered himself up until he could stand, all his weight balanced on his uninjured left leg. His right leg would support no weight at all. As soon as he moved, he would fall. He knew it. Radwulf knew it too.

Radwulf regained his balance. He hefted his sword in his hand. Neither man had a shield now, but it did not matter. One more stroke would settle the thing. He approached. Gyrdan watched him, panting.

Radwulf thrust. He aimed with precision, care and calculation. Any sane man would try to evade the blow and would fall in the process. It was a perfect stroke, landing precisely where Gyrdan's neck should have been.

Should have been, but was not. Gyrdan cared nothing for preserving his own life. If he moved he would fall, if he fell he would not have the strength to rise again, and Radwulf would take the victory. Never that, never, never! He faced Radwulf without flinching.

So, instead of in the throat, the sword took him on the left side of the chest. No mail could withstand a direct thrust from a dwarf-blade with all Radwulf's formidable power behind it. It tore like cloth, and the sword raked a bloody furrow in its wake. Radwulf's lips drew back to frame a yell of triumph.

But he never uttered it. Gyrdan had not thrown his life away. Death he was willing to accept, but only as the price of victory. Gathering together all his remaining strength, he had swung his sword high. Now he brought it down full on the centre of Radwulf's helm, in a great two-handed stroke.

A shower of sparks spewed from the blade. But it held, and it bit deep. Dwarf-steel, given in friendship, it clove through helm and bone and brain, spouting a crimson trail of ruin. Not until it struck the breastbone did it stop, and the shock jerked it from Gyrdan's numb hand. For a terrible moment Radwulf still stood, horribly transfixed, and then with a swaying motion he toppled, and fell.

The rebels cheered and whooped and danced for joy. Even Radwulf's own army heaved a collective sigh of relief. Not a man would weep for him. It was over, and now they could go home.

But even in death, Radwulf betrayed them. Trumpets sounded their brassy notes of command, cutting across the celebrations. Officers shouted orders. Bewildered, baffled, but obedient, the ranks of Radwulf's army lurched forward. His fall had been the signal for attack.

Gyrdan stumbled to his knees in a spreading pool of blood. Oblivious to the gathering storm, he was trying to retrieve his sword. He wanted to flourish it above his fallen foe, the traditional stance of the victor, but his strength was fast failing. Clumsily, he tugged the blade free. Using it once more as a crutch, all but spent, he dragged himself upright. For a fraction of a second he stood tall in the sunlight, blood flowing over his battered armour, sustained only by an indomitable will.

Then, as the incoming tide crashes over an isolated rock, Radwulf's army swept upon him. For an instant his position was marked by an eddy in the swirling crowd, and then even that disappeared.

Rough hands shook Corin out of his stupor, dragging him back to painful reality.

"Sorry, lad," mumbled the captain shamefacedly, drawing a knife from his belt. "Orders, see? No hard feelings."

Too bruised and weak to resist, Corin shut his eyes. But instead of the thin tearing pain of a stab wound, something struck him hard across the back and shoulders. Steel screeched close at hand, and something wet and sticky splattered his face. He felt himself thrown bodily into the air, and he screamed from fear of falling. Then he was caught and held. A horse snorted and sidled, and he caught a glimpse of Kerian wielding a red-bladed sword and Radwulf's captain sagging in the saddle, with no head left. He felt himself retch, but he had been sick so often that there was nothing left to bring up.

Someone cried, "Go to it, Kerian! I have the boy!"

The surging, heaving motion of a horse in full gallop. Then blessed stillness, the all-enveloping warmth of heavy cloth, the security of encircling arms and the slowing, rhythmic gasps of someone getting their breath back. Corin lay still, weeping quietly with relief. He had been a fool, and it had brought him terror and humiliation such as he had never imagined. Now he was alive, and cradled by a rescuer, and nothing more was going to happen to him. He felt crushed, exhausted and yet also somehow at peace, as if after a storm.

He found a gap in the sheltering cloth, and peered out.

It was Irinya who held him. He was wrapped in her cloak, they were high on the slope near the stream, and alone except for their horse. Corin gasped,

uncomprehending. How could Irinya be his rescuer? She hated him! He made a little frightened squeak of pure shock, and a feeble attempt to pull away.

She hugged him closer, rubbing his back through the cloak.

“Hush. Hush. You’re safe now. I won’t harm you, Corin. I had to act so, for your sake. Had I let Radwulf see I cared, he would have broken every bone in your body. Because he thought I did not, he did not hurt you. Please understand.”

His mother might have spoken so, with pity and with understanding. Where was the bitterness she must surely feel?

“Don’t you ‘ate me, miss? For gettin’ you caught, an’ - an’ ‘urt so bad -” he choked on the words, having now a very faint inkling of what they might mean, and turned on her a look of pure misery and remorse. “I’m sorry, miss,” he whimpered. “I’m sorry. ‘Ave you forgive me?”

“Forgiven you, Corin? I never bore you a grudge in the first place. You acted for love of him, however mistakenly. How shall I, who also loved him, condemn you for that?”

It took Corin a moment to grasp the full import of the words. Loved, she had said. Past tense. He scrambled round until he could see.

The plain was a hideous, heaving confusion of struggling men and horses. Dead lay in grisly heaps, and the screams of the dying rose to the indifferent sky. Apart from a few pockets of determined resistance, Radwulf’s men were streaming in all directions, dashed into a bloody rout. From all sides the rebel forces closed in. There was Fastred leading a charge, his helmet gone and his hair glittering gold in the sun. There was Hygurd, covered in blood but striding at the head of his men. There was Everard and his archers, all their arrows spent, racing down to the fray with knives flashing in their hands. There was Guthrum, steady and determined, and there Kerian and his Gragarain whooping with savage joy. Of the outcome there could be no doubt. But of Gyrdan there was no sign.

For the first time in his life Corin felt the terrible pang of bereavement.

“Noooo!” he wailed. “No! Not the Captain! ’Tain’t fair! ‘Tain’t *fair!*”

A tremor ran through Irinya’s body from head to foot, the only surface sign of the anguish within.

“He meant to die,” she whispered brokenly. “I saw it in his face. And perhaps it is better this way, Corin. Perhaps it is better this way.”

Chapter 31.

Hygurd made his way up to the great hall of Highbury Manor with the last light of day. Irinya was sitting huddled in a chair, staring into space. She did not stir as he entered.

“I bring you Radwulf’s sword and shield, as you asked.”

She looked up slowly, seeming not to understand. Then her eyes focused and she returned out of her thoughts.

“Thank you.”

Hygurd studied the weapons thoughtfully, and tested the blade of the sword with his finger.

“Dwarf-make,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Magnificent.”

“Yes.”

“And clearly ancient. Prized heirlooms.” He shot a glance at Irinya. “If I did not know it was impossible, I would say these were the great sword and shield of Bethoc Dulamael. Handed down to his son Crinan, stolen by Crinan’s daughter, and lost to the world.”

“Not lost, Hygurd, as you see.”

“There is a story behind these, is there not?”

“Yes.”

An expectant pause.

“But not one that you are going to tell me?”

“I should have thought you could guess.”

“Maybe I can.” He laid the weapons on the table, rather gingerly and with great respect. “Her curse was real, then?”

“Radwulf believed himself accursed, and that was enough to make it real. Whether there was more than that I do not know. But I am her namesake and her heir, and I should like to keep her promise. Neither she nor I will rest until the sword and shield are returned to their rightful owner.”

“But Crinan fell in the last battle, and lies in an unknown grave.”

“And Bethoc’s sword and shield were lost to the world,” she said quietly. “I think the Dragon has its secrets as well as the Falcon, does it not? Irdil Ionason survived that battle. He would not have left his uncle’s body to the ravens and the mob. He would have borne Crinan home to the mountains, to lie at peace in a secret grave.”

“Where none could steal from him again,” Hygurd returned, stony-faced.

Iryna sighed. “We have neither of us an inheritance to be proud of, Hygurd. It was her folly and passion that led her to betray first her father and then her husband. And it was Irdil’s jealous rage that condemned her to a terrible death. Alone in darkness and desolation, unburied and unmourned, and with a broken vow on her soul. You are his heir, just as I am hers. Will you not help me restore these things to their rightful home and release her from her torment?”

Hygurd darted a sharp glance at her. Then he nodded, slowly.

“Aye. Sufficient to each generation be the hatred thereof. Let us lay this to rest. I will guide you, but it must be you who comes, and you alone. It is not far within the mountains, no more than a long day’s journey from here.”

“Then tomorrow we set out. There is nothing to keep me here now.”

A pause, and then, in a carefully expressionless voice,

“Did you also retrieve Radwulf’s body?”

“As you commanded us, lady.” He scowled. “We were in time, just. The mob were after hacking him to pieces and throwing him to the dogs.” He paused a moment, and added bitterly, “Had I my way, I would have left them to it!”

“And what purpose would that have served? To dishonour his corpse does not hurt him now, and still less does it repair the harm he has caused. All it can do is demean us.”

“Most of the mob were his own soldiers. And nor can I blame them!” He put a hand to his eyes. “Of all the wicked acts at Radwulf’s door, this battle must be among the worst! His men were disgusted, confused and hopelessly outmanoeuvred. There was never the slightest doubt of the result. But it didn’t stop a lot of men getting killed. Some of them mine. Why? In the name of pity, why? What could he possibly hope to gain?”

“For Radwulf, it is enough that others should lose. Perhaps I was wrong to accept. But then there would have been a battle anyway. It only takes one side to make a war.” She sighed deeply. “I wonder, was there some other way out? If I could have swallowed my pride and revulsion and yielded to him at the beginning, perhaps he would not have grown so full of hate.”

“Aye,” said Hygurd sourly, “and perhaps pigs have wings. The best of men have some evil in their hearts, but the reverse is not true. You are well rid of him.”

“Hygurd -”

“Do not mistake me, lady. My offer for your hand still stands, if you choose to take it, but I will not press you. Especially not at a time like this. Give me credit for

finer feelings than that!” He went and stood by the window, gazing down into the courtyard. After a while he said, with some hesitation, “Had I known you loved him, I would not have spoken so then.”

“It does not matter,” she said emptily. “Nothing really matters now. Have - have you found - him?”

“Not yet. He was not lying beside Radwulf as we expected. But they are still searching, by torchlight. I did not even have to command them. Whoever else lies out on that field this night, Gyrdan will not be among them.”

She made a little sound between a sob and a moan, and looking over his shoulder he saw she had sunk her face in her hands.

“It is for the best, lady,” he said gently. “He died very bravely, and now all men will honour him as a fallen hero. None will remember why he was fighting Radwulf in the first place. It is for the best.”

“All I can think of,” she mourned, “is that I shall never see him again. Never hear his voice, never see his smile -”

“Oh, lady,” Hygurd said sorrowfully. “If I can help -”

She did not answer, and he went back to staring out of the window, helpless in the face of sorrow. What could he say, what could anyone say, to comfort her?

Something was happening in the courtyard. A crowd of men with torches, walking slow and with bowed heads. In their midst, six stalwart fellows bearing a bier. And lying on the bier, a still form swathed in bloodstained cloaks.

Hygurd turned swiftly.

“Lady -” he began.

Before he could continue, the door flew open and Everard burst in, breathless from running and heedless of all ceremony.

“We’ve found him, lady! We’ve found him!” He gasped for breath. “Buried in a heap of slain, a long way from where we expected. He must have tried to get into the thick of the battle -”

“Yes,” she said softly. “Yes, he would.” She braced herself to stand, the Lady of Carlundy and not a woman who had lost the man she loved. “You know my order. Bring his body here with all honour, and lay him in state, and I will give him a hero’s funeral -”

Everard shook his head furiously. “No, no, lady, you don’t understand. He was stunned and half-suffocated, but he’s alive! Lady, he’s alive!”

“I thought she would be overjoyed,” Everard confessed to Rosie, some days later. “But instead she looked as if I had struck her with something. I thought she was going to faint.”

“Shock,” Rosie said vaguely, reaching for another sock to darn. It was evening, the long tranquillity of summer twilight, and they were sitting together in an upstairs room at Highbury Hall. Hygurd was there too, sitting silent and withdrawn in a corner by the open window.

“Yes, but surely -,” Everard persisted. “I mean, I thought she loved him -”

“Shh.” Rosie nudged him warningly, and nodded towards an inner door, standing ajar. “E might hear.”

No sound from the bedroom but even, shallow breathing. Everard got up, peered round the door briefly, and came back.

“He’s sleeping,” he reported.

“Best thing for ‘im,” Rosie said, snipping off another length of wool. “I’ll sit with ‘im tonight, Everard, it’s my turn.”

“The Lady ought to be here. She ought to be nursing him hand and foot.”

“She did to start with,” Rosie said defensively. “It was ‘er an’ Mr Fastred what pulled ‘im through that first night. An’ she was with ‘im all the next night, too. It were only when they knew ‘e were goin’ to live that they went away up north. An’ you can’t blame Mr Fastred for wantin’ to get back to ‘is lady. Messengers sayin’ she’s all right is all very well, but it’s three months since ‘e saw ‘er, an’ ‘er with child as well -”

“Oh, I don’t blame Lord Fastred,” Everard said hastily. “But I don’t know what reason the Lady had to leave -”

“If she won’t tell you, you can bet it was a good reason,” Rosie said stoutly. “An’ she come back the next day, lookin’ fit to drop, an’ come straight up ‘ere an’ stayed with ‘im all that night, too.”

“Yes, and then she went off down south with all the others,” Everard protested. “And he was unconscious all that time. He never even knew she was there. I hope if I was in danger of my life, Rose, you wouldn’t go gallivanting off before I’d woken up.”

“Rose is not the Lady of a realm,” Hygurd put in, with his unsettling ability to follow a conversation without taking part in it. “Iryna has somehow to rebuild a country out of the ruins of war. And she will have an uphill task now, I fear.”

Rosie jumped. She was not entirely sure what to think of Hygurd. He had supported Gyrdan before the duel, which made him a good man, but it was he who

had (to Rosie's way of thinking) dragged Irinya away on that short and mysterious trip to the Black Hills. And his sardonic expression and frequent silences gave her the creeps.

"I'd forgotten you was 'ere!" she complained. She peered at him suspiciously. He was sitting by the window, turning a piece of chain mail over and over in his hands. "What you got there, mister?"

"A puzzle," he answered absently, as though he were talking to himself. "This is the mail shirt we cut off him that night. Here is where the sword first struck. If it had penetrated there, it would have pierced the lung and nothing could have saved him. But it didn't penetrate. The mail deflected it."

"Well, ain't that what it's for?" Rosie said, tartly. "I thought swords was meant to bounce off?"

"Not a dwarf-sword," Hygurd said decidedly. "And Beth - Radwulf's was definitely a dwarf-sword. It should have stabbed straight through at the first point of impact. Instead, it skidded on the surface, and by the time it did penetrate, here, it was at so shallow an angle that it cut to the ribs but not through them. Result: a flesh wound, bad but not mortal."

Everard sat up, interested, and took the mail fragment from Hygurd. "I see what you mean. That is strange! I suppose the angle must have been just slightly wrong, somehow."

"It does not look like it though, does it?"

"No," Everard admitted. "I cannot understand it. By all the rules, he ought to be dead."

"Among my people," Hygurd said thoughtfully, "it is said that true dwarf-weapons - those made by their creators for love of the craft - have a mind of their own. That they will occasionally play a false master false in his turn. I wonder if that is true?"

"Sounds a bit far-fetched to me," Rosie muttered. She dropped the darned sock on the steadily growing pile at her left hand - now officially affianced to Everard, she was taking her position very seriously - and stretched her arms above her head. Outside in the corridor, a floorboard creaked, and a stealthy shadow flitted hastily across the door.

"Corin!" Rosie shrieked. "You come 'ere!"

"Er - in a minute."

"*Now.*"

Her tone was as inexorable as a winch, and Corin appeared reluctantly in the doorway, bedraggled but defiant. There was mud on his clothes, his nose had been bleeding, and one eye was coming up into an impressive swelling.

“Corin! What’ve you been doin’?”

“Fell over,” he mumbled sullenly.

“No, you never. ‘Ave you been fightin’? You know what Ma says about that -”

“Everard fights all the time,” Corin argued, with maddening logic.

“That’s different -”

“Why?”

“Well - ‘cos Everard’s grown up,” Rosie said lamely. “Come ‘ere, an’ I’ll bathe that eye for you.”

Corin submitted to his sister’s ministrations with a bad grace but little choice.

“It didn’t ‘urt ‘til you started on it,” he grumbled. “Ow!”

“Keep still! What ‘appened?”

“Well, I was down in the village, an’ these two boys come by, an’ started callin’ names. Strawhead, stuff like that. They couldn’t ‘elp bein’ thick,” Corin said magnanimously, “so I ignored ‘em to start with. Then one of ‘em asked when all the soljers was goin’ ‘ome. So I thought maybe they was goin’ to be civil, an’ I told ‘em Miss ‘ad asked for ‘em to stay ‘til she got back from the south. That’s right, ain’t it?”

Everard nodded agreement.

“Thought so. Ow! Rosie, that ‘urts! Then the smaller one said what did she want ‘em for, an’ the bigger one said - well, ‘e said somethin’ rude. So I told ‘im what I thought of ‘im.”

“Good for you! An’ then?”

“Well, some other boys come up. One of ‘em ‘ad black ‘air, an’ ‘e took my side. Said Miss was goin’ to stop all the lords murderin’ an’ thievin’ an’ send ‘em to jail, an’ let ‘is Pa out. An’ the others laughed, an’ one said, sort of sneerin’, *some* murderers wasn’t goin’ to jail. An’ they all laughed, real nasty, an’ one said, if you wanted to get away wi’ murder all you ‘ad to do was - was - Well, e’ called the Captain a bad name. So I knocked ‘im down.”

Rosie hugged him.

“An’ then the big one said she was a - a - hippo-crit -”

“Hypocrite?” Everard suggested.

“Prob’ly. Well, I didn’t know what one o’ them was, but I guessed it was somethin’ bad. So I knocked ‘im down too. An’ then they all jumped on us, me an’

the black-‘aired lad against all the others.” He blew on his burst knuckles with studied indifference. “We knocked three of ‘em down, an’ pushed the other two in the duck pond, an’ then I come ‘ome.”

“Oh, well done, Corin!” Rosie cried, ruffling up his hair. “That’ll learn ‘em!”

“So the strife begins,” Hygurd said, on a sigh. “In a small way, among the children. But it will spread ever outward from its focus, like ripples on a pond, and it will tear the country into ruin.”

Corin’s face puckered up suddenly. “It didn’t ought to be like that! There didn’t ought to be no more fightin’! We won! Didn’t we? Why are they callin’ names? Why ain’t everybody ‘appy ever after, like they ought to be?”

“Because a man’s faults are forgotten only when he is dead,” Hygurd answered sombrely. “I am glad he survived, but I fear it will cost us all dear. It is a pity Irinya must fail so soon.”

Another week slipped by. It was now over a fortnight since the battle, and still Irinya remained in the south. She had much to occupy her.

Many of Radwulf’s barons had been captured, either in the battle or fleeing from it. Expecting to hang from the nearest tree, they had been astonished to find they were offered honourable terms. Not only would she spare their lives, they would be allowed to keep their lands and office, on only a few conditions. A ransom was required from each. This was normal practice and, rich men all, they accepted without demur. They must swear fealty to her as Lady of Carlundy. They must swear also to uphold the law in future. And, to ensure their good faith, they must disband their private armies and breach the walls of their fortresses so that they could not be held against armed assault. For after all, if they were all to be law-abiding citizens, castles would no longer be needed to guard against the depredations of enemies. Would they?

A few had spat defiance, rejected the terms absolutely, and sworn they would never bend the knee to a chit of a girl. Considering that she was approaching thirty, Irinya took that as a compliment, which infuriated them still further. These recalcitrants were being conducted under armed guard to Mickleburg, where a few weeks languishing in its dungeons was expected to work wonders. Most of the others, after much grumbling, had accepted, and Guthrum was making sure they kept their side of the bargain, under threat of force if necessary.

A few lords had escaped to their own fortresses and were still, in theory, at liberty and in revolt. But with few men to command they were impotent, and could only

pace and rage in their castles like caged wolves. In time, these castles would have to be invested and their arrogant owners brought low, but that could wait.

Some form of government had to be restored, for administration seemed to have broken down completely in Radwulf's last months. Setting it straight would be a lifetime's work, but a few things could be done swiftly, in token of more to come.

Those of Radwulf's hangers-on who had not already fled were turned out of Mickleburg without brutality but with great firmness. His collection of mistresses were dismissed back to their families, along with their children but minus most of the jewellery Radwulf had showered on them. The salt tax went down from three shillings a barrel to three pence. Prisoners were released, emaciated scarecrows who came stumbling and blinking into the sunlight. Those for whom no record of a charge could be found were given food, clothing and a little money and sent straight home with no further ado. Those who had been charged with some crime or other had to find three people to stand surety for them, promising that they would return to stand fair trial in due course. It would have been simpler, as well as more dramatic, just to declare a general amnesty but Irinya was determined to start as she meant to go on, and that meant a fair hearing for everyone, victim as well as accused.

And over it all hung the question no-one dared to ask: what was she to do about Gyrdan?

It was the middle of June, not far short of midsummer, when they finally returned to Highbury. Irinya jumped off her horse as soon as they entered the courtyard, and came straight upstairs without even stopping to take off her cloak.

"How is he?"

"Getting better," Everard answered, beaming. "He's still in pain, and he'll always limp, but he gets stronger every day. He is out of danger, lady."

She smiled brilliantly, and for a moment her angular features softened and became almost pretty. "I am so glad! So glad! I cannot thank you enough for your care -"

"Iryna -?" came a faint voice from the open door. "Is that you -?"

Gyrdan was lying propped up on pillows, pale and worn and very still. The hollows in his face were more pronounced, and a narrow line of pain had formed between the brows, but in some curious way he seemed at peace. He smiled, and held out his good hand as she came swiftly to sit in the chair by the bed.

"I knew you would come," he said.

"In my heart I have never been away. But I had a promise to keep."

"I know that." His voice dropped. "Did you succeed?"

She nodded. "The Lords of Darain have tended Crinan's grave these many years. It is a secret closely warded, for with Crinan lie the treasures of his house, hidden to keep them safe from marauding hands. Hygurd guided me, at night and by winding paths, so that I should not know the way again. It is a rock tomb, cunningly hidden and sealed with a great stone slab, which we could just move between us. I did not dare to venture far in, but I laid the sword and the shield in the entrance way, and we closed the tomb again. And I - you will think me fanciful, but I am sure of it - I felt her presence at my side. Only for an instant, but at peace. If there was a curse on the land, it is gone now. We may look ahead to a new day, full of promise."

"*You* may. It is not for me."

She shook her head, happiness blinding her to understanding. "But you are recovering, they tell me! You will soon be well again. And I will need you at my side, Gyrdan - Gyrdan?"

"No, my love," he said heavily. "For us it is not yet over. You have surely not forgotten? I fear, lady, your first duty as Lady of Carlundy will be to preside over my execution."

All the hope and life drained out of her face. With an inarticulate, strangled cry she fell forward, burying her face in the coverlet, her thin shoulders shaking with a pain too intense for tears.

Gyrdan laid his hand on her head, stroking her hair tenderly.

"I am sorry, lass," he murmured. "I had hoped to spare you this. It is a pity Radwulf was not a better swordsman, or his army a little more awake. I am sorry, so sorry."

She sat up, pushing her hair back, her face white and rigid as a death-mask.

"I won't do it," she said mutinously. "I won't! *I can't!* I owe you so much. And I love you -"

"You must, lady. It is the law."

"Damn the law!" she cried. "I am Lady of Carlundy. I can spare your life if I choose. And I do so choose!"

"Then I am disappointed in you," he told her quietly. "By sparing me you say to the world that murder is permitted, provided it is done by someone you love. I do not know about you, lady, but that is not what I was fighting for."

"You knew this, all the time?" She shook her head, struggling to understand. "When I spoke to the men at the beginning? And before then, in Billand? And still you fought for me? Even though you knew it would cost you your - your life?"

“I fought for justice, lady,” he corrected her. “Not for you, nor even against Radwulf. For justice and the law. I do not shirk the consequences, and neither, my lady, can you.”

“I won’t do it,” she repeated, but the certainty had gone out of her tone. “There must be a way out. I will find a way out.”

“There is only one way with any honour. I will stand trial for my life and abide by its decision.”

She fastened on the idea like a drowning man on a lifebelt.

“Yes. Yes, a trial. You can plead mitigating circumstances. There must be some. I will find a reason to dismiss the charge -”

“If I had the strength, I would slap you,” he said wearily. “Face it, Irinya. You never wanted for courage before.”

She looked straight into his eyes for the first time, a desperate, pleading glance.

“But this -! I cannot bear it, Gyrdan, I cannot bear it -”

“You can, for the simple reason that you must.”

“It is too soon,” she said desperately. “You are still in great pain -”

He laughed bitterly. “Lady, I need not be in perfect health to hang.”

“Do not speak of it!”

“Why not, since we both know it is true?”

“But the trial. There must be a trial. And you are not strong enough yet -”

“I can sit in a chair, and walk a few steps with help. And it will hardly be a long trial, lady. I have already admitted my guilt once. I will do so again, and there is an end of it.”

“No,” she said helplessly. “No.”

“Yes,” he said firmly. “Oh, Irinya, sweet - it is hard to die when I have at last found someone worth living for - but it would be harder still to live with the knowledge that you betrayed a whole people for me. Could you live with that?”

She did not answer. He stroked her hand where it lay on the coverlet.

“Soon, lady. Make it soon. Delay brings only greater agony to both of us.”

His hand closed over hers. She drew a breath, a long shuddering sigh of torment, and bowed her head in acquiescence. He lay back, exhausted, and gazed on her with love and deep pity.

“It is the right course, lady. It is the right thing to do.”

Her voice was muffled. “That does not make it any easier.”

“It would be better if you do not see me again, before - before -”

“Lest my love overcome my resolution? Aye, you are right.”

She got to her feet, stiffly, like an old woman, and stumbled blindly to the door. On the threshold, he called to her, a sudden intensity in his voice.

“Lady -! Promise me one thing.”

She did not turn, and her voice was hardly more than a whisper. “Anything.”

“Build the gallows high. A - a swift snap, not a slow strangulation. Do that for me, lady, if you love me.”

“This is madness!” Fastred cried. The news had brought him hot-foot from Caradon, incredulous and horrified. “Madness! Lunacy! Are you out of your mind?”

“Not quite yet,” Irinya answered.

She watched him with white face and burning eyes. Tears might have brought her some relief, but she had not wept since her father’s death and seemed to have forgotten how.

Outside, the carpenters knocked and hammered.

“It is wicked! He loves you! He risked his life for you! And you reward him like this! I would not have thought your heart so hard!”

“I have no choice -” she began, but was interrupted by a snort of something very like contempt.

“Choice! Don’t give me that! You *rule* this rotten country. You can do whatever you like. All you have to do is give the order -”

“If only it were so simple! Fastred, I -”

Fastred swore at her, a filthy phrase he had never in his life used to any woman, not even the hard-faced city whores, and was viciously pleased to see he had shocked her. He advanced on her, stabbing with his finger as though he wished it had been a dagger, incomprehension warring with hate in his eyes.

“You’re doing this deliberately! It’s been the same ever since we came here! Me, Tyria, all the hill chiefs, young Guthrum, that steward, even Radwulf - all of us end up like - like - like puppets on a string! You twist everything and everybody to do what *you* want, and you don’t let anyone stand in your way! First it was poor Lameter, so you could show off your high bloody principles. Now *this!* You don’t need Gyrdan any more, and people say you’re afraid of him, that he knows too much about you - so you decide to get rid of him too! You haven’t got any heart at all! You’re scheming, and two-faced, and cruel -!”

Irinya let him shout and hurl insults until he ran out of verbal ammunition, and looked at him sadly.

“If you truly believe such things of me, Fastred, there is no point in my trying to answer you.”

Fastred sank into a chair, exhaustion taking over suddenly from his fury. “I don’t know what to believe,” he said miserably. “It doesn’t make any sense. Nothing makes any sense. He loves you. Until now I thought you loved him. And yet you’ll watch him hang, by your order, without lifting a finger to save him. How can you do it? How can you?”

“I have no choice,” she repeated. “You say I rule this country. It would be more true to say *it* rules *me*.” Her voice became suddenly low and sad, laden with yearning. “Fastred, you think I want to see him hang? You think I want to endure life without him, all the lonely empty years of loss and regret? You think I would not go to the gallows myself, if it would save him? I know how much I owe him. It weighs on me by night and day, and it will follow me always. But first, I am Ingeld’s daughter, and I owe a duty to other people. Between us Radwulf and I have put this country through hell. Hundreds, thousands, killed on both sides. Many more wounded, crippled, maimed. Families riven by strife. Wounds that may never heal. Because I promised I would give them a law to live by, a law that applied to the great and the small alike.” A bitter smile fled across her drawn face. “Had I known I would be tested so soon and so severely, I would have spoken softer. But I made that promise, many times. I have to keep it, whatever it costs me. Think yourself lucky, Fastred, that it is not your decision.”

“If it *was* my decision, I wouldn’t execute my best friend! In the name of heaven, Irinya, show some pity! Look, I know all that about the law, but surely you can make one exception? He is a good man, and you love him.”

She looked across at him, and suddenly it seemed that the difference in their ages was fifty years instead of five or six. Her voice was weary, as though she had given up all hope of making him understand.

“Yes, he is a good man, and I love him. Undoubtedly he should be spared. But sooner or later there will come another man, who is not quite so good and whom I do not love quite so much. Shall I spare him? And then there will come a good man whom I do not love. Shall I spare him? And then, finally, there will come a man who is not good at all but whom I love, and if I spare him I am no better than Radwulf and every man who died in the war died in vain.”

“I don’t know how to argue with you,” Fastred said stubbornly. “But you’re wrong. I feel it.”

He walked out and left her looking after him with a face of pure misery.

“Oh, dear gods,” she murmured. “Am I to lose all my friends too?”

Gyrdan lay alone, watching the shadows creep out of the corners. It was evening. The trial was fixed for the following morning, and the knowledge had made Rosie and Everard and Corin intolerably miserable. He had sent them all away, preferring to endure the night alone than to watch them suffer.

A longer shadow fell across the bed, and the door creaked. Someone was standing on the threshold, hesitating. Gyrdan turned his head to see, and his face lit up.

“Fastred!”

Fastred hesitated no longer. He shut the door, sprang across the room and seized his friend’s hand.

“No-one here! Thank heavens! Come on, I’ll find your clothes, and we can creep down the stairs while everyone’s asleep. I’ve got the key to one of the gates, and the guard’s promised to look the other way -”

Gyrdan stared, bewildered.

“Fastred, what on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m going to get you out of here. I know you can’t ride, but I’ll find horses and a litter. We can’t get far in one night, but young Everard managed to hide Rosie somewhere, he can hide you, and after all the fuss has died down and you’re strong enough to ride, I’ll sneak you safely out to Billand -”

“Fastred.”

“What?”

“Do I get any say in the matter?”

“What, would you rather go to the Black Hills? Well, it’s nearer, but in theory it’s under *her* control, it might not be safe -”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Fastred’s turn to stare. “But if you don’t, they’ll hang you in the morning -!”

“I deserve no less,” Gyrdan said quietly. “Have you forgotten?”

“I was wrong!” Fastred burst out. “Wrong, wrong, wrong! I should never have said that, never. And then to go away and sulk - I’m ashamed of myself!”

“But they told me you saved my life.” A wry smile. “And I can recognise your handiwork, Fastred. At least one of these wounds had your care.”

Fastred squirmed, shamefaced. “Only because she begged me to. It was only when I heard about - about *this* - that I realised how - how much you mean to me - oh, for pity’s sake, Gyrdan! I tried and tried to convince her, and she would not budge. But you can escape - you can get away -”

“I shall do no such thing,” Gyrdan said, firmly. “Fastred, can’t you see that isn’t an answer? She would have to search for me. And anyone who helped me would have to suffer too. For yourself you might not care, but how could your wife endure seeing you imprisoned - by her own kinswoman? And Everard - before you drag him into it, remember he is hoping to marry Rosie. And Irinya - how could she bear having to punish all those she loves best?”

“She’s hard-hearted enough to cope,” Fastred muttered bitterly.

Gyrdan sighed. “Spare a thought for her, Fastred. It is worse for Irinya than for any of us. You can salve your conscience by pleading with her. You will be able to look back and say to yourself that you did all you could. She can’t. She has to bear the weight of this decision, on and on for the rest of her life. Don’t make it worse for her - for my sake if nothing else.”

“You won’t go?”

“I won’t.”

Fastred turned away to hide his face.

“Sometimes I think - you’re either - a madman - or a saint -!” he choked. And then he gave way, buried his face in his friend’s shoulder, and for a minute or two he sobbed as though his heart would break.

Gyrdan waited for the storm to pass before saying, quietly,

“This is not some terrible mistake, Fastred. I am guilty. I do not seek to hide it. The only difference between me and the assassin you hanged at Shipton is that I was successful and he was not.”

“That isn’t true. Don’t ask me to explain why, because I can’t. I don’t care what you did. I don’t even want to know why, although I bet there was a good reason. None of that matters. What matters to me is what you *are* - and you are my friend, and I will stay by you til the end.”

Gyrdan grasped his hand, wordlessly, and they sat a long time in silence in the gathering dusk.

“Will you light the lamp, Fastred?” Gyrdan asked, eventually. “I do not like the dark - there are ghosts in it -”

The flame flared, illuminating Fastred’s face marked with sorrow, and Gyrdan sighed.

“I think I am suffering the least of any of you,” he said, his voice soft with sympathy. “Perhaps it is because I have been expecting this for nearly thirteen years. I have grown used to the idea of death.”

Fastred choked again, but Gyrdan's expression was genuinely serene.

"Aren't you afraid of dying?"

"Of dying, yes. Though I - I hope to meet it steadily. But of death, no. Death is only nothingness. What is there to fear in that?"

"Don't you believe in heaven and hell?"

"About heaven I would not know. Hell is here in the world. People make it for each other, and for themselves. They need no supernatural help."

"You speak from experience," Fastred said slowly. "Gyrdan - I know I said I didn't care why, and I don't, but I should like to know, all the same."

Gyrdan smiled slightly. "The time hangs heavy, does it not? Very well, if you like. I have nothing to hide now. Where shall I start?"

"At the beginning. I don't know anything about you. Nobody does. Who were your parents, and where were you born, and why did you join up as a soldier?"

"Well, on some of those I can't help you. I don't know who my father was. My mother would never speak of him, except to say that she had loved him and he had caused her great pain, and so she had left him. I think they were not married - though that matters less in the Hills than it does in the Lowlands.

"My mother was of a bardic line, very beautiful but with a fey strangeness about her. She had the clear sight, and could look into the future and the past at will, and often it seemed she lived only partly in this world. People tended to steer clear of her, awed and a little afraid, and we were all the world to each other. I never remember having any settled home. We wandered all through Billand and into the lowlands of Carlundy. She sang and played the harp, and made songs for people, and I helped her. It was a precarious life. Sometimes we found a fire and a hot supper, other times we slept hungry in a ditch, as fortune dictated. Yet it was a good life, while it lasted, and I at least was happy."

He laughed ruefully. "How long ago it seems! Is it not strange to think, if things had gone otherwise I might have earned my living as a minstrel and turned my hand to the harp-string instead of the bow? But that is not how it happened. For a wandering life is a hard one, and my mother was gentle and fragile and could not bear it long. She fell gravely ill one winter, as the first frosts began to bite. A farmer took pity on us, and gave us shelter and food, though we could not pay for either."

A shadow crossed his face, and he closed his eyes. "It was a short illness, but an agonizing one. She died on the third day. I can't describe how I felt. I wished I had died too. I buried her myself, and sat by the grave a long time. I don't know how long. Days, I think. It seemed to me that all the light and love had gone out of the

world. It was raining, I remember, a cold drenching rain as if the heavens themselves were weeping for her. I watched the water trickle into the earth, and I wished that I could join it.

“The farmer and his family ignored me. Perhaps they were hoping I would go away, eventually, and give them no further trouble. They did not care; why should they? Orphaned beggars’ brats were common enough, even in those days.”

His eyes opened, fixed on something far away, and now a smile came to his face and his voice changed. “Save for the farmer’s daughter. She would be fifteen or so then, a lovely girl, with hair the colour of sunshine and eyes like a cloudless morning. She was beautiful as the flowers, sweet as wild honey, merry as the lark in spring, and kind as summer rain. All the country round knew her, and all loved her. Algiva the Fair. She was kind to me then, when kindness came like the first drops of rain on scorched earth. I suppose she coaxed me into shelter, and gave me food, but I don’t remember that. All I remember is being comforted, and finding the strength to carry on living.

“I stayed with them a year or so, for a strong boy is always useful on a farm, and then they decided I should learn an honest trade - minstrels are frowned upon by respectable folk - and apprenticed me to the local woodcutter. And after a while I found a sort of contentment, and I might have lived peacefully there all my days and never hewn anything but wood. But that did not happen either.

“Algiva was fast growing into a woman. Every young man for miles around came courting her, and presently she found one who was the love of her heart. They were to be married on Midsummer Day, and I was given half a day’s holiday to come to the wedding.”

He turned his head a little, looking at the wall, and went on in a carefully toneless voice. “Their landlord was one Radwald, youngest brother of the Lord of Carlundy, and a worthless, arrogant, cruel man. He and his son Radwulf - who was then about sixteen - and several friends had heard of Algiva’s beauty. They turned up on the day of the wedding, for a little sport.

“The farmer was a proud man and not one to yield up his daughter tamely. He fought, and his three sons and the bridegroom fought with him. Outnumbered two or three to one, and with scythes and pitchforks against swords and spears. You can guess the outcome.”

Fastred was sitting rigid with horror, his mouth dry and his limbs frozen. He could not speak.

“I found the bodies,” Gyrdan said, and his even tone began to waver. “The farmer and his sons were all dead. His wife was dead, though first they had - had -” He stopped, and swallowed hard. “Algiva’s bridegroom - a fine young man, I knew him well -” He broke off again, overcome by the memory. “He was alive, just. It was he who told me who had done it, before he died. He had been terribly wounded in the fight. And they - they had - they had stripped him, and nailed him to the door of the barn, and they had made him watch - and in his struggles to get loose, he had torn the nail right through his hand -”

“In the name of pity -!” Fastred choked.

Gyrdan seemed not to have heard him. “Algiva still lived, though she had been - cruelly used. No-one ever called her “the Fair” again. I cared for her as best I could, and she did not die. It would have been better if she had.”

His voice was numb now with remembered pain. “They had destroyed her. She never spoke or laughed again - she who had always been so full of merriment and life. She lay or sat where I put her, staring straight before her, and to look on her face was to look on a soul in hell. What she suffered, trapped in her own tortured mind, I cannot begin to imagine. But I know it must have been very terrible. She - she hanged herself, as soon as she was strong enough to stand unaided. Algiva, laughing, lively Algiva, who was a joy to all around her - dead by her own hand, dead with that terrible sin on her soul - because of one man’s brute cruelty.”

Fastred put a hand over his eyes to shut out the picture. “Such savagery -! It is not *possible* -!”

Gyrdan heaved a long, long sigh.

“Yet it happened. It was not the first time, and nor was it the last. Radwald was a brute beast when he was angered. It is difficult to understand. The closest I have ever got was to think of the way some children pull the wings off flies. To Radwald and his type, other people are no more than toys, put here for their amusement.

“Our friends and neighbours were kind, in their clumsy fashion, but so - so *useless!* They shrugged and shook their heads, as if it were merely a piece of bad luck. Nothing you can do, they said. Only endure it, they said. Accept it and learn to live with it, they said. As if it were a storm at harvest-time, or a cow falling sick, and not a whole family destroyed by one man’s cruel whim -!”

He was angry now, even after so many years. “By all the laws of the land, he should have been hanged for murder several times over. Yet no court would even hear the case, let alone find him guilty. If anyone was to punish him, it must be me.

But I was fourteen, little more than a child, and knew how to play the harp and to hew wood.”

Fastred surfaced, briefly.

“Fourteen? But you said -”

“I told you I am not so old as I look. I would have been thirty-eight this autumn, though I know most people would estimate a decade on that. Mine has not been an easy life, my friend.”

He returned to his tale, speaking more easily now. “Bardic blood is a strange thing, Fastred. It runs still, but it runs very, very deep. My pain turned into a kind of cold anger. I was determined to make Radwald pay. If I had learned to harp and cut wood, I reasoned I could also learn how to kill. All I need do was find someone to teach me. And then I thought of the army of Billand, and I made my way south.

“It took some time to get them to accept me. I was really too young, and I had to work as a servant and labourer for a while, in and around Fairhaven. But the frontier was under pressure, and I was both strong and willing, and eventually the recruiting sergeant overcame his misgivings. I signed up for seven years, and seven years I served, faithfully and well. I even waited a few extra months until we were withdrawn from the frontier. But I did not forget my purpose, and as soon as I was free I came back to Carlundy.

“For over a year I stalked Radwald. He was a difficult target, for he had many estates and many homes and moved between them often and at random. Many times I trudged fifty weary miles on foot, only to find he had grown tired of the house, or its hunting, or the weather, and had ridden off again, and I must toil after. He had also many enemies, and so he wore armour when abroad, and was usually surrounded by a crowd of servants and men-at-arms. But I stuck to my task, like a burr to a dog. And eventually I cornered him in the Badgers’ Wood, and struck him down.

“Blind panic overcame me, and I fled without knowing where or why. How they failed to capture me I do not know, for I must have left a trail a blind worm could follow. But that night I found myself on the moors, alone in the desolation with no sign of any pursuit. I had escaped.

“I expected to feel triumph, or at least satisfaction. But there was nothing, only a great emptiness, as empty as the barren hills around me. For almost as long as I could remember, I had lived to kill Radwald. I had never looked beyond that. Now the deed was done, and I had achieved nothing by it.

He sighed. "I don't know what I expected to happen afterwards," he confessed. "I was a child when I made the resolution, and I had never examined it since. Perhaps I thought that by killing him I would undo his evil deed. Perhaps I thought, somehow, it would bring Algiva and her family back to me. But of course, nothing happened. It seemed that the whole world had ended, and only I was left. A black wave came over me, and I fell down into despair."

"What happened?" Fastred prompted, after a long pause.

"I don't honestly know," Gyrdan said simply. "I think I went out of my mind. About eight months is completely missing. I have no idea at all what I did or how I lived. It was during that time that the grey first appeared in my hair.

"The next clear memory I have is in the forests out in the east of Billand, just as winter was giving way to spring. How I got there I have absolutely no idea. Somebody had found me a few months previously, destitute and starving, trying to steal one of their chickens, and instead of stoning me out of the village to die, they had given me food and shelter and clothing and set me to work." His brow furrowed. "I can't remember very much about that time. I could not really tell what was real and what was dreams. I did not know who I was, or what I was doing there, or anything. I was a sort of village idiot, just capable of the most menial tasks -"

Fastred shifted in his chair, embarrassed, and Gyrdan passed on swiftly.

"Anyway, as spring went on the campaigning season started. A regiment of soldiers camped for a few days near our village. I did not know why, but I found the camp fascinating." He smiled wryly. "Seven years of drill does something to the soul.... So when they marched on again, I followed. They did not know I was there, because although my memory had deserted me my woodcraft had not. I tailed them for six days, out of the forest and up into the mountains. And there they fought a battle, and I watched."

He shivered. "There was a man killed by an arrow, almost in front of me. And that was like unlocking the door into a long-forgotten room. All the memories came flooding back. I can't describe it. It was horrible. I felt I was drowning. And after the nightmare came the emptiness and hopelessness, like a black fog.

"This time, though, it did not crush me. I found, after a while, that I could think again. I felt the weight of the murder on my soul, and I thought of going back to Carlundy and giving myself up. It would be easy, so easy, and I would have paid for the crime.

"But I could not make myself do it. I did not see why I should submit to the law when others did not. If I am a murderer, Radwald was a worse one. He deserved to

die. I did not and do not repent of the deed, and if I had my time again I would do exactly the same. It was wrong and ultimately pointless, but I do not, in all honesty, see what else I could have done. Sometimes there is no right course.

“So, I was alive. I did not want to live, and I had not expected to live - I had expected to be hunted down and executed after the murder - but I was living and I had to get up and carry on as best I could.

“And that meant carrying the murder with me always, like an invisible load. All the things that men hope for - wife, family, home, friends, even rank and professional respect - all those were denied me. For sooner or later my secret would come out, as secrets always do, and then all decent people would turn from me in disgust -”

Fastred stirred, but Gyrdan would not let him speak.

“I thought of Billand, and the villagers who had been kind to a witless beggar. I thought of Algiva and the people of Carlundy, and of my mother’s folk in the Black Hills that I had never seen. And - I do not know how to say this - I thought I should try to do something worthwhile with whatever time was left to me. A man is the sum total of his actions, and though the murder would always weigh heavy on the scales, I might go a little way - just a little way - towards balancing it.

“So I served with your King’s army again, as a translator, scout or spy, but none the less faithfully for being irregular. After a few years I ventured back to Carlundy and found the country on the rack, stalked by fear and famine. The old Lord was dead and his daughter had married Radwulf, son of the man I had murdered and his father’s equal in cruelty. I could have killed Radwulf as easily as I had killed his father, but that was no true solution. Another, maybe even worse, would have sprung up in his place. So I sought other ways to help, and eventually that led to my arrest and to Irinya. The rest you know.”

“One thing I don’t understand,” Fastred said slowly, after a long silence. “If you say you don’t repent of the murder, why are you prepared to die for it?”

It was a while before Gyrdan answered.

“It was lawlessness killed Algiva and her family. Radwald was only the instrument. And it was lawlessness drove me to my crime. So it goes on for ever, a cycle of revenge and violence and misery that reaches no end. I could not destroy that, no matter how many lords I assassinated. Irinya can. She has the opportunity to make Carlundy a country fit to live in. If a man’s death and a woman’s sorrow is the price of that, it seems a fair exchange.”

Chapter 32.

The midsummer night was short, and dawn came early. So did the crowd. By first light they were already congregating at Highbury Manor, and by the time the guards opened the gates at sunrise the queue stretched right down the hill and back along the Road. People of all types and stations had come - soldiers from the tarrying armies, people with packs and staves who had obviously travelled great distances, curious locals with their gossiping wives and wide-eyed children, hawkers sensing an opportunity for profit, idlers finding any excuse to shirk, beggars asking alms. One enterprising local innkeeper was coaxing a pair of sweating horses and a heavy dray up the road, reasoning that so large a crowd would generate a great and profitable thirst, and a dozen sellers of cakes and hot pies were already doing a brisk trade up and down the queue. A casual observer might have thought there was a fair on - if he did not look too closely at the faces. The atmosphere was sober, even solemn. All there sensed that this was a crucial day for Carlundy, one that would show whether the war had given them a new government or merely a new ruler.

Highbury was a substantial manor, built to provide not only a stronghold for its lord but a refuge for his tenants and their stock in times of trouble. The house, with its outbuildings and scruffy kitchen garden, occupied less than half the area enclosed by the curtain wall, the rest forming a large irregular courtyard. A wooden platform had been built near to the front wall of the house, and next to it stood the grim skeleton of the gallows. The rest of the courtyard was empty, and the crowd spread out into the space like dust particles over water.

At the appointed time, four hours after dawn, there were signs of activity in the house, which until then had presented a resolutely blank face. Servants manhandled a heavy chair up on to the platform and piled it with cushions. Shadows congregated in the great hall and flitted across the doorway. The crowd nudged and shushed one another noisily. Pints of beer were finished and food hurriedly swallowed. Children were retrieved and told to sit quietly and behave themselves. The pie-sellers stopped crying their wares, and the innkeeper climbed up on his cart for a better view.

Irinya emerged first, a slight figure in lustreless black. It was the first time since her widowhood that she had worn mourning, and only the terminally naïve thought it was for Radwulf. She swayed a little as she walked, as though sick or weary, but she held her head up proudly. The Lords of Carlundy followed in a compact group,

Guthrum keeping solicitously close to Irinya, Hygurd leading the chiefs of the Black Hills, and three hulking Lowland barons bringing up the rear and looking frankly baffled.

Irinya mounted the platform alone, leaving the lords to fan out around the base. She stood in silence for a few minutes, facing the crowd, and those at the front caught their breath and turned away, praying they would never again see such anguish in a human face. She seemed to have aged many years in a few days, and those who had thought her heartless quickly changed their minds.

Yet when she spoke, her voice was clear and strong and she needed no herald to cry her words over the hushed crowd.

“You all know why you are here. You are come to witness the trial of a man for murder, that all may see justice done. I do not intend to rule as Radwulf did, with one law for the powerful and one for the weak. I, and those who fought with me, believe that laws should apply fairly to all. This trial is the first test of that principle. You are called here to see that the test is not failed.

“I have tried to make sure that all of Carlundy is represented here. The armies go a long way towards that, for they contain Lowlanders and hillmen, those who fought with me and those who fought against me. And in addition, I have sent out heralds the length and breadth of the country, inviting every village to choose a representative to come here, to listen for it and to speak for it, if necessary. I see that many have come. Many, no doubt, have not come. But none can say they were not asked!”

She drew a deep breath. “The accused is well known to you all, by reputation if not personally. Some of you know him as Gyrdan, commander of my forces in the recent conflict. Many more of you will know him as the Shadow -”

A buzz of excitement passed through the crowd, consisting of hundreds of people whispering, “I told you so!” to their neighbours. Irinya waited for it to pass.

“In the ordinary course of things, a man is judged in the Lowlands by his lord, and in the Black Hills by his clan chief,” she went on. “But Gyrdan has neither lord nor clan. Therefore only I, as Lady of Carlundy and Daughter of Ardern, can sit in judgement on this case. It is a grievous responsibility, for I owe him more than any here. Yet it is my duty to judge the case impartially, on its merits and on the facts laid before me. You are here to see that I do not fail in that duty.”

She raised her voice, and for the first time there was a tremor in the firm tone. “Bring out the prisoner!”

A dead hush fell as Gyrdan appeared at the hall door. His presence somehow made the trial real, not an elaborately staged show for set-piece speeches, but a forum which would hand out life or death.

Hygurd started, and frowned as if he did not quite believe his eyes.

“Well!” he muttered. “So he is here after all. I expected to hear he had mysteriously vanished in the night!” He shrugged, and the cynicism came back into his voice. “I suppose she thinks she can get away with acquitting him.”

Beside him, Eomer said, very quietly, “Does it not occur to you that she may condemn him?”

Hygurd looked round at him, astonished. “Impossible!” he hissed, *sotto voce*. “No-one can be that impartial!”

Eomer shook his head sadly. “I do not think he has left her much choice.”

Hygurd stared at him. Then he looked up at Irinya, white and so rigid that she was trembling, very slightly, from head to foot. He frowned again, this time with intense mental effort, like a chess player trying to puzzle out the fiendishly clever strategy behind his opponent’s unexpected and apparently suicidal move. In common with a couple of thousand others, his eyes went to Gyrdan and rested there, unblinking.

Gyrdan stood quite still in the shade of the doorway, leaning on Fastred’s arm. His face was very pale and he was sweating slightly, but this was not due to fear. Either he had been over-optimistic about his strength, or the ordeal of waiting had set back his recovery. The crowd appeared to him only as a shimmering coloured blur, pitching like a ship in a heavy sea, and something was twisting a red-hot knife in his leg.

“For pity’s sake, Gyrdan,” Fastred begged again, “*please* let me get a stretcher -”

“I’m damned - if I’m - going to be - carried about - like an invalid,” Gyrdan gasped, through gritted teeth. “I still have my pride.”

The dizziness was abating. He could see the platform now and set himself to reach it, his face fixing into a determined yet distant expression, as though his mind was on other things. To Fastred, who had suffered serious wounds himself, this looked like near-superhuman courage. To the crowd it looked like arrogance.

“Filthy murderer!” someone yelled.

The cry was not taken up, but neither was it contradicted. A kind of grumbling mutter filled the courtyard, getting angrier as Gyrdan not only paid no attention but, if anything, held his head higher. Slowly but quite calmly, leaning on Fastred as little as possible, he limped up onto the platform. Only Fastred saw the effort and

pain that each arduous step cost him, and only Fastred knew that he was on the verge of collapse when he reached the chair.

“I told you you shouldn’t be walking yet!” Fastred hissed as he helped his friend to sit down. “I bet you’ve opened that leg wound again!”

“It hardly matters if I have,” Gyrdan answered, with a grim laugh and a glance - a very brief glance - at the gallows.

Fastred sighed and went to stand behind the chair, his hand on Gyrdan’s shoulder. Quite apart from the surgeon’s natural annoyance at seeing his careful work undone, he also felt vaguely that this display of pig-headed bravery would do Gyrdan no good. In the courts at Fairhaven he had seen lawyers play an emotional audience as an angler plays a fish, and if it was faintly tacky it was undeniably effective. As a wounded hero Gyrdan could have commanded both sympathy and respect from the crowd, and that would have made it very difficult to sentence him to death, whatever the facts of the case. He did not know that Gyrdan was deliberately throwing away this card to make the situation easier for Irinya, and he would not have understood if he had.

Gyrdan looked up and across at Irinya, standing motionless at the far side of the platform. Their eyes met and held, a long glance of sorrow and forgiveness, love and farewell. Then Gyrdan deliberately withdrew his gaze, staring straight ahead with a countenance of granite.

Irinya took several deep breaths, like a diver preparing for the plunge.

“There is but one charge against you,” she began, her voice gathering strength until it rang through the whole courtyard. “That charge is, that on July thirteenth thirteen years ago, in the Badgers’ Wood, you lay in wait for Radwald son of Ingeld and without challenge or provocation murdered him by arrow-shot. Are you guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty,” Gyrdan answered, without hesitation and in a voice loud enough to carry to the entire crowd.

Fastred winced. He knew that Gyrdan was not proud of the crime; why did he have to sound as if he was? He opened his mouth to speak up for his friend, remembered his promise of that morning, and shut it again. Gyrdan had begged him not to intervene and drag out the ordeal, and Fastred had reluctantly agreed - even though the request now seemed to border on insanity.

The crowd had turned very grave as the charge was spoken and even the lout was now sufficiently subdued not to jeer. Yet a faint hiss of disappointment compounded

with condemnation rose from the listeners, as those who had thought the charge false had their hopes dashed, and those who had thought it true muttered “I told you so!”

Irinya paid it no attention and continued to address Gyrdan.

“Do you wish to plead for the charge to be reduced to some lesser offence, such as homicide in self-defence or manslaughter?” she asked, and she could not keep the hope out of her voice.

Gyrdan did not look at her.

“No.”

“Then the charge of murder stands. But in exceptional circumstances the sentence may be reduced, at the judge’s discretion, to banishment or imprisonment. And, in very exceptional circumstances, for example in recognition of great service to the country, the ruler of Carlundy has the power to cancel the charge altogether and issue a full pardon.”

The crowd muttered, evenly divided between those who knew Gyrdan as a commander and would gladly have forgiven him a dozen murders and the cynics who grumbled darkly, “Any excuse! Said this were a put-up job!”

Irinya looked hopefully at Gyrdan. “Do you wish to plead for clemency in your case?”

“No,” he answered obstinately, still staring straight ahead.

The buzz in the crowd was abruptly stilled, and then restarted again at a lower, puzzled level.

Two opportunities spurned, and Irinya was running out of options. Her voice sharpened with anxiety.

“Do you repent of the deed? Do you wish to ask for forgiveness?”

“No,” came the answer, in the same hard dry voice.

Opinion in the crowd tipped sharply against Gyrdan. A murderer who admitted his guilt without shame or regret had little claim on their sympathy, and nobody could say that Irinya had not given him ample opportunity to defend himself.

“Filthy murderer!” the same voice jeered, and this time the cry was taken up. First by a small group of louts, then in a spreading wave.

“String him up!”

“Murdering bastard!”

“Let’s see him swing!”

Many people did not join in, but only a few tried to stop it, and none were willing to speak up in Gyrdan’s defence. Partly from a pressure to conform, but more from

the disappointment of being cheated of their hero. "They're all t'same," these people muttered miserably. "Nowt to choose between any of 'em."

It took Irinya several minutes to restore order and an approximation to silence, and all that time Gyrdan sat silent and unmoved under the gibes and catcalls of the people he had risked his life to liberate. Fastred hoped very much that he was too ill to hear, and knew it was a false hope.

At length the crowd fell silent, and Irinya turned back to face Gyrdan. A spasm crossed her face, and she took half a step towards him, hand outstretched.

"The customary sentence for murder is death by - by hanging." Her glance flickered involuntarily to the gallows. "Will you not say *something* in your own defence?"

Gyrdan ignored the imploring tone. He did not look at her.

"Lady, I have no more to say."

"*Please!*"

That was no more than a whisper, audible only to Gyrdan and Fastred and some of the lords below. For one moment she had forgotten dignity, forgotten her duty of impartiality, forgotten everything save that she was about to lose the man she loved, the man who had saved her life, freed her from a cruel imprisonment, restored her to her realm.

Gyrdan trembled at her appeal, but he made no reply, not even by a look.

Fastred felt a lump grow in his throat and tears of rage and sorrow prick behind his eyes. He thought wildly of kidnapping this stubborn, noble, conscience-ridden pair and bundling them onto a ship bound for the other side of the world, where they would *have* to live happily ever after. And if this rotten ungrateful country ended up under the thumb of a worse lord than Radwulf, it was a fate it richly deserved.

At the foot of the platform, Hygurd's fists were clenched and his lips moving soundlessly, as if he were willing an exhausted runner to clear the last hurdle of a long race.

Irinya let her hand fall to her side. She drew herself up.

"Very well," she said, and her voice was hoarse and seemed to cost her a great effort to speak. "The accused has pleaded guilty to the charge of murder, and has declined to offer any defence -" She paused again, to give Gyrdan one last chance to change his mind. He did not move. "And therefore I have no choice but to declare -"

Out in the crowd, a rough voice yelled:

“*Stop!*”

She did so, very gratefully. A stocky man of about forty was barging his way through the throng, all elbows and shoulders. A couple of soldiers moved to stop him climbing up onto the platform, but Irinya stopped them with a gesture, and he vaulted up.

Hygurd’s lip curled into a scornful smile.

“Right on cue,” he muttered, and Eomer stared at the ground and made no answer.

The newcomer ignored them entirely, if he even noticed. “If he won’t speak in his own defence, I will!” he announced. “Does tha know me, my lady?”

Irinya thought for a moment, and then her face cleared.

“You captained the smugglers at Raven Tor, did you not?”

He grinned, pleased. “Aye, thar’ I did! Holman’s t’name, my lady, an’ right glad I am to see tha safe!” He held out his horny paw, and to everyone’s amazement Irinya shook it warmly.

“I said then I were sorry I’d got nowt to give thee, lady. Does tha mind?”

“I do, indeed.”

“Well, now I have.” He turned to Gyrdan, who was watching him in puzzled apprehension. “I said I thought thy name should mean summat to me, didn’t I? Well, it’s come to mind what. Is tha Gyrdan t’ woodcutter, as were near enough brother to Algiva the Fair?”

“I am,” Gyrdan said faintly, through dry lips.

Holman swung back to Irinya. “Tha’s heard one side o’ t’story, my lady. Now I’ll tell tha t’other. Algiva were kin to me. Listen!” he shouted to the crowd. “Them as talks about murder an’ wickedness! Listen, an’ I’ll tell thee a tale as’ll make thee cry.”

And he recounted the whole tragedy, exactly as Gyrdan had told it to Fastred the previous evening, and as he spoke the crowd began to seethe and bubble like a stew over the fire.

“There it is, my lady,” he finished. “An’ not a one of us had t’guts to stand up and do summat about it - except *him*.” He indicated Gyrdan, who was sitting quite still and silent, perhaps stunned by hearing his own painful history declared to a huge crowd in a voice like a loud-hailer. “Radwald - may he rot in hell - were a murdering bastard, and t’fella what killed him should ger’ a medal, nor’ a bloody rope!”

Quite a large proportion of the crowd cheered.

Irinya looked across at Gyrdan. “Is that true?”

Fastred, afraid that in his present mood Gyrdan would deny it, answered for him. “It’s true,” he said. “He told me the tale last night.”

Confirming a true statement, he assured himself, didn’t count as intervening.

Iryna looked relieved. At least Gyrdan had had a motive. But she must still act the impartial judge. She squared her shoulders.

“Thank you, Holman,” she said gravely. “But it is for the law to determine guilt and punishment, not private vengeance -”

“Tha can say that *now*,” Holman interrupted briskly. “And happen tha’s right, and happen tha’s not. But ‘tweren’t so then. Thy father - well, he weren’t a bad lord, but he weren’t a good one neither! He’d do nowt against Radwald - his own brother. When t’law don’t do its job, tha can’t complain when folks takes matters in their own hands.”

“But then there is no end. Revenge is revenged in its turn, and the cycle runs for ever. Only the law can call a halt.”

“An’ what’s this hanging, my lady, if not revenge?”

“Punishment,” she said, but her voice was uncertain.

“Oh, aye. Well, it seems to me there’s a fine line between ‘em. He was punishing Radwald. What’s t’ difference?”

“The difference, Holman, is that Radwald was given no trial and no chance to defend himself.”

Hygurd’s jaw dropped. Eomer met his eye and whispered, “*Now* do you believe her, my lord?”

Hygurd did not answer. He stared up at Iryna in frank disbelief, before remembering his dignity and doing his best to compose his expression.

Eomund stifled a yawn and studied the sun to see if it was lunchtime yet.

Iryna turned back to the crowd. “Has anyone anything else to say?”

Holman’s intervention had set an example. Where the crowd might once have grumbled among themselves and then gone away in sullen silence, the sight of one of their own arguing with the Lady and being listened to had broken their habitual reserve. All over the courtyard people stood up, shouting opinions and pushing their way to the front.

Iryna was momentarily aghast. Carlundy’s apology for a justice system had no real provision for public comment, both verdict and sentence being the province of the judge. People were supposed to come and watch in suitable awe, not take part

themselves. But having let Holman speak, she had no option but to listen to everyone else as well.

The first man, a burly farmer with a face the colour and shape of a setting sun, was shouting even as he clambered up the steps.

“Tha says as Radwald never got no trial and no chance to defend hisself. But the likes of him don’t abide by trials!” He waved a brawny arm at the crowd in an all-encompassing gesture that Holman had to duck. “Anybody here ever seen a lord in court? Except as t’judge?”

Incredulous laughter and cries of “Some chance!”

“See, my lady?” The farmer jabbed a horny forefinger in Irinya’s direction. “What were he meant to do, say -” he put on a mincing tone - “Scuse me, Lord Radwald, I accuse thee o’ rape and thievery and murder and me and me mates thinks tha should be hung for it?”

The crowd giggled nervously, some of them wondering if this was going a bit too far. Radwulf would never have tolerated even a fraction of such back-chat. But Irinya’s guards all stayed stolidly in their places.

The farmer mopped his florid face with his sleeve and resumed his normal bellow. “Tha’s out o’ touch, lady. Laws don’t apply to lords. An’ if they don’t live by ‘em, they shouldn’t complain when they don’t die by ‘em neither!”

Before Irinya could speak, Everard cut in. Like many of those close to Irinya, he had felt that he could not be impartial and should not interfere, and he had been trying to comfort Rosie in the dim quiet of the hall. But now he felt he had to say something. Leaving Rosie and Corin to sob on each other’s shoulders, he forced his way to the front.

“He’s right, lady. Corruption at the top is like a spreading poison. It becomes impossible to live by the law and by your conscience. I think there will be very few in Carlundy who have *not* broken some law! Certainly I have. I have lied to officials, cheated on my taxes, traded in illegal goods, concealed fugitives, answered violence with violence and threats with death. And there are few in my village who did not share, or at least connive, at those crimes. Not, I hasten to add, because Standale is a den of rogues!” A ripple of laughter spread through the throng. “Because we were forced to it. As Gyrdan was forced. I understand what you are trying to do, lady. And *henceforth* you can apply the laws strictly to everyone. But looking back, into that tangle of corruption - then it is not so simple. You yourself had to use lies and violence to escape, did you not? People live by their own moral

codes, and when the laws are widely seen to be cruel and unjust, they will be widely flouted.”

“You are saying that the end justifies the means, are you not? But no end was served by Radwald’s murder.”

“Scuse me, ma’am!” shrilled a woman’s voice. “Scuse me, but thar’ ain’t true! Wor’ about all t’other lasses on his lands? We was all right glad to hear he were dead, may I be forgiven for saying it!”

“And anyway,” persisted Everard, “what end is served by this hanging?”

“It is the principle of the thing,” Irinya said weakly and then, with more decision, “One murder does not justify another. Two wrongs do not make a right. If I start making exceptions there will never be an end.”

“String him up!” bawled a couple of the louts, eager for a lurid spectacle, but this time the crowd did not join in, and their jeers died away uncertainly.

A young hillman came up, the florid farmer jumping down to make room.

“I am Traharn son of Travan, of the Valley of the Lake of the Maidens, in Buchart,” he declared, his sing-song accent very pronounced. “And it seems to me that it is only because of the General that you have the opportunity to hold this trial, my lady. I was with my lord Eomund when we crossed swords with my lord of Darain, and came back to find our homes in flames and our womenfolk fled into the hills like wild deer. Always that is the pattern, brave struggle and gallant defeat. Until Lord Gyrdan came and showed us how to win. It is to him that you owe your power, lady, and it seems but an ill reward that he should be the first to suffer from it. Are there not many worse criminals in the country more deserving of your wrath?”

That provoked a huge cheer from almost the entire Highland contingent, joined by a lot of the Lowlanders who had fought on Irinya’s side. Fastred beamed, and squeezed Gyrdan’s shoulder encouragingly. There might be hope yet.

Gyrdan hardly felt it. The sun was riding high now, and the heat poured down with almost tangible force. Still barely convalescent, weak from massive loss of blood, he had not slept at all during the night and he had not eaten since the previous afternoon. He had been ready to bear a short trial, not the prolonged ordeal this was turning out to be. His head pounded, his vision and hearing were getting blurred around the edges as if in a high fever, and his wounds ached intolerably. It called for all his strength of will merely to keep upright in the chair, while all around him the debate over his life raged.

“I know well that I have cause for gratitude,” Irinya answered clearly. “None more than I! And yet I cannot take that into account. I have to judge the case on its own facts.”

Hygurd had given up thinking of his dignity and was gazing open-mouthed at the platform. “This is incredible!” he muttered to himself. “Incredible! I would not have thought it possible. *I* could not do as much.”

A tall, spare, elderly man spoke up, with great politeness.

“I am Alfric, t’ Miller of Dasset Southend,” he said, and got a gasp of shock. Dasset Southend was thirty miles south of Mickleburg, and by the look of the dust on his clothes the miller had walked every step of the way. “I were chosen to represent t’village, like t’herald said, and I come here to see a murderer hung. But now I’ve heard why - well, now I ain’t so sure. Tha said “without prov-o-ca-tion”, my lady, but it seems to me he’d been provoked enough for owt. If he’d been there on t’day, and fought Radwald to protect his sister, and killed him - then there wouldn’t be nowt to try. We’d all say a fella’s got t’right to fight for his family. It’s only because he had to wait til he growed up that tha calls it murder.”

A buzz of agreement, and the crowd looked for all the world like a vast concourse of nodding dogs. This time, there were no cries of “Murderer!”, only a few sullen mutters.

“That is true,” Irinya answered. “But I have to judge what happened, not what could have happened.”

There was a stir and a commotion at the right of the yard, where Radwulf’s troops had congregated, and then a pale pasty-faced man in his thirties was pushed out into the space. He stood blushing furiously and twisting the loose end of his belt into knots.

“Can I speak, my lady?” he faltered. “Even though I were fighting against thee?”

“Anyone may speak who feels he has something to say,” Irinya reassured him. “I am Lady of all Carlundy, not only of those who fought on my side. Come up here so that all can hear you.”

The man fell over his feet on the way up the steps, turned bashfully to face the crowd, and instantly became tongue-tied.

“Er - ah - er -” he stammered. “Er -”

“Look at me,” Irinya said gently. “Just talk to me, but as loudly as you can.”

The soldier went redder than ever, but he ventured a grateful smile.

“Er. Well, ma’am, me and t’lads, we was t’Wolf’s guard when he come to parley, like. So we heard. And it seems to us, well, tha didn’t catch Lord Gyrdan proper, see? I mean, tha wouldn’t never have known if he hadn’t admitted it then. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and none o’ this wouldn’t never have happened, would it? And he only said it to make t’Wolf fight him, see? To save all t’rest of us from getting killed - because t’Wolf were going to kill us and murder our families if we didn’t fight, and we knew your fellas’d kill us if we did. So it ain’t fair to punish him for that. Er. That’s all.”

The rest of Radwulf’s troops, who until then had been nervously silent, cheered their reluctant spokesman, who blushed furiously and made a hurried escape from the platform.

“I have something to add to that,” boomed a bluff voice, and a large richly dressed man left the group of lords and pushed up onto the platform with the assurance of one who expects everyone else in the world to get out of his way - which they did.

He gave Irinya a perfunctory bow. “I am Cynric, Lord of Bigbury Beacon. I fought for Radwulf because Radwulf was my overlord. And we lost because you, my lady, are a better leader, and your Lord Gyrdan there is a better general. Fair and square, no hard feelings, and I will serve you as faithfully as I served Radwulf and your father before you. Now, I was at that parley too, and the only reason Radwulf agreed to the duel was because of the murder. Because he had sworn to find and slay his father’s killer. That amounts to trial by combat, lady. He had a fair chance - more than a fair chance, because he was fresh and had better armour, even without the absurd rumours that are circulating in the camps about magic weapons.” He sniffed, and added tartly, “If they were supposed to be magical, he was sore deceived! It was a fight on equal terms, fair and square. The only cheating was on Radwulf’s side - to his shame! - and Radwulf lost. As far as I and my fellows are concerned, that settles the matter. Lord Gyrdan stands exonerated.”

The crowd’s reaction was rather more muted than might have been expected. Trial by combat was for the nobility, and had little relevance to people with neither weapons nor the skill to wield them. For them, trial by combat all too often meant the opportunity to fight a sword-wielding baron with a bent pitchfork or a blunt scythe.

“I thank you, Lord Cynric,” Irinya said gravely. “But for that to be valid, it should have been accepted as trial by combat on both sides before the duel. It was not, and I think you would find that both Gyrdan and Radwulf thought they were fighting for other reasons.”

“Technicalities!” Cynric huffed, but the glance he shot from under his bristling eyebrows was more admiring than annoyed. He did not much like the idea of knuckling under to a woman, but at least this one had some strength of purpose.

The astonishment on Hygurd’s countenance had already given way to disbelief, and now it was replaced by something not far short of reverence.

“I got summat to say,” announced a young woman, climbing up onto the platform with a pretty - and probably deliberate - display of shapely ankles. “I don’t understand half what’s been said, ma’am, though I ‘spect tha does. Bur’ it seems to me that he didn’t get nowt out of it for himself, if tha takes my meaning. I mean, he didn’t kill this fella for money or land or nowt like that, and he don’t look like he’s had no easy time of it since, see? If he done wrong - an’ I don’t know that he did - bur’ *if* he done wrong, he’s paid for it already. And there ain’t no call to make him pay again.”

“He has not paid the penalty laid down for murder,” Irinya insisted. “A life for a life, so says the law.”

“Oh, does it?” The cry was incensed, and Hedric forced his way up to the stage, steaming with fury. “I weren’t going to say nowt, lady, because I’m in this too deep. And I were fighting for t’law too, tha knows that. But in this case, it’s wrong, wrong, wrong! A life for a life, is it? Wor’ about *my* life? And my wife’s? And my three littl’uns? And all them others safe in Billand, hundreds of ‘em? All alive because of *him!*”

A sweeping gesture included the entire crowd. “And wor’ about all t’widows he gave money to? And them he helped get back home to their folks after their men were took away in t’night? And all of thee as sold thy cloth to a stranger at the door, good prices paid an’ no questions asked? And all of thee as bought smuggled salt for a fraction o’ t’cost o’ t’legal stuff? So’s tha could afford enough to get through t’winter and live to see t’spring? If it weren’t Lord Gyrdan personally, it were *because* of him! How many of us *don’t* owe our lives to him? Eh? Think about that!”

He rounded on Irinya. “A life for a life, lady? Aye, then it works t’other way an’ all. Thousands saved, against one taken!”

She had to shout above the tumult of agreement. “Would you speak so if it had been *your* father he shot? To the bereaved, the life of a single loved one counts more than a thousand unknowns. Even Radwulf had the right to love his father!”

Vigorous arguments broke out all over the courtyard, some taking one part, some another. Nobody noticed a thin, stooping man begin to make his way unobtrusively through the yelling crowd - until he stepped up onto the platform, shy and yet somehow also commanding. He stood silently, head bowed, waiting for quiet.

“My name does not matter,” he said, and something in his tone hushed even the most heated discussions. “I too have something to say. Something I have not spoken of for near thirteen years, not to a single soul.

He glanced across at Gyrdan.

“I have never seen this man before. And yet once, we were very, very close. For he was not the only assassin in the Badgers’ Wood that day. I was there too, stalking the same prey.”

He shrugged his thin shoulders, wryly. “I can claim no high motive of revenge. I was being paid. Thirty gold crowns. In those days that was a fortune. But the best command high prices, and in those days I was the best of my profession. Or perhaps I should say the second best, for that day I was beaten by an amateur.

“I had been promised that Radwald would be there that day. That he would have only a small escort, lightly armed. I was waiting for him in the eaves of the wood, where he would be framed against the afternoon light at its edge. He came, as promised. I strung my bow. I set an arrow to the string. I drew. But I never loosed.

“For even as I aimed at his heart, another arrow came singing out of the undergrowth ten yards to my right and buried itself to the feathers in his back. Now we all know who shot it. But this I have to say - another thirty seconds, and it would be me awaiting the gallows-tree today, and Radwald’s death would have been on *my* conscience. And I cannot say it would have weighed very heavily there. In my profession conscience is a grave handicap. I was being paid, and the deed had been done. I was not one to forgo a fine reward merely because I had not earned it. I reasoned that even if the other archer were to be caught, I could claim he was an innocent peasant I had cleverly framed. I waited for the appointed hour, and then I met with my employer, and came away with enough money to buy myself a small property and live like a gentleman for the rest of my days.”

Iryna was staring at him, ashy-faced. “Who - who paid you?”

The retired assassin permitted himself a thin smile.

“Can you not guess, clever lady?”

She flinched at the accuracy of the mimicry, and the assassin nodded his head, slowly. “Did you never wonder why the assassin was never caught? For I would have brought my employer down with me, and well he knew it. And did you never

wonder why he made such a fuss? Why he was so, *so* distraught? Why he swore on the Great Oath of Ardern to find and kill the culprit? Who would ever have suspected so devoted a son?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Myself, I never take oaths. They have a habit of turning against those who speak them lightly. My employer never expected to have to keep his oath - because he believed his father's murderer to be a man as dishonourable as himself. *I* could be trusted never to reappear to haunt him. But Lord Gyrdan is an honourable man, and honourable men are - inconvenient."

He drew a long breath, and spelt it out for the slower of his rapt audience. "It was Radwulf who paid me. Thirty gold crowns, for the murder of his own father."

The assassin made a perfect bow and exited the stage like an actor after a command performance, leaving behind him a void of shocked silence.

Irinya was the first to pull herself together, as perhaps she should be. She stepped forward to the front of the platform.

"Has anyone anything else to say?"

Nobody had. Even the louts were silent.

"Then, having heard all the evidence, it remains for me to give my judgement -"

To those who knew her well, the heaviness in her tone said clearly what that judgement was going to be. Fastred bowed his head to the back of Gyrdan's chair, tears trickling down his face. Everard turned away and put a hand over his eyes.

Hygurd switched his gaze from Irinya to Gyrdan. Eomer, independently but simultaneously, did the same. Both had followed the mood of the crowd, Hygurd to see if Irinya would be swayed by it, Eomer to assess whether the sentence was likely to be accepted. They had felt its shift while she, certain of the law's demands and lost in her own misery, had not. It was not in their interests to say anything. If Gyrdan lived, Irinya would never marry anyone else, and neither of them would have any chance of becoming Lord of Carlundy. They hesitated. Then they looked back at Irinya, at the torment she was unable to hide, and both were suddenly carried away in a rush of feeling. They exchanged a glance and an imperceptible nod, and both bounded up the steps.

"Lady," Hygurd said crisply, "in a case such as this you are not fitted to sit in judgement."

"So much has been said and argued that it would be impossible for one person to weigh it all," Eomer added.

They ranged themselves one on each side, supportive or intimidating depending on one's interpretation.

"I am Lady of Carlundy," Irinya insisted dully. "I cannot shirk this responsibility."

"We do not ask you to shirk it, merely to share it," Eomer said.

"No-one can possibly doubt your sincerity now," Hygurd said, with the earnestness of the convert. "But a judge must be impartial, and you cannot be impartial. You are too close."

"Oh, indeed! You have not yet heard my judgement!"

"I can guess it," Hygurd retorted darkly,

"None can say you are too lenient, lady," Eomer said. "But many might say you are too hard."

"Consider the evidence," Hygurd urged. "Consider what we have heard. If he were any other man you would show mercy. But you fear to be thought weak, and that makes you judge too harshly."

"How can it be justice, to execute a man because you fear your own heart?" Eomer argued.

Irinya turned from one to the other miserably, like an animal in a trap.

"Why must you make this so hard for me?" she whispered. "It is cruel enough as it is. Why must you twist the knife?"

"To remove it," Hygurd replied cryptically.

Eomer raised his voice. "We have here a fair representation of the whole country. Hillmen and Lowlanders, lords and peasants, soldiers and farmers, men and women. Some who fought for you and some who fought against you. Do you not think, lady, that they may come nearer to justice than you?"

"It is too weighty a matter for one person to judge," Hygurd concurred, also in a voice that bounced off the walls. "But many heads will find the truth where one may not. Give the judgement to them, lady."

The assembly seethed and fidgeted like a vast audience of mice. There was much astonishment, puzzlement, hasty discussion, giving way to a general preponderance of nodding heads. No doubt that the idea was approved.

Irinya hesitated, and glanced across at Gyrdan. He nodded, once and very slightly, no doubt eager only to get it over with and reach a decision by any means possible.

She lifted her chin and drew herself to her full slender height to address the crowd for the last time.

“Very well. You have heard all the evidence given. I remind you that the charge is murder, and that the accused has pleaded guilty and offered no defence. The verdict is not in doubt.”

She held up a hand to quell the stir.

“Hear me! There is no doubt that he did the deed. What is at issue is the sentence. There are three possibilities. First, he may be deemed guilty of murder, for which the penalty is death by - by hanging.” She swallowed, carefully not looking at the gallows. “Second, you may decide that the circumstances of the killing - the fact that it was provoked and at the time the law offered no legal redress - make it homicide or manslaughter rather than murder. For that the penalty is exile. Finally, you may believe that the killing was not culpable at all - because Radwald was himself guilty of murder and would have been sentenced to death in any fair trial - or that any guilt has been redeemed by subsequent service to others. If that is so decided, then he walks free from this court, exonerated from any blame. I will put these to you one by one.

“Guilty of murder.”

Dead silence. The pie sellers and the innkeeper stopped their patter. Even the children were still. No shuffling, no fidgeting, hardly even breathing. It was difficult to believe so large a crowd could keep so quiet.

Up on the platform, Fastred heard Gyrdan whisper,

“Exile - oh, gods, have I not borne enough?”

Iryna let the silence run a full minute.

“Guilty of manslaughter.”

A baby squawked and was shushed. Eddies formed and swirled as people looked over their shoulders to see what their neighbours were doing. A few people started to say something and then turned it into embarrassed coughs. But apart from that there was quiet.

Iryna’s voice shook.

“Exonerated of all blame.”

Silence again. Then a mutter began in the assembly, starting low and soft like the sigh of a faint breeze lapping a still pool, rising to the latent surge of waves on a shoreline, and swelling to the deep-throated roar of a thundering cataract in full flood.

“AYE!”

On it went and on, people clapping their hands and whooping, punching the air in delight, shouting again and again their decision, the vocal forgiveness of a whole people.

And there in front of everyone, for the first time since her father's death, Irinya Ingeld's daughter fell on her knees and wept as though her heart would break.

Chapter 33.

Late July was a lazy time in Carlundy's agricultural calendar, the hot breathless pause between hay-making and harvest, when the days were still long and there was not enough work to fill them. So as the extraordinary vehicle came nosing up the Giants' Road to Highbury, on a day of brassy heat and still air, it rapidly acquired a large escort of children and inquisitive idlers.

It looked a little like a farm-waggon, with big wheels and sturdy planking to cope with rough roads, but it was painted a brilliant deep blue, only a little dulled by the dust from the road. Hoops of smooth wood - bent, not jointed, which puzzled the carpenters - arched high over the well of the cart, and to each hoop was bound a pudgy roll of thick blue cloth, evidently to be fastened between the hoops in the event of rain or cold. Bench seats, upholstered with well-stuffed leather, ran down both sides, and it was drawn by a matched four of powerful black horses, easily the finest beasts anyone there had ever seen.

None of the locals had ever encountered anything resembling a carriage before. Carlundy was possessed of precisely one good road, and as a result travellers rode or - if very weak or very refined - were carried in horse-litters. This was the Earl of Sherbourne's largest and least elegant conveyance, carefully selected for the expected rough journey from Ash Dene into the wilds of uncivilised Carlundy, and in Fairhaven it would have been considered laughably rustic. In Carlundy it caused as much stir as a flying carpet.

The people were hardly less exotic than the vehicle. The Earl of Sherbourne himself was leading the escort, richly dressed in silk and velvet and riding a magnificent white stallion. With him were a dozen or so gentlemen almost equally well-dressed and well-horsed, thirty men-at-arms in gleaming mail and blue surcoats blazoned with the family crest, and half a dozen servants in new blue and silver livery. The Earl was keeping up appearances with a vengeance.

The waggon was driven by a large sunburnt blond man quite unconscious of the dash he cut in his new clothes and concentrating only on his beloved horses. This was Dorin, Corin's father. In the waggon behind him sat six women. First his wife, Corin's mother, a plump matron of faded but obviously once quite entrancing good looks. Next to her, Mrs Wootton, a formidable lady of a certain age, coming to retrieve her husband and make sure he was behaving himself. At the back of the cart, showing off a new dress and shaking her long golden tresses so they glittered in the sun, sat Marigold, flirting indiscriminately with the soldiers of the escort, the

younger members of the Earl's entourage and any other attractive man within range. She was every bit as pretty as Rosie, and the local youths gaped at her in silent yearning until their own girls pinched them crossly and pulled them away. Every so often Mrs Wootton would nudge her primly, which only caused Marigold to toss her head and smile more brilliantly than ever. Her mother, on the other side of Mrs Wootton's formidable bulk, looked on indulgently, with fond memories of her own youth. Marigold had finally decided she had fallen in love with the blacksmith's apprentice and was going to marry him this Harvest Home, and while she would settle down to being a good and loyal wife, there was no need for her to start just yet.

Opposite Marigold, happily tucking into a bag of cakes bought from a peddler half a mile ago and a bottle of beer from the previous inn, Cook was beaming benevolently on the world. She too had a new dress, and in honour of the occasion had extracted her best hat from its hibernation behind the kitchen dresser. This was about the size and shape of the platter used for the Yuletide sucking pig, crowned with wax fruit and silk flowers, and made her resemble an exceptionally large and cheerful table centrepiece. At the front of the cart, Mistress Poll looked on the ignorant foreigners with pitying hauteur, disdaining to pay attention to the giggling girls or the pointing children. Her own hat was quite a match for Cook's, a preposterous confection that must have come as a terrible shock to at least one ostrich. Crammed between these two astonishing apparitions, like a very small and excited buffer state, was Violet the scullery maid. She had once been as far as the fair in the next village, all of three miles from home. To her the dark-blue humps of the Black Hills looming ahead, some of them still capped with snow, were the haunt of dwarves and dragons, and Mickleburg Castle, with its towers and turrets reflected in the lake, had seemed like something out of a fairy-tale.

On arrival, they found Highbury Manor in complete uproar. Rosie's wedding was to be held there the following day, and there is something about weddings that provokes panic in even the most rational people. The house was a maelstrom of dressmakers, florists, cleaners, decorators, temporary cooks, wine merchants and early-arriving guests, with Edred and Rosie keeping control - just. Everard had thankfully slipped off back to his estate at the first opportunity, on the feeble excuse that he ought to make sure he could provide his bride with a roof over her head. Irinya's wedding present to them was the gift of sufficient money to repair part of the hall, and Everard was making sure it was well spent.

Iryna herself came out to greet the newcomers, Rosie at her side and Corin following like a small and energetic hurricane, and a joyful reunion promptly developed. The Earl, with a very low threshold for what he called “women’s cackle”, beat an immediate and hasty retreat. Eight women with eight months’ gossip to exchange, he would be amazed if they stopped talking before the middle of next week. He handed his imposing letter to a suitably awed servant, requested a private audience with the Lady at her earliest convenience, and retired to his allocated apartment in confident, if slightly irritated, expectation of several hours leisure.

He had barely washed and changed out of his dusty travelling clothes before a servant came tapping on the door, and his valet brought the message that the Lady had perused his letter with great interest and would be delighted to meet him in her private study as soon as convenient.

The Earl guessed that this probably meant “at once”, convenient or not. He smoothed his thick iron-grey hair with considerably more care than usual and eyed himself attentively in the mirror while his valet adjusted his collar. Not bad, he conceded grudgingly, not bad for a man who would be eight and fifty in a few months. At least he still had his own hair, and constant exercise had prevented him developing a paunch. Absurd, he told himself, to fuss over his appearance in a way he had not since before his wife died, but he had to admit he was feeling ever so slightly stimulated. The coming interview promised to be among the more exciting of his diplomatic career. After all, what kind of woman led a successful rebellion against her own husband? The King’s large and hastily assembled file on the subject had left him none the wiser. Every report contradicted every other, and the Earl’s imagination hunted between shrieking harridan, snivelling victim, and sultry harlot. Which, considering the second part of his mission, might be a matter of considerable importance.

“Where’s me ‘usband?” demanded a jutting-jawed Mrs Wootton of the frankly terrified gate-keeper. “If ‘e’s been up to no good, I’ll give ‘im what for, so I will. You just take me to ‘im right now, lad.”

“C-can’t leave me post, ma’am,” protested the gate-keeper, trying to avoid the Gorgon-like stare. “But tha’ll find t’ Sergeant-Major at t’ shooting butts at this time o’ day -”

He stopped. It was rather like watching a man-eating lion transform into a soft fluffy kitten. Mrs Wootton practically purred.

“Sergeant -? *Sergeant-Major?* Oh, me dear, good, *wonderful* Wootton -”

“Yes, dear,” said Corin’s mother glassily, for the thousandth time. “Ow brave you were, dear.” She supposed she might get Corin’s tangled description of his adventures straight in her mind one day, after about twenty years trying. “An’ you did remember to change your socks every day like I told you?”

“Madam,” begged a perspiring Edred, “Madam, if you won’t leave my kitchen, *please* will you take off that hat. It’s moulting feathers into the syllabub. And do try to persuade your friend to come out of the pantry.”

“Dunno if I’d wanter marry no lord, Rosie,” Marigold said, eyeing her sister’s flushed face amid the chaos of the great hall. “Seems like a lot o’ work, an’ you ain’t even wed yet. Reckon the blacksmith’s shop’ll do me just fine.”

“Ain’t it *romantic?*” breathed Violet to herself, climbing up on the battlements and gazing round-eyed at the mountains. “Ain’t it *romantic?*”

“Now what,” mused Dorin, poking around the stables, “what’s the young master done wi’ them ‘orses ‘e took?”

The Earl was shown into a first-floor room to wait. It was empty. After about half a minute he decided crossly that the Lady shared the habit of lateness with the rest of her sex, forgetting that the summons had not been immediate. Slightly under one minute later his limited store of patience gave out, and he began pacing about. It was not a large room, and far less luxurious than the chamber he had been given. The floorboards had never seen polish since they were laid, the hangings were dark and gloomy, and the furniture was ugly, looking as if it had been designed primarily as a barricade with comfort a distinct afterthought. Three tall windows looked north to the distant hills, their shutters propped wide open to admit the soft summer air. On this hot July day, the absence of glass did not matter, for the room was shady and pleasantly cool, but in winter the occupant would have the choice between stuffy darkness and freezing cold.

A large and somewhat battered table stood under the furthest window, strewn with papers and stacked with books, and the Earl’s perambulations gradually took him in that direction. Not that he was idly curious, perish the thought! But the King wanted

his assessment of the new regime in Carlundy, and the papers in the Lady's private study might be most informative. It was, he assured himself, his *duty* to take a good look.

The loose papers were evidently private jottings and told him little. Many were densely covered in figures, with little or no explanation of what they might mean. The others were written in an apparently random mixture of two languages, as if the writer simply switched language in the middle of a sentence when stuck for a word. The Earl, a resolute monoglot, was impressed. There was no need for anyone in Billand to learn a second language - foreigners who wanted to trade eagerly learned Billingan, and foreigners who didn't trade didn't matter - but the Earl nevertheless bore a sneaking admiration for people who could talk his language *and* their own as well.

The books were more informative. Several were written in "foreign", but history and philosophy figured importantly among the titles he could understand. There was also a large volume listing weights, measures, tariffs and taxes at the port of Fairhaven - the current edition, too - and a well-thumbed copy of *A Treatyse on Ye Pryncyples and Practyse of Ye Kyng's Law*. The Earl recognised this definitive text from his early and ill-fated attempt to train as a lawyer, and noted with a wry smile that she had got a lot further through it than he ever had. Its pages bristled with slips of paper, many of which bore scribbled comments. Some were in the unknown language, but the ones he could read struck him as remarkably intelligent. The Earl pursed his lips thoughtfully. Harlot or harridan, the woman at least had a brain.

Turning from the desk, something else caught his eye. A solitary candlestick, marooned in the middle of the litter. Its candle was burned down almost to the socket, and thick dribbles of wax had trickled down the sides and welded the base of the holder to the table. The Earl stood still, suddenly rooted to the spot. It was the middle of summer, and they were a long way north. If there was six hours darkness a night he would be very surprised. That worn candle-end spoke eloquently of long and lonely hours of weary study. He shook his head sadly. One thing all the reports agreed on was that she was still a young woman, no more than thirty. His own daughters were much the same age, and though he had often ticked them off for their frivolous lives, which revolved around gossip, clothes and other women's husbands, still he would not wish them this serious-minded solitude. A sudden pang of pity stabbed his heart.

Swift, light steps sounded on the stairs, a skirt swished on the panelling, and the Earl just had time to retreat guiltily to the middle of the room before Irinya herself appeared in the doorway.

His first impressions were as confused and contradictory as the King's reports. He was shocked that she was not wearing widow's mourning - then, a split second later, he realised he would have been far more shocked to find her a hypocrite. No train of attendants followed her, except a page bringing wine and a dish of fruit, which was astonishingly informal by all accepted standards - yet she was no silly and flirtatious girl. The page did as he was bid and withdrew when told to, and yet her manner was authoritative without being dictatorial. She was certainly not beautiful - the reports had all been right about that at least - but they had somehow neglected to mention that she did possess the far rarer quality of elegance. After a few seconds the Earl rather wished that his sisters and his daughters, who dressed like jewelled peacocks, would come up here and absorb this alternative fashion. Irinya's dark red gown was of austere simple cut, adorned only by a silver belt at the waist, and yet managed to look every bit as smart as the outrageous creations his daughters flaunted at society balls. She seemed older than thirty when he looked at her eyes, which had the indefinable expression common to those who have borne command and responsibility - and yet much younger when he noted her figure, which was light and slender, almost girlish. She met his eyes without blushing or fluttering, and yet also without either hauteur or boldness.

"You are welcome to my country, my lord of Sherbourne," she greeted him. Her voice was rather deeper than usual for a woman and carried a slight musical accent - which the Earl, in common with his youngest son, found very attractive.

He advanced towards her, already feeling much happier about his second task, and bowed low over her hand.

"Charmed to meet Your Majesty," he said, and for once he meant it.

She took her hand back rather too eagerly, but her smile was pleasant.

"You give me too great deference, my lord. I claim no royal title."

The Earl was avidly filing that for future reference when she added, still in the same musical tone, "We of Carlundy recognise no Kings save those who are gone."

The Earl mentally filed *that*, too. Royal or not, she was determined to keep her country's independence. So much for the King's hope of acquiring a vassal province.

The sharp brown eyes were amused. Evidently she was following his thought processes without difficulty. The Earl grinned. He enjoyed fencing.

“Has your ladyship found time to read the letter I brought?”

She tapped a roll of parchment in her hand. “Indeed. May I take it you are aware of the contents? Your King is - kind.”

The Earl, who had helped with the draft, blinked. It was not the word he would have chosen to describe it.

“It is sweet of him to be so concerned for my safety,” Irinya went on, and there was merriment in her eyes. “But I must respectfully decline his offer of - ah - protection. After all, he will surely have need of all his fine soldiers on the frontier, now that there is trouble again in the East.”

The Earl’s jaw dropped. “How do you know that -?” he began, and then stopped abruptly, kicking himself. She had probably not known - but she did now. First blood to her. *Damn*. He made a mental note to warn the King not to try threats. She was quite clearly capable of calling his bluff.

“My master wishes only to ensure continuing friendship between our two countries,” he said smoothly. “Trade has sadly stagnated in previous years, and renewing it would be to our mutual advantage.”

“Which is why you have brought a dozen merchants in your entourage,” she said at once.

“Eight merchants and four bankers,” the Earl corrected, grinning in spite of himself. How she had found that out so quickly he had no idea, but there was no point in denying it. “We shall be happy to be of service, my lady.”

“I introduced the cloth merchants to Master Hubert, of the Weavers’ Guild,” she told him innocently. “I trust you do not mind, my lord? They seemed to have much to discuss. I think you will find that Carlundy’s weaving standards have improved somewhat over the years.”

The Earl, surreptitiously observing the liquid folds of her dress and wondering what fabric it was made of, almost blushed. “That was - er - very thoughtful, my lady.”

She smiled sweetly. “Please reassure your King that he need have no fear of enmity from me. I shall always think kindly of Billand, for Fastred’s sake.”

This time the Earl did blush, hotly. Fastred was still an exile. “A - a regrettable misunderstanding, my lady -”

Her eyes glinted.

“Which I trust will *soon* be put right.”

The Earl said, cautiously, “I have with me two other letters from the King. Fastred is to be restored to all offices, property and freedoms - providing - er - providing he

makes a full apology for his actions and - and humbly begs His Majesty's pardon." The words stuck in his throat. "If, however, he remains obdurate -"

Irinya arched an eyebrow.

"Indeed! Those are humiliating terms, are they not, my lord? Pray, why should Fastred abase himself before your King?"

The Earl swallowed. There were times when he would dearly like to resign from the diplomatic service, and this was one of them. He had no desire to humble his own son just to pander to the King's hurt vanity, but neither did he want to banish Fastred to permanent exile in this cold, grey and backward country. And he was quite sure that Fastred's reaction would be to tell the King in graphic detail exactly where he could stick his letters, which would certainly result in banishment for life. He would never see his favourite son again. Yet he was the King's envoy, and he had to do his job.

"Fastred led an armed force into a sovereign country," he said. "It is a very serious offence, my lady."

"I am glad to hear that your King takes so strict a view," she returned. "Now I have the fullest confidence that he would *never* countenance such a thing himself. I shall write to him and say how glad I am that you have set my mind at rest, my lord. Will you take some wine?"

"Ah," said the Earl, unhappily. "Quite. Ah - thank you."

The conversation had not been supposed to take that turn. He had been instructed to offer friendship with Billand as a favour which the King might graciously confer on his upstart neighbour if she proved herself worthy of it. Now she was blithely assuming it as a right, not a favour. If he did not correct her, he was going to find himself in serious trouble as soon as the King heard of it.

"The circumstances were exceptional and should not be considered generally applicable, my lady," he said, a little less smoothly. "I am sure you agree that troops should be kept under proper control and should not be allowed to run riot on the orders of a minor captain. Fastred was acting without authorisation and without invitation from the foreign ruler -"

"He had *my* invitation," she corrected him tartly. "Or at least, I made him most welcome! Does your King deny that I am ruler of Carlundy by right, and have been since my father's death?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the Earl, rather too hastily. "Of course not, my lady."

He took a long swallow of his wine, thinking. In a way, he was pleased to see her defending Fastred - it was good that she did not forget her friends - but it was making

his life difficult. The King had been infuriated not because Fastred had ignored a foreigner, but because Fastred had not consulted him. Only a grovelling apology would make him forgive that.

“My King hopes very much to maintain amicable relationships with all neighbouring rulers,” he said, laying just enough stress on the word ‘hopes’ to imply that the King might - reluctantly, of course - make an exception in her case. “It is a matter of the utmost importance to him to exercise military force only after the most careful consideration and with due authorisation from the very highest level. Fastred deliberately disobeyed the orders of an officer of the King. His Majesty would be grieved to jeopardise the mutual regard between our two countries by permitting such an offence to go unpunished.”

“If your King values my regard, punishing my dearest friend for coming to my rescue seems a curious way of showing it,” she retorted at once. “That would be the action of an enemy, would it not?”

“Er -” muttered the Earl, helplessly. Carlundy was not a large or important country, but it had been a lucrative market once and the King wanted it that way again, with no fuss to distract him from the far greater worries in the East. Irinya had the power to deny the King that, and she evidently knew it and was going to use it on Fastred’s behalf. Which meant the Earl was in deep trouble. He had come here with instructions to forge a political alliance in which Carlundy would be a loyal but definitely junior partner - as was only fitting, said the King, for a small and poor country ruled by a woman. He was supposed to be just charming enough to win her friendship, and at the same time just threatening enough to ensure that she would not dare step out of line. An awkward balancing act. Even so, thought the Earl morosely, it took some doing to fall off both sides of the tightrope simultaneously. He stared gloomily into his wine. He enjoyed fencing, but not when he was lying flat on his back with his adversary’s sword at his throat

Irinya leaned back in her chair.

“Fairhaven is a pleasant city, I understand,” she said, in the manner of one making small talk. “I believe your King normally resides there. Is it a great distance from Ash Dene?”

“About sixty leagues,” replied the Earl, inwardly cursing the female delight in trivia. It was going to take him most of the night to write what promised to be an exceptionally difficult report, and he did not want to sit here chatting. She would probably start talking about the weather next.

“At least three days’ ride, then, even for a fit man,” Irinya mused. “If Fastred had journeyed to Fairhaven to seek your King’s approval for the venture, it would have been too late to help me. I am sure the King would have given his blessing, if only there had been time to ask.”

“There was a King’s officer on the spot, my lady. And - er - he withheld permission.”

She threw him a sharp sideways glance, like the flash of sunlight through trees.

“Oh, yes. But you - I mean, the officer - may not have been in full possession of the facts.”

The Earl began to pay more attention. Perhaps this was not quite as trivial as he had thought.

“Fastred would naturally have been far more frank if he had been able to speak to the King directly,” Irinya went on. “There may have been certain material facts which he could not disclose -”

“Material facts,” echoed the Earl, making notes.

“- lest they be prejudicial to the King’s interests -”

“King’s interests.”

“And the King, with his great intellectual powers -”

“Intellectual powers,” nodded the Earl, doing his best not to grin.

“- and his statesmanlike grasp of the full complexity of the international situation -”

The Earl put his wine down in case he spilled it trying not to laugh.

“- and his well-known humanity and generosity of soul -”

The Earl caught her eye and snorted. Irinya arched her eyebrow again, in perfect command of her countenance.

“I trust you are not unwell, my lord? You see, I am confident that your King would have done all in his power to help restore the ruler of a sovereign power to her rightful position, if only he had known about it in time.”

“Oh, if only he had known,” agreed the Earl.

“So he really should not be held responsible for the decision of an underling -”

“Underling!”

“- when his own actions would have been so *much* more worthy of my gratitude,” Irinya concluded. She caught the Earl’s eye again, and this time they both laughed, the Earl very merrily. Not an adversary, at least not on this point, but an ally. There were the bones of his report. Flesh them out with a little - well, all right, a lot - more flattery, and it would not be difficult to persuade the King to accept credit he did not

deserve. He would have to grovel to the King for making the wrong decision on his behalf, which would not do much for his own ego - but taking the blame when his master backed the wrong horse was part of a diplomat's job.

He raised his wine glass, now thoroughly disarmed.

"Your health, my lady!"

She smiled. "Will it serve, do you think?"

The Earl nodded, mentally polishing phrases. "Oh, yes, my lady, I think so. Fastred is safe from the King's wrath this time. The other letter goes in the fire the instant I leave this room!" He drained his glass. "But I have my own score to settle with my son! *And* I have the men to do it, this time!"

"I did wonder why you had brought so large an escort," Irinya said, smiling. "Carlundy is not so lawless as all that."

The Earl grunted. "Last time I visited Fastred, the young spark arrested me! This time I'm taking no chances."

"Oh! I am sorry to disappoint you, my lord, but Fastred is not here. Nor do we expect him. His wife is near six months gone with child and should not travel -"

The Earl's bellow rattled every tile on the roof. "*What?*"

It was Irinya's turn to blink in astonishment.

"Did you not know, my lord?"

"No, damn it, I did not! He sent word to say he was well, but not *that* well!" Amusement was getting the better of his anger, and finally he laughed out loud. "The young rascal! Married! My sisters will be *furios!*"

"At the end of December. Oh, dear," she said, apologetically, "He must have meant to surprise you -"

"He has certainly managed *that*," said the Earl, fervently. "Fastred with a wife! Ye gods, I could easier imagine a horse with two heads!"

"A child, too. Soon, anyway. October."

The Earl counted on his fingers, exactly as everyone else had. "Good grief, he doesn't waste time!"

"Will you take more wine, my lord?" Irinya offered, laughing. "I can see we have much to discuss -"

And moreover, wrote the Earl, laboriously constructing his report after the unfashionably early dinner, *may it please your Majesty to know that I have spoken with many here both great and small and I am convinced that the Lady has as secure a hold on this country as any Lord before or since. For, with a few quite*

unimportant exceptions, all the lords of the low country and of the barbarous highlands beyond seem to hold her in universal respect and of the common people it is difficult to find any who speak of her with anything other than a great love. It is her endeavour to devise a system of laws to govern this backward country, and your Majesty may take it as a great compliment that this is to be modelled on your Majesty's own order, with which the Lady has been much impressed during her sojourn in our land, saving only where the customs of the country dictate otherwise.

He bit the end of his quill, and carried on.

May your Majesty also note that it is her firm desire to remain on friendly terms with Billand and therefore to this end I have informed her that my son Fastred - with whom she has a great friendship and who is now married to her dearest kinswoman - is to be restored to all rights and property, as your Majesty instructed me to do -

He read that twice. Combined with the four pages of flattery and explanation that preceded it, it should do the trick. And the King would have a lot of difficulty going back on it now, apology or not, especially as Fastred was now married into what amounted to Carlundy's royal family. Should he make the veiled warning more explicit? He considered, and decided against it. If the King did not pick it up, the Chancellor certainly would.

- And in token of her goodwill towards your Majesty, your Majesty will be pleased to hear that taxes and customs duties are to be reformed, starting with great falls in the duties levied on salt and on exported cloths, and I do not have to remind your Majesty what a valuable opportunity this may be to our merchants and traders, and may I humbly suggest that the Guilds of the City of Fairhaven be invited to assemble a trade delegation forthwith, which I have the Lady's personal assurance will be very well received -

The Earl was grinning from ear to ear as he wrote that bit. The recommendation put him in the clear, but by the time any such delegation arrived the eight merchants from his own companies and the four financiers from his brother's bank should have stitched up most of the deals worth doing. They had not got to be the richest family in Billand by accident.

He reached for another sheet of paper and sharpened his quill.

On the subject of the Lady's character and morals, he wrote, I must say that I have formed the highest opinion -

He stopped. The Chancellor could misinterpret that if he was looking for an excuse. He took another sheet.

On the subject of the Lady's character and morals, I have made diligent enquiry and it is my opinion that a great many of the tales reported to us were no more than malicious rumours invented by her enemies to blacken her name. While not seeking to condone her actions in first leaving and then taking up arms against her own husband, it is nevertheless clear that the late Lord did grievously abuse her -

The Earl's face was hard as he wrote that. He had been a soldier, and his general attitude to women could fairly be described as robust, but some of the tales he had heard had shown him that he was not as unshockable as he thought.

- And though her household has a free-and-easy manner that might to some outsiders appear excessively informal, and she herself is quite astonishingly careless of ceremony, I have neither seen nor heard evidence of any licentious behaviour -

Much to the disappointment of the young bankers, who had been eagerly anticipating an orgy.

- and the Lady herself appears to be of quiet, modest and studious disposition. Those who are closest to her also pour scorn on the notion that she may be guilty of adultery, and indeed I must say myself that her action in allowing her supposed lover to stand trial for his life must give the lie to any such charge. May your Majesty note that I have made especial enquiries into the truth of this rumour and so many people have confirmed it to me that I have no doubt of its veracity, indeed it appears to be chiefly this trial which has convinced so many of the people of this country of her sincerity in devising a fair and just legal system, on which I refer your Majesty to my earlier paragraph.

He turned over the sheet and sat nibbling his quill for a moment before beginning.

Lord Gyrdan, the man who released her from the late Lord's captivity and took her to safe custody with my son in Billand, was severely wounded in the last battle of the campaign, owing it is said to some treachery on the late Lord's part. He suffered a severe relapse after the trial and has lain many days in peril of his life, but is said now to be on the road to recovery. Your Majesty may note that he also is held in very high esteem here, for witness the fact that although he has as far as I can ascertain neither lands nor office, he is called by everyone "Lord" Gyrdan, as though people have awarded him the title out of personal respect instead of material possession. It is hoped by most of those I have spoken with that he and the Lady will marry in due course.

Which, he thought, would upset the King's plans more than a little. He grinned. It would do the King and the Chancellor no harm at all to have their noses put slightly out of joint.

Whereof the second matter of which your Majesty bade me speak. I conveyed to the Lady your Majesty's great wish for a closer alliance between our two countries, in especial that your Majesty would look favourably on an alliance by marriage. She reminded me that such an alliance already exists, as my son Fastred is of -

He crossed that last word out very thoroughly.

- is related to your Majesty's royal house, and his bride the Lady Tyria, Chieftainess of Clan Caradon -

What a name, he thought, I hope she lives up to it -

- is herself of high descent and kin to the Lady from afar. However, remembering the stress that your Majesty and your Majesty's esteemed Chancellor laid on this matter, I ventured to press the Lady further on the subject, saying that your Majesty had in mind alliance on a higher and closer level, to wit at the highest level indeed. I explained to her that I had myself the great honour to be one of your Majesty's chosen candidates, but that if she were to prefer a man closer to her own age -

The Earl sighed as he wrote that, but after all she was a year younger than his younger daughter.

- closer to her own age, that your Majesty's nephew Prince Kenwrick would be delighted also to bid for her hand and gave her the Prince's portrait and the letter that he did write her -

To the King's dictation and practically at swordpoint. A pity that the King had no idea how to write a love-letter. The Earl recalled Irinya's acid mimicry as she read out some of the purpler sections, and could hardly finish his sentence for laughing.

- but I must say to your Majesty that I saw no sign that the Prince's dart of love had pierced her heart, he wrote diplomatically.

- To me she made a most charming reply, but think on it as I will I can find in it no hint that she intends to accept me -

Was he disappointed? No, he decided, not the least. He had no desire to marry again, and still less to leave Fairhaven and the warm shores of Billand for this mountainous and half-tamed country. Irinya had proved likeable and excellent company, but he knew he would never be truly at ease with her. It would, he thought with a sudden flash of insight, take a remarkable man to make her a husband.

He took up his quill again and wrote,

Even if she were to accede to the hopes of her people and wed Lord Gyrdan, your Majesty need have no fears of hostility, for he also holds Billand in high regard and indeed has served faithfully for many years in your Majesty's own army. However, it is my own belief that the Lady is herself unwilling to contemplate a further marriage

with anyone, at least for the foreseeable future. While at first sight this may seem prejudicial to your Majesty's hopes for greater influence in Carlundy, your Majesty may on reflection take comfort from the fact that she is at least unlikely to wed an unsuitable husband. Moreover, it is my firm opinion that the Lady herself has every intention of governing her country alone, married or single, and any man wishing to wed her in the hope of ruling the country himself is like to be sore disappointed.

If not worse, thought the Earl with a wry smile, considering the fate of her first husband. He toyed with the idea of writing a line to that effect and dismissed it, rather reluctantly. The Chancellor was not noted for his sense of humour.

Though deplorable, this situation is not so hopeless as it may at first appear. First, the Lady is not a headstrong and ignorant girl but is possessed of a steady heart and much good sense. She has indeed shown herself so by her actions thus far, not least the fact that she has led a successful rebellion and moreover has managed also the far more difficult task of producing peace after war. Second, your Majesty will not find your investment wasted when child-bearing intervenes to take her away from affairs of state or even to curtail her life, for agreement is universal that the Lady is barren.

The Earl wrote that with cold brutality and considerable speed, to save having to think about it. Of his wife's twelve pregnancies, four had resulted in agonising miscarriage and three in children who died in infancy. The ratio was no worse than most and better than many, but he still wondered secretly if barrenness was so awful a fate for a woman as conventional wisdom made it.

He dipped his pen in the ink and continued.

Third, she has already professed herself willing to maintain friendly relations with Billand, in appreciation of the kindness done her by my son Fastred and the great friendship between Fastred and Lord Gyrdan -

No harm in reminding the King of Fastred's importance again, he decided, after a moment's hesitation. He tapped his teeth. There was space for one more line, and the Earl was reluctant to waste paper, which cost good money.

In short, he wrote with a flourish, this is a lady we can do business with.

It was agreed that the Earl would stay for Rosie's wedding, and then Irinya would furnish guides and escorts so that he and the staff from Ash Dene could go to visit Fastred in Caradon before returning home. The day of the wedding dawned bright and fair, and Everard's grinning band of ex-smugglers delivered the bridegroom in

good time - head-down across a pack-horse, looking distinctly green about the gills, and strangely reticent about the previous evening.

Despite Everard's fragile condition, the ceremony went off without a hitch, except that Corin dared one of the local pages to try hitting the wax pineapple on Cook's hat with a catapult - and the boy took him up on it, missed and got Corin in the back of the neck instead. It said much for Corin's newly developed self-control that he refrained from squealing, and did not even go and duff up the other boy after the ceremony.

It was a merry party that sat down to the wedding breakfast, and Highbury's dour great hall seemed bright and almost welcoming. The meal was somewhat delayed - for reasons which Edred would not explain - but drinks and trays of fruit and sweetmeats circulated freely. Irinya was paying for the festivities out of the income from her own manors, and had told Edred not to stint on the hospitality. He had evidently taken her at her word and as toast followed toast the mood became ever more amiable, until nobody seemed to mind the delay any more.

Irinya surveyed the scene from her position at the extreme end of the high table. Rosie and Everard had the places of honour in the middle, of course - this was *their* day. Rosie was positively radiant with happiness, and Everard looked as if he still could not quite believe his luck. Next to Everard was Hygurd, acting groomsman to everyone's surprise - yet another of the unusual friendships that had developed out of the campaign. He looked suspiciously pleased with himself, which suggested that he had worked hard on his speech and it was going to be a winner. Next to Hygurd sat Everard's one surviving relative, a stone-deaf aunt who smiled beatifically at everyone and replied, "Oh, very fair, very fair," to every question. On the aunt's other side sat Wootton and his wife, swapping reminiscences with the Earl of Sherbourne, and then Irinya herself.

Rosie's side of the high table was rather more crowded. Her parents came first, then Mistress Poll, Corin, Marigold, Cook and, right at the end, Violet. Rosie's mother was alternately smiling and crying, pleased that her daughter had found herself such a fine young man, but also miserable that she would be living so far away. At least she had the comfort of knowing that she had not lost both her stray children, for Corin had abandoned his idea of going for a soldier.

"I seen a battle an' I been a spy, an' I don't want to do neither of 'em again," he'd said, very decidedly. "Ain't nothin' like as much fun as I thought. I'm comin' 'ome wi' you, an' Mr Fastred says I can be 'prenticed to Pa an' learn about 'orses."

Marigold was happily making eyes at the Earl's companions, who had all come to lean over the front of the table to chat, Mistress Poll was trying in vain to make Corin behave with what she considered suitable decorum, and Cook had captured a decanter of wine and two plates of sweetmeats and was making steady progress. Only Violet looked unhappy. No-one at all was talking to her, and she was clearly feeling lost and insignificant and very lonely. Irinya tried to catch her eye and smile reassuringly, but Violet was studying the table intently, probably trying not to cry.

Irinya thought of getting up and going to talk to the girl, but that would only excite comment, and that was the last thing poor Violet would want. Fortunately, someone else had also noticed. A tall, dark man detached himself from the nearest group, crossed to the high table in two long, uneven strides, and settled himself in the vacant place on the end of the table. Violet looked up in quick fright, like a mouse, and then squeaked in delighted recognition. The newcomer was Gyrdan, pale from weeks confined indoors and much thinner than usual, but otherwise unchanged. Irinya smiled to herself, and relaxed. How like Gyrdan to be both observant and kind, even though this was almost the first day he had been well enough to leave his room.

Next time she looked in their direction, Violet was chattering to him nineteen to the dozen - Violet, who never normally had a word to say for herself - and looking happier than Irinya had ever seen her.

Somewhere around the middle of the afternoon, about two hours later than planned, a flustered but triumphant Edred appeared in the inner doorway.

"Dinner," he announced to ironic cheers, "is served."

Rosie stood up quickly, and tapped on a wineglass until she got approximate quiet.

"Couple more minnits won't 'urt, Edred," she said. "An' I got summat to say, while you're all sober enough to listen to it."

Judging from a contented snore from the far end of the hall, she might already be too late for some.

"I knows it ain't done for the bride to propose a toast," she went on. "But everybody else 'as, an' I don't see why I should be the only one left out. You've drunk 'ealth to me an' my 'usband -"

The inevitable raucous cheer and giggling interrupted her.

"An' to Mr Edred for organisin' everythin', an' to Ma an' Pa an' all the guests, an' to the bridesmaids -" at this point Violet blushed furiously - "An' to Lord Hygurd as

best man. An' to Miss - my lady - for lettin' me get wed from 'er 'ouse, bein' as me own 'ome's so far away -"

Her mother wiped away a tear.

"But we've forgot somebody. Without 'im, I wouldn't never of met Everard, an' I might not even be alive now. An' without 'im none of us wouldn't be 'ere."

All eyes followed Rosie's to the far end of the table, where Gyrdan's expression was compounded of roughly equal measures of dismay, astonishment and delight.

"My lords, ladies, an' gennelmen - an' Corin -" which provoked a laugh - "'ere's to Lord Gyrdan. Glad to see you back on your feet again, sir. An' 'ere's wishin' you many long years of health an' happiness to come."

Rosie raised her glass. "Lord Gyrdan!"

Chairs and benches scraped as everyone in the hall spontaneously stood up, a mark of respect that had been awarded only to the bride and groom and to Irinya herself.

"Lord Gyrdan!" they chorused, and drank. No voice had greater fervour than Irinya's, and the Earl thought he would remember her smile for the rest of his days.

Poor Edred, his carefully planned meal was doomed to face yet one more disruption. Just as he got the first course served, there were sounds of disturbance from outside. Some courier, he thought crossly, can't they wait until evening -

He got halfway towards the grand doors before they burst open and a goddess swept in. A goddess of beauty and fecundity, swathed in acres of crimson velvet and glittering with gold, straight raven hair framing a face of heart-breaking loveliness.

"Tyria of Caradon!" announced the gate-keeper, breathlessly.

The Earl's spoon dropped into his soup with a splash.

"And her husband," said a clear well-bred voice out in the hall, rather ruefully. "*Now* I know what it feels like to be the appendage. Last time I ever call a woman Mrs Anybody. Go on, go and see to the horses, there's a good lad. Even I can't get lost from here."

Fastred appeared behind Tyria, looking exasperated, solicitous and very proud of her, all at the same time.

"Oh, good!" he said irreverently. "I was afraid we'd missed dinner." He looked round hopefully. "Room for two more, anywhere?"

A chair went over backwards with a crash, and the Earl was bounding down the hall with an energy that belied his age.

"You young scoundrel!" he roared. "You rascal -!"

“Dad!” said Fastred blankly. “Good grief! What are you doing here?”

The Earl enfolded his errant son in a bear-like embrace, laughing and cursing incoherently.

“What a greeting! Again! Am I never welcome?”

“Never more welcome than now,” Fastred said, beaming from ear to ear. “Never more welcome!”

His father held him at arm’s length and studied him intently. There was a new maturity in Fastred’s face, not entirely due to the beard, and the Earl recognised it underneath the nonchalant manner.

“You’ve grown up,” he said, thoughtfully. “You were a boy when you went away in the winter, and now you are a man. Much must have happened in eight months.”

“It certainly has,” Fastred said, grinning. “And the best thing to happen to me is standing just here -”

He turned to Tyria.

“Dad - my wife. Tyria - my father.”

Tyria offered her hand with a brilliant smile, and the Earl produced his very best courtly bow.

“Enchanted, madame,” he said. “*Enchanted.*” He clapped his son on the back. “Congratulations, Fastred! I wish I were thirty years younger!”

“I am glad you are not, lord,” Tyria said merrily, “or I could not have wed your son, no? I am delighted to meet you at last. I have heard much about you!”

“Ah,” said the Earl, nonplussed. “I won’t ask what. But I have heard nothing about you, my lady!” He glared at Fastred. “I was even told that you would not be coming today!”

“Well, it wasn’t *my* damn fool idea,” Fastred complained. “I was going to stay sensibly at home.”

“Ah, you all make too much fuss,” Tyria shrugged. “I am having a baby, no? I am not suddenly made of glass!”

“You were singing a different tune in February,” Fastred grumbled.

Tyria smiled sunnily, and linked one hand through his arm and one through the Earl’s.

“Well, to begin with it was terrible,” she confided. “I was sick, and my head hurt, and my back hurt, and I had not a civilised word for anyone -”

“You’re telling *me!*” Fastred muttered, and the Earl grinned in sympathetic recognition.

“And so I made up my mind that this would be the only child, no?” Tyria went on, leading them both up to the high table where Edred had hastily cleared space between the Earl and Irinya and set out two extra chairs. “But as I grew bigger I grew better, yes? And by June I was myself again.” She inclined her head gracefully. “And I knew Fastred wanted very much to come here to see Rosie married and meet all his friends again. And I wished to meet all his friends also, and to see my kinswoman again.” She stooped, and kissed Irinya.

“So I asked all the doctors why it is I must not ride. And they said, it could hurt the baby if I fall.” She laughed. “And then the problem disappeared, no? Tyria of Caradon does not fall! So yesterday morning I got up with the sun, while Fastred still snored, and by the time he had woken up and ridden after me I had come too far to be worth turning back. So we are here, yes? And, you see, nothing terrible has happened after all.”

She turned her lovely eyes on the Earl, who was clearly smitten. “It is going to be a girl.” she assured him. “My old nurse says it will be a boy, and she has been wrong about every child in the valley for as long as I can remember. I hope you do not mind her being a girl, father?”

“If she bears even the slightest resemblance to her mother,” said the Earl gallantly, “I am certain she will be my favourite grand-child! You must come often to Sherbourne -”

“Er,” Fastred said hesitantly. “Er - I thought I was in disgrace?”

“With good reason,” said his father crisply, and then relented. “But not any more!” He fished a letter out of the inside pocket of his jacket, crumpled now but still bearing the resplendent royal arms. “The King has magnanimously decided to forgive you all offences, and restore you to all lands, property and office as though nothing had happened. You can come home whenever you like.”

Tyria gave a little shriek of delight, but Fastred looked first dumbfounded and then rather sombre. He had grown to love the Black Hills and their hot-tempered, warm-hearted, stiff-necked, generous, changeable, honourable, quarrelsome, *maddening* people.

“Ah,” he began. “Well, father - I don’t know that I can. Tyria will never leave Caradon. And I think - it is also my home now -”

“But it is so simple, no?” Tyria chimed in, seeing the Earl’s face fall. “I am Mael Caradon and I could never *leave* my country. But that does not mean I have not a yearning to see the world outside! Besides, if Fastred has to endure another winter in the Black Hills, I think I may have to choose between my husband and my country,

and that I do not wish! To hear him complain about the rain, you would think he expected to dissolve, no? All the finest birds fly south for the winter. So we join them, yes?"

Chapter 34.

Once Rosie and Everard retired, to the accompaniment of much cheerful and intimate advice, the wedding party began gradually to break up. Violet fell asleep at the table and was carried upstairs without waking. Marigold was, with much difficulty, extracted from the centre of an appreciative masculine crowd and sent with her.

Gyrdan sat on alone in the darkening hall, long after everyone else had left. He felt oddly out-of-sorts, tired and yet also restless. For everyone else, the pieces of the jigsaw seemed to be coming together - but it seemed to hold no place for him. It was well into the night before he stirred.

A door opened behind him as he made his way along the dark upper corridor to his room, and Irinya called to him.

“Gyrdan -? Could you spare me a moment?”

Two men stood up as he entered the lamp-lit study, and bowed with punctilious courtesy.

“Count Wolfram of Estery Bay,” Irinya said, indicating a tall, sleek aristocrat with a distinctly punch-drunk expression. “And Master Winyard of Fairhaven.”

“My card, sir,” said this plump, jolly little man, immediately proffering a small square of pasteboard. Gyrdan took it, because it could not easily be refused, and read *Winyard, Tigglethwaite and Sons. Finest Cloths, Ribbons and Lace. Import, Export, Wholesale, Retail. No Order Too Large or Too Small. Personal Service Guaranteed. Silk, Velvet, Taffeta, Grosgrain, Finest Carlundian Broadcloth -*

“Much prefer to come and do the buyin’ meself,” beamed the merchant. “Never trust a middleman - no offence meant -”

“None taken,” Gyrdan said, laughing. The list continued on the back of the card and ended with a note in fine copperplate handwriting, evidently an amendment for the printer.

New This Season!! From Ye Black Hills of Carlundy!! Finest Quality Diribelle!!! Only Stockist In Fairhaven!!!!

“What is ‘diribelle’?”

Master Winyard stopped only just short of rubbing his hands in glee. “That’s what I’ll have ‘em all askin’, the minute I get back ‘ome! There’ll be queues from my warehouse to the dock an’ back again! The warmth of velvet an’ the drape of silk, an’ I’ll bet I can get more than for either!”

“This stuff,” Irinya explained, shaking out a fold of her gown. “Master Winyard seems to think it needs a prettier name than ‘finecloth’, which is the nearest I could get to a translation.”

“A good name’s worth a penny a yard, all pure profit, an’ there’s no better name than Winyard an’ Tiggleswaite -”

“Could we get on, please?” asked the Count, rather wearily. “You were asked here to witness our agreement, not rehearse your sales patter.”

He inclined his elegant chin towards the desk, where two letters lay waiting to be signed, and Irinya nodded.

“Of course. Gyrdan, would you sign to confirm that you have seen the Count and myself sign this agreement? He insists that we have two independent witnesses.”

Gyrdan glanced automatically at the letters, and was annoyed when the Count pushed rudely in front of him and hastily folded the letters down so that only the blank space at the bottom was left showing.

“There is no need for either of *you* to read it,” said the Count huffily. “You are only called to act as witnesses.”

“There is no need for ill-manners, my lord,” Irinya said, irritated. “I have no secrets from Lord Gyrdan.”

Master Winyard, who had evidently had a very merry evening, sniggered and winked, and then hastily sobered up under Irinya’s frosty stare. The two letters were signed and witnessed in formal silence, and then the Count handed one to Irinya, stuffed the other securely inside his jacket, and stalked out, Master Winyard bouncing at his heels.

Irinya locked the letter in a steel box under the table and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands.

“I am glad that is over.”

Her voice sounded flat and drained, and Gyrdan suddenly appreciated how tense she had been.

“You look exhausted, lady.”

She looked over her shoulder with a wry smile.

“Yes; but it will be a while before I can sleep, I think. I shall walk in the garden for an hour or so, while it is cool.” Halfway to the door she paused and said, a little shyly, “Would you join me? I have hardly spoken to you in weeks.”

Gyrdan hesitated, aware of a new constraint in the atmosphere. They had not talked freely together since the night before the duel, for he had fallen gravely ill

after the trial and when the fever had departed, leaving him shaken and weak, she had been away most of the time. Even now that he could come to her, she was invariably surrounded by advisers, officials, secretaries and assorted other hangers-on. It was, he told himself, natural that their old candour should have faded in this neglect; although he knew quite well that was not really the reason.

Irinya felt the same awkwardness between them, and sought an excuse.

“I am sorry. You must be tired - after all, you are only just recovered from illness -”

There was an undertone of hurt in her voice, and Gyrdan suddenly made up his mind.

“No, I’ll come with you.” He mustered a laugh. “I have lain in bed quite enough of late! It is a lovely night for a stroll.”

It was indeed a beautiful summer night, the stars huge and bright like great diamonds on a background of deep, deep blue velvet. Irinya drew a deep breath of the soft air, and some of the tension seemed to leave her. They crossed the courtyard and climbed the steps to the top of the curtain wall, where Gyrdan sat down on the top step with a grunt of relief.

Irinya looked down at him, somewhat concerned.

“I am sorry, I should have thought! You are still limping. Are you in pain?”

He shook his head.

“Not to speak of. There is a stiffness, that is all, and it will ease in time. But the limp will never go away. Fastred is a skilled surgeon, but he cannot work miracles.” He shrugged, carelessly. “It matters nothing. I can get about well enough already, and my strength is creeping back. I cannot dance, mark you, but I was never a dancing man in the first place.”

Irinya laughed, sounding almost natural again, and Gyrdan leaned back comfortably, resting on his hands.

“What of you, lady? I have not seen you look so weary in a long while. What did that Count fellow want with you?”

“Count Wolfram is a partner in the biggest bank in Fairhaven,” she said, her voice carefully toneless. “He has agreed to lend me fifty thousand crowns.”

“*How much?*”

“Quite.”

“But good grief, Irinya -”

She shrugged. "There was nothing else to be done. Radwulf did not exactly leave me a clean slate, you know. I have his armies to pay off - disaffected soldiers are the last thing we need - and they are all owed back pay. As are all his officials and tax-collectors and servants and factors and so on. Half the country seems to have been in his employ. And there is a stack of unpaid bills an inch thick."

She went on in a rush, and he sensed that she had spoken of her troubles to no-one and desperately needed the release.

"Then there is compensation to pay to people who suffered at the hands of robber lords. For loss of life or happiness I cannot make amends, but for loss of property or livelihood I can, and I will. Then the question of who owns what. Radwulf appears to have been quite indiscriminate in granting lands, and his - or rather Anred's - record-keeping makes Fastred look like a model of efficiency. Some manors are claimed by four or five different owners, all of whom have conferred the tenancies on different farmers. All that has to be sorted out, somehow. There is all the backlog of criminal trials to clear. Those last five stubborn barons to be winkled out of their castles and brought to heel.

"Then I have a long, long list of friends who have earned reward. The hill-chiefs expect gifts of gold or jewels, which they can in turn distribute among their followers. My own soldiers have all been paid, but they will expect some parting gift - as why should they not? Those who were disabled will expect pensions, and the families of those who were killed will need support.

"And it will be a poor harvest this year. Too many men were strutting with swords this winter and spring, and half the fields went untilled and the seed unsown. And Fastred made a very thorough job of disrupting the north-east Lowlands. Even if the fine weather holds until the corn is cut, there will not be sufficient grain to feed the country. I can make the lords look after the people on their own lands, but the displaced, the townsmen and those with uncertain title will depend on me.

"I have the income from my own manors, but Anred or various of Radwulf's other cronies have been mismanaging them for years and the returns are a fraction of what they should be. I have the contents of Radwulf's treasury, but most of it has already gone in gifts to the hill-chiefs. You cannot buy a Highlander, but he takes it very ill if he is not suitably rewarded. Eomer and Eomund would take nothing, being family, and neither would Hygurd, but the rest were like so many jackdaws. I do not complain," she added hastily, "for it is the hillman's way. Then I have the lands from those lords who are forfeit, for treason or for other crimes. But that is not a great deal, for by far the worst offenders were Anred and Frealaf - both of whom are

dead - and those five recalcitrants sulking in their castles. The rest, unless someone comes up with a serious and unexpected charge, will get away with fines and orders for compensation. And I allowed Frealaf's lands to pass to Guthrum in the normal way - poor Guthrum, he feels it deeply enough that his brother was a scoundrel without rubbing it in. With Anred's lands I was less generous, though I left his widow with a manor to live on, comfortably enough although not in the style to which she has become accustomed. I will do the same with the other five, if they see reason.

"So little money, and so much to be done. And this is even before I start on any serious reforms. I have already sold most of the plate and nearly all the remaining jewellery - a few heirlooms are all that remain, enough to look the part on those occasions when I have to. What else could I do but borrow?"

Gyrdans lips moved in hurried calculation. "But at - say twelve per cent interest -"
"Four."

He blinked. "Generous terms. Count Wolfram - was that his name? - must be in a good mood -"

"I very much doubt that," she said dryly.

Gyrdan remembered the stunned expression on the Count's face, like a man who has set a trap for a rabbit, caught a very large and angry bear instead, and barely escaped with his life.

"What *did* you do to him?"

"Me?" she said, with mock innocence. "All Radwulf's doing. It seems he owed the Count's bank nearly eighty thousand crowns -"

"Hell - fire!"

"Exactly. What he spent it on I have no idea. Wine and women, I suppose." A cynical smile touched her lips. "But there comes a point when the bank is more worried than the debtor. If I refuse to honour Radwulf's debts, Count Wolfram's bank will collapse."

"You would never renege on a promise."

"Ah, I know that, and you know that. But Count Wolfram does not know that."

Gyrdan laughed admiringly. "Illness *has* made me slow! No wonder he looked unhappy."

"Serve him right for accepting a bad risk," she said acidly. "I have agreed to cover Radwulf's debt as well as mine, but the principal only. Count Wolfram can whistle for his backlog of unpaid interest! All the loans are deemed to start afresh from

tonight, at four per cent interest for the first five years. It was as far as I could push him.”

“Yet even four per cent, on a hundred and thirty thousand crowns, that comes to - five thousand two hundred a year?”

“Five thousand, one hundred and eighty-six. It was not *quite* eighty thousand. And there is the capital to pay back as well.”

Gyrdan was beginning to comprehend the magnitude of the sums involved.

“Can you do that?”

“I have to,” she answered quietly. “I got him to reduce his interest rate in exchange for reducing his risk. The new debt is secured on my lands.”

“Irynya!”

She had never seen him more genuinely astonished.

“Was I wrong?” she asked anxiously. “It was a hard choice. But what else could I do? Carlundy needs money so badly -”

“But it is such a risk!”

She shook her head eagerly. “No, no. It could not be used as the base for occupation. I have retained all the fortifications and anything in a strategic position. I have pledged only the cultivated land - which in any case is nearly all the income -”

“I meant, a risk for you! Have I misunderstood something? You have pledged all your private income to raise money for Carlundy? And if the debt is not serviced -”

“Then in five years’ time Count Wolfram’s bank owns a substantial slice of Errendale, and I am a penniless beggar. And probably a fugitive as well, for I doubt that the lords of Carlundy would forgive me such a public humiliation. Oh yes,” she said in a low voice, “you have understood correctly.”

Gyrdan drew in a sharp breath and wagged his head gravely. “I am afraid, lady, that you will never make a successful ruler.”

She began to bridle, but something in his tone held her back.

“You have misunderstood the most fundamental principle of government,” he went on, and this time there was no doubt. She had heard him talk to Fastred in exactly the same mock-lecturing way. Her mouth curved into an answering smile as she duly fed him the next line.

“Which is?”

“You take money out of the country’s coffers and put it in your own. *Not* the other way round. Good grief, Irynya, why do you think they all fight over the job?”

She laughed wryly.

“Hygurd said once that I was spectacularly foolish, even for a woman. What do you think he would say if he knew about this?”

“I should think he would be too stunned to say anything at all.”

“And you? It is my decision, and it is made - but I should like to know what you think.”

“I think there is not another in the world who would do what you have done,” he said sincerely. “But, lady, it is a great personal risk. What chance - I mean, can the country support that loan?”

“I don’t know,” she said miserably, and then pulled herself together. “I do not see why not. Carlundy could be a prosperous country. It is only the Lords have kept it back - eighteen generations huddled in their castle, waiting for the curse to fall! That fear is gone now, whether people understand why or not, and things are starting to stir. There will be revenue from the salt trade - at three pence a barrel, Holman says there is no profit in smuggling and he might as well set up legally. He is not the only one. Also I am sure the income from the cloth business can be increased. Why should we sell raw fleeces for pennies when we can sell finished cloth for shillings?”

“Ah. Hence Master Winyard?”

“Master Winyard is the end of long chain of coincidences. And he may yet be my saviour, if in somewhat unlikely shape.”

Gyrdan sighed. “I am hopelessly out of things, it seems. Will you explain?”

“When I was in Mickleburg in June, Master Hubert and the Weavers’ Guild came to plead for the broadcloth tax to be halved. As I had already decided to quarter it, we had no difficulty agreeing, and they were so pleased they insisted on holding a banquet in my honour.” She made a wry face. “Well, Master Hubert had rather too much to drink and demanded to know why I was wearing imported cloth and should I not be supporting my own people -”

“Did he, indeed?”

“Yes, his friends were horrified. Radwulf would have strung him up on the spot. I was just surprised. The cloth had been given me by Diribel of Buchart. You know, that very light soft wool they make in the Black Hills, the sort that does not take three weeks to dry when you get soaked? Nothing special. But Master Hubert had not seen it before - the hill-women tend to make it for their own use - and seemed most interested. So I despatched him up to Diribel and thought no more about it.

“Anyway, about three weeks ago he called in here looking like a cat in a cream-jug. He has learned the technique, and his partner has found some clever way of making the cloth take dye more evenly. I admit that bit was rather over my head. He

brought some of the first lengths as a gift, no doubt to sweeten my temper, because he was convinced he could sell the stuff in Fairhaven and wanted to know what the duty would be. Which was a little awkward as neither they nor I had any idea of the price. I had exchanged some - ah - private correspondence with Count Wolfram, and I knew that he would be coming with other merchants in the Earl's entourage. He was most anxious not to excite comment; he is *very* concerned that nobody else knows quite how exposed his bank is. I guessed there would be at least one dealer in cloth, so I invited Hubert here to meet them."

Her voice became slightly incredulous. "And Master Winyard has contracted for every yard Hubert can produce for the first year, at three times the price of broadcloth. Ten per cent with the order and the rest on delivery." She frowned. "I wonder if we could have pushed him to three and a half?"

Gyrdan rocked with laughter.

"You missed your metier, lady!"

"It always falls to the lady of the house to chaffer with the tradesmen," she said with a wry smile. "This is only a larger scale. And it is very necessary. If Carlundy is going to become peaceful and prosperous I have to clear the debts, and the only way to do that is by trading our way out. It is possible, I am sure of it."

She leaned against the parapet, resting her chin on the cool stone, and her voice was suddenly weary beyond all endurance. "But there is so much to be done...."

Gyrdan leaned back, looking up at her as she stood with her shoulders bowed as if under a great weight.

"Can no-one help you?" he asked softly.

Irinya straightened up quickly, almost as if she were ashamed of admitting weakness.

"I am well enough. I need no help. And enough of my problems! What of you? What will you do now?"

He ran a hand through his hair in the familiar gesture. "I don't really know. I have had much time to think about it, but I cannot seem to get to a decision. My campaigning days are over - I was right when I said that to Fastred, if for the wrong reason. All I would be fit for if I went back to the South is square-bashing recruits in some training camp. I suppose I could go to Caradon with Fastred - if he and Tyria are going to fly south every winter, someone will be needed to look after the lands."

"Fastred's steward? *You?*"

"It would be steady, honest work," he said, sounding unconvinced. "Or I could go to Kerian in Gragart. He still persists in regarding me as his clansman."

“All the clans claim you as theirs. Because you belong to none, you belong to them all. It is a unique position. And the Lowlands hold you in high regard also. There is not a house in the country you could not call home if you wanted to.”

Gyrdan made a decision. He got to his feet, looking straight at her.

“There is only one house I would ever wish to call my home,” he said quietly. “Yours.”

Iryna walked a few steps away along the wall and stood looking out through one of the castellations. The sky was lightening and a few birds were starting to twitter in the trees. It would soon be dawn.

Gyrdan followed, but she kept her back firmly turned.

“When last I spoke to you of marriage, you were wed and I believed myself under sentence of death. Now both of those obstacles are gone. My heart has not changed towards you. Has yours towards me?”

“No,” she said, in a strangled voice. “My *heart* has not changed -”

He reached out and laid his hands on her shoulders.

It was the first time a man had touched her since her rescue from the square, except for formal greetings she was unable to avoid. The shock came in two waves. First, the immediate jolt of panic, the instinct to recoil and run. Then an electric surge that ran from her neck to her toes and met itself coming the other way, setting every nerve a-tingle, balanced between fear and - she knew not what. If he had drawn her into his arms, held her closely imprisoned, fear would have won. But his hands only cupped her shoulders, a light touch that caressed but did not constrain. She could break away at any minute, and therefore she stood still.

He came closer. Save for his hands on her shoulders he did not touch her, but she was intensely, desperately aware of his presence.

“I love you,” he murmured against her hair. “I loved you when you were a penniless fugitive, and I love you no less now you are Lady of Carlundy, for you are still my Iryna. I do not want rank or power or wealth. I want only to be with you, through hope and despair, success and failure, joy and sorrow. I want to love you, support you, help you and cherish you. And to be loved in my turn. Will you have me?”

His voice was deep and gentle, tender but not pleading. She trembled like a leaf in a light wind, her heart pounding.

“Oh, gods -!” she got out, though a choking in her throat. “It is late - too late. If only you had come before - when I still had my honour - when I was sixteen -”

“Be careful with ‘ifs’, my love,” he said gently. “When you were sixteen I was hunting a man, and not even your love would have turned me from that task. And if I had never fallen foul of Radwald - then I should have been a vagrant minstrel or a humble woodcutter, and I should never have dared raise my eyes to Ingeld’s daughter except maybe to ask her charity on the road.” He laid his cheek against her hair, and she felt the soft sigh of his breath on the back of her neck. “For my part, sweet, I would change nothing, for it has brought me you -”

He stooped, and kissed her neck.

Again the two shock waves swept through her, far more powerful this time. Her heart leaped against her ribs like a bird dashing against the bars of its cage. She caught her breath, suffocating in air that was suddenly thin and hot and devoid of oxygen. Her hands clenched on the stone, and she would not have been surprised if they had left scorch marks. She no longer heard the trilling birds, no longer saw the growing light, no longer felt the cool stone or the soft breeze. She was aware only of his closeness, the warmth of his body not quite touching hers, the pressure of his hands on her shoulders, the caress of his lips on her skin. All strength seemed gone from her limbs. Her skin tingled. Deep, deep down, a long-damped fire kindled, and this time it was not new to her.

He was still closer now, his breathing unsteady. His kisses traced the column of vertebrae down to the edge of her dress, then moved round, nuzzling beneath her ear. She wanted to turn to him, twine her arms about his neck, meet his lips with hers, melt into his embrace and never leave it again.

In the depths of her mind, imprisoned but never forgotten, dark memories stirred. Marriage. If they were married he would not be content to stop at kisses and caresses. This tenderness would degenerate into lecherous pawing, into violence and humiliation and searing pain -

“No -!”

She pulled away, too numbed by terror to realise that he released her the instant she moved, and backed away along the wall. The bright early light showed her face, dead white and revolted, as if she had turned over a stone and encountered a loathsome worm feeding on rotting flesh.

Gyrdan was too sensitive to try to follow her. He stood facing her, quiet and defeated.

“Why did you have to do that?” she cried miserably. “Why? I hoped you at least would stay my friend! But you are just like all the others -”

“What others?” he said, astonished.

The sarcasm in her voice cut like a whip.

“Oh, every male between childhood and dotage. It seems I am a most eligible widow. Now I am Lady of Carlundy and the wicked baron is safely dead, the knights-errant emerge like slugs after a shower.” She enumerated them on her fingers. “Hygurd. Eomer. Malise of Lanthart. Gartravain even, although I am almost old enough to be his mother. Two or three of Kerian’s cousins - I forget which. Cynric of Bigbury Beacon. The King of Billand’s nephew. Fastred’s father, for pity’s sake. All wanting to father the heir to Carlundy -” Her face contorted, briefly.

“I can trust no advice. I can believe none of them. Everything they say is angled to their own ends. I had hoped - I had hoped that you would be my counsellor. My friend. I am in such need of a true friend, Gyrdan!”

Her voice had become pleading, almost desperate. Gyrdan sighed, and shook his head sadly.

“Lass, that is not possible. Even if we had never felt anything stronger than friendship ourselves -”

She flinched.

“Even then, other people would not believe it. You saw the way Master Winyard reacted. And the Count was thinking the same thing, though he was far too polite to express it. We have been too close, for too long. If I stay with you, as adviser, friend, counsellor, whatever - no-one will ever believe we are not lovers.”

“Damn them! I do not care what others think!”

“Oh, yes, you do. Could you live with your servants whispering and sniggering and falling silent when you pass? Could you stand to be lampooned by every wag between the Mountains and the Sea? I can tell you *I* could not! And quite apart from personal feelings - if you decline to rule this land by terror, you will have to rule it by love. You are their Lady for just as long as your people will accept you. Lose their respect, and when some damn fool of an ambitious lord tries to overthrow you he will very likely succeed. Look,” he said, in a gentler tone, “I will be your faithful friend always, whether you will wed me or no. I am no Hygurd, to woo you with threats and blackmail. But I too have my self-respect, and I will lose that for no-one. I will not dance attendance on you like some lovesick youth. I will not see your name dragged in the mud, and mine with it. If you will not marry me, I will have to leave you. You must see that.”

She shut her eyes for a moment.

“Yes, you are right. As ever. I know it. But it is hard to lose you, Gyrdan, so hard -”

Three steps took him to her side.

“Then why? You have only to say the word, and we can stay together for the remainder of our lives. There is no reason why we should not marry -”

“Oh, yes, there is,” she said dully. “Radwulf -”

“Radwulf is dead. He is gone. You are free of him.”

“I will never be free of him.”

“Now you talk in riddles,” he said, beginning to get exasperated.

She looked at him angrily.

“Must I spell it out? I was wife to him in one way only. And because of that - I could never be a true wife to any man - in that way -”

“Is that all? Is that the only reason you will not marry me?”

“Is it not reason enough?” she said bitterly.

He took her hand. She pulled away, and he let her go.

“It does not matter,” he said. “There is a difference between love and lust, sweet. It is love I feel for you.”

“Love includes lust, or it would be only friendship.”

“Well, maybe you are right,” he admitted. “But friendship will do, to begin with. The other will come, in time. The spark is there. I can wait, sweet.”

“For how long?”

“For ever, if I must.”

“That is not an honest answer,” she told him quietly. “You would hunger for a woman, and in time that hunger would grow too strong to resist, and you would take me by force -”

Gyrdan felt cheapened and humiliated.

“You have a low opinion of men, my lady.”

“In my experience, it is entirely justified.”

“You have no experience of me,” he snapped back. “Do you really think I want to marry you only to take you to bed?”

“Perhaps not *only*. But you do want - I mean, you would not be a man if you did not. It seems a little sacrifice now, maybe. But after years of being married and yet not married, of having a wife who is no wife? Something would have to give way. You might lose patience and force me. You might grow cold and bitter, and turn from me. You might try to persuade me - and then I have a choice - to deny you and hate myself, or to submit and hate you.”

He was silent. He did want her, and there was no denying it. Even now, he was acutely aware of her beside him, setting his heart thumping and his hands trembling.

He had not moved, but as if sensing his thoughts, she took a swift step away. With her back turned, she said stiffly, "There may be an answer. If we were married - and if I - if I could not - satisfy you - I should not mind - that is, I should have no right to mind - if you took your pleasures elsewhere -"

"Oh, for pity's sake -!"

Her back was somehow very stiff and upright.

"You have a man's needs, Gyrdan."

The words and tone were prim and rather disapproving, as though she referred to a minor and rather deplorable habit. Yet it must have taken her immense courage to broach the subject at all, and there was something painfully admirable about both her honesty and her generosity. He shook his head, wondering if she would ever lose her ability to surprise him.

"Are you seriously telling me that you won't agree to marry me unless I promise to be unfaithful to you?"

She swung round. "*Most* men would find the terms extremely generous!" she said cuttingly.

Her flash of temper made him laugh. He threw up his hands.

"You are an extraordinary woman," he told her. "It is one of the reasons I love you. Make any terms you like. Only say you will marry me."

"Pearls!" declared Rosie.

"Diamonds!" Tyria contradicted.

They glared at each other over Irinya's head, at daggers drawn.

It was, Irinya reflected wearily, a good thing they did not have all the jewels she had sold to wrangle over, or they would be at it all day.

"Don't argue again," she begged. "You've had a month to make your minds up, and we went round all this last night. I hate all this fuss."

Rosie was arranging her hair. Tyria was clasping jewels about her throat and wrists. Verenice was lacing the petticoat up the front. What seemed like a score of other women were fluttering about with pins and ribbons and items of clothing. She was tired out after a night of broken sleep and bad dreams, the women had been fiddling and arguing for what seemed like hours, and she was not even dressed yet.

She had wanted a quiet ceremony. So had Gyrdan. But in this case, the entire country had ganged up against them. A quiet ceremony! With such an occasion for

celebration, in a country that had been starved of merriment for so long? They might as well have asked for the moon. The national hero was marrying the national heroine, and the party was going to go on for a week.

The flutter of women around her cleared a little as Rosie and Verenice went to lift the dress off its stand, and in the mirror she could see through the open door into the adjoining bedroom. Until this morning, it had been her room. Tonight - for one night at least - it would be their room. Separate bedrooms on their wedding night would have been so far outside the bounds of convention that she had shrunk from it, reluctantly admitting that she could not face the puzzled looks and muffled sniggers of the servants. A giggling group of housemaids, in between watching the robing, were beginning the process of conversion. Off came the familiar coverlet with the patch in one corner. Off came the plain linen sheets. Down came the faded hangings. The bed stood naked and forlorn in the middle of the room, its scratched posts and chipped frame exposed to prying eyes.

Now it was being decked out afresh, in new and unfamiliar finery. A new mattress. New feather pillows. New sheets - she had drawn the line at silk, but they were very fine linen, snow-white and soft to the touch. New blankets, thick and soft. A new coverlet - and here she had lost the argument and this was silk, heavy and opulent with its woven pattern of roses. New hangings, to match the coverlet. Flowers were laid on the pillows, stood in vases around the room, hung in bunches from the tester. The fragrance of lavender and roses was almost overwhelming in its sweetness. A bridal bed.

Iryna shivered, and Rosie clucked in misplaced sympathy.

“There, miss, you’re cold! We won’t be long now.”

Hands protected her hair. Silk whispered over her head and face, momentarily smothering her. Other hands eased her arms into the sleeves, drew the dress down over her face, settled it on her shoulders. Rosie was on her knees at her feet, arranging the skirt into its folds. Tyria was fastening the laces that ran from underarm to hip on her right side - the opposite side to usual, because she was left-handed and she was damned if she was having any lady’s maid in the apartment tonight. If she was to be shamed it would be in private, and there would be no servants to giggle and whisper in the morning.

“Glorious! Wonderful! Oh, miss, you look beautiful!”

Iryna did not really hear the coos of satisfaction. Apricot silk, pearls at her throat, diamonds in her hair - it did indeed look lovely, but it did not look like her. The elegant apparition in the mirror was a stranger to her. She smiled and said something

appreciative, to please all the friends who had taken so much trouble with her appearance, but she did not really know what she was saying. She kept looking at the bed in the mirror, and the cold knot of fear pulled itself tighter in her stomach.

The ceremony went smoothly. For Irinya there had been one moment of sickening horror, when Edred swung open the ponderous doors and she looked on the great hall seething with light and life and vibrant colour, and suddenly this ceremony blended with the earlier one, the prelude to years of violence and misery. She had stopped in the entrance, poised to run, and then Gyrdan had pressed her hand, and bent his head slightly to look into her eyes, and said softly, "Are you sure, lass?"

That had been enough. It was Gyrdan beside her, Gyrdan whom she loved and who loved her. She had smiled, and laid her hand gladly in his, and spoken her vows in clear ringing tones. And then, later, the great spontaneous cheer from the riotous crowd that had assembled in the grounds, and Gyrdan had kissed her there on the steps in front of them all, and it had seemed so *right*.

But the thought of the waiting bed nagged at her still, like the ache of an old wound.

Edred, aided and abetted by Tyria and Fastred and Rosie, had gone to town on the festivities. There was music and dancing and feasting in the hall. There were games and athletic competitions and races and boxing matches and archery contests, and more feasting and drinking and music and dancing outside. Jugglers and conjurers and contortionists performed. Fortune-tellers stared at the hands of young girls and rolled their eyes mysteriously and made happily inaccurate predictions of tall blond strangers - Fastred's popularity had a lot to answer for. Children bobbed for apples and lucky-dipped for sweets in the sawdust barrel. The entire world population of wandering bards and minstrels seemed to have wandered to Highbury today, drawn by some uncanny instinct for business.

Gyrdan put up with it all with a good grace. He smiled and laughed and applauded at the right times, and tipped the performers generously, and played the perfect host with great diligence. If he was tired or bored, or longed to be alone with his wife, nobody would have guessed it.

Irinya went a step further, and threw herself into the revels. She danced every measure, with a different partner every time, flushed and laughing. She went and watched some of the games outside, and applauded the winners, and presented the prizes in person. She never seemed to tire, and whenever the party showed signs of

flagging or beginning to break up, she would command Edred to bring more wine, or to find another musician or singer or entertainer, and the festivity would start all over again.

Everyone agreed they had never seen a more joyous bride. Why, they said, she seemed ready to dance all night.

Eventually, however, even the most determined efforts could not overcome the combined effects of alcohol and exertion. By then only a very few robust survivors retained sufficient stamina to accompany the happy couple to their room, falling over each other on the stairs and calling out much amusing and incoherent advice.

Gyrdan shut the door on them with great finality, turned the key in the lock, leaned against it as if manning a barricade, and closed his eyes.

“Ye gods!” he said simply.

Irinya began to giggle hysterically. She was exhausted and overwrought, and the sight of Gyrdan - the tireless traveller, the veteran of scores of battles - apparently worn out by an over-long party, struck her as uproariously funny. She reeled against the wall, overcome with mirth.

Gyrdan laughed too. He pushed himself off the door and came to her, both hands outstretched. Happy himself, he had not noticed the edge of hysteria in her laughter, and he thought she had overcome her fears.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he breathed. “Oh, my love, my love -”

His face was in shadow. The lamp-light gleamed on his rich clothes, so unlike his usual plain garments. To the eye of terrified memory, his figure seemed to waver, to shimmer and blur against the light, to spin back over the years and transmute, inexorably, into Radwulf.

She could not back away because of the wall behind her. He folded her in his arms and held her close, his lips seeking hers. She felt him twitch the jewelled comb loose from her hair, and then his fingers were tugging deftly at the fastening of her gown.

She twisted in his grip, turning her head away, pushing with her hands against his chest. He released her immediately, and she shrank back, clutching at her dress, her face pale with disgust.

“My poor lady,” Gyrdan said sadly. “Is it really so bad?”

She nodded, her breath catching in her throat. “I - I am sorry. I cannot help it. There are more memories than those in the mind. You touch me - and *he* is there - all the pain - the shame -” She broke off, and turned away to hide her face. Her

shoulders quivered as if she were fighting down an urge to vomit, and then she took two deep breaths, carefully re-fastened her dress, and turned back with a smile that looked almost real. "I am sorry. It is too soon, that is all, and I am so tired. All the fuss - it has upset me. Maybe tomorrow night?"

Gyrdan sighed. He said, quietly, "Would you like me to go?"

She bit her lip. "Would you shame me so? Have the whole household whisper and giggle behind their hands at us? Have them all *know* that you - that I - that I could not - that I failed you -!"

"You have not failed me."

"No." She swallowed hard, and came to his side. "Nor will I. I am your wife. And I love you. I - I will deny you nothing."

This time he did not touch her.

"I demand nothing of you. You know that." He stooped to drag a footstool into position by the only armchair, and sat down. "Pass me a blanket. I will do very well here for one night -"

"Oh, Gyrdan," she whispered miserably. "I am sorry. I knew it would be like this. I knew it. I should never have married you."

"I am glad that you did," he said, but there was an edge in his voice. He put his feet up on the stool and tried unsuccessfully to get comfortable. "We agreed the terms, remember? I do not mind. But I do not want to spend the night arguing over it. I am tired and I want to sleep."

Some hope, he thought ruefully. Uncomfortable sleeping places were nothing new, but a bramble hedge in the rain would be better than this room with its atmosphere of tension and fear. The sooner they arranged separate rooms the better, and damn what the servants thought.

"You can't sleep in a chair," she said sharply. "It is absurd. And it is not fair. This is my fault, not yours."

He resisted the urge to shout *For pity's sake, woman, make your mind up!*

"All right." He stood up again, gratefully because the chair was hard and uncomfortable. "Come to bed."

Her lips set into a firm line. "Yes. Let us get it over with."

For Gyrdan that was the final straw. It had been a long tiresome day culminating in a maddening frustration, and now Irinya was apparently still regarding him as a potential rapist. He lost his temper.

"Oh, damn it, Irinya! I have never in my life taken a woman against her will, and I don't intend to start with my wife! I will *not* be treated as a repulsive duty!"

“Don’t shout,” she said in a small voice, looking down at the floor.

“Oh, *hell*.” It was almost a groan. “Sweetheart, will you try to understand? I love you. What possible pleasure do you think I would get from hurting you?”

“Do you really mean that?”

“How often do I have to say it? I will never demand anything from you. In time, the memory will fade and you will want to come to me. To begin with it is enough that we grow accustomed to sharing the same room, the same bed. No more. I promise you.”

Irina did not once look at him as he undressed. She brushed out her hair and braided it, very carefully. She laid aside her jewellery, arranging it neatly on a table. Unlaced the embroidered gown, took it off awkwardly and clumsily, folded it tidily on the back of the chair, changed her mind and hung it up instead. Then her hands went to the fastenings of her petticoat. Slowly, reluctantly, she unlaced it, and then, when she could delay no longer, hastily slipped it off, her body shrinking under the thin shift which was its last protection.

“Not like that, Irina,” came her husband’s voice from the bed. “I can’t bear to watch you. You undress as though you are ashamed.”

She looked up, met his eye for the first time, and glanced away again, her face defeated.

“I am near thirty, Gyrdan,” she said, unhappily. “And I was never a beauty in the first place.”

“And I am an old soldier, scarred, and lame, and grey,” he said lightly. “I am hardly one to criticise, lass. But keep your shift on if it would help.”

The relief in her eyes was astonishing and pitiful.

“Don’t you mind?”

“No,” he said on a sigh. “I will neither look at you nor touch you. Come to bed.”

Irina lay rigid, never closing her eyes. She could not sleep, could not even doze, always expecting to feel groping hands, hot breath, the slimy touch of lecherous lips.

But nothing happened. Gyrdan kept his word and kept strictly to his half of the bed. After a while, Irina ventured to steal a glance at him. She had not snuffed the lamp, and though the light was dim it was sufficient to show her that he was asleep. He lay quite still, breathing quietly, his eyes closed and the long lashes throwing a soft shadow on his cheek. In repose, his face seemed less stern than usual, giving

some hint of a younger, gentler Gyrdan who might have existed in kinder circumstances.

She raised herself on one elbow, watching him warily. Her experience of men was both wide and bitter, and all of it had been forcible. Radwulf sought to dominate his wife, and sharing her around was part of the process. She had never understood why anyone married voluntarily, or how Radwulf's courtesans could apparently enjoy their profession. Vaguely, she had assumed that it must be some fault in herself. Perhaps men chose to hurt and humiliate her because she was plain. Or perhaps other women actually enjoyed the experience, though that possibility was and remained beyond her comprehension. It was only now occurring to her that perhaps Radwulf and his cronies might not be typical of all men.

She thought back over the time she had known Gyrdan. That first night, when she had tended his hurts, she had offered herself and he had declined, seeming genuinely shocked and moved by her story. All the time they had been travelling together - alone together, she thought, with a frisson of mingled fear and excitement - he had never, not once, even made advances to her. True, that was before love had come to spoil their friendship. Yet later during the campaign, when without doubt he had loved and desired her, he had again left her unmolested, although the constant travel and upheaval had given him ample opportunity. Even in their terrible wanderings in the caves he had taken no advantage of her fear and loneliness. She remembered how comforting his presence had been, and the peace of lying cradled in his arms. That was the man she had married, not some violent brute. Gyrdan would never hurt her - and in any case, he was asleep. He would never know. She crept close to him.

He was not asleep after all. Without opening his eyes, he held out his arms to her, and she slipped within his embrace. He sighed, shifted his position slightly, and then again lay quite still.

How warm he was! All down the length of her body, shoulder, breast, hip, leg, she was aware of him beside her. Her thin shift was no barrier to the sensation of warmth and closeness. And there were places where there was no barrier at all. Her cheek rested on his shoulder. Her bare arm lay across his bare chest. She felt his every breath, the beat of his heart.

Gyrdan still did not move. His breathing grew irregular, and his heartbeat faster, but he lay perfectly still. In some odd way, this was a little disappointing. She feared his embraces, yet she was also, most unreasonably, hurt by his apparent coldness.

Her own heart beat faster. She was still frightened. Yet she was also fascinated. She had never touched an uninjured man's body, except in desperate and ineffectual attempts to fight it off. This warm content, this quiet pleasure, were entirely new to her.

Without conscious will, her fingers strayed across his shoulder. She felt the smoothness of the skin, the contours of the muscle beneath. She sensed the latent strength in him, knew that he was quite capable of taking her by force if he chose to, and knew also that he would not. Her hand encountered the slight ridge of an old scar, and followed it down across firm, warm flesh, and then beyond the scar's end over the long line of ribs, led now only by the desire to explore.

Gyrdan groaned hollowly.

"Don't *do* that!"

She snatched her hand away. "I am sorry. You do not like it?"

"Like it -!" He made a sound between a groan, a sigh and a laugh. "Gods -! I have fought some fierce battles in my time, but never one so tough as this! To lie with you in my arms and not make love to you - that is bad enough. But to have you caress me - to feel the touch of your hands - and not reply in kind - that is more than I can stand!"

She had been hovering on the brink of decision. Now she made up her mind. Curiosity formed part of the impulse - "to make love" sounded very different from "to take". Generosity formed another part - Gyrdan had given her so much, it seemed wrong not to at least try to give him something in return. She trusted him not to hurt her, or at least not more than he could help, and she had never wanted for courage.

She sat up, lifted the shift over her head and dropped it on the floor, trembling from head to foot.

"No," Gyrdan said gently. "Not against your will."

She lay down beside him again and took him in her arms.

"I am afraid," she said, her voice unsteady. "I cannot help that. But it is not against my will."

Gyrdan woke up with the sun in his eyes and something tickling his cheek. Irinya was resting on one elbow beside him, teasing him with a strand of her hair.

He yawned in mock complaint.

"You look very pleased with yourself, my lady."

She threw the strand of hair back over her shoulder. "So do you."

“Probably for the same reason,” he said laughing, and pulled her down beside him. She came willingly, all curves and softness, and settled against him with a sigh of pure content.

“I never imagined.”

“Sweet,” he said truthfully, “neither did I.”

Her eyes widened innocently. “Do you suppose such joy could come more than once in a lifetime?”

“Shall we find out?”

Epilogue.

Dusk was falling early on this late winter day, and the wind was cold and bitter. Ice cracked in the puddles on the Giants' Road, and starving birds piped their territories thinly from the bare trees. The single horseman huddled deeper into his cloak and hunched his shoulders, grateful to see Highbury looming out of the gloom ahead.

Four and a bit years had changed Highbury considerably. Irinya and Gyrdan had decided to make it their capital, breaking the three-hundred-year tradition of living in Mickleburg. Although far grander, the great castle was gloomy, brooding, astonishingly uncomfortable and for Irinya full of grim memories. Armoury, treasury, prison, stronghold - Mickleburg was all of those, but it could never be a home. Highbury had seemed an ideal alternative. It was near the Black Hills - like Gyrdan, Irinya was always happier when she could look upon the mountains - and almost in the geographical centre of the country, unlike Mickleburg which was the natural centre of the Lowlands. It was on the Giants' Road, which gave easy communication both north and south and was no doubt one of the reasons for the small but thriving town that had mushroomed around the manor itself. And remodelling an existing house was far cheaper than building a new one.

The architect from Fairhaven had been well worth his money. Under his direction, the house had been quite transformed. The gloomy great hall had acquired plasterwork and a parquet floor and a series of tall windows that had taxed the glazier's skill to its utmost, and was now a grand banqueting hall. The other rooms, the ones they actually used, had had existing windows glazed, panelling on the walls, and suspended wooden floors laid over the old icy flagstones. Edred had delightedly doubled the kitchen in size and added a first floor over it for servants' quarters. Like Fastred's house at Ash Dene, although on a grander scale, Highbury was meant to be lived in, not merely defended.

The new, gracious style was already beginning to catch on among the less hidebound nobility, many of whom had wives who were only too glad to exchange draughty keeps and men-at-arms for comfortable, convenient houses and a lot more servants. For it really seemed that the age of the robber baron might have passed. Irinya had acquired a network of castles up and down the country, some of her own inheritance and some by forfeiture, and was ruthless in her insistence that these were to be the only fortified buildings in the country. Garrisoned by the embryonic regular army, small in numbers as yet but tough, disciplined and becoming highly

professional under Gyrdan's rigorous direction, these castles gave Irinya a hold on the country that was discreet but extremely effective - as one or two thick-headed and rebellious barons had found out to their cost. Carlundy was gradually learning not to live in fear.

Gyrdan turned in to Highbury Manor through the gates that had stood open so long that they had lost the key, and a groom came to take his horse, shivering but smiling a welcome. He dismounted awkwardly, for cold always made the stiffness in his leg worse, and his limp was very pronounced as he made his way across the courtyard and in through the half-ajar hall door. The house smelled of paint and new wood and polish, and Edred's voice could be faintly heard in some distant room, scolding some luckless page or housemaid.

Gyrdan mounted the stairs, hanging on to the bannister for support. At this time of day, Irinya was most likely to be in the study -

The door flew open before he reached it, and she came running down the corridor to greet him. It was a long time before they separated.

"How did you know I was home? I was hoping to surprise you."

"If you want to creep up on me, you will have to learn to disguise that limp." She held up her face to be kissed again, and more time passed.

"How come you are alone?" she asked after a while, puzzled. "Where's your escort?"

"Still playing cards in the inn at Swanley, I should think. They said it was too cold to travel today." He snorted. "Of course it's cold! It's winter, what do they expect? Anyway, I left them to wait there til Spring if they want to, and came on by myself. I've never really got used to travelling in company anyway."

"They had a point," she said, taking his hand. "Darling, you're *freezing!* Come in."

The old study was hardly recognisable. A bright and fragrant apple-wood fire burned on the hearth, and three lamps filled the room with light. Glass occupied the windows now, the walls were freshly whitewashed, the floor was polished to a dull gleam and the hideous furniture was long since relegated to some other room and replaced with lighter, comfortable chairs and an elegant desk.

Gyrdan threw off his heavy fur-lined cloak and went to stand over the fire, holding out frost-numbed hands to the flames.

"Ah, that's good!" he exclaimed, his teeth chattering. "I'm chilled to the marrow."

"Don't look for sympathy from me," Irinya said, pulling a chair close to the fire for him, plumping up its cushions and pouring him a glass of brandy. "What

possessed you to ride up from Swanley in this weather? It was snowing here this morning.”

“It was snowing there, too. But I knew it would stop, and I wanted to get home. Three weeks away from you is twenty-one days too long.”

“I was counting the days too,” she admitted.

“Ah, well, it could not be helped.” He sat down in the chair and put his feet on the hearth. “I could get used to this....Oh, Tyria sends you her love. So does Fastred. And they assure me the baby does too, although you’ll have to take their word for it.”

“How are they?”

“All very well. Tyria seems to have recovered as quickly as last time, and this baby seems strong and healthy. The Earl absolutely dotes on her already, which seems to have annoyed the rest of the family even more. Fastred’s aunts aren’t on speaking terms with him, which he says is the best wedding present he could possibly have hoped for.”

“What did he do to upset them?”

“How would I know? It used to be keeping bad company.” He raised a quizzical eyebrow. “But being married to you and in possession of money and a title has suddenly rendered me respectable, so it can’t be that. One of life’s mysteries. Fastred says if he ever works out what he said to offend them, he’ll try it on his sisters as well.”

Iryna laughed. “Poor Fastred!”

“Now, if there is anyone in the world who does not need your sympathy, it’s Fastred. I never saw a man look more content with his lot. Except, possibly, me.” He took an appreciative gulp of the brandy. “Do you know, sweet, it’s almost worth going away just to look forward to coming home.”

She eyed him speculatively. “Are you tired?”

“Not especially.”

“Good. Let’s go to bed.”

He pulled her down onto his lap. “Now *that* is the most sensible idea I’ve heard all day -”

“Business first, I suppose,” she said, surfacing reluctantly. “I have not done without you for three weeks for nothing, have I?”

“Far from it,” he said, suddenly serious. He sat up straight, and reached inside his jacket for a crumpled and somewhat cold paper.

It was the Count’s copy of the loan agreement, with the word “CANCELLED” written across it in very definite black ink.

Iryna heaved a sigh of relief.

“We did it, after all.”

“*You* did it.”

“Joint effort. I would have lost heart on my own, I think.”

“The Count particularly asked me to send you his regards,” Gyrdan said, carefully deadpan. “He says that dealing with you was - ah - an unforgettable experience. And if ever you find yourself on the wrong end of a revolution, his bank is always open to talent.”

She giggled.

“What an offer! I might take him up on it, revolution or not.”

He looked at her in some anxiety. “Trouble?”

“When is there not?” she said, though she did not sound very despondent.

“Remember the compensation fund? Most of the claims are cleared now, but a few of the less intellectually outstanding have finally cottoned on to the idea. Everard had one fellow up before his local court last week, claiming that he’d been thrown off his farm, all his family slaughtered and the house burned down before his eyes -”

“Nothing unusual in that,” Gyrdan said sadly. He had judged most of the flood of claims for restoration of land or financial compensation, and it had been hard and harrowing work.

Iryna smiled merrily. “Ah, but Everard knows the farm in question. It was burned down in his grandfather’s day. Lightning strike in the barn, so everyone remembers it. It’s been derelict ever since. For this chap to have been evicted from it, he’d have to be at least a hundred. We checked with some of the other courts, and he’s tried the same thing in at least five places up and down the country and been sent off with a flea in his ear from all of them.”

Gyrdan grinned. “You’d think he’d have learnt by now.”

“There’s worse to come,” Iryna went on, suppressed hilarity in her voice. “You would not *believe* what people find to complain about. Here I have a letter from the innkeeper in Little Bexley, complaining that four of the local farmers have also started selling beer and providing accommodation and are taking away his trade. No mention of the fact that his trade has increased ten-fold in four years.”

“Ten-fold?”

“At least.” She tapped another paper, all thick parchment and sealing wax. “Here is a most anguished letter from a group of wool merchants and sheep farmers in Billand, complaining about unfair competition. It seems our cloth is both cheaper and better than theirs and, amazingly, it sells better.”

“Well, well, who’d have thought it?”

“Be serious,” she reproved, not following her own advice. “I am accused of taking away their markets and putting them out of business. I wrote back pointing out that our cloth carries a ten per cent export duty, a ten per cent import duty, and moreover has to be carried by cart and pack-horse for a hundred miles further than theirs, and asked them to explain in more detail how that constitutes unfair competition.”

“What did they say?”

“For some reason, I haven’t yet had a reply.”

“Can’t *imagine* why -”

“And here I have a letter from a delightful lady in Mickleburg - stop laughing and pay attention, you’ll like this. She says that she can’t sleep at night for the noise of the waggons and horses on the road, and wants me to put the salt tax back up again. Apparently the smugglers were much quieter.”

She rolled her eyes in mock despair. “Honestly, there’s no satisfying some people. Sometimes I wonder why I wanted the job.”

“That I don’t believe.”

“Very sensible.”

She rolled up the Count’s letter, and tapped it thoughtfully on the arm of his chair, then went abruptly to her desk. From the locked box she took out her copy of the loan agreement.

“Shall we finish this?”

“Yes,” he said quietly, getting to his feet.

Standing together on the hearth, they each dropped one copy into the fire. The papers curled, distorting in the heat. Brownish scorch marks appeared, and thin tongues of flame licked a black border around the edges. Then, one after the other, the papers flashed suddenly into flame, crumpled into ash, and vanished.

“Radwulf’s last legacy,” Gyrdan said softly, watching the last thread of smoke as it coiled up the chimney. “Gone for ever.”

“Now we can *really* start to look to the future,” Irinya said, her voice vibrating.

He eyed her in some surprise. “You have achieved all you set out to do. More, if people are confident enough to cheek you!”

“But there is still more that could be done. Guthrum has a lot of good ideas. He is going to make an excellent Chancellor, I think. And Hygurd, too. The duties and the taxes are not right yet. The legal system needs improving. It works well now, in the first flush of novelty, but we cannot leave the lords fixing verdict and sentence, or we will be back where we started in a few years. I thought - we cannot have everyone in

the country to decide at every trial, even everyone in a village would be impossibly cumbersome, but maybe we could get the whole village to elect some manageable number of representatives? A dozen maybe, or a score. Then it would be so much more difficult for one unscrupulous lord to rig a case. And the standard penalties need reviewing. And we should try to bring the Black Hills and the Lowlands closer together. And we need to find some way of stopping coin-clipping - Guthrum showed me a gold crown the other day that was reduced to the size of a penny piece. There is so much to do. And - and so little time!"

Her voice had changed, and Gyrdan turned to her anxiously.

"What -? What do you mean? Irinya - you are not ill?"

"I - I do not know. It depends. Oh, Gyrdan - I have been so happy, these four years! So happy. I never wanted any more. I never hoped for any more. And now - and now - oh, it is too much -!"

Understanding dawned slowly.

"You don't mean -?"

She threw him a sideways glance, half-laughing and half-crying. "I - I should have said something before. But I thought - I thought it was the change, come upon me early. I - I never imagined - how could I? After so long. But now -" She laid her hands on her stomach in the age-old gesture of pregnancy. "Now I am sure!"

Gyrdan took her in his arms, delight written all over his face. "Sweetheart, that is wonderful!"

She shivered suddenly, and buried her face in his shoulder.

"If I were ten years younger, I would agree with you. But at my age -!"

He stroked her hair tenderly. "Hush. It may be all right. And - sweetheart - whatever happens - we have had these four years. Nothing can ever take that away from us."

Yet even as she melted into his embrace, it seemed to her that she could feel the embryo swelling within her. Their child, heir to Carlundy, her country's future - the child that might take her life as the price for its own.

THE END