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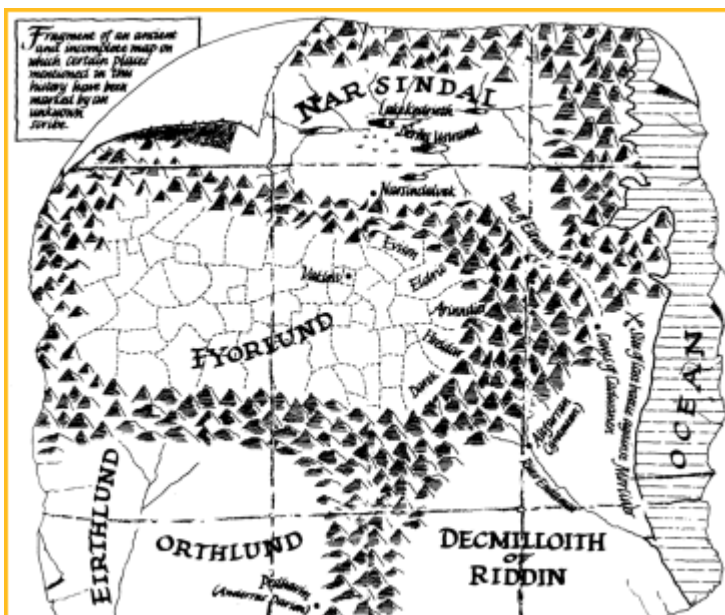
The Waking of Orthlund

Book Three of The Chronicles of Hawklan

Roger Taylor

Mushroom eBooks

Map of Hawklan's Land



“The time of Hawklan is so far in the past that it could be the distant future”

Prologue

When the Guardians, Sphaera, Enartion, and Theowart, had formed the world as a celebration of their being, they found such joy in it that they bade the First Comer Ethriss to create others so that they in their turn might celebrate the miracle of being.

And with his three soul-friends, Ethriss created many others and taught them the Guardians' ways and gave them of their power so that they too could create and take joy in being.

And amongst these was man.

But Sumeral, the Great Corrupter, saw the flaw that must be in all things, and hated it and all the creations of the Guardians, especially those of Ethriss. And He saw that man was possessed of greater power of creation than any other. So as the Guardians slept, He came to him and with soft words said, 'Blessed are the gifts of Ethriss that bring such joy unto yourself and your neighbour.' And He passed on.

But in the word 'neighbour' He laid a subtle snare, and discontent was born, and men began to seek him out, saying, 'You are wise. Tell us, are we as blessed as our neighbours?'

And Sumeral did not answer, but showed them the gift of the power of creation that Ethriss had given them, and said, 'In the use of this power will your joy be increased.' Which was both true and false, for though joy may lie in creating, it is in the totality of the creating and that which is created that the true joy of being lies.

And men found indeed that joy was to be found in the power of creating, but under His guidance their creations were without harmony, and knowing there was no true joy in them, men's discontent grew, and they sought Him out further.

But He dismissed them, saying again, 'I have told you. In the use of this power will your joy be increased. Trouble me not. Create yet more.' Though privily He would say to some, dropping His soft, sweet words into the gaping maw of their desire, 'If your neighbour's creations are more joyous, perhaps it is a flaw in the way of things that should be mended.'

And when they asked how this might be done, He said yet again, 'In the use of this power will your joy be increased.'

And looking on the perfection of His beauty, many men believed Him, and began to gather power to themselves not only to create yet more of His flawed designs but to mar the creations of their neighbours. And their discontent grew beyond measure, until the time came when many were utterly lost in bewilderment and followed His words blindly.

Thus His stain spread across the world, and the air and the sea and the earth became fouled with the poisons of His works, and many humbler creatures were slaughtered utterly. And He led His followers to create war, and wage it upon those who remembered the Guardians and the ways of true joy, for His own discontent grew also.

Chapter 1

Sylvriss struggled desperately to control the frenzied horse beneath her. Riddin born and Muster bred, dealing with difficult mounts would not normally present her with any serious problem, but this was different. The horse was almost demented with terror, and its screaming seemed to fill her very soul. It was as though the animal were trying to obliterate the terrible rumbling clamour that had reached out from the City towards them, shaking and buffeting the countryside as if it were not solid Fyorlund earth, but the surface of a wind-whipped lake.

Almost unseated when the horse had stumbled on the heaving ground, Sylvriss too had felt a terror the like of which she had never known before, and for a moment it was only the deep knowledge that her

body possessed that kept the reins in her hand and any semblance of control over the terrified mount.

Slowly her mind entered the whirling turmoil of emotions, and wilful skills began to replace the reflexes that had saved her so far. She knew that the horse could be quieted by being made more afraid of her than the terror that had just thundered over the countryside and, deep inside, part of her relished that. It rose temptingly before her: primitive anger formed from primitive fear. But that was a demon the Riddinvolk had tamed generations ago, and she spurned it. Rider and horse should be one, and Sylvriss knew that the horse's terror was in part a response to her own; the horse could not be properly stilled until she herself was still.

And stilled it must be. Despite the questions that pounded for her attention, this was no time for debating causes. Suffice it that if she lost her mount, she could not do her husband's bidding.

'Go to the Lord Eldric's stronghold as you planned, my love,' he had said. 'As fast as only you can. Raise his High Guard and ride back to meet us. I'll follow as soon as I've had him released – and his son.'

Then he had embraced her, almost painfully, and with a simple command had effectively dismissed her. 'As you love me, Sylvriss. And our child. Go. Go quickly. Prepare the way, First Hearer.'

And she had left, all questions momentarily silenced by the driving urgency of his manner. When they gradually returned they could not then overwhelm the momentum of her own galloping spirit. But they lingered. What was he going to do? How could he get the Lord Eldric and Jaldaric released? How was he going to face Dan-Tor? And now, what was that terrible noise – no, more than a noise – that force, that had shaken the countryside?

But Rgoric's plea impelled her more than any command could have, and she must regain control of her horse if she was to answer it. To falter here might be to jeopardize all. There would be time enough later to find out what had happened in the City, and time enough when they met again to learn of his plans and schemes.

The thought of Rgoric, renewed and whole again, burst into her mind like the sun through thunder-clouds, and briefly she had a vision of riding by his side at the head of the Lords' High Guards, sweeping Dan-Tor and his Mathidrin out of Vakloss and into perdition, to restore again the Fyorlund that had been and the life they should have had.

Despite her struggle with the horse, she smiled ruefully at the thought, so childlike in its simplicity. However, its effect was oddly cathartic, and sensing the renewed control of its rider, the horse gradually slowed in its frenzied thrashing until at last Sylvriss was able to lean forward and embrace its neck, saying softly, 'We're whole again. Whatever that was, we're here together, and unhurt.'

The horse was still fretful and its eyes rolled white, but gently Sylvriss released the reins and let it have its head until its circling and pawing gradually stopped.

Sitting back in her saddle she instinctively reached up to pull back her black hair that had flown free and wild in her struggle with the horse. As she did so she felt the wind cold on her forehead and wiping her hand across it she found it was wet with perspiration.

Looking up from her glistening fingers she stared for a moment at the ragged clouds flying overhead, carried on the gusting wind that had shaken the City all day, like an uncertain harbinger carrying messages of change. Now it seemed that even the clouds were fleeing.

Turning, she gazed back to look at the City, but it was out of sight, hidden by the brow of the tree-covered hill she had been descending when the noise and shaking had so nearly ended her journey. What could it have been? came the thought again. Now in control of her mount she felt she could allow some concession to this question, and gently she urged the horse back up the hill until the City came partly into sight.

All seemed normal. The palace towers rose up majestically, dominating but not overwhelming their surroundings, and through the trees she could see the tops of many familiar buildings. Yet on the wind there were strange noises. A crowd? She thought she had heard a crowd nearby as she had left the palace to clatter through the quiet by-ways of the City, but she had dismissed the notion; the Mathidrin held the streets too well for that. Now, as the distant sounds vied for her attention with the rustling trees she thought she heard again many voices raised in . . . anger . . . fear?

She leaned forward, face intent, but nothing would take shape for her. Even the wind felt disturbed, unnatural, now quiet, now tearing at her hysterically, and steadfastly refusing to deliver any clear answer to her query. For a moment she thought of moving further forward, to leave behind the shaking trees and come nearer to the City, but the urgency of her mission reasserted itself. Whatever had happened, it was unlikely she could do anything except be taken by the Mathidrin and held as who knew what kind of a hostage against Rgoric's plans.

Turning round, she rode back down the hill, trotting the horse carefully but surely through the widely-spaced trees that covered the slope. Soon she would be well clear of the City and able to ride, ride, ride, over the Fyorlund countryside, each stride taking her further from that accursed brown streak Dan-Tor and nearer to her true friends and a new future with her husband.

It would be a long hard journey, but she had done worse in her Muster training, albeit many years ago, and just to be free from the cloying deception of the past months would sustain her far more than any physical prowess could. Ruthlessly she trampled down the ever-present fears for her husband, lest they infect her mount and, in slowing her progress, bring about their own tremulous prophecy.

At last she broke out of the trees to find herself at a high vantage-point. Reining to a halt, she paused to examine the countryside for signs of movement, but apart from the ruffling of the blustering wind, all was quiet. And there below was the old road which she should be able to follow for many miles, avoiding villages, and thus Mathidrin patrols.

She clicked to her horse, but it hesitated and whinnied softly. Frowning slightly, Sylvriss cast around again for some sign of danger that had escaped her first inspection.

Then a distant, rapid movement caught her eye. Before she could identify it, her horse began trembling as if remembering again its recent fear. She whispered to it soothingly and slowly backed it into the shade of the trees where she could watch without being seen.

The movement became clearer. It was a rider, travelling away from the City. Suddenly Sylvriss caught her breath, and her horse shifted uneasily beneath her. Even at this distance she could feel waves of terror moving before the approaching figure. What had happened in the City? came the question yet again, but it was lost almost immediately as she saw that the rider was not simply travelling quickly, he was plunging along the road at a speed that must surely bring both him and his horse to destruction very soon.

The realization cleared Sylvriss's vision abruptly and the totality of the scene below swept over her. The horse was not carrying one person, but two. Its rider was a large, solid-looking man, but across its neck

dangled a second, black clad figure, seemingly unconscious. And it was no ordinary horse. It was a great black stallion – a Muster horse! And a magnificent one at that. There were few Muster horses in Fyorlund, and none the like of that she was sure. Further, it was not being ridden, it was *carrying* its charges!

Questions overwhelmed her, but she dashed them aside. It was a rare man that such a horse would carry in that fashion.

And no such horse could be allowed to break its heart thus.

Birds flew up in screaming alarm from the jostling trees as Rgoric's queen burst out of her leafy shelter and with a great cry, urged her horse at full gallop down the steep hill.

And none too soon, she realized as she looked again at the charging black horse below. She must be on the road ahead of it, and travelling fast if she was to intercept it. Fine though her own horse was, she knew it could not hope to catch such a powerful, fear-driven animal if once it got ahead of her. Not catch it that is, until it fell suddenly dead, in all probability injuring or even killing both its riders.

Bending low over her horse's neck she willed it forward. A fierce gust of wind caught them sideways and, briefly, her horse staggered, but the two of them together caught their balance and the wind only hastened their descent.

As they neared the road, the field dipped below it a little and Sylvriss became aware of the black horse at the edge of her vision, though she did not dare to look lest the hesitation cause her horse to pause even slightly. Then she was surging up a small embankment and on to the road, scarcely a length ahead of the careering stallion.

The black horse faltered slightly as Sylvriss rose up abruptly in front of it, and its rider swayed uncertainly. What a creature, thought Sylvriss fleetingly, as she saw the horse shift its weight to prevent the man from slipping from the saddle. The action, however, barely slowed the animal and then it was at her side, and moving past.

Gripping her horse with her legs she leaned out and took the bridle of the black horse. Pulling on it powerfully she cried out to it to stop. But even as she did so she knew that the horse was past hearing any normal commands. She tightened her grip and leaned further over. At least now it would feel the weight of both her and her horse in addition to its own double burden, and that must surely take its toll soon. For an interminable moment she clung on silently in a world filled only with the thunder of hooves, the creaking and clattering of tackle, and the agonized breathing of bursting lungs. Pain began to fill her whole body as she struggled to keep her grip on the powerful animal's bridle.

Even in this extremity however, she marvelled at the great horse's fortitude. Its eyes were white with terror, but somewhere, deep inside, was a will that refused to abandon all control to whatever had so frightened it. A will that made it carry and care for its charges even though it should die in the attempt. A will that enabled it to carry its now increased burden without slowing.

Without slowing! She knew what would be her fate if her own horse stumbled at this terrifying pace.

And it was beginning to falter. She was going to die here! Die, in this whirling maelstrom of flying hooves and Fyordyn dust which seemed now to be the very heart of all the confusion and upheaval that had rent her life apart in just a few hours. Die, betraying her husband, herself, the people, everything.

Then, through all the turmoil she felt the tiny flutterings of her unborn child, helpless and needing, its life not yet begun, the very antithesis of this powerful battle-horse charging purposefully towards the end of its own life and sweeping all before it.

‘No,’ she cried out involuntarily in horror and reproach. That above all must not be. A fearful light came to her as she saw the deep wisdom of her child’s lesson. This horse’s will could not be dominated, it would turn from its course only for the greater need of another. Then, almost without realizing what she was doing, she released her horse and slipping from it, swung her whole weight on to the creaking bridle.

Briefly her feet struck the ground with a juddering impact and she curled up her knees desperately. A whitened eye looked into hers as the horse bent its head under this sudden and unexpected weight. ‘Rider down, horse, help me,’ she cried out, her own eyes wide with terror. ‘Rider down.’

And then she was gone, floating free for an instant, old reflexes curling her into a tight ball, before she crashed on to the dusty road. Over and over she rolled, unaware of anything except her terrible momentum until at last it was spent and, unfolding limply, she lay still, face upward on the hard Fyordyn ground.

Gradually, the high scudding clouds came into focus, and with them her awareness, though for some time she could not remember how she came to be here. Then a gust of wind blew her hair across her face and her hand came up to move it. She winced with pain, and her memory cleared.

‘You’re hurt?’ said a voice, deep but unsteady, and a large square head came briefly into her vision, concern and confusion in its brown eyes. It disappeared, and she felt strong hands gently testing her limbs.

‘I’m no healer, lady,’ came the voice again after a while, ‘but I don’t think you’ve broken anything. Sit up, slowly. Let me help you.’ And again she found herself looking into anxious brown eyes as a powerful arm scooped round her shoulders and eased her up into a sitting position.

‘Thank you,’ she said, her voice sounding odd in her own ears. She took hold of her helper and, leaning heavily on him, dragged herself slowly to her feet. It was a painful exercise, but some cautious probing of her own confirmed the man’s diagnosis. She was bruised – badly bruised from the feel of it – but seemingly not otherwise injured. She uttered a silent prayer to her oft-maligned instructors of the past. Closing her eyes she felt her stomach tentatively. Yes, all was well.

Turning, she looked at her helper. He was tall, and powerfully built – rock-like almost – perhaps the same age as Rgoric, though it was difficult to judge from his craggy, dust-covered face. And despite his gentle aid to her, he was fretful and restless.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

The man started slightly as if his mind had flitted on to some other matter. ‘My name’s Isloman,’ he said almost irritably. ‘I’m sorry. Come on, we must get away. We must keep moving.’ He took hold of Sylvriss’s arm, but she shook it free. The man’s manner had no menace in it but it exuded fear and it alarmed her. His great hands had been shaking. A host of questions surged into her mind.

‘You’re an outlander aren’t you?’ she said. ‘Orthlundyn from your speech.’ Isloman did not reply, but turned to his horse which was standing nearby, sweating and steaming in the blustering wind. It too was fretful and anxious, pawing the ground, but otherwise remaining still to avoid disturbing the figure draped over its neck.

Sylvriss pursued her questions. ‘What are you running from?’ she asked. ‘Where did you get that horse? What’s the matter with your companion? What . . .’

Her voice tailed off at the look on Isloman’s face as he turned to her. ‘My friend’s alive, we can look to him later,’ he said, looking fearfully towards the City, still hidden behind the hill. ‘Please mount up and ride. We mustn’t delay here, please hurry.’ He nodded in the direction of Sylvriss’s horse which was also standing patiently nearby.

Mindful of her own journey and seeing that nothing was to be gained by further questions, Sylvriss painfully clambered on to her horse. As she eased into her saddle, a terrible pain, far beyond her immediate bodily discomfort, ran through her and she gasped out loud.

‘Are you all right?’ Isloman’s voice was distant. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the pain was gone, leaving in its wake a cold and fearful emptiness as though something precious had been torn from her forever. The tremulous life inside her fluttered agitatedly, but somehow she soothed it.

‘Are you all right?’ Isloman’s question came again.

She ignored it. She had no words to describe what had just happened. ‘As you’re travelling this road, it seems we’re both going the same way, Orthlundyn,’ she said grimly. ‘So trot your horse gently if you’re anxious to cover a great distance quickly. Match my speed. Talk when you’re ready.’

For a while they rode on in an uneasy silence, though Sylvriss noted that the black horse was still carrying its rider rather than being ridden. Every now and then, it would increase its speed and ease forward, but Sylvriss reached over and took its reins.

‘You’re not whole yet, horse,’ she said. ‘Your duty’s done for now. Take my guidance.’ Isloman did not interfere.

Gradually the horse became quieter, and Isloman too seemed to lose a little of his fearful preoccupation, though he kept turning round.

‘I’m sorry, Muster woman,’ he said, eventually. Sylvriss looked at him sharply, but did not speak.

He continued. ‘I saw you come out of the trees like a saviour out of an old legend. I thought you’d kill yourself for certain, riding down that hillside the way you did. It was unbelievable.’ He looked down. ‘I couldn’t help you. I’m sorry.’

‘You were hanging on to the horse,’ Sylvriss said, understandingly.

Isloman nodded his head a little and then looked at her sadly. ‘I was indeed,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t help you because I was petrified. I was so frightened I scarcely remember leaving Vakloss.’

Sylvriss looked at him intently, questions again bubbling up inside her. ‘Shouldn’t we look to your friend now?’ she said.

Isloman hesitated. ‘He’s alive,’ he repeated. Then, almost childishly, ‘I don’t want to stop. Not yet.’

Sylvriss’s eyes opened in a mixture of horror and anger at the man’s tone. Even in this fearful state, Isloman did not radiate cowardice. Further, a black sword and a black bow hung from the horse,

indicating that he or his inert companion was a warrior of some kind. And the horse was a splendid line leader. What could have happened to reduce such a trio to such bewildered and terrified flight? And again, why would such a beast willingly carry them?

Reaching across, she reined the black horse to a halt. ‘Dismount, Orthlundyn,’ she said firmly. ‘Like your horse, you’re not yourself. We must look to your friend, and you must tell me your tale before we go any further.’

There was a glimmer of resistance in Isloman’s eyes, but Sylvriss outfaced him. ‘The horses will warn us if anyone comes near,’ she said. ‘And we can outrun anything the Mathidrin could send after us.’

Reluctantly, Isloman climbed down from his horse and gently lifting his companion, carried him to the grassy roadside. Sylvriss followed and, as Isloman laid his friend down, she found herself looking at a narrow and high cheek-boned face that seemed to radiate a powerful presence even in unconsciousness. But was the man simply unconscious, for the face was also as pale as a death mask? Hesitantly, she reached forward and placed her hand against his throat.

‘I can feel no pulse,’ she said anxiously. There was no reply. Turning, she saw Isloman lifting the sword down from his horse, and in the corner of her vision a black shadow came from nowhere.

Chapter 2

Crouching in a shaded alcove, Dilrap shook and shook as if the only way his body knew to quell his whirling mind was to destroy itself. Dismissed from the Throne Room by the King with a soft blessing and a loudly proclaimed curse to give him some little protection, Dilrap had watched the ensuing scene through the intricate carved tracery that formed a panel in one of the side doors. Watched the entrance of the strangely transformed Dan-Tor impaled on a black arrow. Watched Rgoric move to slay him, only to fall victim himself to Dan-Tor’s Mathidrin, perishing as he cut a hideous path through them towards their evil Lord.

Rigid with horror, his hands pressed against the sharp edges of the carved wood, Dilrap had watched the Kingship of Fyorlund rise grim and determined from its years of sullen decay only to fall in a welter of primitive blood-lust. With it fell his own hopes and dreams. Now he was alone. Appallingly alone.

Fear and self-pity took alternate command of his mind, though rage seemed to dominate both. Rage at his father for bearing such a poor scion to carry the Secretary’s burden, rage at Dan-Tor and his years of silent, evil scheming, rage at the King for his futile death, at the Lords for their neglect, at the Queen for deserting him, and at this last, rage at himself for the injustice of such base thoughts.

Cowering small in the alcove, it seemed to Dilrap that he was entering a darkness that could only deepen, and that it would be beyond his soul to bear. And yet, even in this terrible extremity, bright threads flickered and he reached out for them in the hope that they might grow and bind together to form a desperate lifeline.

For he had heard too the King’s strange last words. That Dan-Tor would die at the very height of his power; die at the hands of an ancient and insignificant assassin. And that the ancient line of Kings was still unbroken, for the Queen now carried his heir.

Heartening words. But what of the King’s final eerie utterance into the dreadful waiting silence that filled the hall as he had crawled agonizingly towards the fountainhead of all his ills? ‘Nothing shall end the reign of your Master.’ A desperate, doom-laden avowal. And yet it was not uttered as such – ‘It is not what it

seems' – and the King had laughed softly with his last breath, as at some private jest.

What could it mean? And who could be Dan-Tor's master? Then the name that the King had uttered returned to him.

Oklar.

A name from myth and legend. Oklar, the earth corrupter, greatest of the Uhriel, the servants of Sumeral, the Great Corrupter.

A chill possessed Dilrap that set his previous terrors at naught. It couldn't be. Such creatures could not exist. It was contrary to reason. They were ogres for children, old tales embellished through the ages. But the chill persisted. Hadn't he seen Fyorlund deteriorate in his own lifetime? Hadn't he seen the great tower fortress of Narsindalvak and its Watch abandoned, and the ranks of the Lords' High Guards softened into foppery. And now its King was slain, its Queen was fled, and its Lords were arming for a conflict that could only set brother against brother. And who could account for the force that had just shaken the palace, perhaps even the City, to its very roots? But, rising above all this, came the vision of Dan-Tor being carried into the Throne Room; changed, but unchanged. Dilrap knew it was no human creature that now occupied that familiar lank form.

Resting his flushed and tear-stained face on the cold stone of the alcove, Dilrap struggled with his grief, and the enormity of his revelation. Powers were awakening that were beyond human understanding. His sense of loneliness and isolation deepened but, strangely, he felt comforted. He remembered the Queen's words: 'Even your father couldn't have stood against the wiles of Dan-Tor.' The memory made him smile bitterly. How could she have known the measure of the creature that they were opposing?

And yet they had opposed him, and done so successfully. Dilrap had fouled and encumbered his path with his seeming helpfulness. The Queen had restored her long-sick King. They were achievements in which to take no small pride, even if now they would doom him.

Scarcely had the thought occurred to him than the curtain of the alcove was pushed roughly aside and two white-faced Mathidrin troopers confronted him.

* * * *

Sylvriss spun round, and rising rapidly to her feet, drew a large hunting knife from her belt. 'I must have been too long in the Palace,' she said menacingly. 'If a Lord can usurp the King, and thug the High Guard, then I suppose bandits could return to the highways. Well, you've no soft maiden here, outlander.' And she called out to her horse which reared up and flayed out wildly with its forelegs, narrowly missing Isloman's head.

Gavor squawked and hopped a considerable distance away, while Isloman's mouth fell open at the sight of this suddenly wild woman with her glittering knife and an indisputable will shining in her eyes. The horse jostled him violently.

'Lady,' he said, staggering under the impact, 'what are you doing?'

'What are *you* doing?' Sylvriss retorted. 'Lay down your sword before one of us kills you.'

Isloman hesitated, bewildered. Sylvriss's horse moved towards him, forelegs dancing, but Isloman watched it uncomprehendingly. Abruptly, Serian neighed, and Sylvriss's horse stopped. The Queen

shouted to it again, but it did not move.

Sylvriss faltered at this unexpected intervention by the great horse. *Whowere* these people? At her hesitation, Isloman seemed to come to himself and, bending down, he laid the sword gently on the ground.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you.’

Sylvriss bridled. ‘I’m not afraid,’ she lied. ‘That damned bird startled me, landing so close.’

Gavor put his head on one side but did not speak. Then he walked over to Hawklan and peered at him intently. Sylvriss caught the movement in the corner of her eye and, without taking her gaze from Isloman, swung a foot in Gavor’s direction.

‘Shoo!’ she shouted.

Isloman stretched out a hand and stepped forward. ‘It’s all right . . .’ he began, but the Queen levelled her knife at his groin.

‘Really,’ came a fruity voice from behind her. Startled she turned. But there was no one there, just the lifeless black figure – and that damned bird again, standing by the body and staring at her.

Without thinking, she moved towards it angrily. Gavor spread his wings and flapped away. ‘Really,’ he repeated. ‘Do something, Isloman. These Fyordyn women seem to do nothing but kill people when they get hold of a knife.’

Sylvriss stopped, eyes wide. Then, turning, she found Isloman standing next to her, but with his hands raised in surrender.

‘Please don’t be afraid,’ he repeated. ‘I’m sorry I startled you with the sword, but I think it might help Hawklan.’

Sylvriss glanced from Isloman to the motionless figure and then at Gavor.

‘The bird spoke,’ she said, ignoring Isloman’s explanation.

Isloman nodded. ‘Yes, that’s Gavor,’ he said, then, ‘Please call your horse off, so that I can pick up the sword.’ Sylvriss looked at him. He looked powerful enough to have wrestled the horse to the ground had need arisen, but his power was lost in his anxiety and concern. She sheathed her knife.

‘Your horse has called mine off already, Orthlundyn,’ she said. Then, sadly, ‘Attend to your friend if you wish, but I fear he’s dead.’

As Isloman recovered the sword and moved to Hawklan’s side, Sylvriss walked slowly to her horse. Patting its cheek, she said. ‘Why did you disobey me, old friend?’ The horse lowered its head, and Serian bent forward and nudged her gently. Turning to him, Sylvriss saw that fear still flickered in his eyes, but it was being well mastered. So many questions. She stroked his neck. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said, ‘but thank you, line leader.’

She looked at Isloman, now kneeling by Hawklan and trying to place his hand around the handle of the sword. He kept wincing, as though the sword were burning him.

She patted the horse again and walked back over to Isloman. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, kneeling beside him.

There were tears in Isloman’s eyes, and his hands were shaking. ‘I can’t hold the sword,’ he said. ‘I can’t touch the handle. It’s too . . . charged . . . too . . .’ His voice faded. Then, thrusting the sword towards her, he said, ‘Will you try? Please.’

Sylvriss looked helplessly down at the plain black scabbard that held the sword, and then back at Isloman’s pleading gaze. She did not take it. ‘Your friend’s dead, Isloman,’ she said. ‘I could find no pulse.’

Isloman shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘He can’t be. Try again.’

Sylvriss laid her hand on Hawklan’s throat and closed her eyes to shut out all distractions. Very faintly, like the distant stirring within herself, she felt the flutter of Hawklan’s heart.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, as if the sound of her too-loud voice might extinguish the tiny flame. ‘You’re right. But what can I do? I’m no healer. I’ve no idea what’s wrong with him.’

‘I don’t know,’ Isloman replied. ‘But give him the sword. It’s . . . important . . . it’s saved me in the past, and it’s saved us all today. Give it to him.’

Reluctantly, Sylvriss held out her hands to receive the weapon. Isloman placed it gently on to the outstretched palms. As the hilt of the sword touched her, Sylvriss felt the wind-blown Fyorlund countryside disappear in a great soaring song. A myriad voices singing a myriad tales of triumph and despair. There she was, riding by her father’s side across the open Riddin countryside, flirting and teasing the besotted Rgoric in summer orchards, withdrawing into herself over the long bitter years as Dan-Tor poisoned her husband, prowling the Westerclave, slaying the Mathidrin Sirshiant in the streets of Vakloss, at once exhilarated and degraded by the deed. And other tales were there. Everything was there. Everything. Even the life song of her unborn child.

With a cry she let the sword fall. ‘What is this?’ she asked hoarsely. ‘Who are you? And who is this to own such a thing?’ She looked down at the motionless Hawklan.

‘Help him, please,’ said Isloman again, taking her arms in his powerful hands. ‘I’m sure the sword will help him.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘He’s . . . too near the end to hear . . . that.’ She clasped her hands together to stop them trembling as she looked at the sword.

Then she leaned forward and took hold of Hawklan’s hand. It was cold and lifeless; a terrible contrast to the great celebration that had just possessed her. Almost without realizing what she was doing, she pressed it gently against her stomach. ‘He needs a softer song to draw him back from wherever he is,’ she heard herself saying.

The wind buffeted the motionless group, ruffling Gavor’s feathers, and blowing Sylvriss’s hair across her face, but it could not disturb the deep stillness that descended on them all as they watched and waited.

Then Sylvriss laid down Hawklan’s hand and placed her fingers on his throat. ‘His heartbeat’s a little stronger,’ she said after a moment, almost disbelievingly. ‘Still faint, but definitely stronger.’

Isloman checked for himself. 'It is, it is,' he whispered. 'And his face is less pale.' However, despite his obvious relief at this improvement in his friend's frail condition, the momentum of his journey seemed to return to him and without further comment he lifted Hawklan up quickly and began carrying him to his horse.

'What are you doing?' cried Sylvriss in alarm. 'He's very weak. I don't think he should ride any more.'

'He's ridden this far and lived,' Isloman said, almost callously, although his tone contrasted markedly with the gentleness with which he laid Hawklan across Serian's neck. 'We have to get away quickly.'

Sylvriss seized his arm and dragged him round to face her.

'He might die yet, Isloman,' she said angrily. 'What are you running from that's worth such a risk?'

Isloman looked down at her, his eyes full of concern and gratitude, but still impatient and fearful. He cast around for an explanation. It was there, in the west.

'We're running from that, Muster lady,' he said, gently taking her hand from his arm, and turning her round to look at the place they had just so desperately ridden from. 'We're running from that. And the man . . . the creature that caused it.'

There, dominating the distance, was Vakloss, chief city of Fyorlund, standing high on its isolated hill, and crowned by the towers of the King's palace. Its familiar skyline was unchanged, but Sylvriss was aware of some ominous difference, though for a moment she could not make out what it was. Two scars, seemingly rooted at the palace diverged across the city, as though a powerful flood had struck a massive rock and split irrecoverably into two lesser streams. At isolated points, smoke was being swept up and dissipated by the wind.

'What . . . ?'

'Mount up.' Isloman's command cut across Sylvriss's question, and forestalling any further discussion, he swung up on to Serian. Immediately, the horse began walking along the road.

Scowling, at first with annoyance and then with pain, Sylvriss mounted her own horse and rode after the retreating stallion, which had now broken into a trot. Catching a gust in the wind, Gavor opened his wings and rose straight into the air to follow them both.

'What's happened in the City?' Sylvriss finished her question as she reached Isloman.

Isloman shook his great head, trying to order his thoughts. 'I can scarcely remember,' he replied. 'I remember getting involved with a crowd and arriving at the palace somehow, then Hawklan was talking to this Dan-Tor, and . . .' He screwed up his face in concentration, then laid his hand uncertainly on the bow hanging from Serian's saddle. 'Then Hawklan shot him . . . for some reason . . .'

Sylvriss's eyes widened. 'Shot him,' she gasped. 'Shot Dan-Tor!'

Isloman nodded uncertainly.

Hopes began to form in Sylvriss's mind. Was she fleeing now from something that no longer existed? Were these two men simply fleeing an anticipated retribution?

‘Is he dead?’ she asked anxiously.

Isloman turned to her, his face fearful again. ‘How can a thing like that die?’ he asked. Then, almost to himself, ‘It’s so confused. Hawklan’s never used a bow in his life. And he’d never strike anyone . . .’ Memories returned to give him the lie. Memories of Hawklan wielding the sword like a great warrior to hack down Mandrocs as the two of them had fled from Aelang’s patrol in Orthlund, Hawklan defeating Mathidrin in the smoke-strangled streets of Vakloss. ‘Well, not without provocation,’ he added hesitantly.

Sylvriss leaned across to him and laid her hand on his arm. ‘What did you mean – a thing like that?’ she said.

Isloman started slightly. ‘Hawklan’s arrow struck him, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘He twisted away, but it hit him. Sent him staggering. I’m certain it did, and yet . . .’ His voice faded away as he struggled again with the confused images that were vying for his attention.

Sylvriss waited.

‘I remember Dan-Tor standing there, changed somehow, standing there radiating a terrible power, malevolent, like . . .’

He shuddered. The words did not exist. ‘He . . . *it* . . . lifted its hand and pointed at us, then everything around us was heaving and rumbling . . . even the ground.’

Imperceptibly, Serian’s trot became a loping gallop.

Unthinkingly, Isloman’s hands clutched nervously at Hawklan’s limp body draped in front of him, like a child trying to wake a parent for reassurance that his recent vivid torment had been just an evil dream. But there was no response.

Sylvriss took his arm again. ‘What happened?’ she said softly.

Isloman shook his head. ‘It’s gone, it’s gone,’ he said. ‘I remember Hawklan holding out the sword, keeping back some awful . . . I remember cowering behind him as he sank to his knees. Then everything’s confusion, screaming and pain. Everyone’s screaming. *Everything’s* screaming. Even the stones. Pity help me, even the stones.’

Isloman’s head went back in a spasm of despair. Sylvriss flinched away from his pain.

‘Then I was on Serian. Galloping through panicking crowds. Galloping through heaving streets . . .’ Isloman’s eyes widened, and Serian’s gallop increased. ‘They were cracking open in front of us. Like great yawning mouths. And buildings were falling. Debris clattering around us everywhere, and great clouds of dust blowing.’ He drew a hand across his mouth. ‘And all the time, it was behind us, pursuing us. A great howl like a monstrous, demented animal . . . So much hatred . . . So much evil.’

Abruptly Sylvriss realized that they were riding almost at full gallop. Isloman’s relieved terror had wakened Serian’s own. Her Muster instincts set aside the confusion that Isloman’s telling had produced in her and leaning over, she spoke softly to the black horse; gentle words of reward for tasks well done and rest well earned. Gradually, Serian slowed until he was trotting steadily again.

Isloman seemed unaware of the incident and sat motionless in his saddle, staring blankly ahead, apparently with nothing further to say. Sylvriss was content to ride in silence for some time, while she tested the reality of his bizarre tale. Dan-Tor attacked! And by Orthlundyn. Orthlundyn riding a Muster horse. The City raked by some terrible force released seemingly by Dan-Tor. A Dan-Tor transformed into . . . What?

She had felt the fringes of whatever had happened in the City and had been terrified. There was no doubting *that* reality. To be near its heart could indeed have overwhelmed even as fine a horse as Serian and such a man as Isloman seemed to be. As for his stricken friend, Hawkklan – a man whose presence could be felt even though he was at the very edge of death – who was he and what had he borne as carrier of that awesome sword, at the very centre of the horror?

For a moment, she felt as though her mind was going to break free from all restraint and plummet shrieking into an abyss. She had grown used to living in a world of treachery and deceit, a world of political manipulation and intrigue, of power-seeking ambition. It was repellent and oppressive, but it was human. Now what was she fleeing from? A man – a thing, as Isloman called him – who could shake and destroy the very roots of a city?

A chilling thought crystallized abruptly. She seized Isloman's arm. 'Isloman. My husband. What's happened to my husband?'

Isloman turned and looked at her, his eyes focussing slowly as Sylvriss repeated the question.

'I don't know,' he said gently. 'I don't know your husband, Muster lady. I don't know you. I don't even know your name, for all I'm in your debt.'

Sylvriss closed her eyes irritably at the tiny worm of vanity that intruded into her concern. Of course, this man was an outlander, how could he be expected to recognize her?

'I'm sorry Isloman,' she said. 'I'm Sylvriss, daughter of Urthryn, Ffyrst of Riddin, and Queen to King Rgoric.'

Isloman stared at her thoughtfully. 'Your voice marks you out as Riddinfolk and your riding and your horse would mark you out as Muster trained even if you weren't wearing their field uniform. But why would Rgoric's Queen be fleeing the City?' he asked.

Sylvriss's eyes blazed. 'How do Orthlundyn come to be riding a Muster horse?' she shouted, suddenly angry. 'And take pride that they've tried to kill a Fyordyn Lord?' But before Isloman could speak, her tone changed. 'For pity's sake Isloman. What of Rgoric? He must have been with Dan-Tor when you arrived.'

'I don't know,' Isloman replied. 'The only other people with Dan-Tor were Mathidrin – it's difficult, but I don't remember anyone else.' He searched for more comforting words. 'The palace seemed undamaged when we looked back, didn't it? Dan-Tor's harm flowed out away from it. Your husband will probably be all right.'

Sylvriss recalled the terrible chill that had possessed her soon after she had brought Serian to a halt. She shuddered. No, she thought, she must not give way to doubts. Isloman's words were all he could possibly offer. And he was probably right. Perhaps even now Rgoric was on this same road with Eldric and Jaldaric at his side. She could serve him best by doing his bidding; by riding to Eldric's mountain stronghold and raising his High Guards.

‘Where are you going, Isloman?’ she asked.

‘The horse chose the road,’ he replied. ‘As it’s eastward I’ll go to Lord Eldric’s stronghold. There’s nowhere else in this land I can go. And there are people there who need to know what’s happened.’

‘Good,’ Sylvriss said simply. ‘That’s where I go.’ High above, Gavor rode the boisterous air with a relentless purpose, his eyes fixed on the tiny figures below and their precious burden.

Chapter 3

Dilrap made no pretence at dignity as the two Mathidrin manhandled him along the palace corridors back towards the Throne Room. In fact, he felt oddly grateful to the two men for supporting him on this inevitable journey, as his own legs seemed incapable of the task. Strangely however, though the strong hands that gripped him and propelled him along were none too gentle, he sensed little malice in them. Their contact was human and felt comforting for all its harshness.

Glancing at his two escorts he saw that both were struggling to maintain the blank stony features typical of their kind when on palace duty. Catching the intermittent eye signals that were passing between them, he realized that they too were afraid and that, in their fear, there were even elements of compassion and regret for what they were now doing. What was to happen to him could happen to them also.

Their reservations however, were not sufficient to prevent them doing what they were doing and, all too soon, Dilrap found himself before the open doors of the Throne Room. Around him, the Palace echoed with the sounds of people running and shouting, though as he looked to the left and then the right, the corridor he was standing in was deserted except for a few restless Mathidrin.

A push propelled him forward uncertainly into the Throne Room. He gasped. Not at what he saw, for he seemed to be having difficulty in focussing, but at the aura that filled the hall. It was like coming out of the hot summer sun into an inner room expecting to find a shaded coolness but finding instead that a large fire had been left burning. Here however, was not an unexpected and unpleasant heat, but a crawling malevolence that seemed to pass right through him. He felt his legs beginning to shake uncontrollably.

‘Ah, Honoured Secretary.’

The voice was familiar, though it seemed distant and coldly inhuman, and as it spoke, the air around him seemed to vibrate and press in upon him with each syllable.

‘Come forward.’

Dilrap did not move; for a moment he had forgotten how to walk. The air around him vibrated again, appallingly impatient, but before any voice could speak, Dilrap’s legs found their wits and he stepped forward uncertainly.

The scene before him was little changed from what it had been when he had finally fled from his vantage-point at the latticed panel. The King’s body had been removed, but the slaughtered Mathidrin were only just being dragged away by their fellow assassins, unceremoniously trailing blood and viscera across the ancient floor.

A sweet and unmistakable smell rose to Dilrap’s nostrils and he felt the room swirling around him as his stomach heaved with revulsion. Some residue of regard for the erstwhile dignity of the hall managed to

prevent him from vomiting but a great roaring rose up and filled his head. He did not remember falling, but suddenly he was surprised to find himself in the grip of powerful hands again, lifting him up from his knees.

With an incongruous gentleness they held him upright until he was sufficiently recovered to stand alone. He needed to breathe deeply, but that smell.

‘Come forward, Honoured Secretary,’ came the voice again, pressing in on him. Still it was cold and distant, but there was a note of scorn in it which lessened its chilling inhumanity, and deep inside Dilrap the spirit of his long silent defiance stirred again tentatively.

Blinking to clear his vision, Dilrap brought into focus the image of his lifelong tormentor. Dan-Tor was sitting in the chair that had been used to carry him away from his fateful confrontation with Hawklan. He had sat in it when he ordered the murder of the King and had been trapped in it by the dying monarch to hear his enigmatic last words. He was both changed and unchanged. His posture radiated an all too human pain, and from time to time his teeth grimaced white in his creased brown face as some spasm passed through him. Yet though his body and pain were human, he was beyond doubt the source of the malevolence that was filling the Throne Room.

Beside him stood a white faced and very still Urssain. Dilrap walked forward awkwardly. Here is my death, he thought.

Please let it be quick, please let me not whimper. Father, I loved you. Sylvriss, I love you still . . .

‘Ffyrst,’ he said, interrupting his own silent last declamations.

Dan-Tor looked up at him. As their eyes met, Dilrap flinched away. The Lord Dan-Tor had terrified him, but this was not Dan-Tor, this was just an image of Dan-Tor floating on the surface of something . . . unspeakable. The King had spoken truly. Dilrap knew he was indeed standing in the presence of a being whose very existence he would have laughed to scorn but hours ago.

His earlier promise to the King floated before him, mocking his impotence and insignificance. ‘I’ll corrode his new Order as he corroded the old one.’ Then, terrifyingly, from somewhere inside him came the realization that he had no choice. He could not allow this abomination to be. He must oppose because its loathsome machinations would spread beyond all control; spread across all Fyorlund and out into the world. Faced with the reality of the Uhriel, Dilrap faced also its implications. If the Uhriel were among people, then somewhere He too must exist. This . . . creature was but a herald.

The awful clarity and certainty of this revelation froze Dilrap’s heart, so loud was it. It was as if he had just cried it out at the top of his voice for all to hear. His rational mind struggled to tell him that there was nothing he could do against such a power, but the inner certainty persisted. He fixed his eyes on the floor. While he was as nothing, he might yet survive.

‘Why did you not tell me that the King was restored to health, Honoured Secretary?’ Again, the scorn in Dan-Tor’s voice heartened Dilrap rather than dismayed him. This was familiar. This was human.

Tell as few lies as you must, he thought. This . . . creature . . . will smell them out.

‘I didn’t know, Ffyrst,’ Dilrap replied, his voice shaking.

There was a long tingling silence, then, ‘Look at me, Dilrap.’ The voice was heavy with malice, but its

icy inhumanity was fading, as if the wakened Uhriel were retreating, withdrawing its attention from trivial considerations.

Dilrap felt his reluctant head rising as if under the influence of some will other than his own. His gaze met Dan-Tor's. He could not move. Dan-Tor's eyes seemed to fill his very soul.

'Tell me again, Dilrap.'

Dilrap's heart sang out to Sylvriss in thanks that she had had the foresight to keep all knowledge of the King's well-being from him.

'I didn't know, Ffyrst,' he repeated.

The eyes probed further. 'You were that horse witch's confidant, were you not? She would have told you of such a joyful change, wouldn't she?'

Speak against us if you must. Sylvriss's words returned to Dilrap.

'I didn't know, Ffyrst,' Dilrap said again, his mind frantically clutching the flimsy straw of truth that was keeping him afloat. 'I didn't know.'

Abruptly, though Dilrap felt that more and deeper questions were intended, the gaze was gone, and he was released. He breathed deeply to recover himself, despite the reek pervading the hall. He could not have withstood that scrutiny had the questions turned to his quiet conspiracy with the Queen, or the help he had given to Eldric and Jaldaric but minutes ago.

In front of him, Dan-Tor was staring upwards, grimacing in pain, his long hands clutching at his side around the protruding black arrow, but shying away from touching it.

To his surprise, Dilrap felt a flutter of sympathy for the man in his agony. Again the air around him seemed to stir, like a hunter scenting a distant and hated prey. Dilrap crushed the sentiment and substituted self-interest.

'Ffyrst, I didn't see you were wounded,' he said, his voice – his whole manner – full of concern. 'You must not exert yourself. Let the healers remove that . . .' He pointed a trembling hand towards the arrow. 'Such a wound could become infected.'

Dan-Tor's gaze left the scenes of ancient history that decorated the ornate ceiling, and returned to the King's Secretary. Dilrap felt the impact of its scorn, but it was still the gaze of his old enemy. Terrifying, but again human. The demon was gone . . . for now.

Nonetheless the gaze was grim and penetrating, and Dilrap let out a long soft breath as Dan-Tor turned to Urssain. 'Help me stand,' he said, his hands releasing his side and gripping the arms of the chair. Urssain bent down and placed the injured man's arm around his shoulder, at the same time signalling to one of his men to assist. Slowly and painfully, Dan-Tor rose.

Dilrap watched but kept his eyes from Dan-Tor's face, fearing the retribution that might fall on him at being seen to watch his master's weakness. But the image before him was not one of human frailty, commanding sympathy; it was repellent. The lank brown figure not so much being supported by, as wilfully burdening the two Mathidrin in their black, bloodstained liveries, his arms spread wide and his hands clawing their shoulders as if he drew sustenance from their oppression.

Is this what you and your Master will do to the world, you monstrous blight? Dilrap found himself thinking unexpectedly. He lowered his gaze in case the thought showed in his eyes.

‘This wound is infected beyond your imaginings, Dilrap,’ Dan-Tor said, his neck stretching forward to make him look even more like a grotesque carrion bird. ‘It will trouble me for some long time but, have no fear, it’ll neither kill me nor blunt my purpose.’ A spasm of pain shook him. ‘However, you’re right in one matter. I must rest. Take heart, Secretary, that your final piece of advice to me was accepted.’

Dilrap’s stomach, tight and pained by the restraint of his reaction to the gore around his feet, became icy and leaden.

‘Final piece of advice, Ffyrst?’ he said faintly. ‘Am I dismissed my office? The King . . .’

‘The King is dead,’ Dan-Tor said coldly before Dilrap could finish. ‘Killed by . . .’ He paused and looked at Dilrap thoughtfully. ‘By my guards.’

Dilrap had little difficulty feigning horror and disbelief; that Dan-Tor had told the truth had genuinely shaken him. He tried to speak, but could not.

Then Dan-Tor’s predatory smile slashed white across his brown face. It was not the cold spirit of Oklar that shone through it, but the malice there showed Dilrap that humankind could be as foul as any of the creatures they self-righteously label monster.

‘A new order is with us, Honoured Secretary,’ said Dan-Tor. ‘Your office is no longer needed. Nor are you.’ He paused as though savouring the moment. ‘Kill him, Commander.’

Before Urssain could relinquish his burden to implement this command, Dilrap fell to his knees, his mouth working noiselessly. At last he found his voice. ‘Ffyrst. I beg of you. What have I done?’

Dan-Tor looked at him. ‘Done, Dilrap?’ he said. ‘You’ve done well. You were serving my ends admirably, but circumstances have cut across my plans and brought about their conclusion sooner than I had hoped . . .’

Dilrap interrupted desperately. ‘Why kill me then, Master?’

Dan-Tor turned away his face suddenly as if he had been struck. ‘Don’t presume to question me, Dilrap,’ he said angrily, turning back. ‘Your eternal terror clouds my vision, and your eternal fretting over the minutiae of the Law rings in my ears like the buzzing of a trapped insect. Now all can be swept aside. The New Order will be one of simplicity. One requiring only the swords of my Mathidrin and my will. I would be free of you, Dilrap. Urssain, attend to it now. I grow weary.’

Dilrap stared at him, unable to either speak or move, finding no resource within himself that could hope to deflect such malice. All courses of action were closed to him now. Let me not whimper, he thought again. Had he not just seen men dispatched by a single swift stroke from the King’s sword? There would be a moment’s pain and then his journey through his worrisome life would be over. Surely he could receive that with dignity and calm. But immediately behind this calmness came an unexpected and raging anger. No, he would not go so lightly. He would give this . . . obscenity a measure of what it could expect should it hope to hold sway over humanity. Before anyone could seize him he would tear that black arrow from its side and plunge it into its heart.

As the thought came to him, he caught Urssain's eye. Will you be next, Commander? was the message he sent. Will you serve him as I have and end thus? At his whim? No longer needed?

Urssain hesitated. 'Ffyrst, may I speak?' he said softly to his burden.

Irritably, Dan-Tor inclined his head. Urssain nodded to the other trooper to dismiss, and taking Dan-Tor's full weight turned him gently away from the kneeling figure.

'Ffyrst,' he said, his voice low so that only Dan-Tor could hear him. 'After today the men will be stretched to the limit just to keep public order. Large tracts of the City have been razed. The disruption to the normal life of the City will be enormous and will provide all manner of opportunities for malcontents to foment trouble. We had to bring men in for the arrest of Eldric and now they'll have to stay until some semblance of normality is restored.' Dan-Tor frowned, though whether it was at his remarks or at some pain, Urssain could not judge. He pressed on. 'Dilrap understands the people and their ways. He also understands the detailed administration of the Palace and the City. For all his faults, it will be virtually impossible to find a replacement who's remotely as able. We have none, save yourself, and your efforts should be bent to dealing with the rebels in the east. . . ' Then, almost whispering, 'and your greater design.'

Dan-Tor was silent for a moment. 'Will you not obey my order, Commander?' he said eventually.

Urssain quailed at the soft menace in the voice. 'Ffyrst. I'm nothing without your favour. All I have is yours. I try to serve you and I'll do anything you tell me to. But we have difficult problems ahead in the immediate future: why not let Dilrap carry some of the odium that solving them will produce?'

Dan-Tor nodded slowly. Urssain's crawling fear for his own ultimate fate was apparent in his every movement, but his comments were logical. This had been a day of great progress, though at what risk and at what cost? He was burdened with a twofold anger: that his plans had been so jeopardized, and that it was this selfsame anger that had so marred his judgement. What had prompted him to respond to that cursed bird's ancient taunt? If he had not tried to strike it, Hawklan would not have attacked him, and . . .

Angrily, he dismissed the circling and fruitless reproaches, though he knew they would return to haunt him repeatedly. They would burden him as surely as this arrow in his side, as did those for the folly he had committed on the sunlit green at Pedhavin when he had succumbed to the vanity that he might bind the dormant Ethriss.

His only solace was that whatever that green-eyed abomination was, he had come from Anderras Darion, and where the shadow of that sink-hole fell, so His writ ran false, and His servants were deceived. The place was an aberration. Suffice it that the deed was done now. The Old Power had been both used and defied, and Ethriss had not arisen to strike him down effortlessly before turning to his real foe. As his reward for his wanton impetuosity however, he was impaled now on this accursed arrow until He chose to remove it.

Your wisdom and mercy are without bounds, Master, Dan-Tor intoned inwardly, lifting his hand to his side again. The words showed him another truth; the pain of the arrow would after all be a second solace to him. It was a measure of his worth that He had not destroyed him utterly in His cold fury.

Or could it be that He too had been afraid of what Hawklan might be? Afraid to use the Power that was His? Dan-Tor stretched up suddenly so that his pain would at once obliterate and atone for such a blasphemy.

Urssain started at the sudden movement. ‘Ffyrst?’ he gasped, his eyes wide and fearful.

Dan-Tor turned to him. He too must remember the value of his servants. They were the carefully honed cutting edge of his will. They could be punished when they did not cut true but they should not be needlessly squandered. His desire to slaughter Dilrap for the petty irritations that his help had entailed was yet another reminder of the spiteful residue of his humanity. Who could foretell what consequences might ensue from pandering again to a whim arising from so flawed a source?

Urssain too should be encouraged to follow willingly the paths of power and ambition that he could see opening before him in today’s events. One day, Urssain, you will be to me as I am to Him, Dan-Tor mused, and each step will make your ultimate binding easier. An act of petty spleen now, however, could make him reluctant to venture forward; could divert his talents into caution and self-protective conspiracy and that would serve no useful purpose.

A whisper of doubt, however, still lingered around the fate of Dilrap. The man’s true self was permanently hidden in a miasma of terror; part of him was inaccessible and therefore dangerous. Dan-Tor rejected the thought. There could be little at the heart of such a creature, and should he prove worthless or treacherous, he was neither warrior nor leader; none would flock to his banner and he could easily be dealt with at any time.

‘Thank you for your guidance, Commander,’ he said. ‘I spoke in my pain. You’re right. A good servant should not be used thus. Take Dilrap and use him. I must retire to my quarters and attend to my wound.’

Urssain bowed and then signalled to two of his men. As they moved forward to support the injured Ffyrst, he waved them away.

‘Shall I send the healers to you, Ffyrst?’ Urssain asked, seemingly concerned.

‘No,’ replied Dan-Tor. For a moment Urssain saw the Ffyrst’s eyes flicker red like an ominous sunrise, and he seemed to feel a rumble of distant thunder. But the instant passed almost before he could register it, and Dan-Tor was continuing. ‘I know the nature of my injury only too well, Commander, and only I can tend it. You tend the injury to the City that that . . . Orthlundyn has wrought. We must have order again. We have new plans to make.’

Turning, he moved slowly towards one of the side doors to the Throne Room. Urssain snapped to attention as did all the other Mathidrin. Dilrap rose unsteadily and a deep silence descended on the room, broken only by the soft hiss of the Ffyrst’s robes as he made his laboured progress across the hall.

Through the open doorway of the main entrance came a soft and unexpected stirring as an eddy from the wind outside found itself wandering the palace corridors in search of escape. Dilrap felt it cool and fresh on his cheek, though his robes were pressed cold against his back. Then the noise of a distant door slamming shut reverberated through the hall, and the breeze was gone.

No one moved.

Briefly a shaft of sunlight shone brightly through the large window at the end of the hall. It fell on Dan-Tor’s retreating figure like a warning finger. He stopped and turned again to Urssain. ‘Before all other things, Commander, find me that man’s body.’ Then the sunlight was gone and Dan-Tor finished his journey to the door in dusty shade. As he slipped from view it seemed as though the whole room breathed out in release.

Relaxing, Urssain looked around, his face wrinkled with distaste. ‘Get this mess cleaned up, and quickly,’ he shouted to a Sirshiant. ‘Then seal the room and put a guard on the Ffyrst’s room. There could be all manner of people wandering the Palace.’ Then, more softly, looking significantly at the man:

‘And remind these . . .’ His glance took in the waiting Mathidrin, ‘of the life enhancing value of silence, until I have the chance to talk to them properly.’ The Sirshiant saluted and Urssain turned towards Dilrap.

As he approached the Secretary, he noted his strange expression and oddly still posture. He paused. Dilrap did not know what had passed between him and Dan-Tor and would still be expecting summary execution. Urssain had seen what cornered men could do before now and he lifted a hand in reassurance before he came too close. He had no desire to cut down the Secretary in self-defence after having taken such risks to keep him alive.

‘It’s all right, Dilrap,’ he said discreetly when he reached him. ‘You’re safe for the time being. As am I.’ His manner was casual, for the benefit of onlookers, but his eyes bore a different, more urgent, message – intimate almost. ‘We’ve a great deal to organize,’ he continued. ‘Come with me.’

As they walked along the palace corridors towards the main entrance, the activity and noise grew, and Dilrap noted dust and grime layering the floor and darkening statues and ornaments. Equally soiled Mathidrin troopers and palace servants were running to and fro, brought together in common humanity to tend the needs of those damaged by the blow that Oklar had launched at Hawkklan.

‘Commander, we couldn’t find you.’ It was a Mathidrin Captain, his face flushed and sweat-stained.

Urssain waved the remark aside. ‘I’ve been tending the Ffyrst,’ he said coldly. ‘Report.’

The report was brief. Impromptu groups were digging in the rubble to find survivors and clear the streets. The dead and the wounded were being taken to various large halls about the City. ‘The Guilds and the Rede’s people are doing most of the organizing,’ the Captain concluded rather awkwardly.

Urssain nodded. This last remark reminded him why he needed Dilrap. The Mathidrin had neither the administrators nor the resources to run a city. ‘Is there any sign of rioting?’ he said.

‘Not so far,’ replied the Captain. ‘But it could happen. There’s a lot of angry talk about, and when the shock and panic die down, it could boil over.’

Urssain nodded again. Nor did they have the forces to contend with any serious rioting. ‘We must be circumspect, Captain. We mustn’t play into the hands of our enemies by inflaming matters. Check the Palace for intruders. Gently – many of them will just be shocked or seeking shelter – then discreetly seal the Palace. When that’s done, find such Commanders and senior Captains as you can, and report to me in the Westerclave.’ Then mindful of his Lord’s last order. ‘And get a party to clear the gateway immediately. The Ffyrst needs to know that his would-be assassin is dead. Immediately, Captain.’

‘It’s almost finished, Commander,’ the Captain replied. ‘We’ve found some bodies, but not the . . . archer’s.’

‘Keep looking, then. And hurry,’ Urssain said, dismissing the man with a curt gesture.

Scowling at this distraction, Urssain looked around. ‘In here,’ he said, pushing open the door of a small ante-room. As Dilrap entered, Urssain closed the door and bolted it.

‘We have to talk, Dilrap,’ he said without preliminaries.

Dilrap did not reply. His legs failing him, he dropped into a chair. He looked at his unexpected saviour.

In contrast to Dilrap’s stillness, Urssain paced fretfully up and down the small room as he spoke. ‘The Ffyrst is changed, Dilrap,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what or who he is, but he’s changed, and changed unbelievably, and you and I must change also if we’re to survive.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Dilrap lied. ‘What do you mean, changed? And who shot him? And why was the King kill—’

Urssain waved him silent irritably, and Dilrap saw for the first time the fear and deep shock that the man was barely keeping under control. Another reassuring sign of humanity in his enemies.

Urssain stopped pacing and stood looking down at him. ‘Some Orthlundyn assassin shot him, Dilrap. I don’t know why, but the Ffyrst has been fretting about him ever since he got back from Orthlund. It’s not a matter I’d inquire into if I were you, especially now.’

For an instant his composure slipped, his mouth trembled and his terror showed naked on his face. He turned away. In the Mathidrin it was potentially a fatal mistake to show fear. It was almost as bad just to admit to it. For a moment however, Urssain felt drawn to tell Dilrap of the maelstrom of emotions that had torn and twisted him as he had stood by Dan-Tor to face that strange Orthlundyn. Dilrap would understand. He was permanently terrified. He could offer no threat.

But apart from his years of restraint, where could he find the words for such a tale? He could tell of his fear at being faced unexpectedly by a massive and seemingly organized mob. Fear that the ancient will of the Fyordyn had suddenly awakened to call him to account for his deeds. Perhaps he could tell of the eerie tension between his Lord and Hawklan, the one charming yet malevolent, the other grim-faced yet open and honest. Perhaps also he could tell of his horror as Dan-Tor fell to the ground, struck by Hawklan’s arrow. Was this to be the end? His leader slain and the mob free to surge forward to overwhelm the guards and destroy him?

But how could he tell of his emotions as Dan-Tor rose again and revealed his true self? How could he tell of his impotence, his inadequacy, at being less than the merest mote swept up in the howling wake of Oklar’s fury? Or of his joy at finding himself returned unharmed and whole to this world when it had passed? It was beyond all description.

And yet still less could he tell of the dark and vile exhilaration that he had felt at being part of such power, or of his unholy communion with the being that wielded it. That above all was for his own inner contemplation.

Dilrap watched Urssain’s back and read his indecision and torment.

Confess to me, Commander, he willed. Show me your weaknesses for my future use. The harshness of the thought surprised him.

‘Why was the King killed, then?’ he asked bluntly. Urssain started and for a moment looked at him blankly. Dilrap pressed on. ‘I was trying to stop the King releasing Eldric and his son. He was so angry I thought he was going to have me killed on the spot. Then the whole Palace shook and I just ran away. Now he’s dead – killed by your men. What’s happening, Urssain?’

Urssain scowled and crushed his own turmoil under the needs of the present. He leaned forward and brought his face close to Dilrap's. 'Too many questions, Honoured Secretary. I didn't save your blubbering neck just to be interrogated by you. Obedience is the law now. Obedience without question. I've saved your life today. Listen to what I say, and learn, and you may stay alive.' He brought his face even closer until it was almost touching Dilrap's. His voice was soft and menacing.

'The Lord Dan-Tor has powers beyond our imaginations, Dilrap. I've seen them. I stood by him when he razed half the City with a wave of his hand. For those who follow and serve him, there'll be *berewards* beyond imagination, and for those who do not, there'll be extinction. Nothing can oppose him, have no doubts about that. I have his favour and now you have mine. Obey me as I obey him and those rewards will be yours also. But remember, Dilrap. You are useful to me. Valuable, even. But *I am indispensable* to you. Do you understand?'

Dilrap nodded. Out of habit, his body shook and twitched, but his mind was calmer than he had ever known. I understand you perfectly, Commander, he thought. You're Oklar's creature, bound utterly by the folly of your greed and lust. There could be no safer place for me than to shelter behind you. I'll gladly defend your back.

Urssain nodded, then, without a word, unbolted the door and left, leaving it swinging open.

Dilrap watched the hubbub in the corridor, but did not move. Nothing can oppose him, he thought, reiterating Urssain's remark. But a black arrow from a mysterious Orthlundyn has done you no small ill, hasn't it, Uhriel? Orthlund. The blessed land of Orthlund as it was called in the Law. Unexpectedly, the thought slipped into Dilrap's mind that if He were abroad again, a force from an ancient, long-forgotten time, what other forces might not be waking?

A voice reached him from the corridor. It was Urssain's, raised in anger. 'Keep searching. The body must be there. Nothing could have withstood the Lord's power.'

Chapter 4

Isloman reached forward and pressed his fingers against Hawklan's throat again. Closing his eyes to shut out the relentless drumming of the horses' hooves and the throbbing fatigue of his body, he waited. The pulse was still there. Not strong, but steady and unchanged.

It was a reassurance, but Isloman barely knew now why he sought it, so tired was he. It seemed as though he had never known anything but this bumping, pounding twilight world.

He became aware that Sylvriss was laughing at him. With an effort he looked across at her. She too looked tired, but she was still alert, and riding easily.

'Let go, Isloman,' she was saying. 'Let go. Serian won't let either you or Hawklan fall off. Just go to sleep.'

Isloman scowled and Sylvriss laughed again. It was strange, Isloman thought, how the riding calmed her, kept at bay the terrors of the day and the fears for her husband. On the rare occasions that they stopped she soon became fretful and anxious, her brow furrowing and her eyes becoming haunted, being drawn ever back towards Vakloss.

Not that they had stopped very often. By some instinct Isloman could not fathom, Sylvriss, like Hawklan

before, had let Serian judge the pace, and the horse had shown little regard for either his or Sylvriss's needs – although Isloman felt that such stops as they did make were in some way for Hawklan's benefit.

The road they were travelling had been selected by Dilrap when, at the Queen's request, he had planned a route by which, together with the King, they might all escape Vakloss to seek help from the Lords in the east. It was a remnant of times long gone, passing now through only a few quiet villages, and its original purpose was long forgotten. For much of its length it was little more than a wide earth track, but it still bore some indications of having been a substantial highway as there were long stretches, particularly in the vicinity of the few villages it served, where its ancient paving was still intact. Isloman noticed that the construction of the paving was similar to that of the roads that criss-crossed Orthlund, though the workmanship was coarser. It had a worn and aged look but it was obvious that efforts were made to maintain it.

He found the sight and the tired song of the rock rather sad, particularly as the road was patently younger than those in Orthlund, and in his fatigue he found himself, head bent low, lovingly repairing and restoring the uneven and worn blocks, his chisel ringing clear and sweet with a pulsating, steady rhythm trimming and refitting rounded edges, lifting out cracked and broken blocks and replacing them with new ones, fitted true to add support to their neighbours.

Suddenly the chisel slipped from his hand, and he started violently. As the chisel struck the stones, its ringing rose up all around him and transformed itself into Sylvriss's laughter as he found himself abruptly awake.

Serian had stopped.

Smiling, Sylvriss dismounted and walked over to him. She held out her hand to support him as he dismounted and unthinkingly he took it.

'I'm sorry I laughed,' she said, laughing again as he staggered stiffly, 'but you looked so comical, trying so hard not to fall asleep.'

Isloman gave her a reproachful look.

'Go and lie down and sleep properly,' she said, still smiling, and nodding towards a nearby copse. 'I'll tend to the horses and I don't suppose Serian will let us rest for long.'

'What's he stopped for?' Isloman said.

Sylvriss shrugged. 'I don't know. He's not tired. Neither's my horse. Perhaps he's concerned about us.'

Isloman doubted it. Looking round he realized that the wind had dropped and that the sky had cleared. In the west the sun was spreading large and red on the dusty horizon and overhead the sky was turning purple.

He nodded. 'He wants my shadow sight to get us through the night,' he said, carefully lifting Hawklan down. 'Don't you, Serian?'

Sylvriss did not understand the remark, but noted the horse's response. Isloman laid his hand gently on its cheek. 'Give me what time you can,' he said. 'I'm too tired to tell dream from reality at the moment, let alone shade from shade.' The horse shook its head, and Isloman patted it. 'You saved all our lives,' he said quietly. 'Thank you.'

Sylvriss watched the exchange. ‘You’re learning, Orthlundyn,’ she said. ‘You’re learning. Now go and rest.’

Isloman carried Hawklan over to the copse and, after a little searching, laid him down gently in the shade of an old, wide-canopied tree. Maternally he wrapped Hawklan’s cloak about his inert form, and pulled the hood forward to protect his face. Then he sat back, arms hugging his knees, and stared at his friend. As Serian’s driving pace had carried them relentlessly through the day, the feeling of pursuit by the power that the appallingly transformed Dan-Tor had released, had passed. But in its place had come equally dark emotions; regret, confusion and doubt coloured all his thoughts, and he became aware of a deeper, more abiding fear as visions of a grim, embattled future began to form. A future without Hawklan to guide and sustain him.

And questions came also. So many questions.

But they would all have to wait until he reached Eldric’s stronghold where Hawklan could perhaps be wakened. Now above all he must not allow the possible future to cloud the actual present. Now only the immediate concerns of the moment were important. He must take Sylvriss’s advice, and sleep until the horse decided they should move on.

Wrapping his own cloak about him, he lay down by his friend and closed his eyes.

‘Isloman, where are you?’

Looking up, he saw Sylvriss standing at the edge of the copse, silhouetted vividly against the darkening evening sky. Her head was bent forward and with her hands to her eyes she was peering intently into the gloom. Isloman smiled. ‘Come to my voice,’ he said, chuckling softly.

Tentatively Sylvriss moved forward into the shade, very discreetly checking the knife in her belt. Isloman chuckled again. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said. ‘Accept my knowledge of the shadows as I accept your knowledge of the horses, Muster lady.’

She faltered slightly, and Isloman could sense her blushing. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s just so dark in here . . . ooh!’ The cry was caused by Gavor, swooping purposefully through the trees and narrowly missing her. He landed by Isloman.

‘So sorry, dear girl,’ he said offhandedly, then to Isloman, ‘How is he?’

‘Still alive, Gavor,’ Isloman replied, ‘but no different.’

Gavor flapped his wings uneasily. ‘What can we do?’

‘Nothing,’ said Isloman. ‘Nothing except travel as quickly as we can and hope for better guidance at Eldric’s.’

Gavor made a clucking noise and moved to take up sentry duty by Hawklan’s head. Isloman closed his eyes again.

Sylvriss reached them and, sitting down with her back to a tree, pulled her knees up to her chest. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, but even so she found it difficult to see the three figures beside her.

She too was burdened with questions; not least about her strange travelling companions. But overriding them all was concern for the fate of Rgoric. Away from the solace of her riding, her mind too was prey to darker thoughts. The memory of the frenzied activity that had started the day returned, together with all the aches and pains of her fall. She wriggled restlessly, unable to sit comfortably on the hard ground.

As she listened to the soft rise and fall of the sleeping Isloman's breathing, she found her eyes being drawn towards the edge of the copse, looking for the shadow that would be the pursuing Rgoric seeking her out. That he could not possibly have ridden as fast or as far as they had that day, she knew, but still she looked. He would be out there somewhere, striving to come near to her as desperately as she was moving away from him.

Then she found her mind living sunlit future days with him, hopeful and tender. She pushed the thoughts away fearfully, glancing round as if to see whether some malevolent sprite of providence might have caught them. Overhead the trees fluttered against the darkening sky reminding her of the great tree in the Crystal Room where she had taken Dilrap as her ally in her new intent against Dan-Tor. Abruptly her throat tightened and she felt tears forming in her eyes. 'No,' she whispered softly to herself as she tried to hold them back.

'Don't be afraid of your fear, dear lady,' said a voice, soft and gentle in the shadows. It was Gavor.

There was such compassion in his voice that it overwhelmed Sylvriss's restraint utterly and with a little sob, she dropped her head on to her knees and let the tears of months flow silently down her face.

As her low sobbing gradually faded, she leaned back and, resting her head on the tree trunk stared up at the stars beginning to litter the sky. They were streaked and unfocussed and she lifted her hand to wipe her eyes.

'Here, dear girl,' Gavor said. He had left his sentry post and was standing by her side holding a kerchief in his beak. 'It's Hawklan's,' he said. 'He won't mind you borrowing it.'

The incongruity of Gavor's words made Sylvriss smile unsteadily, and taking the kerchief she wiped her eyes until the stars above were sharp and clear.

'Who are you, bird?' she asked, after a while, her voice uncertain through her aching throat.

'Hawklan's friend,' replied Gavor, turning away and returning to his vigil.

'But . . .'

'Rest, Sylvriss,' Gavor said before she could continue her question. 'Serian won't allow you much time.'

'I can sleep while I ride,' Sylvriss objected.

'Rest anyway,' Gavor replied. 'We've some way to go, and plenty of time for talking.'

Sylvriss, however, could sleep only fitfully. Fear for her husband weighed too heavily, as if when she slept Rgoric was in some way unguarded.

When Isloman awoke, he was alert and aware almost immediately. The first thing he saw was Serian standing at the edge of the copse, black and solid through the darkness. Gently he touched Sylvriss's arm and she wakened with a slight start.

‘We must go now,’ he said, standing up and stretching. Sylvriss struggled to her feet slowly and ungracefully as her sleepiness and the stiffness caused by her unusual sleeping position multiplied her aches and pains mercilessly. She shivered.

‘It’s too dark for safe riding,’ she said.

Isloman was bending down to pick up Hawklan. ‘No,’ he said. ‘We’ll not travel as quickly, but we’ll make good progress.’ Reaching the waiting horse, Isloman breathed deeply and savoured the cool night scents. His brief sleep had refreshed him considerably and despite the worries that still fretted him, he felt less lost, more hopeful.

He became aware of Sylvriss moving uneasily to her horse. ‘I needed that rest,’ he said casually. ‘How are you?’

‘Dreadful,’ she replied crossly, ignoring his offered hand. ‘Mount up.’

A bright but narrow moon illuminated the night, though not greatly, and as they rode steadily through the darkness Sylvriss found that she had to trust Serian as blindly as she had previously advocated to Isloman. It was not easy, and it took her some time to refrain from snatching nervously at her horse’s reins when occasionally the tree-shaded darkness seemed to close about her like blindness. As before, Serian was setting the pace but now, Sylvriss noticed, Isloman was holding his reins lightly and sitting very easily as he gazed at the road ahead.

Gavor was perched on Isloman’s shoulder, and in an attempt to draw her mind away from the strangeness of the journey, Sylvriss spoke to him. ‘Did you see any riders pursuing us, Gavor?’ she asked self-consciously.

Gavor turned to look at her, and his black eye shone bright in the faint moonlight. ‘No, dear girl,’ he said. ‘But I wasn’t looking that way. I was looking for patrols ahead. Nothing behind was going to catch us.’

Dilrap had chosen this road because it was seldom used and was thus presumably infrequently patrolled. However, *it was* a presumption, as he was not privy to the operational schemes of the Mathidrin, and Sylvriss was a little shocked to find that she had let the Mathidrin and their patrols become so slight in her considerations after leaving the City. True, it was understandable. More pressing problems had dominated the journey from the outset, with the earth-shaking roar that had nearly lost her mount, then her frantic and painful encounter with her new companions, and the strange and terrible things that they had told her of. Nevertheless, understandable though it might be, it was not excusable. She had been careless, and carelessness in these new times might prove disastrous.

Then another thought came to her in the wake of her self-reproach. As Gavor had said, nothing behind could catch them, but what of Rgoric and Eldric? They could be caught. She drew in her breath sharply as the thought struck cold to her heart.

‘What’s the matter?’ Isloman said, without taking his eyes from the road ahead.

‘I’d forgotten about the patrols,’ she confessed. ‘I hope Rgoric and Eldric don’t run into any. They’ll be less able to outrun them than we are.’

Isloman nodded. He could offer little reassurance. Travelling with the two Goraidin, he and Hawklan had

seen no Mathidrin on their journey to Vakloss, but then they were travelling over the countryside, well away from any roads. And he recalled Yengar's surprise at the number of Mathidrin that had apparently been used to occupy the city on the night of Eldric's arrest at Lord Oremson's. Perhaps Dan-Tor had called in all his resources to ensure that he could contain any difficulties that would arise from this treachery?

He was about to mention this possibility when he recalled also that a small patrol had seen Yengar and Olvric leaving the City and had pursued them relentlessly across the country until they themselves were killed or captured. He realized the Queen had not been alone in her complacency.

'They'll have to fend for themselves,' he said regretfully, after a pause. 'But you know your husband, lady, and from what I know of Lord Eldric, he's a resourceful man, not given to foolishness. The best we can do for them is reach Lord Eldric's and let them know what's happening.'

Sylvriss did not reply. Isloman's summary had been gentle, but brutally accurate.

They rode for the remainder of the night in silence. Isloman peering into the moonlit shadows ahead, gently touching Serian's reins from time to time, and Sylvriss wilfully turning away from thoughts of events that she could not influence so that she would not burden her horse with her doubts. It was trusting Serian, she must trust it. Gavor slept.

Gradually the clear depths of the night sky faded into an untidy grey dawn, and with the light came a breeze that brought in low leaden clouds and squalling showery rain.

The two riders pulled up their hoods and the note of the steady drumming hooves changed as the horses began to splash through puddles forming in the uneven road surface. Free of his responsibilities as guide, Isloman became once again a little more ill at ease on his mount, though Sylvriss noted he was far more relaxed than he had been the previous day. To her surprise, she found herself admitting that he rode remarkably well – for an outlander.

Looking around she tried to find her bearings. She was unfamiliar with this part of the country, but she had spent some time discussing the route with Dilrap and studying the map that he had found for her.

From what she could recall it seemed that they might indeed have made remarkable progress. Then they were clattering over a wide wooden bridge, its colourful carvings dulled by the grey sky. She recognized it from Dilrap's description. They had made good progress.

'Slow down,' she said. 'I think there should be a village ahead where we can get supplies. We mustn't go charging in at this speed.'

Isloman objected. 'We can live off the land,' he said. 'It's not pleasant, but it'll only be for a few days. Let's ride on through.'

Sylvriss shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'The supplies should be ready for us. It'll only take a moment to collect them. Living off the land takes time, and we don't have any.' Her tone brooked no argument.

Serian too, however, seemed to agree with Isloman, and ignored his half-hearted tug on his reins. Sylvriss's jaw tightened, and leaning across she took the rein from Isloman unceremoniously, and shouted a sharp command to the stallion. With an irritable shake of its head, the horse slowed to a walk. Gavor emerged from underneath Isloman's cloak and looked around unhappily at the damp morning. 'I'll fly ahead,' he said reluctantly after a moment. Hopping off Serian's head he dipped low over the road and

then, wings beating purposefully, he rose up and flew off into the rainy greyness.

Minutes later, Sylvriss and Isloman found themselves in the main street of a quiet Fyordyn village. Most of the cottages were single-storey with high pitched roofs and, to Isloman, used to the taller, stone buildings of Orthlund, with their low pitched roofs and jutting eaves, they seemed small and constricting, though they did not have the squat solidity of those he had seen clinging to the mountains when he and Hawklan had first entered Fyorlund.

Nevertheless, with its colourful wooden carvings and its flower-filled gardens that seemed to be spilling out from inside the houses through copious and prolific window-boxes, the place had considerable charm, even in the wind and rain, and Isloman sensed a small hint of the harmony that he had almost forgotten in the turmoil of recent events. The dawn scent of a flower reached him and, unexpectedly, a wave of homesickness for Pedhavin and his friends and his old life passed over him. It showed on his face.

‘What’s the matter?’ Sylvriss whispered as if fearful of disturbing the quiet calm of the street.

‘Nothing,’ he said, waving his hand. ‘Just tired.’

Sylvriss nodded and reined to a halt. She looked up and down the street thoughtfully. Apart from a solitary and bedraggled dog, and a bleary, incurious face glancing briefly through a rain spattered window, there was no movement.

‘We’ve hardly roused them to battle stations,’ Isloman said with gently irony, shaking off the last remnants of his brief longing.

Sylvriss did not reply, but dismounted and began walking along the street looking carefully at the threshold carvings. Isloman made to join her, but silently she signalled to him to stay mounted. They might yet have to leave quickly. The cold memory of her neglect in forgetting about the Mathidrin patrols was still with her and she would not be so careless again. This village was the old Fyorlund and it could protect neither them nor itself from the new.

At last she found the cottage she had been seeking and handing her reins to Isloman she walked up the short paved path and knocked softly on the door. There was no reply. She knocked more loudly.

Isloman glanced up and down the street, feeling peculiarly exposed. Overhead he heard the thrumming beat of Gavor’s wings.

Still no reply.

Frowning anxiously, Sylvriss walked round to the side of the cottage and, hands around her eyes, peered in through a window. Isloman saw her tapping vigorously and then signalling to someone inside.

Then she ran quickly back to the door which opened to reveal a small, elderly lady clutching a nightgown about herself. She curtseyed slightly to the Queen and smiled affectionately, though Isloman could see that she too was anxious and concerned. He threw back his hood to improve his visibility.

There was a whispered conversation, then Sylvriss disappeared into the cottage to reappear almost immediately carrying two large panniers. After a further, brief conversation, the old lady reached out and embraced the Queen tightly, patting her back gently, reluctant to have her leave, reluctant to have her stay.

Without speaking, Sylvriss slung the panniers expertly on the horses and with a wave to the watching woman, now clutching her nightgown about her again, she remounted and clicked her horse forward.

‘Who was that?’ Isloman asked as he came alongside.

Sylvriss seemed preoccupied. Isloman repeated the question and she started. ‘I’m sorry, Isloman. That was Virna. She used to nurse Rgoric when he was a boy,’ she said. ‘Then she was my maid for a long time . . .’ She hesitated.

‘What’s the matter?’ Isloman said.

Sylvriss frowned. ‘Involving innocent people is the matter, Isloman,’ she said. ‘I hate it.’ Then she shook her head as if to clear her mind of thoughts that could now only hinder. ‘It’s as well we stopped,’ she said. ‘Virna said that a Mathidrin patrol passed through here only yesterday. Travelling our way.’

Isloman frowned. ‘How many were there?’ he said.

‘Six,’ Sylvriss replied.

‘Did they cause any trouble?’ Isloman asked, remembering the accounts he had heard from Yatsu, and the uneasy greeting they had had from villagers as he and Hawklan had been escorted to Vakloss from the mountains.

‘No,’ Sylvriss replied. ‘They just rode through.’

Isloman looked down at Hawklan and his frown deepened. He signalled to Gavor who glided down and landed on his outstretched hand. ‘There’s a Mathidrin patrol ahead somewhere, Gavor,’ he said. ‘We can’t risk either fighting our way through them, or losing time moving too cautiously. Try and find them so that we can move around them.’

Gavor hesitated. ‘I’ll find them if they’re there,’ he said. ‘But there are woods ahead. It won’t be easy. Go slowly until I come back to you.’

For all Gavor’s assurance that the village was safe, Isloman was glad to leave it behind. Away from the houses there would at least be space to flee, and he was also haunted by the images of the innocents he had seen caught in the rioting in Vakloss.

However, as Gavor had suggested, they maintained a walking pace, though neither found it either easy or restful. The reason for his advice soon became apparent. Ahead of them lay a rocky outcrop covered with dense woodland, grey and misty in the blowing rain. There was no sign of Gavor.

Isloman reined to a halt and looked at Sylvriss. ‘Can we go round this?’ he asked. Sylvriss tried to see again Dilrap’s map.

It had been a mistake not to bring it but their plan had been implemented unexpectedly and many things were not as they should have been.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘There’s only this road on the map.’ She pointed up to the left. ‘It’s obviously too steep up there.’ Then, down to the right. ‘And I think there’s a river down there. We’d have to go back through the village to cross that, then we’d have to travel south across country for a long

way before we could cross it again.'

Isloman scowled and then let out a deep breath. 'We'll have to wait, then.'

He was looking about for somewhere to make a temporary shelter when Gavor returned.

'I've found them,' he said, shaking his feathers violently and sending up a great spray of water. 'They're camped about halfway through, just off the road.' His voice fell. 'And they're still asleep. If we're careful I can lead you through the trees, well clear of them.'

'Have they posted any sentries?' Isloman asked.

'No,' said Gavor.

Isloman looked at Sylvriss and then along the length of the outcrop that barred their way. She nodded.

As they entered the woods, the sounds about them changed. The wind trapped in the trees could reach them only fitfully, and the steady fall of the rain was replaced by intermittent cascades of large drops splattering noisily on to the forest floor. The rich, damp scents of the woodland rose up to greet them, but its quiet peacefulness was lost in the heightened tension that the two riders felt as the trees and undergrowth constricted their paths for escape.

'Their camp's a little way ahead,' whispered Gavor after they had gone for some distance. 'Dismount, and follow me.'

Carefully the little group wended its way after Gavor through the pathless trees. He would walk, then glide up on to a branch to look around, then sit on Isloman's shoulder. They trod as gently as the damp undergrowth would allow; soft shadows in the forest's dawn twilight.

'How much further?' Isloman whispered as their slow progress began to irk him.

Gavor shushed him. 'I can't see them from here, but we're about level with them now,' he whispered. 'Be quiet.'

Isloman nodded apologetically, but even as he did so, the random sounds of the forest were broken by a sudden swift rushing, and an arrow passed in front of him to thud into a tree just to his right.

Involuntarily he crouched low and drew his club, but another arrow passed over his head to join the first, and a voice said. 'No. The next one will kill you.'

Chapter 5

Dilrap stood alone at a window high in one of the palace towers. Below him lay the City, hitherto an unchanging and deeply familiar sight which, he mused sadly, was like the face of a well-loved friend, often seen but rarely noticed; giving security by virtue of its seeming immutability rather than by its actual appearance.

Now, like so many other things in his life, it was changed, and changed radically, and he realized that another small prop had been removed from him. With each such he knew that he had the choice of toppling or developing the strength to stand unaided.

The great arched gateway at the front of the Palace had stood, like the Palace itself, for untold generations, solid and purposeful, welcoming friends and deterring ill-wishers. Now it was gone utterly, and in its place was a jagged gap in the courtyard wall. The broken and torn stonework that marked the edge of Oklar's fury had seen neither rain nor sun since it was first laid, and seemed now fresh and raw, like a new wound, standing bemused and vulnerable at its sudden and violent exposure to a new age.

That destruction, however, dwindled into insignificance when seen against what lay beyond it, for two great swathes of ruin diverged out from the gateway and cut across the City, each running as true and straight as the flight of an arrow. Nothing stood where these lines ran, and marking their edges was a tangled skein of twisted and crumbled buildings whose foundations had been shaken and torn by the sudden destruction of their neighbours.

It seemed to Dilrap that only the curve of the hill on which Vakloss rested had protected the outer reaches of the City, for in the distance he could see damaged roofs and spires topping buildings that were otherwise unhurt.

From his eyrie, he could see that the two great ruts were alive with activity as countless tiny dots scurried ant-like over the mounds of churned earth. He could not see, but he knew what they were doing. They were searching. Searching for friends and loved ones suddenly wrenched from them. Searching for strangers whose cries could be heard in the wreckage. Searching for anyone.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head. After his unexpected escape from Dan-Tor's vicious spleen and his subsequent conscription by Urssain, he had retired to his high room to calm his mind further and to order his thoughts. Now he knew that he must immerse himself in organizing the resources that would be necessary to rescue and repair the City and its terrified people; both for the present and the future.

The more active and conspicuous he became, the more he could ensure the continuity of the values that were at the heart of the old ways, though even as he had the thought, he realized that that same activity and conspicuousness would tie him to the new ways forever in the eyes of the people. He could not achieve the one without incurring the other.

Further, to be transparent to the people in his intentions was to be transparent to Dan-Tor who would end the matter without a moment's thought, while to be hidden from Dan-Tor would mean being misunderstood by the people – and this would be to court death at their hands should they ever triumph.

He hugged himself tightly. His head told him to take the horse that was prepared for him and flee through the chaos while he could. Flee anywhere away from these appalling choices. But both his heart and his promise to the King told him he must stay. He was the King's Secretary. He could not abandon either the people or his duty. Here, near to Urssain and Dan-Tor he could be of some use. Anywhere else, even with the Lords, he could be of none. He had no other choice open to him that he could take and later look back on without shame and regret.

Taking a final look across the damaged city, he turned away from the window and, closing the door gently behind him, left the quiet little room.

As he descended the tower stairs he could hear only his own soft footfall and the hiss of his robes, but as he opened the stout wooden door at the foot of the tower he was almost overwhelmed by the uproar. It was worse than when he had left Urssain. People were milling everywhere. Injured, panic-stricken, lost, frightened. Whatever attempts, if any, were being made to restore some semblance of public order, they were obviously proving ineffective.

And these people don't even know the King is dead, he thought.

Pushing his way through the crowd he finally reached the main entrance. A strong gust of wind blew dust in his face and, as he wiped his eyes, he felt the grim reality of the scene he had just been watching from the comparative detachment of the tower, high above. The size of the gap where the main gateway had stood, and the solidity of the walls through which it had been torn were awesome, and he had a fleeting impression of the power that must have been exerted to work such damage.

The power of the Uhriel was referred to often enough in old sagas, but as he stared at the gaping hole that had once been the towering, seemingly immovable gateway arch, with its huge carved timber gates, the impact on Dilrap far outstripped any literary flights of description. Was it truly possible that one living creature could have done this? he thought. In his mind he saw Dan-Tor, lank and malevolent. How could a frail human frame contain such power?

However, as his gaze moved on and he found himself looking along the pathways that had been cut through the City, his speculations faded, numbed by the monumental scale of the destruction.

To his horror he found that for all the pain it implied, the sight was eerily beautiful; two long straight avenues reached out relentlessly across the City, arrogant in their certainty and confidence and tapering elegantly into the distance to reveal the countryside beyond.

Dilrap frowned at this unexpected and unwanted response and reminded himself of the human price paid for this new architecture. Then, equally unexpected, came the thought: Why was this done? What, after all these years had so enraged Dan-Tor that he had revealed his true self and released such destruction? What could he have feared that demanded such a response? A lone man with a bow? An Orthlundyn assassin? It couldn't be possible; the very phrase was a contradiction in terms. But even as these thoughts occurred to him, so did at least part of the answer. Whoever or whatever had faced Dan-Tor, it had been strong enough to stand and split that appalling power like a piece of kindling, and then, seemingly, escape. And if such destructive power as Dan-Tor had wielded could be contained within one man, could not also the power to resist it?

He made a note to make himself privy to any investigations into this Orthlundyn 'assassin'. It was like a thin thread of light in the darkness pervading his mind, and who knew where such a thread might lead?

A movement in the distance brought him out of his reverie. A ragged section of wall detached itself from a building and fell into Dan-Tor's new formed gorge. Dilrap could not see whether it had fallen on anyone, but as the dust rose up and was caught by the wind, he heard the low rumble of the collapse, mingling with higher notes that could only have been screams. The sound added a quality to the scene that chilled him utterly and, as he listened, he felt an overwhelming urge to push his way through the crowd and start digging with his bare hands in the mounds of rubble. Involuntarily he started forward, but he had barely reached the foot of the steps when he stopped and, with a grimace, bowed his head. This was not the way he could help. He had other skills.

As he paused, something ran into his legs. Looking down, he saw a small boy. Wide, lost eyes returned his gaze out of a grimy, tear-stained face. There was a smeared graze of dried blood running across the boy's forehead. Too long the butt of palace children to have any great affection for them, Dilrap was taken aback by the feelings of compassion and pity that rose up inside him. He held out his hand, and the boy took it. 'I'm lost,' said the boy in a hoarse, dust-choked whisper.

Dilrap nodded understandingly and looked around through the turmoil for inspiration. The Mathidrin captain he had seen earlier pushed past him. Dilrap seized his arm.

‘Where’s Commander Urssain?’ he said without ceremony.

The man jerked his arm to release it, but Dilrap kept his grip, putting into it the purposefulness he had once felt in Sylvriss’s hands. ‘Honoured Secretary, I . . .’ began the man, with scarcely contained impatience.

Dilrap cut across his protest. ‘Where’s Commander Urssain?’ he demanded again, pulling the reluctant arm towards him.

‘He’s in the Westerclave,’ replied the Captain, seeing no way to escape this fat clown immediately, and a little taken aback at the man’s unexpected strength.

‘Oh yes,’ said Dilrap slowly, allowing himself a conspicuous note of contempt. ‘I remember; his meeting of Commanders and Captains . . .’ Another figure bustling past caught his eye, a stocky middle-aged woman. ‘Alaynor!’ shouted Dilrap. The woman stopped. ‘Wait,’ said Dilrap to the Captain, as he released his arm and beckoned to the woman urgently.

Alaynor was responsible for most of the female servants in the palace. Dilrap rarely encountered her in his normal work but knew that she was held in great affection by most of her charges.

More to the point at the moment however, she was a level-headed and eminently practical person and no mean administrator. ‘Yes, Honoured Secretary,’ she said when she reached him, her face fraught and anxious. Dilrap saw that she too was struggling to remain in control of herself.

‘What are you doing?’ he said simply.

Her eyes became vague, and for a moment Dilrap thought she was going to slip into hysteria. The years of dealing calmly with all manner of crises asserted themselves however. ‘Floundering,’ she said bluntly.

Despite himself, Dilrap smiled. Turning to the Captain he asked him the same question.

‘Organizing men to seal off the Palace and clear intruders out,’ was the impatient reply. ‘In between trying to find as many senior officers as I can for Commander Urssain . . . and answering your questions.’

He paused before the word ‘questions’ to make his disdain clearly felt, just short of outright insolence. Dilrap nodded and hitched his errant gown back on to his shoulder. Now he must take the first steps into his new future, using the lessons he had learnt at the hands of Dan-Tor.

He looked straight at the man. ‘Your name, Captain?’ he said coldly.

‘Halsen . . . Sir,’ replied the Captain, his confidence faltering slightly. ‘Third co . . .’

Dilrap cut across him. ‘You’re seconded to my service, Captain Halsen,’ he said. ‘Whatever men you’ve sent wandering round the Palace, get them back and assembled in the Lords’ ante-room at the double.’

Halsen started. ‘But . . . Commander Urssain . . .’ He waved vaguely at the crowds moving in and out of the main palace entrance. ‘And intruders . . .’ The wind blew his hair in his face.

Dilrap had turned to Alaynor when he had finished speaking and, turning back to the Captain, he

allowed himself an expression of dangerously mild patience.

‘I’ll attend to Commander Urssain, Captain,’ he said. ‘Don’t concern yourself. As for intruders, believe me, there’s little they could do in the Palace that would be worse than what’s already happened.’

‘But . . .’

Dilrap’s expression became angry. ‘No buts, Captain. Are you in the habit of questioning orders?’ He did not wait for a reply, but forged on. ‘As the King’s Secretary, and in the temporary absence of the Ffyrst, my authority overrides all others. You should know that, Captain.’ He emphasized the rank. ‘You may choose to waste time by seeking out Commander Urssain and debating the matter with him, if you wish, but it’s not in your best interests. Those are best served by looking to those people out there.’ He pointed through the gaping gateway. ‘And that’s best done by your obeying my orders right away. Is that clear?’

The Captain surrendered hesitantly after a moment and, saluting, made to move off up the steps towards the palace entrance.

Dilrap laid a hand on his arm. ‘Where are you going?’ he asked quietly.

Halsen looked at him uncertainly. ‘To find the men who’re checking the Palace, Honoured Secretary. As you asked.’

Dilrap sighed audibly and shook his head. Then, pointing casually in the direction of various Mathidrin troopers around the palace entrance, he said, with wilful patience. ‘Send them, Captain. You stay with me. We’ve got a lot to do.’

Colouring, Halsen turned away and called out to the troopers that Dilrap had indicated . . . plus one or two others.

Dilrap looked down at the small boy and, smiling, gave his hand an affectionate squeeze. ‘We’ll look after you in a minute,’ he said. ‘Don’t be frightened.’

Turning again to Alaynor, he found her looking at him enigmatically, her eyes full of questions. ‘Later,’ he said in reply to her silent queries. The sound of Halsen shouting orders too loudly at the troopers floated between them and slowly she raised an eyebrow in acceptance and approval.

‘What do want me to do, Honoured Secretary . . . Dilrap?’ she ventured.

‘What have you done so far?’ he replied.

‘Precious little,’ she said. ‘I think the Guilds and the Rede’s people are organizing rescue parties and setting up shelters for those people who’ve been hurt or lost their homes, but there doesn’t seem to be any overall control.’ She flicked a discreet and derisory thumb towards the returning Halsen. ‘This lot are useless,’ she whispered. ‘Anything other than strutting and bullying and it’s beyond them.’

Dilrap acknowledged the comment with a brief nod but said nothing. Halsen, still flushed, and slightly breathless, arrived back. ‘I’ve attended to that . . . sir,’ he said. ‘But I don’t know . . .’ His manner was that of one about to disclaim responsibility, but he stopped in mid-sentence. Dilrap was quite surprised that his attempt at a menacing look should prove so effective.

‘I don’t want to have to tolerate any more of this reluctance on your part, Captain,’ he said. ‘It verges on insubordination. Confine your comments solely to practical matters that will help get this City back to normal.’

‘Sir.’ Halson snapped to attention and his face went blank. That’s better, thought Dilrap. That the man had had the wit to retreat into his traditional emotionless Mathidrin shell showed at least that he was gaining control over himself.

‘Good,’ he said. Then signalling to Alaynor and the Captain to follow, he walked back to the palace entrance, the wind tugging at his robe, ‘Captain,’ he said. ‘I want you to send messengers to the Guild Master and the City Rede. Tell them that rescue operations are to be coordinated from here. Ask them to send their best people over together with any maps, plans, lists of craftsmen etc. Whatever they think will be useful.’ Halson nodded. ‘Just wait a moment,’ Dilrap added, looking purposefully around the palace entrance hall. ‘Alaynor, I’ll work from the Lords’ antechamber but we’ll need somewhere where the injured can be treated and where the lost and homeless can be fed and housed for a day or so . . .’

‘The Old Kings’ Halls,’ Alaynor suggested. Dilrap nodded. ‘Yes, they’ll do. Gather up what servants you can find and make a start on that. Captain, send a couple of your men with her to help. They’re to do whatever she says,’ he emphasized.

Pausing to look at the disordered crowd outside, he frowned. ‘We have to get these people off the streets,’ he said, half to himself. ‘Captain, as soon as you’ve organized messengers and men for Alaynor. I want you to send out some of your men as Cryers to the main squares, or wherever there’s a large crowd. They’re to ask people – ask, mind you, not tell – to go home unless they can help with the rescue work or with nursing the injured, in which case they’re to come here first. Tell them . . . bulletins will be posted here, and . . .’ He waved his arms vaguely. ‘. . . the Guild Moot House and the Rede’s Hall as information comes to hand.’

Halson hesitated. ‘I’ll have to get mounted patrols to act as Cryers, sir. I’ve already had reports of troopers being attacked by the crowds.’

Dilrap looked thoughtful. Good for the crowds, he thought briefly, but he let the thought pass. He could relish it later. ‘If you go out mounted and in force it’ll turn chaos into mayhem,’ he said. Then in the wake of his first irreverent thought came a second one, appropriate for the occasion and quite elegantly malevolent in character. ‘You should find some High Guard liveries in the Westerclave, Captain,’ he said. ‘Have your men wear those. Providing they keep their mouths shut and watch their manners they should be all right. Tell them to move at the double. That should avoid too many questions.’

Halson’s jaw tightened slightly, but he nodded reluctantly. Dilrap twisted the knife. ‘And don’t forget the Royal Sash,’ he added, ‘if they’re going to look like High Guards on palace duty.’

* * * *

Dilrap looked up from the map spread out on the table as he heard the door slam. It was Urssain, and he was angry. For a moment Dilrap quailed inwardly at the sight, then he stood up and hitched his gown back on to his shoulder.

‘Excuse me,’ he said to the various people gathered round the table with him, ‘I’ll join you in a moment. Please carry on. You know what to do.’

Then he moved quickly to intercept the approaching Commander and, taking his elbow, deflected him

into a side room.

‘What in thunder’s name are you doing, Dilrap?’ Urssain shouted as the door closed.

‘Doing?’ said Dilrap, wilfully innocent.

‘Commandeering my men,’ Urssain banged his chest in emphasis. ‘And dressing them up to look like High Guards.’

Dilrap was surprised at the belligerence of his own response. ‘I’ll tell you what I’m doing, Commander,’ he said in a vicious whisper. ‘I’m saving our necks, while you’re playing Mathidrin politics. And don’t shout. In case you didn’t notice, that’s the City Rede out there. And the Guild Master. And a cohort of their senior officials. The last thing they need to see now is us arguing and playing palace intrigue.’

Urssain clenched and unclenched his fist, but before he could speak, Dilrap continued, his voice still low as if for fear of eavesdroppers. ‘I know I need you more than you need me, Commander,’ he said. ‘I’m not stupid, and you’ve made it quite clear. *Buthe . . .*’ The word was mouthed rather than spoken, and accompanied by a nervous look over his shoulder, ‘needs neither of us.’

Urssain opened his mouth to speak, but again Dilrap forestalled him, his voice now urgent. ‘I know I wasn’t with him when all this happened, but I’ve looked into his eyes, Urssain. I don’t know who or what he is, but I know he could obliterate us with a mere thought if the whim took him. And this City in disarray could provoke just such a whim. He has power enough to control it without our help.’

Most of Urssain’s anger seemed to drain from him suddenly, though a growling residue remained.

‘You should’ve found me and asked,’ he said, almost sulkily. Dilrap straightened up, his face open and apologetic. ‘Commander, there wasn’t time,’ he said. ‘The situation was deteriorating by the minute. I had to act. I’m sorry I had to put your men in High Guard livery, but I had to get messages across the City and you know as well as I do they’d never have got through the streets otherwise.’

He stepped forward and took the Commander’s elbow again, confidentially. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘People won’t remember clearly out of all this confusion. And if they do, so what?’

Urssain’s lip curled as he weighed Dilrap’s comments. The man was right. There would be no future for him, perhaps of any kind, if he had to go running to Dan-Tor for help in quietening the City, and neither he nor the Mathidrin were remotely suited to dealing with this kind of emergency. True, Dilrap’s abrupt assumption of authority would cause some morale problems, but that he was capable of dealing with. Besides, the men had better be taught to treat the man with a little more respect if he was to do his job in future.

He nodded to himself. No harm was going to come of all this after all. Dilrap was proving to be more valuable than he had thought, but he mustn’t let him know it. He’d proved to be deceptively capable today; he could be dangerous if he developed any ambition other than that of staying alive.

* * * *

Towards the end of the day, the wind fell and the sky cleared, allowing the setting sun to flood red through the streets. Long hazy shadows increased the alien strangeness of the City’s new appearance. Dilrap came out of the Lords’ ante-room and walked across to the main entrance. Dust grated under his feet. Standing at the top of the steps, he looked out again at the destruction Oklar had wrought. His two

new avenues were still bustling with desperate activity, but at least the panic and tumult had ceased and there was some aura of organization about the scene, albeit rough and ready.

Lines of torches had been rigged along both sides of each swathe, wandering indiscriminately through the sharp straight shadows cast by the setting sun. Where digging was continuing around individual buildings, the torches came together in tangled watchful clusters and together with the bobbing firefly lights of the torches carried by individuals, they gave the intense red twilight almost an air of Festival.

Looking up a little, Dilrap could see a clear evening sky as through a fine brown gauze. He wiped his mouth; he had been tasting dust all day. Just looking around the Palace told him it would be a long time before it was all removed, but seeing it hovering in the air made him think it might begrime the City forever.

He moved to one side to allow two of the Rede's men to carry in a casualty. Would they never end? All these people crushed and maimed by falling masonry and panicking crowds. Halls throughout the city were full of the injured and the homeless. Alaynor had organized that magnificently, though Dilrap admitted guiltily to a twinge of regret that she had allocated one of the Kings' Halls to the dying and the most severely injured.

It was a correct decision, the hall being more spacious than the City's main sick house nearby, but . . . the noises . . .

With an effort he dismissed the memory. He was no healer. He could do nothing other than what he had. He'd used his skills to ensure that hurt and healers were brought together as quickly as possible along with such medicines and other comforts as could be had, but still . . .

He leaned against the door jamb. No buts, he thought. What price would not any of those poor souls now pay just for the simple privilege of standing unaided and pain free, feeling cold stone against their faces? Just being here he had all that life could offer him, for all the terrors and trauma of the day, and the hazards of the future.

He looked again at the torchlit work dwindling into the distance, and then at the busy but reasonably ordered activity going on around him.

What flexible creatures we are, he thought. As individuals we break and buckle, but as a whole we simply sway, move with the wind, and then swing back to accept whatever new circumstances have arisen.

And what a wind had blown today! It had blown away the valued heritage of generations and ushered in an age the nature of which could only be described as unbelievable.

How could it have happened so quickly? The King, risen whole again only to be cruelly cut down. The Queen and Eldric fled, Dan-Tor suddenly revealed by the hand of a mysterious Orthlundyn as a creature of legend, and laying waste great stretches of the City in his pain and rage.

And the result? Ordinary people picking up the remains. Seizing and holding tightly their own fears for the sake of others. Rushing to familiar places to pick up familiar tools, then soiling precious clothes, heaving and sweating, burying old animosities and rivalries as they dug out friends and strangers alike.

And me? Dilrap's thoughts turned to himself. He had defied his King and then witnessed his murder, faced the gaze of Oklar and survived his spleen, taken control of Mathidrin officers and troopers and

organized them. And now?

Now, he was tired. Tired and glad of it, because his work was not yet finished. It would probably be some hours before he could rest for more than just a few brief minutes and by then he would be exhausted. Now he could remain immersed totally in the needs of the present. The very horrors of the day had given him the opportunity to put time between them and his full realization of them. A strange irony. Had the City not been torn apart, he would have retreated to his chambers to tremble and shake himself into who knew what state of terrors, thereby demonstrating his worthlessness and virtually ensuring his extermination. Now, he was something different. He had made some kind of a decision without realizing it.

He looked down and watched his foot idly making patterns in the dust. His fatigue was protecting him still, he knew, numbing him against the reality that was to come. He may yet prove inadequate for the role he had apparently chosen, but he saw no other choice. He would learn. Had he not silently aided the Queen for months? The memory came almost as a surprise to him.

Abruptly, in its wake came another, older memory of his father cutting down a tree on their country estate. The tree had been diseased and had to be removed for the sake of its neighbours. On some whim his father decided to tackle the job himself and Dilrap remembered being sat down by his mother to watch him while she pursued the mysterious household tasks that mothers pursued. Dilrap remembered vividly the cruel accuracy of his childish perceptions.

Almost from the first stroke it became apparent that the task was not going to be as easy as his father had envisaged. The axe bit only slightly yet succeeded in jamming itself. Dilrap watched as his father passed through many moods and learned many things as he laboured painfully at this unfamiliar task. Overall however, had been a daunting determination, at first smiling and vigorous but later increasingly grim. Finally it had happened. One, two, three strokes of the axe and with a slight groan the tree was falling, crashing down and bouncing slightly as it hit the ground. And there was his father, reluctantly triumphant.

Dilrap nodded to himself. The City had not fallen suddenly at all, nor had he suddenly discarded the worst excesses of his old dithering self. Dan-Tor had chopped silently and relentlessly at the City for years, but he too had learned little by little how to lie and deceive to protect the old ways.

Dilrap remembered also that the tree stump had sprouted again the following year and been a regular hazard to the unwary at night-time.

Chapter 6

The setting sun swept a bright yellow light across the undulating plains of Orthlund, casting the long, deep shadows beloved by the Orthlundyn. It washed through the streets of Pedhavin and in its slow progress released those secrets that had been hidden within the village's carvings to await its special touch.

Many of the villagers were walking the rambling streets and watching the changes being wrought by the shifting sunlight. Some were gazing in admiration at the work of long-dead masters; others were looking critically at their own work or that of their neighbours. A few young apprentices were being marched round to examine some of the 'classical features that can – pay attention – that can be obtained, with care, in this special light.'

High above, in one of the towers of Anderras Darion, Tirilen shaded her eyes and peered down at the village. She could see the little block of apprentices moving through the streets like a tiny phalanx of

infantry, cutting its way relentlessly through the browsing villagers, just as they in their turn cut through the streaming light of the sunset to make their own moving shadow-forms.

The sight brought sad thoughts to mind. Her uncle, Isloman, head askew, looking at some grotesque shadow he was casting on the uneven ground, and chuckling to himself. Then, alongside the worried sadness of that memory, the darker, more frightening image of the Orthlundyn training for war. And training very effectively, the Castle grounds ringing with the practice of swordsmanship, archery, and many other forms of combat. People being selected for special training and disappearing for days on end out into the country or into the mountains. Areas of land that had been tended for generations by loving hands being churned and broken by marching feet, as cavalry and infantry training developed apace.

And the injuries she had learned to treat! She grimaced. It needed little imagination to extend the injuries that resulted from the accidents of over-enthusiastic training into those that must occur in the grim, hate-filled reality of combat. And there was worse.

Healers must enter into the pain, Hawklan had said, but there was pain and pain. The pain of a broken limb or an accidental sword gash was bad enough, but the pain of a mother whose son had fallen to his death in the mountains, or the pain of considering where this work was leading: they were different.

Everything was changing. Everybody was changing. She herself was different in a way she could not begin to fathom. And her father, Loman . . . She turned away from the window and looked down at him sleeping soundly if somewhat ungraciously on a nearby couch. He had changed too. He was a little leaner in the face and such small layers of fat as had decorated his massive frame had turned into muscle many months ago, and . . .

Loman opened his eyes wide as if he felt Tirilen's gaze on him.

And he was different inside. Younger, more alert somehow. More sensitive, yet harder. Like everything else, he seemed to be . . . waking. That was it. Waking. The people, the Castle, even the Great Harmony of Orthlund seemed to be more alive.

'What's the matter, Tirilen?' he asked, his face concerned.

'Nothing,' she said, shaking her head, slightly embarrassed. Then, deftly, she swept her loose blonde hair back into a single shining mare's tail and tied it with a green ribbon.

Loman watched this little ritual of avoidance and raised his eyebrows knowingly. Tirilen shrugged. 'Well. Everything, really,' she conceded.

Smiling, Loman swung himself into a sitting position, stretched and then stood up. 'Everything, eh?' he echoed in a slightly mocking tone as he joined her at the window. Tirilen did not respond to this gentle probe but turned to look out again over the sun-swept village and plains.

Loman's face became more serious and he gazed at her solemn profile for a little while before he too looked out into the warm twilight.

Castellan of Anderras Darion and a smith by calling, he did not have the deep shadow-lore of his brother, Isloman; but he was no mean carver and he had enough to appreciate the long clear-cut shadows below him. He nodded. 'Ah,' he said. 'Isloman would've been out prowling the streets tonight, wouldn't he? Finding shapes and patterns that the rest of us are too blind or too oblivious to see.'

Tirilen's mouth suddenly pinched tight and her face twisted. She was on the verge of tears. Loman put his arm around her and gently led her back to the couch.

'Come on, healer,' he said. 'Sit down and talk.'

Loman had noticed Tirilen's manner growing quieter over the weeks but had been uncertain how to deal with it. In any event, like everyone else, he had had precious little time to look to anything other than the myriad new tasks that circumstances had brought down on him. Awkwardly he had watched his daughter quell her mounting unease with her own tasks of the moment, promising himself that he would speak to her soon.

Now, however, a natural lull had entered into both the training programmes and the farming that sustained the Orthlundyn, and Loman saw in Tirilen's impending tears, a release for both of them. He pulled her head down on to his shoulder and handed her a rather soiled kerchief.

She wiped her moistening eyes and then looked at the kerchief with amused resignation. 'Well,' he conceded, 'I suppose some things never change.'

Somewhat to Loman's surprise however, Tirilen's tears never came, and her solemn mood passed almost immediately, as if the small letting of moisture had released all the pressure that was there. 'I'm sorry,' she said, unnecessarily. 'It was just the long shadows made me think of uncle Isloman . . . and then Hawklan . . . and then . . .'

'Everything?' said Loman, finishing her sentence.

She nodded and smiled. 'Yes,' she said. 'Everything.'

A silence fell between the two for a moment, then Loman said, 'I think I'll tell Gulda to incorporate a little reflection time into our training schemes. We're all so busy we're forgetting why we're doing all this.'

Tirilen nodded. 'I sewed up a gash in Englar's arm today,' she said, seemingly irrelevantly. Loman frowned uncertainly at the name. 'You know,' Tirilen said, impatiently. 'Ireck's grandson.' Loman's frown deepened briefly for a moment and then vanished as the young man's face came to him. Tirilen returned to her tale. She held out her open hand, fingers spread wide. 'It was a span and a half long, father, a span and a half. He's lucky it didn't happen out in the mountains, he'd have bled to death. As it is it's damaged some muscles that I can't repair, and I doubt even Hawklan could.'

Loman frowned again, and involuntarily rubbed his arm.

'He'll not be able to use the arm at all for some time,' Tirilen continued. 'And he'll probably lose some use of it permanently.'

She looked straight at Loman.

'What are we doing, father?' she asked. 'The lad's been permanently damaged. Permanently damaged in a training exercise! And he doesn't seem to mind. When I'd finished and told him what it meant, he just grinned. As if we were children again and he'd grazed himself falling over. What are we turning into?'

Her questions were made the more penetrating by the fact that her voice was calm and steady. Loman turned away from her and, standing up, moved over to a nearby table.

For a little while, he tapped his hand gently on the polished grain while his mind blundered around, looking for easy phrases that would protect them both from the grim reality of events. Phrases that would enable him to hold his daughter tight and soothe away childish hurts in a warm closeness. But Tirilen was no child. And she had the clear sight of the Orthlundyn, perhaps even clearer, thanks to the influence of Hawklan on her healing skills. She would accept her father's love, and gain solace from it from time to time in their normal daily intercourse, but for her inner peace she would accept only that which could withstand the scrutiny of this sight.

'You know what we're doing, Tirilen,' he said, eventually, almost offhandedly. 'We're training to defend our land . . . Preparing to defend ourselves from attacks from the outside. We're learning to be warriors as well as farmers and carvers. All of us. Even you.'

Tirilen wrapped her arms around herself as if she were cold, and bowed her head, but she did not speak.

Loman went on.

'Hawklan told us the obvious. Told us to look at what we knew and act accordingly; to be Orthlundyn.' Still Tirilen did not respond. Loman enumerated the points on his fingers.

'That creature Dan-Tor brought corruption here. Hawklan was lured to the Gretmearc and attacked. Fyordyn High Guards, of all people, kidnapped you, and then Mandrocs slaughtered them on our land. And we could do nothing about any of it except stand by like helpless spectators.'

Abruptly, he stood up and walked back to the window. Hitching himself up on to the sill he looked at his daughter. 'Helpless, Tirilen. Without Hawklan and Gavor we'd never have taken those High Guards by surprise. You'd have been with them when they met those Mandrocs.'

Tirilen nodded slowly. Her hand moved absently to the small blemish on her throat that marked where Dan-Tor's pendant had rested. 'Without Hawklan, Dan-Tor and the High Guards might never have come,' she said quietly.

Loman started as if he had been struck. Tirilen looked up and met his gaze steadily. There was no reproach in either her look or her tone. She saw what she saw and could not deny it to herself or anyone.

Looking into her sloe eyes, Loman found himself floating on a stream of memories. How much darker would life have been these last twenty years, without Hawklan? Could he have found the peace he needed to free his mind of the screaming nightmare of the Morlider War? Would Isloman's poisoned wound have healed itself, or would it have continued draining him day by relentless day? And the village and its people? How would they have fared, nestling under an Anderras Darion, silent and enigmatic?

Happily enough, presumably, he concluded, unchanged and unchanging. But the word 'stagnation' hovered in his mind, and then Aynthinn's reproach. 'Our work has deteriorated through the years. We live in the shadow of those who went before, when we should have learnt their lessons and moved forward.' That would have been their fate. They would simply have been mourners on the death cortege of the Great Harmony of Orthlund. And what would grow where that had once flourished?

Hawklan had opened the Great Gate of Anderras Darion and shone a warm guiding light through far more than that bitter winter night twenty years ago. True, through no apparent act of his own he had become the focus of harmful forces, but perhaps only because it was he who had inadvertently begun to

awaken the Orthlundyn from what might have proved to be a fatal torpor.

Loman saw in his daughter's eyes that she understood this, for all the pain that such understanding brought. He nodded. 'Hawklan merely told us what we already knew in our hearts. No one can answer the final "why?", but we know that evil's abroad, and not to oppose it is to aid it.'

Tirilen stood up and straightened her green robe. 'Yes, I know,' she said. 'But I find no joy in what we're doing, and I'm frightened by what might happen if we have to use all our new-found "skills".'

Loman nodded again. 'You're right to be,' he said gently. 'But we still have no choice. To remain wilfully weak and defenceless in the face of a known evil when we have the means to protect ourselves would be . . .' He searched for a word. ' . . . a betrayal. A betrayal of past and future generations. A betrayal of ourselves . . . of those here and now who can't defend themselves: the old, the young, the sick.'

He found his gaze locked with his daughter's again: that clear-eyed healer's vision that allowed no escape. There was pain, open on her face now. 'I know, father,' she said. 'And I know we'll threaten no one who doesn't threaten us. But how clear is our vision going to be?' She pointed to the scar on her throat. 'We didn't see Dan-Tor's corruption when it was waved in our faces.'

Loman scowled and turned away to look out at the village below. Hidden from his sight at the far edge of the village was the leaving stone and the still mouldering pile of Dan-Tor's wares left there as a constant reminder to them all that not all evils come armed and armoured; that the worst might come with a smile and a jest, and a secret promise to the darker shadows in each of them.

'I can't answer you, Tirilen,' he said almost angrily, looking at her. This time it was she who turned from his pain. 'When all talk with a foe has failed, you find yourself trapped on the finest edge.' His voice rose as if he were justifying some old mistake. 'If you wait until you're attacked, how do you answer to your own people, dead and maimed through your inaction? Yet how can you justify attacking first? That's why violence is a bad thing, Tirilen. It has no point of true balance. It's a demented flux in the order of things, the antithesis of harmony. It destroys in moments things that have taken years to build. People, buildings, things . . . trust, faith . . . everything.'

As suddenly as it had come, his brief passion waned, but a remnant of it swirled around inside him irritably as if waiting an opportunity to burst into life again. 'All I know, Tirilen, is that the finer a tool is honed, the more precisely it can be used. I just hope that in the honing comes the wisdom to see when to use it. You can accept that, can't you? It's all I know.'

A silence fell between the two and there was no movement in the room for a long time except the creeping progress of the yellow light from the setting sun. Their talk could go no further.

Eventually Tirilen raised her eyes and looked at her father.

'We'll need more people trained in healing,' she said, simply.

Loman closed his eyes and nodded. Into his mind came a memory of the aftermath of the last battle of the Morlider War. Sights and sounds were there in nightmarish clarity, in a picture that he could neither watch nor ignore.

'Yes,' he said.

* * * *

The following day found Loman busying himself in the Armoury. His conversation with Tirilen had lingered persistently in his mind and, combined with the old memories it had stirred, it had given him a restless night. Furthermore, he felt that something was eluding him, something that could be important. Something in his anger.

On waking, the unease persisted and he reorganized his – Gulda's – routine so that he could decamp to the Armoury. There he could find the peace that he needed on the rare occasions that the Morlider War returned to trouble him.

That the Armoury was a profound paradox in itself, eased rather than worsened his concerns. It lay at the very heart of the Castle, deep below ground. It housed rack upon rack of terrible weapons. It was guarded by a labyrinth of columns whose gloomy murmuring stillness would swell to a screaming tumult to destroy anyone who stepped from the safe path. And yet, mirror stones carried daylight into its every corner; no darkness lurked there. Openings in the walls of the antechamber were like windows placed high in the castle, overlooking more of the countryside than could be seen from on top of the main wall. And each of the countless weapons was crafted with a deep wisdom and skill that awed and inspired the smith. Here was a place where finer than he had made their answer to the same dilemmas that troubled him. Their honest acknowledgement of their pain and their struggles would always quieten him.

Only the labyrinth seemed to be unrelenting and certain in its purpose, a terrible darkness whose price must be paid before even the uncertain solace represented by the Armoury could be achieved.

Stepping out of the Armoury, Loman closed the wicket door behind him, and looked around the antechamber. Bright sunlight shone through the window openings and he could see clouds scudding overhead. Adjusting the makeshift bundle of weapons he was carrying he walked to one of the openings and paused to look out over the rolling fields and woods. Slowly he realized that his spirits were lighter. The knowledge of the makers of Anderras Darion had eased his undefined distress yet again. When he had finished here, he would go out on to an open balcony on one of the high towers and feel the wind that was buffeting the countryside, cool and summer-scented on his face.

A cloud passed in front of the sun, turning grey and ominous as it did, and the room became darker. Ah, you reproach me for blurring the present with the unknowable future, Loman thought, smiling, and, adjusting his bundle again, he turned towards the labyrinth.

Its dusty gloom contrasted starkly with the sunlit antechamber and Loman's face became pensive. He had little fear of missing his way for although he had passed through it many times, he had never done so carelessly or even casually; here indeed the present must be sharp and clear. But of late the labyrinth had revealed other strange attributes that made him uneasy.

Gulda's curt instruction to him to 'Tidy that lot up, they're no good in here,' had presented Loman with no small problem. The mound of weapons that filled the far end of the Armoury, and to which she was referring, was massive, and he would obviously need a great deal of help. He did not relish the task of teaching anyone the pathway. His own learning had been hard enough, and that had been with the guiding hand of Hawklan to calm the terrifying consequences of error. The path would thus have to be marked in some way.

Then the labyrinth had shown him its subtler defences. No guiding signs could be cut into its columns or floor. Of those few carvers who managed for a little while to withstand the mocking and growing echoes of their chiselling that piled up around them like a pending avalanche, all found that the stone turned their

finest edges. Worse, they found their sleep haunted for many nights afterwards, and their creative inspiration stunted and grim.

Paints and stains too would not adhere to the stone; but most eerily of all, any ropes and marking blocks he laid moved once out of sight. In the end, he had had to lead small groups through personally. It had been tiring and tedious work, and none had tackled it with a good heart, so intimidating was the watching presence of the labyrinth.

Now, although the mound seemed barely changed, the bulk of the weapons they needed immediately had been removed, but Loman would bring out a few more each time he entered the Armoury for any reason.

He began his familiar journey. Around him rose the mounting hiss of anticipation, as if some strange slithering presence was spilling onto the path to entangle his feet and make him stumble. That too was recent, as though the labyrinth were aware that its charge was being assailed. Loman paused; there was another feeling around him, one he had never felt before. Had his concentration lapsed? Dwelling on the summer sun outside? No, without a doubt, no. As always, he could remember his every step. Uneasily he looked around, but there was no visible sign of any change.

Then, through his feet, he felt a slight tremor. The columns around him seemed to draw breath. It was almost a human noise – shock, surprise, fear, and then anger.

Loman's legs started to run before the thought came into his mind, his bundle of weapons clanking and clattering. He felt the will of the labyrinth turning towards him, drawn by the noise like a predatory animal. Now his mind raced ahead of his too-slow legs as he sensed the malign purpose of the labyrinth racing through the gloom behind him.

Then at last there was the end of the path, only a few paces away. Only! The tumult broke over him like a roaring flood, a nail-tearing screeching rending him raw, an earth-shaking rumbling pounding him to his very heart, thunder so intense that it must soon crush him into tortured dust. Somewhere he heard his own voice feeding the turmoil with its screaming.

He was falling, falling, falling into a terrible pit of his own creating. Here was death, sudden and unexpected, with no time to quieten the mind or ease the soul . . .

Then everything was solid again and he was rolling over and over on the stone floor until he came to a thudding stop and the wind was knocked out of him. Rolling painfully on to his side, he realized that the dominant sound in his ears now was his own gasping breath. Underneath it he could hear the sound of the labyrinth's screaming and bellowing fading slowly in the distance.

As his head cleared, the entrance columns of the labyrinth came into focus. He was outside it! Sitting up unsteadily, he found he was leaning against the wall. It must have been that that he struck with such force. But how did he come to be here? Apart from his heart racing and his body trembling, he noted that his legs were aching. Was that the sudden strain of his desperate flight? Or had he leapt reflexively those last few paces that remained when the noise overwhelmed him?

His ear caught the dying strains of the tumult inside the labyrinth. Was it his imagination or was there a note of regret in the sound? Apology, even?

Shakily, he stood up and walked over to the columns that marked its entrance, peering into the gloom ahead, his face furrowed. He had made no error, he was certain of that. The labyrinth had responded to

something other than him. But what?

Impulsively, defiantly almost, he stepped inside. A low rumbling rose up to meet him, like the warning growl of a large animal. In the distance, he heard the rest of the pack stir and the rumbling grew. A wave of fear swept over him. He was on the correct path, but he could go no further. The labyrinth was closed to him.

* * * *

Gulda raised her hand for silence as an agitated and alarmed Loman burst into her study unannounced. She was seated at a small table with an open book in front of her and her head was inclined slightly as if she had just heard some familiar but far distant noise. Her face was stern and ominous.

For an instant, Loman had the impression that he was looking at a tall and strikingly handsome woman, haughty and powerful. Despite his agitation, he felt long-forgotten reflexes tightening his chest and unmaning his legs at the sight. Then, just as suddenly, he was looking at old Memsa Gulda again and feeling slightly embarrassed at his body's unexpected reaction. Slowly Gulda lowered her hand, then she looked at him sharply, and, almost wilfully, Loman thought, her stern face became irritable. 'What's the matter, young Loman?' she said crossly, returning to her book. 'Bursting in here like some spotty apprentice.'

The numbing physical effect of his flight and his impact with the wall was beginning to wear off and the terror of the incident overrode the reserve which he normally maintained with Gulda.

Unasked, he seized a nearby chair, sat down opposite her, and gabbled out his tale, almost incoherently. Gulda listened without comment, keeping her eyes fixed on her book.

'I can't get back into the Armoury, Memsa,' he concluded with an anxious wave of his hand. 'The labyrinth has closed itself in some way. I couldn't step one pace into it without . . .' His voice tailed off.

Unexpectedly, Gulda reached out and laid her hand on his. He started at the touch, it seemed so vital and strong. 'Are you hurt?' she asked, her blue eyes searching into him.

'A little battered,' Loman replied. 'And, to be honest, frightened and shaky now.'

Gulda nodded. 'Good,' she said, standing up and leaning on her stick. 'You're lucky.'

Loman's eyebrows arched. 'Lucky!' he said indignantly. 'It was a sprint the like of which I haven't done in years got me out of that place, Gulda, never mind luck!'

Gulda glowered at him. He cleared his throat. 'Memsa,' he corrected apologetically.

'It was luck, young Loman,' Gulda stated definitively. 'The labyrinth's more dangerous than you can imagine. You were lucky it paused long enough to see you were a friend, or at worst, no foe, and simply threw you out.'

Loman recalled the force with which he had struck the wall.

'Threw me out?' he said softly. 'I don't understand. I must have jumped, surely.'

Gulda shook her head. 'Nothing can escape the labyrinth if it chooses to hold them,' she said. 'It could

have trapped you there to starve to death, driven you mad, killed you outright before you could even sense the threat, even reached out and . . .’ Loman went white, and Gulda stopped. A brief look of self-reproach passed over her face.

‘Hawklan didn’t tell you, did he?’ she said.

Loman shook his head. ‘He just showed me the path and helped me learn it. Perhaps he didn’t know what it could do. He wouldn’t ask me to face a danger I didn’t understand.’

Gulda nodded. ‘Perhaps,’ she said, absently. ‘Who knows where his knowledge comes from? Or what fatal gaps it contains.’ Then she fell silent, staring pensively down at the floor.

‘But what happened, Memsa?’ Loman ventured after a while, adding, with increasing force: ‘I was on the path. I did nothing unusual. Why should it . . . attack me? Aren’t you concerned? We can’t get back into the Armoury now.’

Gulda remained motionless. ‘It heard something,’ she said faintly. ‘As did I. Something neither of us have heard for a long time. I trembled, it acted. My response was too slight, its perhaps too strong. I doubt either will happen again.’

Loman frowned and bit back his first response. ‘Memsa, I don’t understand what you’re saying,’ he managed.

Gulda turned to him slowly. ‘I think perhaps Hawklan has met Dan-Tor, Loman,’ she said. ‘And, I fear, has been assailed by him.’ She raised her hand to forestall any questions. ‘I know no more.’

Loman’s frustration burst out. He stood up, his chair scraping noisily across the floor. ‘How can you say something like that, Memsa, and then not expect me to ask about it?’ he said angrily.

Gulda winced briefly at the force of his appeal, then swinging her stick up, levelled it at his chest. ‘Lower your voice and lower your backside, young Loman,’ she said sternly. For an instant, Loman felt an urge to dash the stick to one side. Gulda’s eyes narrowed and her head tilted again as if she were listening for something. Then she lowered the stick and, stooping heavily, walked over to a large chair opposite the window.

She pulled up the hood of her gown so that her face was completely hidden, then leaned back and stared out over the ridges and towers of the castle, bright in the summer sun, her stick laid across her knees.

‘Loman, I must think,’ she said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. ‘I can’t answer any of your questions. Truly. Go back to the Armoury. You’ll find the labyrinth is open again. It knew enough not to kill you, or even darken your soul. You’ll be safe. Trust me.’

Loman hesitated. ‘But Hawklan . . .?’ he said.

Gulda made a slight movement with her hand, part dismissal, part plea.

‘Please, Loman,’ she said. ‘Do as I ask. Then go out into the wind and light and renew yourself.’

Loman looked at her, now motionless and silent. The memory of the figure he had seen when he first entered returned to him. He looked down at his hands and wondered if his carving skills could capture it.

Suddenly he missed Hawklan and his brother.

‘Very well, Memsa,’ he said.

As he opened the door, Gulda said, ‘Loman, I think we too are assailed. In your quieter moments, ponder your anger of late, and that of your people. We must be eternally watchful with these old skills we’re re-learning.’

Loman paused. The comment stirred unspoken concerns of his own. ‘I will, Memsa,’ he answered quietly. ‘I will.’

Chapter 7

Dilrap walked wearily along the quiet, almost deserted corridors of the Palace’s private quarters. He looked down at his errant robe. It was grimed with dust. As were his hands. As was everything, he reflected. It would be pleasant to bathe, albeit briefly, and then rest safe in soft sheets and soft darkness even if it was only an hour or so until dawn. His fatigue overrode his fears about what kind of a day he might waken to. Whatever future lay ahead, this day was one he could take some pride in. He had helped the Lord Eldric and Jaldaric escape and been instrumental in helping the people of Vakloss recover themselves and draw some semblance of order out of the chaos that Dan-Tor had unleashed on them. Further, he had managed to take a small step away from his own destruction and into the service of Dan-Tor by a combination of his organizing skills and an unexpected confrontation with Urssain.

Head down and preoccupied, as he turned the corner that would bring him to his own rooms he almost tripped over two men who were lying asleep on the floor. One was leaning against the wall, mouth agape, and holding the head of the other in his lap. They made an incongruous sight, looking to Dilrap like large, dirty children picnicking in a forest and, despite his tiredness, he smiled.

As Urssain had originally feared, a great many ‘intruders’ had indeed entered the Palace, and were now to be found sleeping in a variety of places and postures. They were a mixture of exhausted helpers, sleeping wherever they found themselves when fatigue overtook them, and those frightened and homeless who had not yet been drawn into the gentle nets of order that Dilrap had been casting over the City.

Several times through the day, uncertain of his role in the work being undertaken, Urssain had pestered Dilrap about ‘all these people, wandering about’. Finally, in exasperation, Dilrap had hissed at him: ‘All these people, as you call them, are Fyordyn citizens, not thieves and robbers. The Palace is as safe with them as it is with some of your guards. Just make sure the Throne Room and the Ffyrst’s quarters are guarded.’ Then, very softly, ‘And wherever you’ve put the King’s body.’

For a moment he thought he had gone too far, but driving his nails into his palms, he held Urssain’s gaze, tempering the bluntness of his words with a look of pleading urgency in his eyes. It had worked, but Dilrap had reminded himself to win no more such victories for the time being. Very soon his value would become less evident and small acts of defiance such as that could then float to the surface to wreck the fragile vessel of his survival.

Looking down at the two sleeping men, it occurred to him that he should seek a very public opportunity to thank – no, praise – Commander Urssain and his men for their vital contribution to today’s rescue efforts. That should smooth down any ruffled pride and also assure Urssain that the Honoured Secretary knew his place. He nodded to himself. That would be something for tomorrow. Sometime perhaps when the Rede and the Guild Master and a few senior officers were present.

As Dilrap tucked the thought away, an eye cracked open in the dusty face of the man leaning against the wall. Its partner joined it almost immediately. Neither showed any sign of a confused and unexpected awakening and, momentarily, Dilrap found his own taunt returning to haunt him – thieves and robbers?

In the heightened awareness of his intense fatigue, Dilrap felt the man take in his total surroundings with a flicker of pretended bewilderment. Then the second man was awake, and both were standing. Again they showed no sign of fatigue. Dilrap stepped back uneasily. His first question was to have been, ‘Who are you?’ but instead he said, ‘I’m sorry I woke you, gentlemen. Settle down again if you can, it’s still a couple of hours to daybreak and you look as if you need the rest.’

Without speaking, but with a friendly nod, one of the men, yawning and scratching, walked into the junction of the corridors that Dilrap had just come round. He looked casually from left to right, then turning, he glanced significantly at his companion. Dilrap found his alarm mounting though neither of the men seemed to offer any particular menace.

Before he could clear his thoughts, the first man spoke. ‘Honoured Secretary, we must speak to you urgently.’

Dilrap was flustered. ‘If it’s about working parties . . .’ he began, gesticulating vaguely in the direction he had just come. The man shook his head and, taking Dilrap’s arm, gently ushered him towards his room. He spoke again, softly and calmly, but very clearly and urgently. ‘Honoured Secretary, we’re Goraidin in the service of Lord Eldric. We know you’re to be trusted and we need your help.’

Despite himself, Dilrap twitched and hitched up his gown, his fatigue and the shock of the man’s words making him feel disorientated. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said. ‘What are you talking about?’

There was a brief flash of impatience in the man’s eyes, and the grip on Dilrap’s arm became more urgent. ‘Honoured Secretary. We’ve no time for niceties. Suffice it to say that we were with the group that released Lord Eldric and the others from the Westerclave and got them to Lord Eldric’s estate. It was the Queen herself who told our commander that you’d been her great support and were to be trusted.’ Dilrap’s mouth went dry. This was a trap! He had been betrayed! But no sooner had the thoughts occurred than he dismissed them. Neither Dan-Tor nor Urssain would now need to use such subtle tactics to expose his help to the Queen and the Lords.

They reached the door to his rooms and, opening it, he ushered the two men in. ‘What are you doing here?’ he said as he closed the door and gently threw the bolt. ‘Who’s sent you? What do you want?’ Then, as one of them started silently opening the other doors in the room, and peering through them, he added, ‘There’s no one else here.’

The man nodded and completed his search.

The first waker looked at Dilrap searchingly, causing him to remember that one of the functions of the Goraidin was the assassination of the enemy’s senior officers. Again however, he dismissed the thought. What would killing him gain for anyone? Certainly nothing that valuable soldiers such as the Goraidin would be risked for. No, these were brave men, and in need. They were no threat to him and he must help them if he could.

Another sinister memory came to him, and he waved his hand anxiously as if to erase his questions. ‘No, no. Don’t tell me anything about yourselves,’ he said. ‘I won’t be able to keep any secrets from the creature that Dan-Tor has become if he seeks to look for them.’

The two Goraidin exchanged glances; the remark both surprised and impressed them. ‘Very well,’ said the first. ‘No names, nor any reasons why we came here originally, but now, after what’s happened, we have to get everyone away while we can.’

‘Everyone?’ Dilrap interrupted.

‘The King, the Queen, the Lord Eldric. Perhaps his son, perhaps you,’ said the Goraidin without pause.

Dilrap put his hand to his head. This was the second time these people had struck into the very heart of Dan-Tor’s domain to do him hurt. They were like water running through a mailed fist. There was so much hope in such people and such deeds. Another small inspiration to help him through darker days.

‘Events are moving too quickly for you, Goraidin,’ he said sadly, then briefly he told them the events of the day, his voice relentless and matter-of-fact to prevent their interrupting and to cover his own emotions. ‘You’ve done all you can do here,’ he concluded. ‘Take this news back to the Lords, and delay for nothing.’

As the tale unfolded, the men became increasingly agitated although they remained silent. When it was finished however, one of them burst out, ‘It can’t be true.’

Dilrap rounded on him angrily before he could continue. The reliving of the day had harrowed him. ‘Take the message, Goraidin,’ he said, glaring at his doubter. ‘Let others judge its worth. I saw what I saw. Why should I lie about such things? What was Dan-Tor is now Oklar, the worst of Sumeral’s Uhriel. Our King rose up whole and sound to oppose him, and was cut down for his pains.’ His face distorted as the emotion of the events started to overcome his fatigue. ‘Damn you both. I’m frightened enough as it is without having to argue with those I’m trying to help. The man is Oklar. I know it’s against all reason. I know these are children’s tales, but our King named him in his death throes, and I’ve looked into his eyes.’ He struck his chest in emphasis then, angry again, he pointed in the general direction of the destruction at the front of the Palace. ‘And could a man have done such a thing to our city?’

One of the Goraidin laid a hand gently on his shoulder. ‘We don’t doubt you, Honoured Secretary,’ he said. ‘Other things have happened elsewhere that confirm what you say. It’s just that your news was a shock – a terrible shock. We understand what you say and we’ll carry your message faithfully, don’t worry about that. Just tell me what the King said again. It made no sense.’

Dilrap repeated the King’s last words.

‘Nothing shall end the reign of your Master?’ said the Goraidin, echoing Dilrap’s words and shaking his head. ‘That’s a grim prophecy for us all if it was some vision of the future. What did he mean?’

Dilrap shook his head. ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘He did say his words weren’t what they seemed. And there was no despair in his voice. Just a kind of . . . bitter . . . dark amusement. And he was laughing even as he died, and that creature was powerless under his gaze . . . it couldn’t move.’ He frowned. ‘It’s beyond me. I’ve told you, leave it to others. Just tell the tale as I’ve told you. Tell everything as I’ve told you. Now go while you can.’

His tone was final and the men were still for a moment, uncertain. Then they moved to the door.

‘Shall we take you with us?’ said the first man, turning back to Dilrap.

‘No,’ said the Secretary shaking his head slowly. ‘I promised the King I’d stay. I can do more here than

anywhere else. Besides, this is all I know. Find me again when you need me. I'll do what harm I can here and I'll tell you whatever I learn.' Then, looking into the man's eyes, 'But tell me nothing that would endanger others if you can avoid it. I don't know how much time I have.'

Distress showed on the Goraidin's face. Dilrap looked at him. 'Tell the Queen about Rgoric gently,' he said. 'And tell her her husband died his true self. Quite free of his old foe, and fighting him to the end. Mocking him, in fact.'

Then the Goraidin were gone and Dilrap was alone in the silence of his room. Fatigue closed in on him again to damp down the exhilaration that he felt at this contact with the forces who would oppose Dan-Tor.

Turning, he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror and shied away from the sight. Though no lover of his own image at the best of times, the bleary-eyed vision that he had glimpsed seemed to be an unnecessarily cruel caricature and he shook his head in a momentary surge of self-pity. His robe slipped awkwardly from his shoulder and resignedly he hitched it up.

'Shall I do something with that robe of yours, Dilrap?' Alaynor had said to him, only a few hours previously when a hasty gesture on his part had swept a table clear of plans and papers. The remark had been made quietly and gently and was sincerely meant. At the time, he had fobbed it off with a friendly gesture. Now it seemed to be more significant for some reason. He slipped his robe off and, holding it at arm's length, examined it critically. It was a traditional garment and wholly inappropriate for his portly figure, indeed it had been the bane of his life since he came to office. However, to continue to wear it would be to show that threads of the old ways persisted while still showing him to be the same old harmless Dilrap. But would that serve his needs? The threads of the old ways would surely be ruthlessly cut as time passed, and would there be a place for harmless ditherers in the New Order? Probably not, he decided. Chillingly, he realized that part of his worth in the future would lie in the assessment of how troublesome and inconvenient his removal would be.

For the first time in his life, he looked at the robe with affection. Then, laying it down on a table, he folded it carefully. The duty of the King's Secretary lies in his heart not in his clothes, he thought. He would give it to Alaynor, to 'do something with', then he would lay it aside until it could be worn with renewed dignity and honour at some future time.

* * * *

Isloman stood very still. The two arrows still quivering slightly in the nearby tree were sufficiently close together to show that the archer knew his craft. Although he had no idea where the man was, he might have risked a sudden dive for cover had he been alone, but with the Queen and Hawklan in his charge, that was out of the question.

Gavor moved discreetly into his line of sight and, cocking his head on one side, raised his spur-clad wooden leg in a gesture both incongruous and menacing. Isloman shook his head almost imperceptibly and mouthed, 'Not yet.' Not until he knew more precisely what they were dealing with. Gavor retreated and Isloman caught a glimpse of his black shadow rising up through the trees beyond.

Slowly and carefully he raised his hands in the air. 'Muster lady,' he whispered, very softly. 'Do you know these cockroaches? Can you talk us out of this?'

'I'm their Commander-in-Chief, for what it's worth,' came an uncertain reply from behind him. 'But I don't know how I can explain our being here. They'll almost certainly want to escort us back to

Vakloss.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Isloman said. ‘Just pull rank and keep talking. We’ll see what turns up.’

‘Don’t shoot,’ he shouted. ‘We’re lost. We mean no harm, and we’ve nothing worth stealing.’

There was a brief pause, then, ‘Put your club down and walk towards my voice, slowly.’

‘What about the horses?’ Isloman shouted. ‘We’ve an injured man here.’

‘Let the other fellow lead the horses,’ came the reply. ‘You keep well to the front, and keep your hands up.’

Slowly and conspicuously Isloman replaced his club in his belt, at the same time surreptitiously loosening his sword. Without comment, the Queen took Serian’s reins from him.

Isloman soon saw their attacker. His brow wrinkled slightly. The man’s position was worrying. To anyone without the sight of an Orthlundyn carver, he was well hidden; part way up a tree, but securely balanced, with a good field of fire, and yet able to abandon his position at speed if need arose. And his ability to shoot straight and with discretion was already proved. If the others in this patrol were as well trained, it would be difficult to find opportunities for escape.

As they drew nearer, Isloman affected to look around for him, and he feigned great surprise when the man jumped down lightly several paces in front of him, bow raised. For all the sureness of his challenge, he seemed young and nervous. ‘You startled me,’ Isloman said, stepping back and smiling.

The Mathidrin, however, did not respond to this pleasantry. ‘Keep your distance, and follow me,’ he said tersely. Isloman nodded. ‘Well, I see from your uniform you’re not a robber anyway . . .’ he began.

‘Be quiet, and keep walking,’ said the man.

Very soon, Isloman saw the Mathidrin camp through the undergrowth. Like the sentry, it was well hidden, and implied a degree of training that he would not have imagined the Mathidrin capable of. He frowned again.

‘Ho, the camp,’ shouted the sentry.

There was no reply.

The man glanced quickly over his shoulder. ‘Ho, the camp,’ he shouted, more loudly, an excess of rasping anger in his voice further betraying both his youth and his nervousness. ‘Prisoners coming in.’

This time there was a response. A tousled head appeared out of the makeshift shelter and cast a weary glance upwards into the rain. ‘Very funny, Crooper,’ it said sarcastically. ‘Very funny. It’s not our fault you drew last watch. You didn’t have to wake us all up in the middle of the night.’

‘It’s nearer the middle of the morning, Criach,’ the young man snapped back. ‘You should’ve relieved me an hour ago, but let that pass. Get your idle behind out here, right now, we’ve got visitors.’

The party came in full sight of the shelter, and the head, startled, disappeared. After a small commotion, Criach reappeared in a state of barely modest undress: a cloak thrown loosely over his head and

shoulders. He shivered slightly in the morning rain.

Isloman was about to smile vacantly again when the Queen swept past him, hood thrown right back, and cloak opened a little to reveal in part her Muster uniform. 'Well done, men,' she said authoritatively. 'You keep an excellent guard considering you're so far from the City. I'll see that your vigilance is mentioned to your superior officers.'

Crooper's bow wavered uncertainly and his face showed he was struggling to identify this suddenly transformed 'other fellow'. Criach reacted more quickly, hissing something to him urgently and stepping in front of his raised bow as the Queen approached. He saluted as well as he was able with one hand clutching his cloak. The Queen returned the salute. 'Wake your Sirshiant please, trooper,' she said. 'We've an injured man here and we've lost our way. We need your help urgently.'

'Majesty, there's no Sirshiant with us,' Criach said, hesitantly. 'We're on a special initiative exercise. But how can we help you, ma'am?'

Sylvriss raised her eyebrows. 'No Sirshiant, trooper?' she said, pulling her hood forward again as the rain intensified. 'That's unusual. Tell me about it as we ride. Get changed now, quickly. You're getting soaked. And that goes for the rest of you.'

The last comment was made to other heads that had appeared out of the shelter to abuse the cause of the disturbance.

'Quickly,' the Queen repeated loudly, and the heads disappeared, along with Criach. Only Crooper remained, now standing stiffly to attention.

'Stand easy,' the Queen said pleasantly. The young man relaxed, but still seemed to be unusually nervous.

'Don't worry, trooper,' the Queen added, comfortingly. 'You're not going to get in trouble for challenging your Commander-in-Chief. We were strangers approaching the camp. You'd no choice, and you did well.'

'Yes ma'am. Thank you,' Crooper replied uncertainly.

Sylvriss turned to Isloman to say something, but he was examining Hawklan. 'How is he?' she asked, changing her question.

Isloman shrugged fretfully. 'The same,' he replied. 'But I won't be happy until we get some proper care for him. His cloak's keeping him warm and dry, but . . .' His voice faded and he glanced quickly at Crooper, now shifting his weight from one foot to the other nervously. 'We must get away from these people as soon as possible,' he whispered.

'I know,' said Sylvriss softly. 'But there's something odd about this group though I can't pinpoint it.'

'Odd?' Isloman queried. Sylvriss did not reply but turned to meet the troopers now emerging from their shelter. They lined up quickly and smartly, though all seemed ill-at-ease. Crooper joined them.

The Queen looked at them briefly, then, walking to her horse, she mounted and signalled Isloman to do the same. 'Gentlemen,' she said. 'We've no time for formalities. Break camp immediately and mount up.' She indicated Hawklan. 'We have to get the envoy here to a healer as soon as possible.' There was

some hesitation.

‘Majesty,’ Criach said. ‘We’ve been out some time. We haven’t the supplies to get to Vakloss, and the horses are nearly spent.’

Sylvriss glanced at Isloman, her face puzzled. It was not so far to Vakloss that a group of young men couldn’t survive the journey without supplies.

‘And what about your own escort?’ Criach continued. ‘Won’t they be waiting for you somewhere?’

Only careful intonation prevented the question being insolent. The queen answered it simply. ‘We only had a small group,’ she said. ‘Three. A token escort for the envoy here. We got caught by a rock fall – a bad one. I’m afraid they were all killed. The envoy was hurt and we lost our way.’

Criach looked distressed, but his manner did not ring true. Rather, he seemed relieved.

He paused thoughtfully. ‘The nearest help will be . . . to the east, Majesty,’ he said. ‘Lord Eldric’s estate.’

Sylvriss looked at him narrowly. ‘Lord Eldric is currently under arrest in Vakloss, trooper, and his friends are reputed to be preparing for a rebellion. Are you seriously suggesting I seek help at his door?’

Criach looked helpless. ‘Majesty, it is the nearest place where you’ll get proper medical help. I’m sure the Lords wouldn’t treat you other than honourably and with the utmost respect.’ Then, almost as an afterthought, ‘Unfortunately, of course, we’d only be able to escort you part of the way.’

Sylvriss frowned, then nodded. ‘Very well,’ she said reluctantly. ‘Break camp quickly, and mount up.’

A little later, as the group rode out of the trees and joined the road, Sylvriss signalled to Isloman and the two trotted slightly ahead of the patrol.

‘There’s something definitely odd about these men,’ she said. ‘Their horses are far from spent and I’ve never met a Mathidrin who’d even think in terms of an enemy showing honour and respect to an enemy; they’re back-stabbers to a man. These men are more like High Guards.’

Isloman nodded. The Queen’s words chimed with his own thoughts but the ominous black liveries disturbed him. ‘Just stay alert,’ he said. ‘They’re wearing Dan-Tor’s uniform and we must assume they’re his men, for all their courteous behaviour. From what I understand, your country’s very divided about him. The Mathidrin could be drawing people from many sources by now.’

Sylvriss’s face wrinkled in distaste. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘But we’d better lose them at the first opportunity.’ Discreetly she urged her horse into a fast trot. Serian followed. ‘If we’re careful,’ she said. ‘We should be able to tire their horses gradually, and then outrun them.’

Isloman nodded again. ‘Take care,’ he said. ‘Don’t do anything impulsive. We can’t outrun that archer, and the others are all carrying bows as well. At least we’re travelling the right way at the moment. If we stop I’ll try and speak to Gavor. He might be able to help distract them if we decide to run for it.’

As the party moved steadily eastwards along the forest road, the rain gradually died out, leaving an overcast, unpromising sky. As usual, now they were riding again, Isloman noticed Sylvriss’s manner lightening. The air was cool and damp about them, and small clouds of steam started to rise above the

treetops lining the steep slopes around them.

The horses splashed through the shallow puddles that mottled the uneven road, throwing up showers of spray, silver even under the grey sky, and occasionally they would ride through a gloomy arbour formed by overhanging trees, where the sound of the horses' hooves would seem to echo.

Skilfully and imperceptibly, Sylvriss broke up the pace of the journey, riding now faster, now slower, but always keeping a modest distance in front of the patrol so that they would not become concerned.

Eventually, Criach rode alongside. 'Majesty,' he said, rather breathlessly. 'Our horses are not as fine as yours, and they've been riding for several days already. Could we rest awhile?'

Sylvriss turned to him, then looking back at the following patrol she reined her horse to a halt. 'I'm sorry, trooper,' she said. 'I was anxious about the envoy and I'd forgotten your horses were tired.'

As the others reached them, Isloman noted them discreetly puffing out cheeks and exchanging wide-eyed glances. The Queen's finely judged riding was taking a toll already.

His satisfaction at this, however, vanished immediately as a large group of riders came around a bend in the road ahead. They were Mathidrin and they were galloping.

Isloman looked quickly at the Queen. His own thoughts were reflected clearly on her face. This troop must inevitably escort them back to Vakloss. She caught his look and, with a sudden cry, urged her horse forward off the road and into the trees. Without any signal from Isloman, Serian followed, and once again Isloman found himself a passenger on a Muster horse at full gallop as the great horse surged after the Queen.

There was a confused shouting behind them, but Isloman could make nothing of it. Somewhere above him he thought he could hear Gavor calling, but everything was lost in the din of the two horses crashing through the forest.

Abruptly the trees thinned out into a large clearing and, to his horror, Isloman saw a line of Mathidrin horsemen had moved to cut them off. The Queen's horse reared and spun round. Serian halted rapidly, but more cautiously, in deference to his burden. Twisting round, Isloman saw more Mathidrin behind them. Then there were horsemen all around and closing in rapidly.

He heard the swish of a sword being drawn, and felt Sylvriss's horse bump into his leg. He reached down to protect Hawklan's head. 'Back to back, Orthlundyn,' came the Queen's voice, urgent and commanding. 'Look to your sword and trust your horse, they're trained for this. We're not finished yet. Whoever's in charge of these people is good but there are weaknesses in the line. They'll leave a gap and we'll be through it before they know what's happened.' Isloman drew his sword almost unthinkingly and the approaching riders slowed to a walk.

For a moment the only sound in the clearing was the soft clatter of tackle and the light footfalls of the horses through the undergrowth. Serian and the Queen's horse, side by side and head to tail, turned methodically on the spot. Isloman and Sylvriss, swords drawn, waited.

Then the approaching riders stopped and one of them moved forward. At the same time, Gavor landed on Serian's head.

'What are you doing, dear boy?' he asked.

Isloman stared at him, taken aback by the question, but before he could reply, the lone rider spoke.

‘Majesty,’ he said with a slight bow. ‘My apologies for startling you, but when Gavor told me some of my men had found you I was anxious to get here as quickly as possible.’

The Queen’s eyes narrowed menacingly, first at Gavor and then at the speaker, but Isloman cut across whatever intent she had formed. He smiled. ‘How’s your shoulder, Dacu?’ he asked.

Chapter 8

The Mathidrin reached up and pulled off his helmet to confirm Isloman’s shadow sight. ‘Still stiff from time to time, Isloman,’ Dacu said, smiling and rolling his shoulder in demonstration.

‘Our own healers are very good, but I miss Hawklan’s massage.’

He nodded in the direction of Hawklan’s body, his smile fading sadly.

He turned back to the Queen, who was still levelling her sword at him suspiciously. ‘Again, my apologies, Majesty, if our uniforms and our hasty approach startled you. After Gavor found me and told me what had happened I was concerned for the safety of my charges and was anxious to reach you as soon as possible.’

The Queen raised her eyebrows. ‘More concerned for your men than for your Queen, Mathidrin?’ she said, acidly.

Seeing his erstwhile companion beginning to flounder, Isloman intervened. ‘This man is Goraidin Dacu, lady. He was one of the party that released Lord Eldric and the others.’ He waved an arm round the black circle. ‘I suspect these men here are High Guards on a training exercise.’

Dacu nodded gratefully. Slowly the Queen lowered first her sword, and then her eyes. She did not speak for some time and Isloman noticed that she was breathing slowly and deeply, dissipating the desperate battle tensions that had led them both on their brief flight. Quiet woodland sounds filled the air as the group waited in silence: the trees rustling slightly, scattering gathered raindrops onto the undergrowth; a horse shaking its head; a rider’s whispered reassurance; the scurrying of small animals and birds resuming their daily rounds.

Then, looking up, the Queen sheathed her sword. ‘I’m sorry if we frightened your men,’ she said with an ironic smile. ‘But perhaps you could spare us one or two to guide us on the rest of our journey.’

‘We were due to return home today, Majesty,’ Dacu said, heartened by this response. ‘This exercise is finished. If you’ll allow us to return to break up our main camp we can escort you in force.’

‘Thank you Goraidin,’ Sylvriss replied. ‘But I fear you’ll be too slow for us. We’re anxious to get Hawklan to proper care as quickly as possible.’ As she spoke, she looked around searchingly at the waiting men. ‘I think those men will do, Goraidin, if you can spare them,’ she said, indicating three of them.

Dacu seemed uncertain. ‘At your command, Majesty, but . . .’

‘Are there any real Mathidrin patrols between here and Lord Eldric’s estate?’ the Queen asked, cutting

across Dacu's reservations.

'Not that we've seen, Majesty,' Dacu said. 'But . . .'

'Good,' Sylvriss ploughed on. 'We'll stop at your camp so that your men can pick up supplies, then we'll head for Lord Eldric's stronghold as quickly as we can.'

Dacu glanced briefly at Isloman, but saw the carver was looking down pensively at Hawkklan's body.

The Queen moved alongside Dacu. 'Don't worry, Goraidin,' she said. 'I've picked your best riders, they'll not slow us down too much, and they'll probably save us a lot of time in the end just by knowing the way.' Dacu nodded reluctantly. 'Don't worry,' the queen repeated reassuringly. 'We've come so far unscathed. Five of us and the bird will be safe enough.' She paused briefly. 'But I'll take three of your reserve mounts from your camp as well,' she added as an afterthought. Then she moved closer, and lowered her voice. 'I've another task for you, Goraidin.' Dacu leaned forward. 'I'd like you to take some of your men as far towards Vakloss as you can. At your discretion, of course. No unnecessary risks are to be taken, but the King and perhaps Lord Eldric should be heading this way and may need your aid.'

Dacu's eyes widened. 'The King! Fleeing Vakloss, Majesty?'

'Yes,' Sylvriss replied, frowning, anxious not to waste any time in idle and perhaps vain speculation. 'All having gone well, they should be travelling this road. Can you help?'

Sensing the Queen's mood, Dacu set aside the questions bubbling up inside him. 'Yes, Majesty,' he said simply. 'When you reach the stronghold, would you tell Commander Yatsu what you've asked us to do. Tell him we're in sound condition, with no injuries and no serious supply problem. We'll be going in in correct livery.'

Then he saluted the Queen and turned to Isloman, hand outstretched. 'Ride safely, Orthlundyn,' he said. 'We've come across no Mathidrin but . . .' He nodded significantly towards Gavor. 'Keep your eyes open.'

The remainder of the journey was uneventful, though it took its toll of the three High Guards that Sylvriss had seconded. As she had surmised, they were of great assistance in the latter stages of the journey, Eldric's stronghold being well hidden in the mountains and quietly protected by a maze of wandering paths and byways.

However, when they finally arrived, the three men were in a sorry state. Sylvriss swung easily down from her horse and walked across the courtyard to them through the gathered servants and guards.

'You ride well,' she said, reaching up and supporting one of them as he slithered stiffly out of his saddle. Several hands took the burden from her. 'I'll give you some instruction later, when you've rested,' she added.

Isloman, helping the other two, smiled. 'I don't think they're listening, Majesty,' he said.

Sylvriss looked round at Eldric's stronghold, solid, traditional and reliable, like the man himself. The wet courtyard glistened in the bright torchlight which shone like so many welcoming smiles out of windows and doors now filling with inquisitive heads.

Come soon, Rgoric, she thought. This is the real Fyorlund – your Fyorlund. From such as this we can stop Dan-Tor, whatever he’s become.

Grooms moved forward to take her horse, but she shook her head. ‘No no, I’ll tend to my horse, thank you,’ she said, then looking at Isloman, tenderly lifting Hawklan down from Serian. ‘And yours, Isloman. Get Hawklan to Eldric’s healer right away.’

* * * *

Isloman woke up with a start. For a moment he could not remember where he was, then the memories of recent events flooded in on him reproachfully. Hawklan! How could he have dozed off like that? He sat up suddenly, but the movement sent his head spinning and he slumped back, eyes closed and hands clasping at his bed until the darkness itself stopped whirling.

There was a low chuckle from nearby. ‘Relax, Isloman,’ said a voice. ‘Relax. Just lie still. The dizziness will pass.’

Slowly he opened his eyes and turned towards the speaker. It was a slight, thin-faced man, with sparse grey hair and grey bushy eyebrows currently arched ironically over amused brown eyes.

Isloman screwed up his face in concentration, and gradually recognition dawned. Eldric’s chief healer, fetched hastily from his lowland home when Yatsu saw Isloman bearing the inert form of Hawklan.

‘Hylland,’ he said slowly. Mockingly, the man mouthed the name as Isloman spoke it, and then laughed outright. ‘Well, you’ve not lost all your wits, have you, Orthlundyn?’ he said. Isloman lay back again and stared up at the ceiling. It was skilfully decorated with a simple rural scene and he smiled appreciatively as he noticed how the painted foliage that fringed the scene blended imperceptibly into an intricate carved wooden tracery which decorated the upper part of the walls. He recognized it as belonging to the room he had occupied on his earlier stay at Eldric’s stronghold, and he remembered remarking to Commander Varak that it reminded him of Orthlund. He appreciated the man’s thoughtful gesture in putting him there again.

Hylland followed his gaze. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Varak said you liked this room. Not many left who can do that kind of work I’m afraid.’ He stood up and walked to a nearby table. ‘Bit of a carver yourself, I believe.’

‘A bit,’ replied Isloman, cautiously levering himself into a sitting position.

Hylland placed a tray of food on his lap. ‘You’re hungry,’ he said.

Isloman shook his head and lifted a hand to wave the food away. Hylland’s eyebrows went up again. ‘That wasn’t a question, Isloman. Or just idle conversation. It was a statement for your information. Eat!’

‘But . . .’

‘Eat!’ repeated Hylland firmly. He swung a chair round and sat down by the side of the bed. ‘Lord Eldric’s instructions to his healers are unequivocal,’ he said. “‘Keep the men in fettle whether they like it or not,’” he says. And we do.’

Isloman could not help smiling at the man’s manner.

‘I must go to Hawklan,’ he said.

Hylland shook his head. ‘What could a bit of a carver do that we couldn’t?’ he said, adding, more seriously, ‘Shortly, Isloman, shortly. I’m afraid there’s no hurry. Hawklan’s unchanged. No better and no worse. Still . . . asleep.’ His brow furrowed. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it. I think we’ll all have to talk later on. Perhaps we’ve all got part of the answer.’

Isloman concurred reluctantly and made a tentative start on the food in front of him. His memory of the immediate past was becoming clearer. Despite the entreaties of Sylvriss, Yatsu and various others, he had sat by Hawklan’s bed for hour after waking hour, waiting anxiously for some sign of movement apart from the slow rise and fall of his breathing. Hylland and his assistants had moved patiently round him, and finally pronounced Hawklan fit and uninjured.

Finally he had a vague recollection of slithering into a delirium of fatigue and an equally vague memory of being manhandled argumentatively along interminable corridors and stairways.

He looked at Hylland guiltily. ‘Did I give you a lot of trouble?’ he said.

‘You’re heavy,’ said the healer pragmatically.

Isloman cleared his throat and was about to return to his food when the door opposite his bed opened slightly. No one entered, but he heard a characteristic clunking step and, abruptly, Gavor flapped up to perch on the end of his bed. He shook his wings noisily, and tilting his head first one way then the other, examined Isloman critically for some time.

‘Love the robe, dear boy,’ he said finally. ‘Very fetching.’

Isloman followed his gaze to find himself clad in an embroidered orange gown. He glared at Gavor and then at Hylland.

The healer looked insincerely apologetic. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It was the nearest thing to hand. And we’d other things on our mind at the time.’

‘Yes,’ purred Gavor. ‘Who’s a naughty boy, then? You *were* a problem the other night.’

The remark deflected Isloman’s response. ‘The *other* night?’ he said. ‘How long have I been here?’

‘A couple of days or so,’ Hylland replied casually.

Isloman’s eyes opened wide and he made to remove the tray from his lap. With an air of resignation, Hylland stood up and levelled a finger at him. ‘Stay there until you’ve eaten,’ he said, in a tone that would accept no dispute.

Gavor chuckled, and Isloman glowered at him.

Hylland continued. ‘You were worn out when you arrived, Isloman, physically and emotionally. You declined suggestions that you rest and, nuisance though you were, I let you have your way until your condition rendered you more amenable.’ He leaned over Isloman purposefully, making the big man cringe slightly. His eyes narrowed with professional relish. ‘And when you finally went out, I kept you out until I was satisfied you were rested enough.’

Isloman quailed. 'How is the Queen?' he said weakly by way of distraction.

'The Queen's fine,' Hylland said, sitting down again. 'Being female, she has more sense than you in such matters, not to say, probably, in most matters. She rested when her body told her to. Now, apart from worrying about her husband, she's fine.'

Isloman sighed. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

Hylland nodded. 'Well, never mind that,' he said. 'Eat your food, then get up. I can't have you idling in bed all day. Your clothes are over there.' And with that, he was gone.

Silently, Isloman did as he was bidden, Gavor standing by his elbow expectantly. Slowly, he swung out of the bed and stood up. This time, the room stayed still, though he still felt a little unsteady. 'Lack of food,' Gavor diagnosed definitively when he mentioned it. 'I myself haven't had anything for . . . hours,' he said, looking balefully at Isloman's empty plate.

There was a soft tap on the door, and Yatsu entered. Standing in the doorway he looked Isloman up and down appreciatively. 'Not a word, Commander. Not a word,' said Isloman menacingly, carefully untying the laces that secured his gown. Yatsu pursed his lips, his face now taut and stern. 'Hylland said you were with us again. Are you feeling better now?'

Isloman nodded.

'Good,' continued Yatsu. 'We've all got a lot to discuss.' He raised his hand casually, to cover his mouth. Isloman eyed him suspiciously. 'Perhaps you could come down to Varak's office, when you've . . . changed your frock.'

Isloman's boot hit the suddenly closed door with a loud thud.

* * * *

As Isloman reached Varak's office a clamorous trumpet call rang out. Reaching forward to push the door he nearly stumbled as it opened urgently and unexpectedly. He found himself confronting the neat form of Eldric's High Guard Commander. Yatsu was standing just behind him.

Suddenly impeded by the Orthlundyn's bulk, Varak stopped abruptly and looked up at him. 'Ah. Isloman. You're looking better for your rest,' he said, clearing his throat. 'Come along. This sounds like Dacu's group coming back.'

Despite his meticulous and formal manner, Varak's eyes betrayed his excitement, and Isloman found he had to stride out to keep pace with him as they walked towards the courtyard.

Nor did the pace lessen when they reached it, for Varak strode straight across and trotted neatly up the stone steps to the battlements. A Sirshiant ran up to greet him and saluted smartly. 'It's Goraidin Dacu's group, Commander,' he said. 'They've got two riders with them. They're about an hour away.'

Isloman moved to the wall and peered out over the valley. The morning air was clear and fresh after the recent rains, and laden with the scents of mountain trees and vegetation. In the distance, he could just make out a column of riders moving steadily along the wide track that would bring them eventually to the castle. They did not seem to be an hour's ride away, but Isloman was sufficiently familiar with the deceptive perspective of mountain regions to accept the Sirshiant's assessment as being correct.

‘Commander Varak. If you’ve a horse to spare I’d like to ride out and meet them.’

Varak grunted curtly and then nodded. ‘Good idea,’ he said. ‘I’ll join you.’

Within minutes, the two men were mounted and clattering through the main gates. High above, Gavor circled lazily in the sunny sky.

Varak rode with the same upright formality that characterized most of his actions, though, Isloman began to notice, what seemed to be stiffness was in reality extreme economy of effort, each movement the man made being small and efficient. As they trotted along the steep-sided valley, it came to Isloman that Varak was a man who habitually husbanded his resources jealously against some future need. A legacy of the Morlider War, he thought suddenly. The man had been in some extremity in which prodigality would have meant death, for him, or others, and the survival habits he had learned there had struck deep enough to last him for the rest of his life.

The clarity of the thought startled him. In so far as he had considered it at all, he had assessed the blight of war as being that it left conspicuous pain in the heart and the mind, or did permanent visible damage to the body. This sudden awareness of subtler harms disturbed him unexpectedly. Varak was a healthy tree grown from a wilfully bent sapling. I wonder what signs I carry to be read by those with the eyes to see, he thought. His troubled introspection did not last long, however, as the calm of the mountains eased into his carver’s soul. He looked up at the surrounding peaks. ‘I must do some carving while I’m here,’ he said. ‘The rock sings a different song from that of Orthlund.’

Varak turned to him, puzzled at first by this unexpected direction in the conversation. He followed Isloman’s gaze and his face lightened. ‘Ah yes,’ he said. ‘Of course, keen stone carvers the Orthlundyn, aren’t they? It’s not common in Fyorlund. Temperament, I suppose. We’re not as patient as you are.’

Isloman laughed as he thought of the hours he had sat listening to arguments being diligently sifted and debated by the Goraidin and the Lords.

‘Temperament possibly,’ he said. ‘Patience no. You people can talk the legs off a table, and you misjudge your own wood carvers, Commander. I’ve seen some fine work here. Often tucked away quite casually, as if you didn’t want anyone to see it.’

Varak smiled shrewdly and cleared his throat. ‘Oh. You’re striking too near the nerve there, Isloman,’ he said, unexpectedly relaxed. ‘I used to do some wood carving myself. Still do occasionally, when the mood takes me. But you’re right. It’s for my own benefit, not for others.’

For the remainder of their short journey, the two talked pleasantly about their different arts, Varak’s stern face and manner softening under the influence of the open-hearted Orthlundyn, and Isloman himself finding solace both in listening to this professional soldier give a measure of his inner worth and in simply remembering his own carving again. It was a brief and happy interlude in the midst of stormy times and as such it would help sustain both men in the future, even though it might well be forgotten to their conscious memories.

Then the tide of present events washed over them again as the approaching column came into sight. At its head were Dacu, Eldric and a bearded individual that Isloman just managed to recognize as Jaldaric. Both seemed to be on the point of collapse.

Isloman held back a little as Varak greeted Dacu and then Lord Eldric and his son. He was formal again

but he could not keep the emotion out of his face at the sight of his Lord.

Eldric focussed uncertainly on Isloman.

‘It’s good to see you, Isloman,’ he said distantly.

‘It’s good to see you too, Lord Eldric,’ Isloman replied gently. ‘And your son, safe and well, if a little the worse for wear.’

He reached across and took Jaldaric’s hand in both of his. The young man’s weary face broke into a smile, but Isloman could see that their meeting revived memories of their last parting and the horror that had taken his friends while he had lain unconscious.

‘A decent meal and a wash will repair any damage that just being free hasn’t cured,’ Eldric said with strained heartiness before Jaldaric could speak.

‘And a sleep,’ Isloman added, promising himself that he would talk to Jaldaric later.

Eldric shook his head and his face became grim. ‘No, Isloman. Not yet. Young Jal needs one, but I’ve far too many questions clattering around in my head to be able to sleep. You must tell me everything that’s happened, then we can start detailed planning. Dacu’s told me what he could.’ He put his hand to his head, and his eyes glazed slightly. ‘That was a bad business at Evison’s, Isloman, a bad business. He was a tough old devil. And what in thunder’s name happened in the City?’

Isloman glanced at Dacu, who shrugged and cast a significant glance towards the castle. With a move of his head he ordered the column forward again. Isloman snatched at a Fyordyn word to stem the Lord’s questions. ‘Lord Eldric. I’m no Gatherer, you know that. Let’s get to your home. Let Hylland have a look at you and your son, then we can talk in an orderly manner.’

Eldric waved the idea aside. ‘There’s too much to be done, Isloman,’ he protested. ‘We can’t be idling in our beds like sick children.’

Isloman retreated. Eldric was far too exhausted to be reasoned with and after his own recent behaviour he was well content to leave the matter to someone else – anyone else.

The someone else proved to be the Queen. Arriving at the castle, Eldric, scarcely able to stand once he had climbed down from his horse, had proposed an immediate discussion, and Isloman’s earlier conversation with him began to be repeated.

Very quickly, voices began to be raised, and the Queen took him aside firmly. ‘You set a poor example, publicly arguing with Commander Yatsu, Lord Eldric,’ she said quietly but with great force. ‘You’ll put yourself in the hands of healer Hylland immediately, and do exactly what he says.’

Eldric looked at her defiantly.

The Queen’s eyes widened and her jaw set. ‘Would you argue with me, Lord?’ she said.

Chastened, Eldric departed with Hylland.

When he had gone, Sylvriss turned to Dacu, ‘What news of the King?’ she asked.

The Goraidin shook his head. 'None, Majesty, so far. I've left men on the road, and Commander Yatsu's sent such reinforcements as we dare, but . . .' He faltered. He had no words of comfort for his Queen. Both Eldric and Jaldaric had been too shocked by their desperate flight from the City to give any indication of the fate of the King, and from what he had seen of the damaged City in the distance, who could tell what might have happened there?

Sylvriss lowered her gaze. 'Thank you, Goraidin,' she said quietly. 'I'll be in my room. Please let me know if he's sighted. I'd like to ride out and greet him.'

There was an uneasy silence in the room after the Queen had left. Yatsu cut through it. 'We've all got as many questions as Lord Eldric,' he said. 'And we're all worried about the King. However, conjecture will get us nowhere. We've done all that can be done for the time being.' He lifted a hand before anyone could speak. 'I know, I know. It's not much comfort, but it's all we've got. We've waited before and we'll wait again. I can't imagine it's ever going to get any easier. In the meantime, those of you who've got duties, get back to them. Those of you who haven't . . .' He shrugged. 'Wait as best you can.'

Belonging to the latter group, Isloman returned to the battlements and spent some time leaning with his arms on the cool stone and gazing into the distance as if that alone might speed the King on his way. But the valley was deserted and still, the only movement visible being that of the shadows of the clouds drifting silently by. Everything seemed to be waiting. After a while he abandoned his post and returned to the room in which Hawklan had been placed.

He found Hylland there, sitting in a low chair and staring thoughtfully out of the window. He turned as Isloman entered.

'How are Eldric and Jaldaric?' Isloman asked.

'Sound asleep,' Hylland replied.

Isloman nodded. As he did so he caught the flicker of the man's gaze rapidly and intuitively appraising his whole presence. It was a healer's trick and it reminded him of Hawklan.

'You're better,' Hylland said.

Isloman smiled. 'Is that a question or just another statement for my information?' he asked.

Hylland returned the smile and stood up. 'You're better,' he said conclusively, moving over to the bed where Hawklan lay. 'Which is more than we can say for your friend here.'

Isloman looked concerned, but Hylland made an effort at a reassuring look. 'No,' he said. 'He's no worse. But he's no better, and that's almost as bad.'

'What do you mean?' Isloman asked.

Hylland's thin face became pensive. 'If he just lies there long enough, Isloman, his body will simply deteriorate through plain lack of use. I've seen it happen. To be honest, I'm surprised he's still in such good physical condition. Something inside him must be fighting to keep him whole. It's a very good sign, but . . .'

'But you don't know what to do?' Isloman finished his remark.

Hylland nodded. 'I've no idea,' he said. Isloman looked at the seemingly fragile little man and saw why he had become Eldric's most respected healer. His mind was both worldly and as simple and open as a child's. He would face anything and try to see it for what it was. To admit his ignorance cost him nothing. Hawklan would value him.

'Hawklan would tell you not to fret, but to follow your heart,' he offered.

Hylland looked at him, then hitching himself on to the bed he took Hawklan's hand. 'I don't think I can,' he said, after a moment.

Isloman sat down on the bed opposite him. Hylland digressed. 'Hawklan impressed the men,' he said. 'And they're not easily impressed by any means. Particularly the Goraidin.' He tightened his grip on Hawklan's hand. 'But I don't need their opinions. Even unconscious, I can tell he's an exceptional healer.'

He turned to Isloman, his face almost bewildered. 'You say follow my heart, but I can't. He's protecting me, Isloman. He's the hurt one, yet he's protecting me.'

Isloman's frowned.

'To help him, I must enter his pain,' Hylland said softly. 'But can I face the pain that left such a man thus? Even now he feels my fear and he . . . won't let me help him.' He nodded and repeated himself softly as if to confirm this revelation. 'Won't let me help him.'

After a long silence he stood up and walked back over to the window. To Isloman it seemed that the little man was easier in his mind. 'I understand,' he said. 'Or at least I think I do. It sounds like something Hawklan would do.' Their earlier conversation returned to him. 'You said before that we might all be able to help. What did you mean?' The healer did not reply. Isloman raised his voice. 'Hylland, we can't stand by and do nothing.'

By way of response, Hylland threw open the window. The everyday sounds of the castle's activities drifted into the room. In the purposeful tone that Isloman recognized quite clearly, Hylland said, 'If he's enough wit left to be concerned for me, then he might be able to hear and understand what's going on around him.' He turned and looked at Isloman. 'Let's lure him back to life, Orthlundyn. Back to the present. I'll get some of Varak's big lads to help carry him. You can ride him round on that horse of his. He can sit at our meals. He can sit at our talks. We can let him know that he's not frozen at the palace gate, facing whatever horror Dan-Tor launched at him. We can let him know that he survived and is here.'

He turned round and spoke to Hawklan directly. 'You can rest assured, young man, that Dan-Tor won't be lying fretting about your encounter. He'll be moving on to other matters now.'

Chapter 9

Hylland's vigorous confidence in his robust suggestions for 'luring' Hawklan back to life overcame any reservations that Isloman might have had.

Indeed, after his initial surprise, he warmed to the idea. At least it was something positive that he could do, and after all, hadn't Hawklan survived their pounding journey from Vakloss without coming to any harm?

Accordingly he spent the remainder of that day, and much of the next, seated on Serian, holding Hawklan in front of him like a tired child. He gave the horse its head and as they rode quietly along winding stony pathways, he talked to Hawklan incessantly. Gavor came with them, soaring magnificently through the cool mountain air, now high above them, a tiny dot among the towering crags, now below, a black shadow arcing over the green valleys along the strange unseen pathways that only he could feel.

Eventually Isloman drew Serian to a halt on a prominent grassy knoll so that he could gaze around at the surrounding countryside. In the distance, barely visible, he could just make out the lines of Eldric's stronghold amid the myriad subtle shades of the mountains. Below him was a broad green valley, its sides tree-lined and scored by streams making their way to the small river that meandered along the bottom. Here and there were dwellings and patchwork patterns of cultivation, rendered tiny and toy-like by the scale of the scene. In the distance, peaks receded to the horizon like a storm-tossed sea suddenly frozen. Hints of green and blue told him of other valleys and lakes.

Dismounting, he lifted Hawklan down and carefully propped him in a sitting position against a rock. 'It's not Orthlund, is it, Hawklan?' he said. 'But it's beautiful.' He sat down by him and, closing his eyes, leaned back to feel the warmth of the sun on his face. Everywhere was peaceful and calm, but he knew he could not fully accept such a gift while his friend was stricken thus. And, as if signalled, came the memory of the desecration he had felt near the mines: a sensation so foul that it had almost overwhelmed him and only Hawklan, with his sword, had been able to retrieve him.

He opened his eyes and looked around again at the mountains and valleys. 'I doubt such splendour plays any part in Dan-Tor's scheme, though,' he said, continuing his one-sided conversation. 'Come back to us, Hawklan. Tell us what he is. Tell us what you saw that made you attack him. Come back. We need you.'

But there was no response.

In a rush of wind, Gavor skimmed suddenly in front of him, making him start. 'Sorry, dear boy,' the raven cried. 'Just seen someone I know. Got something I need to talk about. Join you later.'

Isloman shook his head as Gavor disappeared from view into the valley below. 'No chance of Gavor being stuck in the past, is there?' he said. 'He's well rooted in the present.'

Later, as they were returning to the castle, Serian stopped and bent forward to drink from a small stream that bubbled briefly and noisily along the edge of the path before disappearing underground. Watching the horse, the thought of Gavor's hedonistic dive recurred to Isloman, and with it came another; that he should not seek too eagerly to return Hawklan to a world which seemed to hold such burdens and so few pleasures for him.

Had he not already given twenty years of light for no tangible reward? Had he not sought out and faced an enemy who had wilfully persecuted him? Wasn't he entitled to return in peace to Anderras Darion and let others finish the task that was, after all, none of his making?

Even as the thoughts passed through his mind, Isloman knew that Hawklan would reject them, but they left him filled with guilt. He tightened his arms gently about his friend and held him close. 'Don't be afraid, Hawklan,' he said. 'We don't know who you are, but we know your worth. You're not alone. Truly you're not alone. And other things are stirring than Sumeral's creatures.'

Serian paused from his noisy drinking and looked up as if he had heard something. Then, unbidden, he began to trot along the narrow path back towards the castle. Isloman, slightly taken aback by this

unexpected action, concentrated on supporting Hawklan. He knew from past experience that when the horse moved thus it would go its own way, independent of any of his instructions.

As they neared the castle, he saw riders milling around the courtyard.

‘The King must have arrived,’ he said to Hawklan in some excitement. He was anxious to meet this man whose flag he had fought under during the Morluder War and in whom the Fyordyn placed such store despite his long withdrawal from public life. He was interested also in seeing what kind of a man could so command the affection of a woman as remarkable as Sylvriss. Unexpectedly, hopes rose within him. Perhaps this man had finished the work that Hawklan had begun. Perhaps he had ended the life of the man who had hunted Hawklan and who by all accounts had held him thrall in sickness for so many years.

But these thoughts withered as they bloomed. He remembered the abject terror he had felt as he cowered behind Hawklan in the face of Dan-Tor’s wrath. Who could have faced that? And would the King be here if his troubles were ended? Then again, perhaps it was not the King but a messenger bringing good news.

However, as he rode through the gates, his darker thoughts were confirmed. The courtyard was the usual noisy confusion of men and horses that might be expected on the arrival of a large patrol, but there was no air of joyous return, and such friendly greetings as he heard were subdued and weary. Neither King nor good news had returned with these men.

Through the mêlée he saw the familiar forms of Lorac and Tel-Odrel walking towards the main door, talking, apparently casually to Yatsu. Only days ago the two Goraidin had been guiding him and Hawklan to Vakloss, to establish contacts for obtaining the information that would be needed if the Lords were to consider moving against the City in force. Why had they returned so soon? Further, though he could not see their faces, something in their postures disturbed him and his sense of disappointment turned suddenly into foreboding.

The High Guards that Varak had selected to help him tend to Hawklan, ran forward and, leaving his friend to their care, Isloman dismounted and began pushing his way through the crowd after the retreating figures.

As he stepped into the spacious entrance hall, the noise in the courtyard fell away abruptly and he could hear the purposeful footsteps of the three men still walking away from him. He ran after them, calling out.

Hearing him, they turned and waited, though when he reached them their greeting was preoccupied and unsmiling.

‘What’s happened?’ he asked, but before anyone could reply the Queen appeared from a nearby stairway. Her face was flushed and excited and she was obviously running to meet the newly-arrived patrol.

She stopped suddenly as she saw the four men. ‘You’ve been so long,’ she said. Then, looking round expectantly, ‘Where’s Rgoric?’ Isloman caught the brief frightened look on Tel-Odrel’s face, like that of a man suddenly and unexpectedly attacked and wishing only to flee. Sylvriss too saw it, for it was reflected immediately in her own face.

‘Where’s the King?’ she repeated uncertainly, her glow fading as though an icy wind had just struck her.

Isloman found himself holding his breath.

Tel-Odrel stepped forward and bowed slightly. He swallowed and faced the deed he had been dreading since he left Vakloss. Despite Dilrap's request, and his own wish, there was no gentle way to do this. Swiftness was all he could offer. 'Majesty,' he said tonelessly. 'The King is dead. He was mur . . .'

'No!' The Queen's voice was raucous with a mixture of fear and regal defiance. Her right hand swung up and struck him across the face as if the ferocity of the deed and the loudness of her cry might reach back through time and prevent the escape of such news. But even as she did so, the blood drained from her face, and Isloman knew that she was looking into the cold empty void that the rest of her life had suddenly become.

Tel-Odrel staggered slightly under the impact of the blow and red weals appeared on his cheek almost immediately. His left hand started to reach up to soothe the injury, but the right hand restrained it. Water came to his eyes.

'Majesty,' he said, his voice strained. 'I'd take a thousand such if it would make my news untrue, but the King is dead. Murdered by Urssain and the Mathidrin at the command of Dan-Tor.'

The Queen looked at him pleadingly for a long moment, but Tel-Odrel's tearful gaze gave her no escape. Suddenly spent, she closed her eyes and briefly covered her face with her hands.

The four men stood motionless.

When Sylvriss lowered her hands, her face was pale and strained but controlled. She looked at Tel-Odrel's reddening cheek and her eyes narrowed slightly in self-reproach.

'I apologize, Goraidin,' she said quietly. 'I behaved like a stable maid. It was inexcusable. Forgive me.'

Tel-Odrel opened his mouth to speak, but had he found the words, his taut throat would not have allowed him to speak them.

The Queen turned away and moved back towards the entrance to the staircase. 'I shall be in my quarters for some time,' she said. 'I don't wish to be disturbed.'

'Majesty . . .' Yatsu began, but the Queen was gone and the four men were left standing in silence, listening to the echo of her footsteps growing increasingly faster as they faded into the distance. Once she stumbled slightly.

Tel-Odrel wiped his eyes with the edge of his hand, and for some time the others avoided looking at each other.

Slowly the noises of the disbanding patrol filtered down the long corridor and helped ease them away from that terrible moment.

Yatsu cleared his throat, a strange tocsin calling them back to the present from their dark isolation. 'I'm sorry Tel-Odrel,' he said. 'That was my job.'

Tel-Odrel waved the remark aside. 'We've done worse for each other,' he said. 'Besides, you'll have to tell Eldric and the others what happened.'

Yatsu nodded. 'You told no one else of this?' he asked.

Tel-Odrel shook his head. 'No, of course not,' he replied. 'Only that the King wouldn't be following.'

Yatsu looked along the corridor. In the distance he could see the neat form of Commander Varak, obviously looking for someone. 'Come along,' he said. 'We need a little quiet time to talk and think and . . . to accept this atrocity.'

Without comment, the three men took his lead and slipped quietly from the corridor. Varak, casting up and down for Yatsu, blinked as he thought he caught a shadowy movement in the distance. He dismissed it as a fancy.

Unthinkingly using old battle reflexes, the four men moved through the castle unseen and unheard until at last they reached a lonely room in a high tower.

Yatsu bolted the door behind them and then flopped down in a chair. His earlier calm was replaced by a restless agitation.

'This is horrific,' he burst out. 'Rgoric assassinated. I can't believe it.'

No one spoke.

'Poor Sylvriss,' he muttered softly, staring down at his hands. 'Poor. . .' He swore. Then he looked at Tel-Odrel and Lorac. 'Tell me everything that's happened,' he said, almost angrily. 'Hawklan comes back stricken in some strange fashion. Isloman tells us that Dan-Tor has razed half the city with a mere gesture. The Queen flees to us saying the King is miraculously well again. Now you tell us he's dead – murdered. In the name of sanity, give me clear information – something to make sense out of all this.'

The tale took little telling. The two Goraidin had parted from Hawklan and Isloman when they reached Vakloss and had gone quietly about the business of re-establishing old contacts. As a result they had been well away from the palace and the two great levelling swathes of destruction that Dan-Tor had cut in his agony and rage.

Stunned and shocked by what had happened they spent some time digging frantically for survivors along with countless others. Eventually some semblance of order had emerged and they too had become calmer, gradually remembering why they were there. Circumstances having changed so appallingly, they moved into the palace to seek out Dilrap as being the most likely source of information.

Yatsu made them tell Dilrap's tale twice, watching them intently as they did so. 'You confirmed the King's death?' he said coldly, when they had finished. Lorac frowned at him. 'Of course not,' he said irritably. 'But the Throne Room and all around it was sealed tight although the rest of the Palace was wide open.' He leaned forward over Yatsu. 'And Dilrap saw what he saw, commander, have no doubts about that. He's supposed to be some kind of a clown, but the man's worth ten of any one of us.' Tel-Odrel nodded.

Yatsu put his hand to his forehead then abruptly looked up again. 'And you ask me to believe that Dan-Tor is one of the Uhriel? Oklar . . . the earth Corruptor,' he said, almost contemptuously.

Neither Goraidin flinched from this onslaught. 'The King named him, Commander,' said Tel-Odrel. 'With his last words.'

'Dilrap's words,' Yatsu sneered.

‘Dilrap saw what he saw, commander.’ Tel-Odrel’s echo of Lorac’s words was menacing. He levelled a finger at his eyes. ‘And we saw what we saw. An army of sappers and engineers couldn’t have done that to the city in months. Only the real sweat and toil of real digging stopped us going mad. That and real people in real pain. And real death,’ he added as a grim afterthought.

He struck the sleeve of his tunic with his hand and a cloud of dust leapt up at the impact. Yatsu stared into the hovering motes. ‘That’s Vakloss, commander,’ Tel-Odrel said through clenched teeth. ‘It’s under my nails, ingrained in my skin, my hair, everywhere. And it’s *noman*’s handiwork.’

Yatsu turned away and sat silent for a moment. Then he turned to Isloman. ‘If this . . . force . . . was so powerful, how did you and Hawklan stand in front of it?’ he asked. His voice did not have as harsh an edge as when he had spoken to his fellow countrymen, but it was severe.

Isloman shook his head. ‘I’ve no idea. I was too terrified to think,’ he said quietly but in a voice that would allow no questioning. ‘Hawklan withstood the force. I merely hid behind him. Perhaps he’ll remember if – when he wakes.’

‘And you saw nothing of Dan-Tor changing into this . . . this Uhriel?’ Yatsu pressed.

Isloman shook his head again. ‘Not really,’ he said. ‘But Hawklan saw something very clearly, or he wouldn’t have attacked the way he did.’ He paused. ‘And Dan-Tor was changed in some way,’ he continued hesitantly. ‘Changed and unchanged. I can’t explain it. Anyway, it doesn’t really matter. You can put your own worth on your own men’s words, Yatsu, but the Dan-Tor that loosed that force against Hawklan was no man.’

Yatsu closed his eyes and sat very still for some time, then, relaxing suddenly, he breathed out heavily.

‘Is that everything?’ he asked. The two Goraidin nodded. They too relaxed. ‘Sorry if that was a bit rough,’ he added.

‘You’ve been harder,’ Lorac said. ‘And it’s no easy tale. Have you any doubts?’ Yatsu shook his head.

‘What shall we do?’ Lorac asked.

‘Our jobs, I suppose,’ said Yatsu without hesitation. ‘Lord Eldric’s back with us. Arinndier’s still here. Hreldar and Darek will be back very soon. We’ll give them such information as we have. Speak if our opinion’s sought, and take whatever orders they choose to give.’

‘When?’ Lorac asked.

‘Now,’ Yatsu replied. ‘Let’s get things moving. They’ll be searching the castle for us by now anyway, if I’m any judge.’ He put his hand behind his neck to massage it.

‘Go and find Lord Eldric and Lord Arinndier,’ he said to Tel-Odrel. ‘Ask them to come to the meeting hall, in . . . an hour, say. Lorac, find the men and get them there as well. And ask Commander Varak if he’d be good enough to join us.’

The two men left.

Isloman looked down at Yatsu. ‘I’ll bring Hawklan,’ he said.

Yatsu gave him a sad smile. 'Yes,' he said. 'Why not? He probably understands more about this, asleep, than the rest of us do wide awake.'

The remark was without bitterness. Isloman put his hand on Yatsu's shoulder. 'I'm sorry about the King, Yatsu,' he said simply. 'Not least the manner of his going. His death doesn't mean as much to me as to you, but I feel for your loss.'

Yatsu laid his own hand on the carver's. 'I know, Orthlundyn, I know,' he said. Then looking up at him. 'Just leave me alone for a while. I need to think – to go through my own memories and say my farewells.'

As he walked back through the castle, Isloman was glad of the sense of normality provided by the routine comings and goings of the people he passed. Soon all would know the news and this simple solace would be gone. Not only because the castle would be in mourning but because, in the assassination of the King, another irrevocable step had been taken away from the light and towards some grim future.

* * * *

'This is beyond belief,' said Arinndier furiously, bringing his fist down on the round table. Isloman started; such an outburst was completely alien to the discipline he had seen the Fyordyn adopt in their discussions. 'The King slaughtered like that!' Arinndier continued. 'And all those people in the city. We've dithered enough.' There were murmurs of approval round the table. 'Now you're back, and the Queen's safe, we must strike immediately. We must . . .'

'We must think, Arin.' Eldric's voice cut across Arinndier's outburst. 'Be silent.'

Arinndier's jaw jutted out defiantly.

'Sit down, Lord,' Eldric shouted, before Arinndier could speak again, their two angers merging. Then, more softly, and with a pleading gesture. 'Sit down.'

For a moment, Arinndier held Eldric's gaze before reluctantly lowering himself into his chair.

Eldric looked round the table. With the exception of Tel-Odrel and Lorac there was no one there whose face was not pale and shocked.

'I don't know what to say, gentlemen,' he began. 'What we've learned today together with what we've been told by Isloman and the Queen gives us an appalling picture. One that confirms the very worst of the conjectures and suspicions we've been debating for so long. One that . . .'

'One that demands immediate action,' Arinndier interrupted again. Eldric raised a hand to stop him, but this time he would not be silenced. 'We must stop debating and act.' Again, other voices were raised in support.

'We're far short of our full strength,' Eldric said hastily, though as soon as he uttered the words he cringed inwardly as he realized he had allowed himself to be drawn into this irrelevant debate.

'There's more than enough,' Arinndier said. 'Dan-Tor's hurt. The Mathidrin have been drawn in from miles around and by all accounts they're billeted everywhere, totally unprepared for a major attack. We mightn't even face effective opposition in Vakloss itself if we move quickly.'

Eldric grimaced. ‘My every instinct is to agree with you, Arin,’ he said. ‘There’s nothing I’d rather do now than arm and ride to face Dan-Tor, battle horns blaring, and hack the man and his black-liveried creatures down.’ He slapped the table and closed his eyes in frustration. ‘But these aren’t the thoughts of rational men, are they?’ he continued more quietly. ‘We’re all shocked. Look at the way we’re conducting ourselves. We all need time to take in this dreadful news.’

But Arinndier pressed on. ‘We’ve taken too much time already, Eldric,’ he said. ‘We can’t debate this endlessly.’

Eldric put his hands to his head in an attempt to bring his own thoughts under control before the meeting deteriorated into a noisy brawl. ‘For mercy’s sake, Arin. Think,’ he said. ‘In the short time I’ve been here, even I can see we haven’t enough men or supplies for a full assault on the City. Hreldar and Darek’s men are presumably still far from fighting standard. We don’t even yet know the sympathies of all our neighbours. What price our flanks and supply lines, Arin? It’s a long way to Vakloss.’

Arinndier turned away as if not to hear such arguments. Eldric continued.

‘And if we arrive unscathed at the City, what then? Street fighting. Man to man. Probably something these creatures are good at. And all done in the midst of frightened citizens milling everywhere. It would be like a battle of rats. Who knows how many would die?’

‘It doesn’t have to be that way . . .’ Arinndier began, turning back.

Yatsu interrupted. ‘Lord Eldric’s correct,’ he said. ‘We must allow time for the shock of this news to pass. With the possible exception of Tel-Odrel and Lorac, none of us here are in a fit state to discuss tactics and strategy. We must collect ourselves and honour the death of our King fittingly.’

Arinndier turned on him angrily. ‘By doing nothing?’ he said.

Yatsu held his gaze. ‘By behaving like Fyordyn, Lord,’ he said, scarcely containing his own anger. ‘Have you forgotten so soon what we’ve just been told? Men and supplies are irrelevant. Dan-Tor isn’t a man, he’s a . . . demon . . . a natural force – or an unnatural one . . . what you will, it doesn’t matter. The point is that he obliterated half a city with a mere gesture. Would you move close-ranked infantry or cavalry against such a force, Lord?’

Yatsu’s words hung cold and unrelenting in the sunlit air of the meeting hall, their implications brutal in their simplicity. For a moment Arinndier searched for a rebuttal but, finding none, his truer self asserted itself and his rage evaporated. He bowed his head. ‘I’m sorry Goraidin, Eldric. You’re right. Grief unmans us all. I apologize. I’ll leave you until . . .’

He stood up.

‘Stay, Arin,’ Eldric said gently. ‘We’d be poor souls indeed if we didn’t rage at such events. You spoke no more than the rest of us thought.’

Arinndier remained standing and looked at Eldric. Despondency had filled the void that his anger had left. ‘But what could we do against such a power?’ he said quietly.

Eldric shook his head. ‘What Yatsu said is correct. The prospect of ranks of men walking against such a force is unthinkable. And yet one man did, and survived.’ He looked at the inert form of Hawklan, sitting

next to Isloman, seemingly asleep but eerily present. 'We're a long way from the Geadrol in every sense now, Arin,' he went on. 'All we have is more and more questions, and fewer and fewer answers.' He smiled ruefully. 'It's all well beyond Gathering, I'm afraid. So I suppose that logic dictates we must leap beyond logic for our guidance.'

He fell silent and stared down at the table pensively for a while. 'For what it's worth, gentlemen, my feeling is that we must prepare our men to fight his men, and that opposition to his power, and the power of his Master, will come from some other source. Though Ethriss knows where.' He looked again at Hawklan for a moment, then turned back to Yatsu, practical now. 'Failing that, we'll have to approach him by stealth and assassinate him.'

Before anyone could respond, he became brisk and matter of fact. 'In any event, those are ideas for another time. Another time quite soon,' he added reassuringly. 'Now I must see the Queen, and express our sorrow and horror at what's happened and assure her of our continuing loyalty. By the Law, she's our ruler now. Yatsu, Varak, gather everyone into the main courtyard. I don't relish it, but it's my duty to tell them about this and the sooner it's done the better. Tomorrow I declare to be Dith-Galar, a day of mourning for our King, when we can each ponder and remember in stillness and quiet, and remind ourselves of the great gift of life. After that we can indeed begin to talk about the future.'

He stood up quickly and with a curt nod dismissed the meeting. As chairs scraped back and low conversations began, a thought struck him and he raised his hand for attention. 'A small point, gentlemen,' he said. 'No. Not a small one,' he added reflectively. 'A most important one. And though he's not here, I ask the pardon of the man concerned for not mentioning it before.' He looked at the circle of men. 'The part of Secretary Dilrap in this matter is to be mentioned to no one. That man alone is worthy of our best efforts. The King is dead, but a brave man lives, and we must honour and protect him by our silence. Absolute silence, for his sake and for our own. One whiff of gossip and he could be extinguished like a candle.' He raised a cautionary finger. 'Remember.'

Outside the meeting hall, Isloman's helpers came to take Hawklan from him, but he waved them away with a friendly gesture. Now he would have to ponder his own future plans. He could sit Hawklan on the balcony to his room and talk to him about them.

As he walked through the castle, he realized he had few alternatives. Without Hawklan, he was little use to the Fyordyn, except as an extra sword hand, or perhaps a training officer. And if he stayed, what of Hawklan? He was beyond Hylland's help. He would be a burden. And what of Loman and Tirilen? What of all Orthlund?

In his mind he saw the future rough-formed by broad cleaving strokes such as he might use at the beginning of a large carving. The Fyordyn would have to fight just to regain their own country but, that done, they were worldly-wise enough to know that they would then have to look north to Narsindal and move against the cause of their plight if they were to be safe in the future.

As the Riddinvolk had turned to their neighbours for help against the suddenly dangerous Morlider, so the Fyordyn would need help for such a venture. But what kind of help? Men and materials of course. But to counter the likes of Dan-Tor? The Uhriel? This was beyond the province of ordinary men.

He looked down at Hawklan.

A group of High Guard cadets ran past him, laughing, the sound forming golden chains which offered to bind him to the solid reality of Eldric and the Goraidin.

They would guide the Fyordyn as well as any men might. But, he realized quite suddenly, they could not guide him. He had to bear a different burden and travel a different path.

He must return to Anderras Darion. There might be the knowledge to waken Hawklan. There might be the knowledge of where to find aid to oppose the power of the Uhriel.

More people passed by, as the many inhabitants of the castle began to converge on the courtyard. One of them was the Goraidin Olvric who, with Yengar, had observed Eldric's confrontation with Dan-Tor and his subsequent treacherous arrest. Isloman acknowledged the man's passing salute with a smile, but it faded quickly as he continued on his way.

Olvric made him uneasy. In some subtle way he radiated a darkness that Isloman did not find in the other Goraidin. He had met similar men during the Morlider War. Trustworthy and loyal, men to be turned to in extremity, but different. Either lacking or possessing a quality that demanded they seek out just such extremities. Demanded that they pit themselves against other men.

'We'll have to approach him by stealth and assassinate him.' Eldric's words returned to him abruptly. Already the grim logic of war was working. Silent, personal, murder. To kill the one to save the many. Necessary, but . . .

He reached Hawklan's room and, briefly, the thoughts left him as he struggled awkwardly with the handle. But as it clicked open, the dark images returned; murdered guards, soft footfalls whispering along still passageways, blackened faces and black-bladed knives; Olvric's work. He shook his head irritably at the injustice of this last thought as he shouldered the door open.

A hooded figure rose up suddenly from the bed, and moved towards him.

Chapter 10

The name of Elewart is written deep into many of the legends of the First Coming, though perhaps in none so deeply as those of the Riddinvolk, who claim him for their first true king and the creator of the Muster.

It is said that he was a great and beloved ruler of the people who were to become the Riddinvolk, at a time in the earliest days of the rise of Sumeral when the Guardians slept but were still remembered, and His beauty and will could be seen truly by only a few: a few who dared not raise their voices against the clamorous worship that He drew to Himself.

Elewart, among many, fell to His will, but alone among many, rose high in His favour, leading his people to His service so that they too were bound by Him and, unknowing, spread His subtle corruptions far and wide in the guise of light and hope. But there came a time, when, in the anguish of his love for the foully betrayed Gwelayne, the darkness fell from Elewart's eyes, and he too understood the truth of his Master, and sought to lead his people away.

And, say the Riddinvolk, Sumeral in His rage and shame at His own treachery, cursed Elewart with a great deformity and banished him for his temerity. But such was the spirit that fired Elewart that he raised an army of horse warriors so great and powerful that Sumeral fled before him in great fear, taking refuge deep in the mountains to the north.

There, fate decreed that He should come upon Elewart alone, rapt in thought and sad memories in a soft and fertile valley where he and his Gwelayne had first sworn their love. And there in His terror and anger

Sumeral unleashed such power that Elewart was destroyed utterly, and the entire valley with him, from end to end.

Others tell a different tale, saying that Elewart was treacherously slain while Sumeral spoke words of forgiveness and friendship under a flag of peace; while others again say that Sumeral had not then given man the gift of war, and that He destroyed Elewart not in fear but in hatred and envy of the love that Elewart and Gwelayne had had and that He must ever be denied.

But all agree that He used the Old Power from the Great Searing and that the valley became a dead and barren place, beyond all hope of redemption, to be ever haunted by the voices of Elewart and Sumeral as they discoursed before His treacherous blow, and the tragic sighs of the beautiful Gwelayne.

* * * *

The wind sang its perpetual, low, echoing song along the Pass of Elewart. Bleak and weather-blasted peaks stood dark and brooding under a sullen, slow-moving, grey sky, but nothing stirred except the occasional flurry of dust along the wide pathway that wound its uneven way along the valley floor. No trees or grasses bent gracefully before the wind, for no vegetation grew there except tight-clinging lichen, patching the rocks yellow and brown. And other than the sound of the wind, nothing could be heard except the occasional distant clatter of some rocky fragment loosing its ancient grip on a high crag and tumbling down to join its countless fellows below.

Slowly into the moaning stillness, from a dark cleft in the rock, the figure of a man emerged hesitantly, eyes screwed tight against the sudden daylight, gloomy though it was. Then, hurriedly, he stepped back a pace into the shade and, for a long time, stood there motionless, searching painstakingly into the sky and over the watching peaks and along the crumpled valley floor.

Seemingly satisfied, he emerged once again and began moving slowly over the shattered rocks that lay between him and the path some way below. His appearance was that of a wretched old man, with bushy grey hair and beard and a tattered filthy gown held together by a length of equally tattered cord. His gait, however, belied his appearance, and while he was patently exhausted, he would occasionally leap almost nimbly from rock to rock as if he were nearing a long-sought destination.

Once on the path, he strode out boldly for a little way, until the bleak immensity of his surroundings gave him a measure of his dwindling strength and reduced him to a slow, meandering shuffle.

Frequently he paused and turned, and his worn but oddly youthful face peered intently into the distance to the north, then up into the sky and over the nearby peaks.

Eventually he staggered to his knees and with an effort managed to crawl over to the side of the path and prop himself against a rock. Taking out a small flask from a pocket hidden somewhere in the folds of his robe, he shook it. There was the gurgling swish of a small amount of water and he let the flask fall into his lap.

‘Not now, body,’ he said to himself desperately. ‘Not now. You can have that later. Keep moving. Just put one foot in front of the other.’ The wind gave a strange gasping sigh like someone making a great discovery, and he wrapped his arms about himself fearfully. ‘Each step takes us further away from Him, and nearer to home,’ he said slowly as if explaining to a stupid child. ‘Keep moving.’ Then, angrily. ‘Move, damn you.’

Still muttering to himself he struggled to his feet and set off again, an insignificant speck amongst a myriad

such, distinguishable only by its almost imperceptible movement along the valley.

At one point he clutched at the cord securing his dirty, tattered robe, but even as he did so, his eyes opened in horror. 'No,' he said, releasing it fearfully. 'What are you doing, you old fool, Andawyr. Fine Leader of the Cadwanol you are. Would you send Him a beacon? Bring Him down on us after all this time? Let all that terror and suffering be for naught?' He gritted his teeth. 'Just put one foot in front of the other,' he repeated. 'Forever. Until you arrive . . . or die. This body will do it. It needs no aid from . . .'

He looked down again at the cord, his face tormented. Then closing his eyes, he shook his head. 'It needs no aid.'

Gradually the day darkened, but Andawyr maintained his painfully slow progress, head down, almost too exhausted to watch where he was going. Without looking up, he knew the grey opaque sky would blot out the moon and the stars when night arrived. No shred of light would illumine his way then and he would have to stop and rest where he could until dawn. But dare he stop and rest out in the open? Strange predatory creatures inhabited the Pass of Elewart; but worse than they, dare he risk falling asleep and have his weaker nature unleash the Power for its momentary comfort? Maybe just a little light, a little respite, a little easing of the pain and fatigue that wracked him. Increasingly the thoughts rose to tempt him, and increasingly it was becoming difficult to set them aside.

No, he dare not sleep. When the night came he would have to follow the path as well as he could, crawling if need arose. But he must not rest.

Slowly the darkness deepened around him and the wind became colder and louder. The Discourse of Elewart and Sumeral, he thought, wryly. Talk for ever and ever, you demon. We know You now. We have no words to measure You, but no words You can speak will ever again hide Your true self and Your treachery. I will die before You bind me again. I will walk until I die. My very death will announce Your presence to my kin. Knowledge of Your Coming will be abroad soon, whatever my fate.

The thoughts heartened him a little, grim though they were, but his more pragmatic nature sensed the onset of hallucination and his ultimate decline. He stopped. 'In pity's name, does this awful place have no end?' he said hoarsely. The wind mocked him in reply, and without knowing how he came there, he found himself on his knees, his hands pressing into the dry dusty rock.

'Stay here, my love,' whispered Gwelayne softly. 'Stay with me. Let us be forever in this place.'

Such sadness. Who could not resist such a plea?

'Leave me,' said Andawyr feebly.

Gwelayne brushed against him. 'Come, my joy, my love, my light. Stay. We shall know such . . .'

Andawyr bowed his head, opening and closing his hands to feel the real presence of the solid rock beneath his fingers. The words were gone, but how long ago? How did he come here? When he looked up he found that all was blackness now. His eyes opened wide, searching for the faintest glimmer that might tell him he was not utterly alone and lost, bound again in darkness by His will.

'No,' he cried out in fear and rage. 'No.' The wind took his voice and broke it against countless rock faces before returning it to him mockingly.

'This is the Pass of Elewart,' he intoned to himself. 'I am Andawyr, Leader of the Cadwanol, the wind is howling through the rocks, and the rocks are echoing my voice. I am tired and frightened but I am on the

path. Safety lies ahead of me. I mustn't rest.'

But his words offered him little comfort, ringing oddly, meaninglessly, in his own head, and flickering like tiny lights in the distant blackness of his mind. Flickering . . .

He strained his eyes. Flickering. There were lights! But were they inside or outside his head? They blurred and danced, moving hither and thither. They were there! Outside. Not some creation of his fevered brain.

Panic surged over him. He was discovered! What had he done? Had he slept and betrayed himself? He tried to stand, but his legs would not obey him and he felt himself hit the ground with a winding impact. He tried to roll over, but where in this blackness was up and where down? The dancing lights were now ahead of him, now above, now to the side, now inside his head, now outside.

He would not be bound again, and his body must not be taken. His brothers must know what he knew now. He must use the Power to destroy himself. They would feel it and know it was his. Know that he had returned from his journey and that it was his one last message. Others must take up the struggle.

He was spent, and now utterly lost.

As the lights neared, he struggled to find his cord. It seemed he was like two separate people; the one with lost searching hands groping over an alien surface, the other fighting to escape some probing assault.

Then the lights were around him, bigger now. And voices crying out, blurred in his pulsing hearing. And shadows, strange fearful shadows.

Suddenly he knew he was on his back, the shadows circling him, tall and ominous. And here was the cord. Here would be a light to blind these creatures of His, to shine gloriously up out of this blighted place. A light to end his awful journeying and deliver his message to those who must now carry it.

He opened his mouth to speak, to shout a last mortal defiance, but some unexpected power interposed itself and the cord fell, or was taken, from his hand, and another voice sounded in his ears.

'Brother Andawyr. It's you. Ethriss be praised. I can't believe it. We've kept watch, but we feared you long dead.'

The power was gone but, bewildered, he still could not speak. He tried to turn away from the painfully bright lights.

'Shield his eyes, brothers,' said the voice again. 'He's exhausted and he's been too long in the darkness.' Gentle hands touched him. 'He's barely with us. Take him up carefully, we must get him back quickly.'

Andawyr felt himself lifted and borne along rapidly. Occasionally the lights resolved themselves into hooded torches, and vaguely familiar faces drifted in and out of shadow as he drifted in and out of consciousness. One bent over him from time to time. A name formed in his mind; and his message.

'Oslang,' he said weakly. The face came forward again, its concern clear and focussed. Andawyr reached up and caught his friend's robe. 'Oslang. He is here. I have felt His presence. He's come again. In our time. Tell . . .'

He slipped away into unconsciousness.

‘Hurry, brothers,’ Oslang said urgently. ‘He’s been sorely tried. We may lose him if we delay.’

* * * *

Andawyr awoke suddenly and gazed around in alarm. Everywhere was dark. His thoughts whirled in despair. Had his rescue been just a dream? Brother Oslang and the others? Was he still bound by Him, cowering fearful in the mountains of Narsindal? Hiding his body from His scouring patrols while his spirit and power were pinioned?

He started at a sudden sound nearby in the darkness. It came again. A grunt, then a splutter. Slowly a torch bloomed into life to reveal a familiar room and a familiar figure sprawled awkwardly on a short couch. Oslang. He was yawning ungraciously and rubbing his eyes.

Relief spread over Andawyr, more comforting even than the soft sheets and the muted torchlight that covered him. It had been no dream. He was home. Not in his own room he noted, but home, without a doubt. Like most of the rooms at the Cadwanen, it was plain and simple except for a panel on the wall to his left. This was decorated with a finely painted pattern of intricately intertwined leaves and stems.

Sitting up, he reached out and passed his hand in front of the panel. Noiselessly, the pattern gently fragmented and unwound itself like an opening flower. Daylight flooded into the room revealing to him the splendid and familiar panorama of the mountains that marked the northern boundary of Riddin.

Andawyr turned his face away from the sudden brightness, and there was a cry from Oslang followed by a thud as he fell off his couch.

‘Sorry, Oslang,’ Andawyr said, as his friend, rescuer and Under-Leader of the Cadwanol struggled to his feet. ‘I thought it was still night-time.’

Oslang looked up at him blearily, then struggled to his feet and sat down on the edge of Andawyr’s bed. His high-domed and balding head slumped forward, and his right hand rose to massage some wakefulness into his eyes.

Andawyr looked contrite. ‘Sorry,’ he repeated.

Oslang stretched and yawned again. His long narrow face looked tired and worn, but happy and relieved. ‘How are you feeling now, brother Andawyr?’ he asked, emphasizing the name and title.

‘Dreadful,’ Andawyr said. ‘I’m starving . . .’ His tongue protruded and retreated and his mouth twisted into an extensive moue. ‘And I’ve got a mouth like a felci’s . . .’

Oslang raised an eyebrow.

‘Like a felci’s,’ Andawyr concluded, marginally penitent again. Oslang grunted and shuffled to a table by the bed. He poured water into a carved wooden beaker from a similarly carved jug, and offered it to his friend.

Andawyr downed the contents in one long noisy draught and held the beaker out at arm’s length. Oslang smiled. ‘In service, we guide. In service, we learn,’ he said as he obeyed the unspoken request and refilled the beaker.

Andawyr took a smaller, more leisurely drink and then placed the beaker back on the table. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. 'We become so learned, Oslang, we forget the wisdom to be found in simple pleasures,' he said, leaning back and looking out at the sunlit mountains.

His face clouded abruptly and he turned back to his friend. 'Just to be able to see, Oslang, just to be able to drink . . . such gifts. I've been so long in the darkness. You can't imagine the agony of having the Power and not daring to use it to sustain yourself in extremity. You can't imagine it. When . . .'

Oslang leaned forward and laid a hand on his arm. 'Relax, Andawyr,' he said. 'There'll be plenty of talking soon enough. Enjoy your simple pleasures, now they're available to you again, and take some pride that you resisted whatever you had to resist, and completed your journey safely. There's nothing so urgent that your resting a little more will alter.'

Andawyr's face darkened further as the word urgent brought his memories flooding back. 'Yes there is,' he said. 'We mustn't delay. We must start . . .'

Oslang raised an admonitory finger, and reluctantly, Andawyr subsided. Somewhat sulkily he looked round the room again. 'Where am I, anyway? Why am I not in my own room?' Then, suspiciously, with a closer look at the mountains reflected in the mirror stones of the window opening, 'How deep are we here? And how long have I been here?'

Oslang looked at him steadily. 'You've been back several days, Andawyr. You were totally exhausted. As to depth, you're on the twentieth level, for reasons I'm sure you understand.'

Andawyr closed his eyes. 'Several days,' he said quietly. 'And that deep. You must have been very frightened.'

'Cautious,' corrected Oslang. 'You were in a strange mood after your spectacular return from the Gretmearc with that . . . abomination, and your tales of Ethriss dormant, and . . . Him, risen again. Then you went off into Narsindal against all our advice. And you were gone so long.' He hesitated. 'With all that, and other signs . . .'

'You had to be certain I was what I seemed,' Andawyr finished Oslang's remarks.

The tall man nodded. 'And that you carried no corruption or taint,' he added.

'And?'

'You're fine,' Oslang said, a smile lighting up his long face. 'Quite unchanged.'

'You're sure?' Andawyr added.

Oslang's smile broadened. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'We put you well below the twentieth level when we brought you in.' He laughed nervously. 'We could have bound Sumeral himself there.'

Andawyr scowled. 'Don't blaspheme,' he said angrily, suddenly leader of the Cadwanol. 'From henceforth, that name is to be held in the awe it merits. It's suited for neither casual oath nor dry academic debate.'

Oslang's smile faded at this unexpected rebuke. Andawyr swept aside his sheets and swung off the bed. 'I'm sorry, Oslang,' he said. 'If I'm any judge, you've probably nursed me yourself since you found me, and I'm sure you've taken every precaution for both my well-being and the well-being of the whole

community. I appreciate it. But times are changing rapidly and from now on we'll have to be truly watchful. Foolish, so-called harmless habits acquired over the years may be fraught with all manner of hazard.'

Oslang's eyes narrowed, slightly resentful. 'We've watched and treated you meticulously, Andawyr,' he said. 'Be assured. You're completely recovered, and without any taint other than that which is naturally yours. I'm not oblivious to the changing times.'

Andawyr nodded dismissively. 'I know that,' he said. 'But I've learned so much in such a short time, and much of it has been about myself. Believe me, I'm much changed, as will you be in due course. As will everyone. Everything.'

He made an airy gesture, then stretched himself and yawned lavishly. 'May I leave?' he said abruptly, with a smile to dissipate the unease that had grown between them.

Oslang started. 'Yes, of course,' he said, indicating the door.

'And my robe and cord?' Andawyr said.

'They'll be in your quarters when you arrive, brother,' Oslang replied.

The door to Andawyr's temporary cell opened on to a large high-ceilinged hall, octagonal in shape. Like the small room he had just occupied, it bore little decoration, but he nodded appreciatively as he looked around. Although buried deep beneath the mountains, mirror stones in the ceiling and walls made the hall seem as though it were as high above the ground as it was in reality above the deepest explored levels of the cave system. As a result, it was bright with sunlight bouncing off its polished stone walls and floor.

Air too, moved through the caves, bringing the scents of the seasons of the mountains to all levels.

Andawyr looked through one of the window openings. 'It's very pleasant down here,' he said. 'Feels secure. I don't think I've been this deep for a long time,' he added pensively. 'That's remiss of me, really.' Then, almost anxiously: 'How deep did you say you took me at first?'

Oslang looked at him. 'I didn't,' he said, simply. 'But it was as deep as we dared.'

Andawyr blew a long breath and turned towards one of the broad passageways that led from the hall. That was more than caution, he thought. That was fear bordering on terror.

He hesitated as he came to the threshold of the passage, looking at the symbols glowing softly on each side. The whole of the Cadwanen caves must be on Full Watch. 'You must have been frightened out of your wits,' he said, stepping forward determinedly.

A soft, ringing echo pervaded him and he looked conspicuously relieved as he strode into the passage. Oslang affected not to notice.

'Yes,' he admitted. 'You were in a bad way when we found you. Rambling, incoherent.' He cleared his throat awkwardly. 'You were on the verge of killing us all. I don't know yet whether I managed to take your cord from you, or whether you released it yourself. I'm just glad one of us managed it. I shudder to think who you thought we were.'

Andawyr grimaced. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'You were right to advise me not to go into Narsindal alone,

and I was right to go alone. It was *my* time. Suffice it that you found me and that I did no harm to you. Who knows what strange threads control our destinies?’

‘Strange indeed,’ Oslang said. They stopped in front of a door.

Something in Oslang’s tone caught Andawyr’s attention and he looked at him quizzically. ‘Explain,’ he said, knowingly.

Oslang passed his hand over an ornate pattern that decorated the centre of the door. ‘We’ve not developed the habit of taking extended nocturnal walks along the pass since you left, you know,’ he said, folding his arms and hugging himself slightly as if a sudden chill had come over him. ‘You talk of strange threads. You owe your life to a rocked felci’

Before Andawyr could speak, the door opened and he was obliged to turn his eyes away from the brightness that streamed out of it. Somewhat crossly, Oslang ushered him forward and, passing almost immediately through a second door, they entered directly into Andawyr’s quarters.

Andawyr blinked owlishly. ‘We must do something about that light,’ he said irritably. ‘It’s far too bright.’

Oslang was unsympathetic. ‘It’s your own fault. You were the one who insisted they be speeded up. I told you when we changed over that the time you’d save in travelling you’d spend in blinking, but you wouldn’t listen. And you *have* just come from the twentieth level.’

Andawyr scowled. ‘What do you mean, a rocked felci?’ he said, refusing to become involved in an old argument he was going to lose. He started immediately to root through the routine and massive disorder of his room.

‘Kristabel,’ Oslang said.

Andawyr paused and smiled. ‘Ah, Kristabel. She’s sweet,’ he said. ‘Where’s my robe and cord? Has Dar-Volci been tidying up in here again?’

‘More to the point, she’s sharp-eyed,’ Oslang said, ignoring his leader’s sentimentality and adding caustically, ‘Try the cupboard.’

Andawyr muttered something under his breath and after wending his way through the boxes and piles of documents that littered the floor, reached the cupboard Oslang had indicated.

He opened the door and, for a moment, stood admiring the simple white robe hanging in front of him. It seemed to shimmer in the sunlight. He took it down carefully and put it on, then examined the cord. It was neat and immaculate. He nodded approvingly. ‘Thank you, Oslang,’ he said. ‘This is a fine weave. Really excellent work. Excellent.’

Oslang inclined his head in acknowledgement of the praise.

‘Now. Kristabel,’ Andawyr said, more seriously. ‘How did she come to get rocked, and what’s she got to do with finding me?’

‘Usual way,’ Oslang replied. ‘Didn’t recognize what she was chewing until it was too late.’

Andawyr grimaced. ‘Is she all right?’

Oslang nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'Just a bit disorientated for an hour or two but otherwise none the worse.'

'Good,' Andawyr said. He moved a large bag from a couch and sat down, nodding to Oslang to do the same. 'I'd miss her, to say the least.' Uncertainly, Oslang carefully wedged himself on to another loaded couch.

'Go on,' Andawyr urged.

'Well, the others went after her when they heard her whistling and howling, but when they brought her back she was rambling about having seen you wandering along the pass when she accidentally broke surface.'

'And you listened?' asked Andawyr in some surprise. 'They see anything and everything when they're rocked.'

Oslang shrugged. 'You used the phrase. Strange threads. She just sounded different in some way, so I took a chance. I can't explain it.'

Andawyr nodded thoughtfully. 'Don't try, Oslang,' he said after a long silence. 'Don't try. We must accept good and bad fortune with equal grace. Let's just be grateful for the one and prepared for the other. You're sure Kristabel's all right?'

'She's fine,' Oslang said reassuringly.

Andawyr fell silent again, resting his head on his hands. 'Strange threads,' he muttered to himself. 'And she's normally so careful.' Oslang watched but said nothing. Then Andawyr sat up abruptly. 'Call the senior brothers together, would you, Oslang?' he said. 'We've a great deal to discuss.'

Chapter 11

Loman and Gulda took each others' advice. He pondered his anger and its causes. She gave the Orthlundyn space to consider their new ways.

When Loman suggested that those being trained be given time for reflection and thought, she looked at him beadily and then delivered a typical thrust to the heart of the idea.

'Interesting notion, young Loman,' she said. 'Your daughter's, I presume.'

'Not entirely,' Loman said, bristling a little. 'But it came out of something we were discussing.'

Gulda nodded. 'I'll think about it,' she said. 'Tirilen's ideas are usually worth listening to.'

Three days later, Loman was asked to give his opinion on an extensive revision of almost every training programme. Looking at the sheaf of papers in his hand, all written in Gulda's immaculate script, he shook his head. 'Do you never sleep, Memsa?' he said.

'Let me know what you think,' she said, ignoring the question and walking away.

As he expected, Loman had very little to add to Gulda's work. It was detailed, meticulous and

appropriate, and superior in every way to what he had suggested. Later he told her so.

She bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement of Loman's rough compliment. 'I only stand on your shoulders, Loman,' she said, unexpectedly offering an explanation. Then, with a deep chuckle, 'You should do it more often yourself. The view's better.'

Rather than allow time for reflection, Gulda had chosen to ease the intensity of the entire training programme. 'It was a timely thought, Loman,' she said. 'We nearly made a serious mistake. We nearly allowed the training for war to become dominant.' She shook her head. 'An old mistake.'

She sat down opposite Loman and fixed him with her piercing gaze, sending him back to his schooldays again. 'To become better fighters, better able to defend what they value, people need to find a place in their ordinary lives for their new knowledge. They need to reaffirm, to appreciate and understand the value of being warriors by being farmers and carvers first and warriors a poor second.' She paused, unhappy with her last comment. 'Or perhaps I should say, by realizing they can be each as required. I think you'll find that debates and discussions will arise naturally and that'll be all to the good. We mustn't be arrogant, must we? We must learn from our pupils. They're Orthlundyn – the remains of a great people.' She paused. 'Still a great people,' she added pensively. 'They'll absorb most of what's good in what we taught them and forget most of what's not so good.' Then, businesslike, 'And there'll be enough training continuing to keep everyone up to scratch.'

The more relaxed training regime, however, could not apply to Loman's elite group. By its very nature, their training demanded intensity.

Having made the decision to form such a group, Loman had gathered together his most able 'students' and described to them as truthfully as he could his own experiences with the Fyordyn Goraidin during the Morlider War. All of his listeners had accepted the need for and value of such a group, but despite Loman's stark telling, only a few of them had had the sight to realize that the cost of such service would be too high for them. Others were to learn later, as the relentless and severe nature of the training took its toll, though insofar as he was able, Loman ensured that none left the group feeling other than richer for the experience they had gained.

Eventually, he was able to leave much of this training to others, but initially, as a matter both of necessity and of personal honour, and to some extent to salve his conscience in forging such a tool, Loman personally trained the groups, teaching everything by his own example.

'You are too old for this, father,' Tirilen growled emphatically each time he returned home from some protracted survival expedition into the mountains and, free from the gaze of his students, crashed down into a chair and gazed skywards. 'Far too old,' she would repeat. 'I've got people who are really sick to attend to, you know. This . . .' She waved her hand over his collapsed remains in sweeping dismissal, 'is self-inflicted.'

Her hands, however, belied her words, and she soothed his aches, eased the stiffness from reluctant joints, and repaired the damage that was incurred from time to time as he taught his students the skills needed for survival against both animate and inanimate enemies.

But she could not ease the pain that sometimes wracked his heart. Only Gulda could come towards that. Not that he ever approached her. She would appear as if in response to some silent call and, blue eyes looking deep into him, would say quite simply. 'You know it's necessary, don't you?' The words were trite enough, but her presence and the assurance of her own inner knowledge would lighten his burden in some way he could not define.

Occasionally as he stared back into her piercing eyes, the memory would return of the handsome and proud face he had glimpsed briefly when, running in terror from the labyrinth, he had burst suddenly into her room. At such times, Gulda's eyes would narrow, then she would lower her gaze, pull her hood forward and slump off, more stooped than ever.

It was in his elite group, however, that Loman found other problems multiplying. By its nature, their training took each individual to some extremity and exposed flaws in their characters that, left unseen, might have destroyed them at some future time, or worse, destroyed others they were responsible for. Angry outbursts were not uncommon and sometimes, of necessity, discipline was both severe and delivered summarily. But there've been too many such, Loman thought one night, sitting alone on a small balcony which faced up through the valley that Anderras Darion's builders had sealed; up into the mountains. Too many.

Gulda had said, 'I think we too are assailed. Ponder your anger of late and that of your people.' It was an enigmatic remark and she had offered no explanation nor mentioned it again, but he knew that that was because she was uncertain. She had spoken only the words she could, and he realized abruptly that in so doing she was asking for his help.

Ponder your anger . . . ?

A bright full moon had swept the stars from the sky, and under it the rooftops and courtyards of the Castle sprawling out before Loman's high vantage glistened damply. Ahead of him the black shadow of the mountains was broken by washes of silver brightness.

Slowly, he brought to mind the various violent incidents that had occurred over the past few weeks. Superficially, all of them were provoked by some trivial act, but there was nothing mysterious in that. The real cause could usually be identified as an accumulating series of similarly trivial acts, each one unrelieved until finally catharsis had been sought in a blow, sometimes delivered, sometimes threatened and restrained. He himself had offended; delivered summary punishment with his fist or his hand when, even as he struck, he knew words would have sufficed.

But too often, he thought again. Too often.

And in the wake of this came a newer realization. Not only were there too many such incidents, they were getting worse. If it continued, it was only a matter of time before someone was killed. His stomach suddenly became leaden and icy. It would happen! And how could he face that? Three men and one woman had already died in training accidents and he had had precious little real comfort to offer their grieving parents. How then could he answer for the *murder* of one of his charges by their own?

He could not.

We must be eternally watchful with these old skills we're re-learning, Gulda had said. But it was more than that, Loman thought. He knew the dangers – the Orthlundyn knew them. Indeed, in some strange way, they had not been re-learning old skills, they had merely been discarding the dust and clutter that had been hiding them for generations. They would not be so careless, so unaware, as to be so easily used by their darker natures.

The word, careless, however, hung in Loman's mind. He stood up and stared intently at the mountains, the memories of the four deaths returning to him vividly.

Memories of saying, 'I don't understand. It was such an odd thing to do. So out of character.'

His hands tightened around the moon-sheened rail that edged the balcony. The mountains, still and silent, watched and waited.

So out of character . . .

* * * *

Gulda was sitting on a long stone bench in a quiet sunny courtyard that she seemed to have made her own. The book lying open across her knees was a treatise on siege warfare though she seemed to be paying scant attention to it. Rather, she was watching a group of small birds bobbing to and fro across the close-cropped lawn in search of food.

Loman closed the door behind himself very gently, but the birds were gone in a sudden flurry. Gulda looked up at him as he approached. No haughty presence there, he thought, just a strange, probably lonely old woman. Where did she come from? And how did she know so much about so many things? He smiled and she nodded.

Crouching down in front of her, knees cracking slightly, he came straight to the point. 'What's happening in these mountains, Memsa?' he said, his eyes indicating the surrounding peaks.

Gulda's eyes went to her book. 'Only what's happened for generations,' she said off-handedly. 'The mists come and go. The birds and the animals . . .'

Loman placed a hand over the book. 'Memsa,' he said almost angrily. 'Don't be obtuse. You asked me to think about my anger. I've thought. All last night I thought. And the morning's brought no change. There's a pattern of violent behaviour occurring within our special group when they're in the mountains that I can't explain. Something is affecting them.'

Gulda looked down at the smith's powerful hand and with a delicate thumb and forefinger removed it from her book. Her mouth curled impatiently. 'Be specific,' she said.

Loman was. He detailed the deaths and injuries caused by unexpected lapses of concentration; the violence provoked by incidents which should have passed unnoticed. It took him some time. Gulda affected to read while he spoke, but Loman knew she was listening intently.

'It's a problem inherent in this kind of training,' she said when he had finished.

'Some of it, yes,' Loman replied. 'But not this much. And it's getting worse. And there are other things. Not serious, but odd, untypical.'

Gulda looked at him.

'Sickness, for want of a better word,' he said. 'Headaches, tiredness, sometimes very severe.'

'It's the height,' Gulda said dismissively, returning to her book.

'Memsa,' Loman said, softly, but very firmly, 'I know about being too long at too great a height; there's no peak around here that Isloman and I haven't climbed unwisely at one time or another when we were young. This is different. We've all of us had headaches come without warning. I never mentioned it to

Tirilen, but some I thought were going to burst my head open. And then, just as quickly as they came, they were gone. And fits of tiredness the same.'

He gripped her arm tightly, bewildered by her continuing indifference. 'I don't get headaches, Memsa. I was at the last battle of the Morlider War. I've hammered iron the thickness of my leg into the finest wire. I just don't get headaches. Nor do I suddenly lose all my strength and will like some over-tired child. What's happening?'

Effortlessly Gulda raised the arm he was gripping and closed her book. The unexpected ease and power of the movement caused Loman to lose his balance slightly.

'Sit down, Loman,' Gulda said, indicating the empty seat by her side. Loman did as he was bidden.

Gulda picked up her stick and, folding her hands over the top of it, rested her chin on them. 'I agree with you,' she said. 'Your analysis was good. Cleared my own thoughts on the matter considerably. You're improving. Something's amiss. I've only vague suspicions about what it might be, but if I'm right I'm far from clear what it means, or what we can do about it.' Her face looked pained, and Loman waited silently.

Gulda sat motionless for a long time and one of the birds made a tentative return.

She eyed it narrowly.

'Do you remember Hawklan telling us about the birds that followed him to the Gretmearc?' she continued. Loman remembered too well. The kidnapping of Tirilen and all the subsequent events had been distressing enough, but at least they were understandable to some degree in human terms. Hawklan's tale of his journey to and from the Gretmearc on the other hand, with its sinister watching birds and its strange people with inexplicable and violent powers, had been profoundly disturbing, and he was reluctant to dwell on its implications.

The bird hopped towards him. He froze. 'That's not one, is it?' he said nervously.

Gulda gave a small jovial snort, and the bird flew off quickly. 'No,' she said. 'Don't worry. I think those eyes have been hooded for the time being. But do you remember about the one that Hawklan carried into Andawyr's tent?'

Loman screwed up his face in concentration. Pushed into the back of his mind, it all seemed so long ago. 'Gavor killed it, didn't he?' he offered eventually. 'Or stunned it, or . . .'

As he spoke, he remembered the tale of Gavor and the bird falling from the sky and the two strange shadows in the mist. But it was too late.

'Really, Loman,' Gulda said crossly, her fingers twitching around the top of her stick. 'How can you train your own Goraidin if you don't listen to what you're being told. Some things you only get told once.'

Loman winced and hastily raised his hands in apology. 'Elflings,' he said helpfully.

'Alphraan,' Gulda corrected wearily. She turned and stared up at the surrounding peaks, solid and comforting in the bright sunlight. After a moment she turned back to Loman, apologetic. 'Still,' she said, 'I shouldn't rebuke you. I gave the incident precious little heed myself until recently.'

‘I’m sorry, Memsa,’ Loman said. ‘I really don’t know what you mean. If I remember, it was Gavor who thought he saw two figures, and went rambling on about them singing. Hawklan wasn’t too sure what he’d seen. And I’ve never even heard of little people living in the mountains hereabouts. Anyway, what would they have to do with the problems we’ve been having?’

Gulda stood up. ‘Come along,’ she said, nudging Loman’s foot with her stick. ‘I’ve forgotten what little I ever knew about the Alphraan. We’d both better go to the library and see what we can find out.’

Loman had no desire to go prowling round the library with Gulda, prone as she was to become distracted. ‘Didn’t Gavor say there were tales about these little people on the Gate?’ he suggested.

Gulda’s stick swung up to point at him. ‘Which I can doubtless read dangling from the top of a ladder, eh?’ she said caustically. ‘Come along. Stop wasting time.’

* * * *

Loman, however, found it hard to believe that Gulda’s ladder climbing days were over. His feet were burning and his legs were aching, but she seemed to be unaffected by the slow and seemingly endlessly trek round and round the tiered circular balconies of the library as she made him accompany her on her search for some elusive guidance.

Book after book she discarded, and when finally she separated two large, beautifully bound books to retrieve a small, nondescript-looking volume, he was well into the stage of shuffling and stamping his feet like a waiting carthorse.

‘This looks as if it might be useful,’ she said, examining the spine. ‘This fellow was much respected in his day. A good writer. And very accurate.’

Loman looked over her shoulder but the author’s name meant nothing to him. ‘It looks very old,’ he said. Gulda did not reply, but set off for a nearby table.

Loman frowned as Gulda opened the book. She answered his question before he could ask it. ‘That’s the ancient Fyordyn language, young Loman,’ she said. ‘I doubt there’s many can read it these days, and even fewer speak it properly.’

‘Can you?’ he asked. Gulda snapped her fingers and indicated the chair next to her. ‘This might take a little time,’ she said. Loman sat down with some relief.

As Gulda read, Loman relaxed and looked around the library. It was alive with people from all over Orthlund, drawn there by Loman’s bidding to prepare for war. They were moving busily hither and thither, though their movement was so silent that it reminded him of autumn leaves blowing in a gentle breeze.

On every tier and across the main floor far below, people could also be seen bent over books and documents. Some were writing earnestly, sheltered by books piled high around them like redoubts. Some were thoughtfully perusing maps and scrolls, others were sat high on mobile ladders or crouched low, moving frog-like as they searched the floor-level shelves. One or two were asleep.

Loman smiled to himself. Despite the slumberers, the scene reminded him again of the sense of awakening that seemed to pervade the country, a sense that he felt most vividly in this wonderful Castle

so arbitrarily given to his charge that dark wintry night some twenty years ago. He gazed upward towards the higher tiers towering above. What knowledge must be here? What people had gathered it together thus? What must this place have been like once when its population matched its scale?

Gulda muttered and clucked to herself softly as she read, her head bouncing gently to some soundless rhythm and her mouth forming silent words. The performance drew Loman's attention and he watched her for some time in mild surprise; Gulda usually sat motionless when she read.

'What is it?' he ventured after a while.

Rather to his surprise, she smiled and answered him immediately. Even more to his surprise, she answered in a strange language, although he thought he detected fleeting overtones of the High Guards' battle language. He gaped, and, surprised herself by this reaction, she mirrored his expression until realization dawned.

'I'm sorry, Loman,' she said. 'I was so engrossed. I'd forgotten how fine a writer he was. And it's such a beautiful language.' Her face became thoughtful. 'I wonder if any of the Fyordyn can still speak it,' she said.

'Memsa,' Loman prompted her gently with a glance at the book.

Gulda nodded, and with a little sigh, returned to the present. 'It's a poem,' she said.

'A poem,' Loman echoed, rather more coldly than he had intended.

Gulda eyed him. 'An epic, historical poem,' she added sternly. 'It's a record of an old oral tradition, and it's probably the nearest thing we've got to an accurate source for information about the Alphaaan.'

Loman jabbed a finger out into the void of the library and whispered heatedly. 'You've just spent a considerable time rejecting endless books of history and reference. What's so special about this . . . poem, that you couldn't find in them?' He braced himself for a blistering reply.

Gulda, however, let the comment pass. 'If you search those books diligently, Loman,' she said, 'you'll find most of them refer back to such works as this for their commentaries on the Alphaaan. Those that don't quote their sources are patently worthless.' She looked at the small book. 'There may be better than this, but it's unlikely, and we haven't the time to search anymore.'

There was a hint of urgency in her tone that again surprised Loman. 'Whatever you say, Memsa,' he said. 'But I'm still utterly lost. What have you found?'

She inclined her head to indicate a door opposite where they were sitting. As they stepped through it, they entered one of the broad corridors that circled the library tower at each tier level. Large continuous windows filled the corridor with sunlight, and offered the two arrivals the familiar view of the village far below, and the rolling Orthlund countryside.

As they walked slowly round the corridor, they gradually exchanged this view for one of the mountains.

'None of this is certain, Loman,' Gulda began. 'As I said, there may be other books in there, but this one chimes with my memory and no one knows much about the Alphaaan except that they definitely did exist once.'

Loman prepared to listen reluctantly. Again he felt the strange disorientation that he experienced when thinking of Hawklan's experiences at the Gretmearc. It was ever thus when Gulda spoke so rationally of ancient times.

Fear, he realized unexpectedly. Brutal and cruel men, training and fighting, hardship and suffering, all these he could face if need arose, but these ancient things . . . people – the name Sumeral came hesitantly forward – with their mysterious powers? That was different. What defence could he have against such creatures? The image of Hawklan came to him, amused and mildly reproachful. Just because you can't answer a question doesn't mean it can't be answered, does it? You're frightened because you're ignorant. If you're ignorant, then learn. Same old lesson yet again.

'Loman, pay attention.' Gulda's voice cut across his renewed revelation.

'I'm sorry, Memsa,' he said. 'I was just thinking about . . . Hawklan . . . Sumeral . . . everything.'

Gulda stepped in front of him and examined him intently. 'Good,' she said after a moment. 'You should. And you're right to be frightened when you do. That way we'll be prepared, and we'll stand a chance.' She gave a satisfied grunt and slapped his arm briskly with the book, like an old comrade. 'Now, pay attention.'

Steering him over to the window she pointed her stick up into the mountains. 'Some tales say the Alphraan were created by Ethriss, like we were. Others say that they came about through some foul experiment by Sumeral but that He erred and they escaped His bondage and fled underground in search of their own peaceful destiny.' She shrugged. 'It doesn't matter anyway. Suffice it to say that they existed and that they so angered Him that He sent the Mandrassni against them.'

She caught Loman's look. 'The Mandrassni were one of His experiments, beyond a doubt,' she said, her mouth wrinkling in distaste. 'They were about so high.' She held out a hand to indicate the height of a small child. Loman noticed it was shaking slightly. 'Like tiny Mandrocs only worse by far. Demented and wild. Hordes of them, skipping, bounding, clambering everywhere with their terrible screaming and those glittering short blades – double-edged – one in each hand . . . it didn't matter how many you killed . . .'

Gulda turned away from him abruptly and fell silent.

When she spoke again, her voice was cold with control. 'Some say that the Alphraan appealed to men for help but were refused and thence fled in bitterness. Others say that they allied themselves with Ethriss and promised to destroy the Mandrassni which were taking a dreadful toll of Ethriss's armies.' She paused. 'A dreadful toll,' she repeated softly. Then, brusquely, 'Anyway, whatever the truth, the tale is that both they and the Mandrassni were destroyed utterly in a terrible battle deep below ground.' Gulda fell silent again.

Loman was unaffected. 'That's a sad little story, Memsa,' he offered casually. 'But no different from countless other old tales, and what's it got to do with our present problems?'

Gulda pursed her lips. 'Loman, what does "phar'n" mean in the High Guard's battle language?' she asked.

Loman shrugged. 'Sound. . . song, maybe.'

Gulda nodded. 'The word "Alphraan" is derived from the ancient Fyordyn language this book is written in.' She tapped the book against his chest by way of emphasis. 'The same language that forms the basis of the battle language. "Alphraan" means people, or warriors, of sound. Perhaps even carvers of sound.'

Loman looked blank.

‘The Alphraan were apparently a gentle, peaceful people, Loman,’ Gulda continued. ‘All they had was Ethriss’s, or Sumeral’s, gift. The gift to use and shape sound.’

‘Music?’ queried Loman.

Gulda shook her head. ‘More than just music. It’s said that the last remnants of them, fleeing before the Mandrassni, deep into the roots of the mountains, learned to use their gift as a terrible weapon, and sent sounds echoing through their warrens that caused the Mandrassni not only to become lost and bewildered, but so enraged them that they fought and destroyed each other as they destroyed the last of the Alphraan.’

Loman had a momentary vision of dark winding tunnels choked with bodies, seething and struggling in a screaming tide of sound.

‘The labyrinth,’ he muttered softly to himself, suddenly chilled by Gulda’s seemingly innocuous tale.

Gulda caught the remark and looked at him uncertainly. Then she looked down at the book. ‘This telling ends poetically as you might expect,’ she said. ‘The last survivor of the Mandrassni wandered howling and lost through endless echoing tunnels until he came upon the last Alphraan dying silently in what had been their holy place. Filled with bloodlust, the demented creature leapt forward to strike this last victim, but the Alphraan, at the moment of dying learned the truth of his race’s gift and with a silent word shattered the Mandrassni into a myriad tiny sounds that would fly forever through the rocky heart of the mountains to tell all who could hear of the evil of Sumeral and the futility of his ways.’

Loman’s memory of the labyrinth welled up suddenly with Gulda’s last words as if her tale had caused some deep resonance.

‘You’ve gone pale,’ Gulda said.

‘It’s wandering all round that library, looking for fairy stories,’ Loman blustered in spite of himself.

‘No it’s not,’ said Gulda bluntly but with a hint of sympathy. ‘This tale has struck a chord somehow – almost literally – hasn’t it, Castellan? Traveller through the labyrinth.’

Loman did not reply.

Gulda looked at the book again, and then out at the mountains. ‘With your knowledge, it’s as well you can’t feel the language of the original,’ she said grimly.

Loman struggled to get back to normality. ‘What are you saying, Memsa?’ he asked awkwardly. ‘That these Alphraan actually still exist and are up in the mountains, slowly destroying our – my – people?’

Gulda kept her gaze on the towering peaks. ‘Hawklan saw something,’ she said. ‘Gavor saw and heard something: something he called a killing song that struck that bird out of the sky. And something we can’t explain is affecting our would-be elite troops. Seriously affecting them.’

Loman did not speak. He himself had clearly identified the problem in his own mind and had rejected its obvious causes. Perhaps now it was his turn to face the strange other realities that he had tried to push to

the edges of his mind ever since he had seen Hawklan's black sword sliding down that long, still mound of weapons.

'What shall we do?' he asked finally.

Gulda tapped her stick on the floor thoughtfully, and then looked at him expectantly. He nodded.

'Stop the mountain training,' he said. 'Then go and look for these . . . people. These Alphraan.'

Chapter 12

Burdened by Hawklan's body, Isloman was unable to use his hands to protect himself from the approaching figure. His foot however, came up reflexively, though even as it did so he took in the familiar, now hesitating, form, and his shadow vision probed into the hood for confirmation.

'Lady, forgive me,' he said. 'You startled me. I was preoccupied with dark thoughts.'

Sylvriss threw back her hood. Her face was controlled, but she could not keep the pain from her eyes. Isloman in turn, could not meet her gaze.

'Lord Eldric's looking for you, lady,' he said, a rather helpless response.

Sylvriss nodded. 'Only to tell me what I already know,' she said. 'He'll not disturb my locked room.'

Her tone was unexpectedly harsh and Isloman frowned. Then he reproached himself. Had he too not lashed out blindly in the past in response to such pain?

'What can I do?' he said gently, moving past her and putting Hawklan on the bed.

'Let me stay by Hawklan tonight,' she replied immediately.

He looked at her in surprise. 'Of course,' he said. Then, hesitating, 'But why?'

Sylvriss pulled her hood forward again. 'I don't know,' she said softly. 'I'm just . . . drawn here. Some need.'

Isloman felt himself frowning again. Despite the shade of her hood, he saw fear come into her eyes at this response, and even as he spoke he tried to call the words back. But they had a momentum of their own. 'I understand your pain, lady,' he said. 'But who knows what *this* pain is? What pain keeps him from returning to us. He shouldn't be burdened further.'

Sylvriss bowed her head. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't think. I'll leave you.'

His words spoken, Isloman could act again. He placed a hand on her arm to stop her then picked up a chair and placed it at the head of Hawklan's bed. 'Sit down,' he said gently. 'It's me who didn't think. I'm sorry. Whatever his pain I know Hawklan wouldn't refuse you such a simple comfort after your terrible loss.'

The memory of the woman who had risked her own life to save his, a stranger's, and who had ridden so determinedly, so hopefully, by his side only days before, washed over him, and he had difficulty speaking. 'It's just that I feel so helpless myself,' he managed. 'Unable to reach him. Just carrying him around and

talking to him. It feels so futile when I remember what he's given to me and to so many others.'

He took another chair and sat down on the opposite side of his silent friend. Sylvriss reached out and took one of Hawklan's hands. For a moment, Isloman thought he saw the hand tighten gently about the Queen's, but she made no response.

Silence hung between them. Then, unexpectedly, she said, 'Tell me how Rgoric died, Isloman.' Isloman started slightly, and for a moment he searched around for an excuse. Sylvriss anticipated him. 'I know the Goraidin will have told you,' she said. 'Now you tell me. There'll be less pain in the truth than any fiction I might fabricate.' Her gaze and her reasoning were inescapable.

Isloman shifted uncomfortably. 'I only know what Tel-Odrel and Lorac heard from Dilrap,' he said awkwardly. At the name Dilrap, the Queen grimaced in self-reproach. She had almost forgotten about her faithful co-conspirator. 'Then it'll be the truth,' she said. 'Tell me . . . Please.'

Isloman reluctantly related the tale of the King's murder in its entirety, unconsciously adopting the detailed thoroughness that had typified the Goraidin's telling.

Seemingly unaffected, Sylvriss listened intently, but asked no questions. When he had finished, she showed no reaction other than to nod to herself as if understanding something for the first time.

After a long silence she said, 'We Riddinvolk are taught from childhood to know our emotions and to let them flow freely. Especially powerful emotions, such as grief. They're like certain horses. If you bind them, beat them into submission, they seem to go quiet, but sooner or later they break free and destroy you.'

Isloman did not speak.

Sylvriss looked straight at him and then at her right hand. 'When Tel-Odrel told me about . . . what had happened, I felt as though the ground had opened under my feet; that I too could not stay in this world in the face of such a truth. But part of me understood . . . I've grieved before. I ran to my room. I knew what would happen, what must happen. But it didn't. I couldn't weep. I knew I should, but I couldn't. I still can't, Isloman. Something's stopping me here, amongst my friends. Out in the night, under the trees, I wept for nothing, but now . . .' Her voice faded.

'The Fyordyn are a little stiffer in such matters,' Isloman offered.

Sylvriss shook her head. 'No, it's not that. They have their own ways, and they're very understanding of the ways of others.'

Isloman looked down.

'It's the walls, I suppose,' Sylvriss said after a while, looking round. 'Too long in rooms and corridors under the eyes of Dan-Tor. Always hiding, cheating, lying. Endlessly watching for those tiny signs that might tell him of my deceit, and doom us all; and then shackling them, holding them tight.' She grimaced and clenched her fist as she spoke.

Isloman let the remarks fall into the silence. Behind Sylvriss a rather bedraggled Gavor landed unsteadily on the sill of the open window. He opened his beak to speak, but Isloman made a tiny gesture to encompass the scene. Gavor put his head on one side, then glided silently to Isloman's feet. The carver bent down and Gavor stepped silently on to his hand to be lifted up on to his shoulder.

‘And for what?’ Sylvriss continued after a while, her tone more shrill, a faint harbinger. ‘To feed my own pride and arrogance? To show the man I could defy him, overcome him?’ She lowered her gaze. ‘If I’d left him alone, Rgoric would be alive today.’

‘Maybe,’ said Isloman. ‘But nothing you could have done would have stopped *us* seeking out Dan-Tor and releasing his true self. Who knows what would have happened to you then? And can you say Rgoric was alive when Dan-Tor was poisoning and controlling him?’

Sylvriss looked at him. ‘Alive is alive, Isloman. Dead is dead. Gone. Finished. Beyond hope.’

Isloman turned away from her. ‘Didn’t Dilrap say your husband died his true self?’ he said. ‘Died quite free of his old foe, and fighting him to the end? There are worse ways to end one’s life.’

Sylvriss squeezed Hawklan’s hand. ‘What good’s that to me? A hero’s death,’ she exclaimed bitterly, but immediately her head went back, eyes and mouth closed tight in self-reproach. ‘No. I didn’t mean that. I meant . . . Poor Dilrap. I . . . Damn you, Isloman.’

Then she started rocking back and forth as if to some inner rhythm. ‘How can you know?’ Her voice rising and raucous in its pain. ‘I held him and loved him. He was my man . . . my beautif . . .’ She faltered. ‘And they hacked him . . . and cut . . . and . . .’

She thrust her fist into her mouth and bit her curled forefinger as she spoke, but nothing could stop the release now, and, suddenly, she bent forward and cried out her husband’s name in a long keening wail. Isloman clenched his teeth at the sound.

Then she wept. Wept for a long time, her tears intermingling with incoherent bursts of reproach and rage. Isloman sat motionless, harrowed and helpless, his own eyes streaming for this dead stranger. At one point he reached out tentatively to take the hand clutching at the patterned counterpane that covered Hawklan’s bed, but the sight of his own hand seemed to give him a measure of his intrusiveness at this most private moment and he withdrew it.

As the daylight gradually faded, so also did Sylvriss’s sobbing. Surreptitiously, Isloman wiped his own eyes and waited for her to emerge from her inner darkness into this less harsh one. A torch by him slowly started to glow. He reached out and quietly extinguished it.

Eventually Sylvriss sat up and after a small scuffling search produced a kerchief to wipe her eyes. It was Hawklan’s, given to her by Gavor when she had wept before as they lay in the copse, taking a brief respite from their pounding journey away from the city. She did not notice.

With incongruous delicacy she blew her nose and then shivered.

Isloman stood up slowly, his whole body stiff with tension. Walking past her awkwardly, he closed the window.

Sylvriss inclined her head in acknowledgement.

‘Would you like me to take you back to your room?’ Isloman’s voice was soft, but it seemed to be uncomfortably loud in the heightened atmosphere of the room.

Sylvriss turned to him and laid her hand on his arm. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Let me stay here. Watching your

friend with you. I'll be no burden to him. I'm used to night vigils. You can tell me everything else, about yourself and . . .' She motioned towards Hawklan. 'And why you're here.' She paused and looked down at her hands. 'I don't want to wake up . . . alone again.'

Isloman nodded and returned to his seat. He felt suddenly very tired.

For some time the two sat in companionable stillness, Isloman slowly piecing together the turbulent history of the past months, Sylvriss listening. As the night deepened, however, Isloman felt his body relaxing and he began to doze fitfully. It seemed to him that he was again at Pedhavin, in the heart of his friends and memories, sleeping in the Great Harmony of Orthlund under the beneficent gaze of Anderras Darion and the strange healer who had opened its Great Gate and brought such light with him.

Yet part of him knew clearly that this was not so. This interlude was just a small gift from somewhere to refresh his weary spirit. True, he was amongst friends, both new and old, but they were battlefield friends with battlefield memories. And he was resting not in Anderras Darion but in a battle-ready fortress in a country seemingly destined for civil war. Terrible powers had been unleashed, and Hawklan was . . . ?

He opened his eyes suddenly, not alarmed but wide-awake. Gavor shifted uneasily and mumbled something in his sleep. Moonlight was streaming through the window and Isloman could see that Sylvriss too had succumbed to fatigue. She was leaning forward in the chair and her head was resting on her arms by Hawklan's side.

Hawklan's hand lay on her head protectively.

The scene had a quality of strangeness about it that Isloman could not identify, but as he felt sleep wafting back over him almost immediately, the only clear thought that came to mind was, I must wake her gently in the morning, she'll be stiff, sleeping like that. Then, slightly amused, as will I.

Both thoughts were with him when he woke, but to his surprise he found he was quite relaxed, despite having foregone the large easy chair he had used on previous nights for a stern upright one. Then he recalled Hawklan's hand resting on Sylvriss's head. She mustn't wake to that, he thought. Not to such affectionate contact. But as his eyes focussed, he saw that Hawklan's hand still lay by his side.

A dream perhaps, he thought. But it had been extraordinarily vivid. And the memories of Orthlund were still strong and clear.

As if aware of his scrutiny, Sylvriss stirred, then woke with a little start. Slowly she sat up. Her face, though drawn, showed none of the signs of bewilderment or concern that might be expected of someone waking under such circumstances. Isloman looked at her carefully. Seemingly more out of habit than need she yawned and stretched, then she looked from Hawklan to Isloman and smiled.

'How strange,' she said. 'I had such dreams. Such old, wonderful memories. Such strength. I know there's a lot of pain ahead, more tears to shed, but something's changed. Rgoric's gone.' She put her hand on her stomach. 'But not gone. We found again what we'd lost, or what had been taken from us. That's not given to many, and it can't be taken away. I mustn't waste my life. That would be a betrayal. I must do what he'd have done. What we'd have done together.'

She looked down at Hawklan and then back at Isloman. 'We're poor nurses,' she said. 'Sleeping when we should have watched.'

Isloman stood up and took his friend's hand. It was warmer than usual and, as he held the wrist, the

pulse was stronger.

He shook his head. 'I'm not certain who was nursing who last night,' he said, 'but even Hawklan seems stronger in some way.'

His reflections were disturbed by a boisterous flapping from Gavor followed by a noisy yawn and a brief but quite unintelligible speech addressed in the most earnest terms to someone other than the three people in the room. 'What?' he concluded.

'I said Hawklan seems stronger,' Isloman said, wilfully thrusting reality on the bird.

Gavor turned to him in surprise and gazed at him blearily. 'What?' he repeated sharply.

'These mountain birds too much for you, Gavor?' Isloman taunted.

Gavor cocked his head on one side then imperiously spread his wings and glided from his perch on Isloman's chair to land lightly by Hawklan. He closed his eyes and bent closely over the sleeping figure's head. 'Yes, yes,' he said after a moment. 'He is, he is. You're right. He's coming nearer.' He began to hop about excitedly. 'What happened?'

A soft knocking interrupted him. Isloman opened the door and Yatsu entered. He was about to speak to Isloman when he saw the Queen. 'Majesty,' he said, momentarily disconcerted. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know you were here. I didn't mean to intrude. I'll . . .'

He made to leave, but Sylvriss signalled him to stay. 'It's not possible for such a friend to intrude, Commander,' she said simply. 'Give Isloman your message.'

Yatsu bowed. 'Lord Eldric asked me to tell Isloman about Dith-Galar, Majesty,' he said. 'And about the Speaking.'

Sylvriss nodded. 'Yes,' she said with a sad smile. 'That was thoughtful. I'd forgotten Isloman was an outlander . . . like me. I'll tell him. Where's the Speaking to be held?'

'In the main hall,' Yatsu replied.

Sylvriss's face became pensive. After a moment, she said, 'Tell Lord Eldric that I'd like to speak formally . . . before the Speaking starts.'

Isloman detected a flicker of surprise on the Goraidin's face, but it was gone almost immediately as he acknowledged the request and, with a bow, left, closing the door quietly.

Seeing a mirror, Sylvriss stood up and expertly began to repair some of the damage that her unusual night's rest had wrought in her appearance. Isloman looked at her reflection expectantly.

'The Speaking's one of the Fyordyn's ways,' Sylvriss said after a moment, answering his unspoken question. 'A very Fyordyn way,' she added with gentle mockery. 'They appoint a time and a place, then whoever wishes to can attend and speak as the spirit moves him about . . .' She faltered. 'About whoever's died. No debate or discussion, just memories and thoughts. And no ceremony or formality. Just people, talking and remembering.'

She turned round, businesslike. 'It's a good way,' she said. 'The Fyordyn are such a . . . good people.'

Very wise and understanding.’ Then with a last glance in the mirror. ‘It’s a good way. Come along.’

Isloman blinked at this peremptory command. He looked at Hawklan. ‘No,’ Sylvriss said. ‘Leave him. Let him lie in the quiet sunlight.’ She walked to the window and opened it. The sound of bird-song drifted into the room, mingled with sounds of subdued activity in the courtyard below. ‘He can know little or nothing of Rgoric and the grief of so many would be a needless burden to him,’ she continued. ‘He’s done enough for us all already. Gavor, will you stay with him?’ Gavor nodded silently.

As she reached the door she paused thoughtfully. ‘May I borrow Hawklan’s sword?’ she asked Isloman.

He looked at her anxiously. ‘Can you touch it, lady?’ he said, remembering the last time she had tried to handle it.

Sylvriss stepped forward to Hawklan’s bed and, unfastening the scabbard, lifted it up and took hold of the sword’s hilt. Immediately, she closed her eyes and Isloman started forward in some alarm. As he reached her, she opened them again. They were calm and clear. ‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘It’s quiet again.’ Then, enigmatically, ‘It’s remembered.’

As they walked towards the main hall, Isloman said, ‘Yatsu was surprised when you said you wanted to speak at this ceremony.’

‘That was because I asked to speak formally,’ Sylvriss replied. ‘It’s just not done. They’ll accept it because I’m their Queen and because I’m Riddinvolk – an outlander. And . . .’ She smiled briefly. ‘Because they’re a tolerant people.’ Her face became purposeful again. ‘But there are things that need to be said, and quickly,’ she went on. ‘Any Speaking acknowledges and marks the changes in direction that a death brings to the lives of others. This one marks the change for a whole nation. It’s important that the new direction be clear and well focussed.’

Gradually the corridor began to fill with a silent procession of figures converging on the main hall. With her hood forward and Hawklan’s sword concealed under her robe the Queen looked no different from many of the other women present, and several times in the gentle confusion Isloman became separated from her.

As they entered the hall, however, she threw back her hood and started moving towards a small raised platform that had been hastily built at one end.

The crowd parted before her, and the hiss of her name rose softly out of the silent gathering to fill the hall like a wind in the tree-tops. Isloman followed self-consciously in her wake.

On the platform were Eldric and Arinndier, together with Hreldar and Darek, both of whom were showing marked signs of shock and fatigue. Hard riding was Isloman’s diagnosis of the cause of the latter.

When they reached the platform, Sylvriss walked up the steps but Isloman stopped at the bottom until she turned and beckoned him to join her. Eldric came forward to greet her.

‘May I speak, Lord Eldric?’ she asked. Eldric did not reply, but simply bowed and extended his arm towards the now packed hall. Sylvriss bowed in return then turned to meet her subjects.

For a moment she looked at them, then she spoke quietly and clearly, her voice rich with the

characteristic singsong lilt of the Riddinvolk accent. The form of the hall carried her words to each individual as if she were standing only a few paces away.

‘I ask your pardon, my friends,’ she began. ‘I know you’re about to start your Speaking and, as Rgoric’s widow, I shouldn’t intrude my grief on yours. But these are no ordinary times and certain matters must be resolved before we can allow ourselves the luxury of grief.’ There was a hint of sternness in her tone and Isloman felt the attention of the hall beginning to focus on her intently.

‘For many years Dan-Tor has poisoned not only my husband, but our whole country. With his words and his deeds, he has caused us to turn away from the wisdom of our ancient ways and duties. We now know why. In other circumstances we would catalogue the misdeeds of such a man, but we have no need of such niceties here, because we know now that *he is no man.*’

Eldric shot a glance at Isloman.

‘He is the dark agent of a darker power that has risen again in Narsindal. We know him now for Oklar, the Earth Corrupter, the first of the Uhriel of Sumeral. A creature we had thought only a legend, but who we see amongst us now as a creature of terrible reality. One whose power is beyond our imagining.’ Her voice was still soft and steady, and her command of her listeners was now absolute. She held out her hand to indicate Isloman.

‘Even as I was told of this I knew its truth beyond doubt. And I found solace in it. Great solace.’ She leaned forward, hands extended in powerful emphasis. ‘Did you think that such as Rgoric could be downed by a man? Did you think that Fyorlund could be so reduced by a man? To be laid so low by the acts of a man would be a dishonour indeed, but to stand unbowed after a such blows from such a creature tells us that he has missed the heart of people utterly and that now, as in times long gone, he is neither invincible nor infallible, and that both he . . . and his Master.’ She pointed northwards. ‘Can be defeated.’

The hall was silent.

‘For even with his treachery and cunning, he could not bind forever the will of your king. He could not hide forever from the light of truth. And even with his vaunted, city-crushing power he could not destroy the determination of people to stand against him. To oppose him utterly.’

Eldric moved to her side.

‘By your Law,’ Sylvriss continued, ‘I am now your ruler. But none has ever sat the throne of Fyorlund without the word of the people and I would hear yours now.’

There was a stir among the crowd, but Sylvriss silenced it with a gesture.

‘But know this. As your ruler or not, I shall oppose this creature and his master as Rgoric did. To the end. I shall oppose him for the sake of the Fyordyn, the Orthlundyn, the Riddinvolk.’ She paused and laid her hand on her stomach. ‘For the sake of all peoples. For if we who know him do not oppose him, then who will?’

Then, slowly, she held out Hawklan’s black sword horizontally, her left hand gripping its scabbard. ‘This sword comes out of Orthlund. Orthlund, whose care we have so recklessly neglected. It is the sword of Hawklan. A man. With it he faced the wrath of Oklar. He has paid a price that we cannot yet fathom, but he lives and he recovers, and even in his dreams he reaches out and aids us. Truth and help have come to

us unasked. Who can say what forces are stirring now? We have allowed evil to grow in our midst because of our blindness. Let us not now be blind to the good which has awakened also, for in not seeing it, we will bind it.'

Her right hand came up and, gripping the hilt of the sword, she drew it and held it high above her head. 'I cannot pledge you this sword. Such a pledge is not mine to give. But I pledge you my sword arm and my spirit to follow the path that this sword has begun to cut through the choking weeds that have fouled our way for so long.'

Before the crowd could respond, she turned round and faced the Lords on the platform and looked at each in turn.

Then she knelt down. 'Do you want such a Queen, Lords?' she said quietly, bowing her head. Eldric drew his sword and offered it hilt first to her. She laid her hand on it. Each of the Lords did likewise and Isloman remembered how they in turn had knelt before the Goraidin and the High Guards to seal such a pledge.

While Sylvriss was still kneeling, Eldric moved to the front of the platform. 'Is this the will of you all?' he said simply and quietly.

Isloman started visibly as a great cry burst out from the previously silent crowd. Then, spontaneously, from no source that Isloman could see, they were all singing. A rhythmic and stirring song unfamiliar to Isloman but obviously to no one else. Despite that, however, the massed voices were so powerful that he felt his pulse racing in excitement at the sound.

Then on a climactic chord the song was finished and the ordered harmony fragmented into equally loud cheering and shouting. Isloman looked round at the others on the platform. Without exception they were flushed and damp-eyed. Eldric cleared his throat awkwardly. 'Didn't expect that,' he said to the others. 'Marvellous.'

Isloman turned to Arinndier.

'It's the Emin Rithid,' Arinndier said, anticipating his question. 'Supposed to have been sung by the warriors of the Iron Ring at the Last Battle.' He was obviously deeply moved. 'It means a great deal to us as a people. That was most unexpected. I . . .'

He cleared his throat noisily and, with a nod, directed Isloman's attention to Sylvriss, now rising to her feet. She sheathed Hawklan's sword and held it out to Isloman.

'Thank you,' she said to him, then, to the still noisy crowd. 'This sword must return now to its true owner, but we have swords of our own which will serve our needs well enough. I'll leave you now to your Speaking. Let it be open and honest, and when at the end you turn your faces forward, let it be not only with the hope you've just expressed but in the knowledge that more than just Rgoric's spirit lives on.'

She placed her hand on her stomach again. 'I carry his child. Spread the word through the countryside. The line of the Lords of the Iron Ring is unbroken. Let it be a thread of brightness in these dark times, a thread to weave the rope that will bind the awful creature that would seize not only our land but our very hearts.'

The council chamber of the Cadwanol was sparsely decorated, low-ceilinged and circular with many doors around the wall; all were open. Between them, mirror stones brought bright clear window images of the surrounding Riddin countryside into the room. Rolling foothills spread out to the south like a heaving sea caught by some great whim of nature and held motionless, while to the east, sparse grasslands shimmered into the distant horizon, where a thin bright line betrayed the presence of the ocean. Dominating the scene however, were the surrounding crags and peaks of the approaches to the grim Pass of Elewart; a daunting sight even in the bright sunshine that had greeted Andawyr's awakening.

Not given to excessive protocol at the best of times, the senior brothers of the Cadwanol were almost childlike in their enthusiasm at the return of their leader, bustling around him, applauding, laughing, all talking at once, and generally impeding his progress.

Smiling broadly, Andawyr shook as many of the proffered hands as he could and acknowledged such comments as he managed to hear before finally reaching his chair of office.

'Brothers, brothers,' he shouted, laughing as he sat down gratefully. 'A modicum of dignity please. Rest assured I'm as happy to be here as you seem to be to see me. There's been many a time in the past when I've roundly cursed some of you, but there've been more of late when I thought I'd never live to see any of you again, and was the sadder for it.'

The din abated a little and he closed his eyes and luxuriated in the comfort of his chair. 'I always thought of myself as someone who valued truly what he had, but I think that can perhaps never really be the case, try as we may. Suffice it that I value many simple things even more highly than I did, and whatever resolution I had in the past to fulfil my role here as your leader is increased tenfold.'

He smiled at the familiar faces surrounding him. Then reluctantly, he pressed on, 'However, take your seats brothers. I'm afraid we have weightier matters to discuss.'

Subdued somewhat by the change in his tone, but still happy, the brothers moved to their respective seats arranged in a wide circle at the centre of the room. Discreetly, Andawyr watched each in turn as they settled down. As usual, all of the senior brothers were present.

There was a brief silence, during which he squeezed the remains of his nose between his thumb and forefinger reflectively, then a surge of questions welled up from nowhere and broke over him like an ocean wave and he had to lift his hand for silence.

'After so long in the darkness, it's a true joy to be here again, amongst such friends,' he said, pushing himself upright in his chair. 'But you'll have to listen in silence a while if I'm to answer any of your questions. After that I suspect we'll have plenty to talk about.'

The questions ebbed away.

Andawyr twisted round in his chair and, resting his head on his hand, looked round at each of his friends in turn. His battered face became thoughtful and anxious.

'It's odd, really,' he said, almost to himself, 'but the hardest question I've had to face over the past weeks . . . months,' – he waved his free hand vaguely – 'is "Why me? Why now?"' His eyes continued their progress around the circle. 'I've found no answer. Possibly there isn't one, other than the ancient soldier's consolation – we do what we do because we are where we are. For what it's worth, as your leader, I counsel you not to accept the burden of these questions, however tempting it may seem, but to

bring your minds as quickly as you can to the real, immediate and dangerous problems we face.’

Someone coughed impatiently. Andawyr eyed him narrowly. ‘I accept your rebuke, brother Ryath,’ he growled insincerely. ‘I’m blathering – avoiding the issue. I’ll come to the point. And quickly.’

Oslang leaned forward to speak, but Andawyr stopped him.

‘I’m afraid there’s no gentle way this news can be broken,’ he said. ‘And it may as well be told quickly as slowly.’ Then he paused and took a deep breath. ‘Brothers, our worst fears have been fulfilled. The Second Coming is upon us. Sumeral is risen again. His Uhriel are abroad and probably have been for some time, doing who-knows-what harm. Derras Ustramel is rebuilt and, I presume, is growing daily with His power. Brothers, we are at war.’

Uproar filled the room the instant he finished speaking and several of the brothers leapt to their feet. Andawyr made no effort to stop the confusion, but sat motionless until, gradually, under the weight of his silence it died away. He looked regretfully at his now agitated companions.

‘Come now, my friends, this can’t be so great a shock,’ he said gently. ‘There’s been an unease growing for many years now. You all know that. We’ve all felt it, but none of us – myself included – have dared to face what we knew might have been its real cause. Now, starting with my own personal ordeal at the Gretmearc and my sudden return bearing my unexpected . . . attacker . . . circumstances have begun to force that reality on us unequivocally.’

Ryath stood up suddenly. ‘Really, this kind of nonsense is too much, Andawyr,’ he said. ‘We’ve all discussed what might have happened to you at the Gretmearc while you were in Narsindal, and while I don’t want to seem unkind, I for one feel you should rest more before you come to the Council.’

Andawyr looked at him, but did not speak. Ryath continued, beginning to feel conspicuous. ‘There’ve always been individuals who’ve come upon some of the secrets of the Old Power.’ He gestured vaguely. ‘You encountered one such at the Gretmearc. An able one admittedly if he could control that . . .’ He hesitated. ‘That bird. But it’s thrown you off-balance. That and your wild-headed trip into Narsindal with barely a word of proper explanation has been too much for you. As I said, you should rest before you speak so hastily. You can’t possibly . . .’

‘Please, Ryath, listen,’ Andawyr interrupted him quietly. ‘I understand your concern.’ He looked round at the others. ‘I understand all your concerns. But this is not an academic debate. Ryath, you and I have had some fine, if heated, disputes in the past, and I’ve valued them. But times are truly changed. We’re no longer friends talking about scholastic matters – theories, ideas, learned flights of speculation. We’re Cadwanwr, guardians of the knowledge given to our ancient predecessors by Ethriss, and the only people in the world who can oppose Sumeral and His Uhriel with the Old Power until Ethriss and the Guardians themselves can be found and awakened.’

Ryath, uncertain, pulled a wry face as if distressed to see a loved friend so deluded. In an untypical expression of impatience, Andawyr slapped the arm of his chair. ‘Ryath, you know how highly I respect your many skills. I could ask you to trust my judgement in this matter, and I know you would, albeit reluctantly. But I’ll not do that. It wouldn’t be right – not between you and me. Just know this.’

He lifted his hand slightly towards Ryath, who sat down suddenly as if pushed. Taking hold of the arms of his chair he tried to rise, but could not. Closing his eyes in concentration, he mouthed something silently. The air between himself and Andawyr seemed to tingle, but still he could not rise. Instead he seemed to be pressed further into his seat.

Andawyr lowered his hand, and Ryath was released, red-faced and slightly breathless.

There were cries of dismay around the circle. ‘That was completely unnecessary,’ Oslang said angrily.

Andawyr ignored him. ‘Ryath,’ he said sharply. ‘I’m sorry about that, but you understand now, don’t you? Tell them.’

Ryath dropped his head on to his hand. ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I can’t describe that. I’ve never felt such power. You’ve always been more powerful than the rest of us, but that . . .’ He shook his head. ‘What’s happened to you?’

‘I’ve learned,’ Andawyr said simply. ‘Nothing more, nothing less. When my time of trial came at the Gretmearc, I learned. Found resources I never imagined I possessed. Are you all right?’ Ryath nodded and made a reassuring gesture.

Oslang however, was less easily mollified. ‘That was still unnecessary, Andawyr,’ he said, still angry. ‘This is a Council meeting. Explain your conduct towards brother Ryath immediately and explain why you made no mention of this new . . . knowledge when you returned from the Gretmearc.’

‘*I will ask you* to trust my judgement, Oslang,’ Andawyr replied. ‘I’ll ask you to wait until I’ve spoken. Ryath knows why I did what I did, don’t you Ryath?’

‘It was a vivid lesson, well taught,’ Ryath answered. ‘I’m not offended, brother Oslang, truly.’

Andawyr turned back to Oslang. ‘As for why I never mentioned my new knowledge,’ he began. ‘Well, as I remember, we were all rather too busy dealing with our . . . guest, to indulge in debate. And, in truth, I see now that I was too bewildered to understand fully what had happened to me. All I knew was that I must learn about fire by thrusting my hand into it.’

Oslang grimaced at the sudden pain in Andawyr’s voice.

‘And did you learn?’ he said softly.

Andawyr nodded. ‘Oh yes,’ he said. ‘And shortly I’ll teach you what I can, though less painfully I hope. But I’ve no new knowledge to share with you my friends, only a clearer understanding of what I already knew. A clearer vision. The obvious becomes obvious again. I apologize for my demonstration, but it was necessary. Time is against us and simply can’t be squandered on needless debate. I chose my words carefully. We are at war. Metaphorically at least, we must lay aside our pens for our swords. We must fulfil the duties that Ethriss laid on our order so long ago.’

Several of the brothers again stood up to speak, but Andawyr silenced them with a wave of his hand. ‘Listen,’ he said, looking at each in turn. ‘And think. I’ll be as brief as I can, but I must tell you again what happened at the Gretmearc, then what happened in Narsindal, and you too must be prepared to re-examine what you think you already know.’

He paused briefly to collect his thoughts. ‘Even my being at the Gretmearc was unusual. You know that. I very rarely go there, but some spirit moved me, and I went. We’ll not speculate on why I should choose to go there instead of one of the student brothers, but it is a factor to colour our thoughts. However, when I arrived, there was a strange shifting aura about the place. Then one night outside my tent landed a raven, a raven with a wooden leg, a raven that talked, that told me he was searching for his

friend, a healer, Hawklan, key-holder to Anderras Darion no less, and bearer of a black sword that had fallen at his feet in the Armoury of that place. A man drawn mysteriously to the Gretmearc by a strange corruption he had seen. A corruption that had been brought into the heart of Orthlund.'

He looked round at his audience. 'How could I not help such a tale-bearer search for such a man? Well, after we'd wandered hither and thither for some time, the aura that had pricked and teased me for so many days, vanished.' He snapped his fingers. 'Focussed itself into one clear, foul emanation. I could hardly believe it, it was so appalling. Like a ghastly beacon. And when we found its heart . . .'

He leaned forward and, resting his elbows on his knees, cradled his head in his hands, his eyes wide at the remembered pain. 'I suddenly felt as though I were in a nightmare and that I'd wake up soon in my bed. But it was there. In front of me. Vrwystin A Kaethio – the beast that binds. He hesitated, as if reluctant to go on. 'It's a fearful enough thing to read of such creatures, but to see one . . .'

He closed his eyes. 'I was so frightened. Every part of me wanted to turn and run – run and run – forever. But I couldn't. Some deep folly or deeper wisdom just propelled me right into its lair without a vestige of preparation, the bird at my shoulder.'

He shook his head. 'I barely remember the rest. Playing the innocent clown I managed to do some damage and suddenly the man was free, attacking the creature with his black sword.' He swung his hand from side to side, his face alive with wonder. 'It was Ethriss's sword, as I live. I held it in my own hands later, and felt its power. And such a blow he delivered. And such a scream that creature uttered as it died, if dying is what such abominations do.' He closed his eyes again.

Oslang reached out and laid a hand on his arm. Andawyr covered it gratefully with his own hand.

'And its keeper – even weakened and demented at this destruction of his soul-mate – had power such as I've rarely felt from one man.' He fingered the cord of his robe and looked again at his listeners, his face suddenly calmer. 'That was when I learned again all that I'd ever been taught.'

He nodded at Ryath. 'Your comment was fair, Ryath, but this was no dilettante dabbler who'd happened by chance on a few tricks with the Old Power. This was a powerful and skilled mage, albeit, I fear, only an apprentice.' He shook his head. 'I wouldn't have wished to encounter him at his best. Even after I downed him and scattered the creature's lair, he found us in my inner quarters.'

'The eye called him,' Oslang said, part-question, part-statement.

Andawyr nodded. 'Yes. The eye of Vrwystin A Goleg, the beast that sees all. That at least, you've seen – and felt.' He shook his head again. 'You know the appalling price that must have been paid by perhaps hundreds of people to recreate and fetter the Vrwystin A Kaethio. And who was known for his use of that creature and the Vrwystin A Goleg?'

He fell silent, but the question was rhetorical. 'Oklar,' he continued. 'So went my reasoning. And if Oklar is awake, then He too must be. And the man Hawklan, who tore himself free from the maw of the Kaethio and slew it? Who was he? He's gentle and peaceful, yet his mind is closed by a strange power and he has strange inner resources.' He leaned forward. 'Consider. You can imagine the condition of his arm after being absorbed by the Kaethio. It was appalling. Yet it was healable. I felt those inner resources responding even as I wove.'

Andawyr clenched his fist. 'So many things, brothers, so many. Small wonder I was nearly witless when I returned. A healer, from Ethriss's castle, bearing Ethriss's sword, watched and hunted in a manner that only Oklar would – could – use. Plus what I myself felt. What else could I conclude?' The room was

silent. ‘The man is Ethriss returned, as I live. But dormant in some way. How else could all these things be? And the other conclusions. If Oklar were awake so then must He be. How could I see all these wonders and horror and not go searching for its source? And where else but in Narsindal?’

Through the window openings the shadows of late summer clouds could be seen marching slowly over the undulating countryside. But inside the council chamber, all was still. Held by the power of Andawyr’s telling, no one moved, no one spoke.

When Andawyr began again, his voice was very soft. ‘I sought out some of the Mandroc families that I used to be familiar with many years ago, but they were gone from their normal hunting ranges. No sign. So I went further in. The plains were alive with bands of armed Mandrocs and black liveried men.’ There was a stir among the brothers, but Oslang silenced it with a gesture.

‘Worse than that, though,’ Andawyr continued. ‘The place was alive with His presence.’ He shuddered. ‘He is with us, beyond doubt. And strong. It defies me that we should have been so blind for so long. These things are not the happenings of months or even years.’ He waved his own thought aside and looked again at his cord.

‘I turned back. Fled, in a word. But even in full knowledge, we’re not above foolishness. Despite His presence I used the Old Power to give myself a little light and warmth in that benighted place.’ Andawyr folded his arms around himself as if bitterly chilled. ‘I was in the mountains by then, you understand, and deep. Not so foolish as to be on or even near the surface. But He felt my presence and found me. And bound me like the merest insect. But for the depth at which I had hidden, He could have made me walk to His very castle, had He chosen.’ He fell silent, but again no one spoke. It was as if the dank chill of Narsindal and His appalling touch had reached into this, the very heart of the Cadwanol’s strength.

‘And it was only because I was so deep that his . . . men . . . Mandrocs . . . couldn’t find me. I heard them searching. Passing nearby, but they always missed me, though by what chance I can’t say. It was from them that I heard of the rising of Derras Ustramel.’

He leaned forward, his voice intense. ‘Alone in the darkness and in my pain, I passed through many moods. But twice, at my very lowest, I saw the man Hawklan again. Saw him as clearly as I see you. And I felt his presence. Both times he gave me comfort and on the second he actually reached out and caught me when truly I thought all hope had gone. And He felt him too. For His presence came in Hawklan’s wake. But I’d been given a new stillness and though His binding still surrounded me, it was uncertain.’

Andawyr’s face became pained and anxious. His voice fell even lower. ‘And the third time I saw him – though this time, in some way he reached out to me for my aid – Sumeral’s hold left me. Abruptly. No gradual lessening. It just disappeared. His attention was elsewhere, and massively so. And then Hawklan was there in front of me.’ He began to speak slowly, his eyes narrowed, as if he were watching the scene again. ‘There were others there, I think, but in truth he was alone. And facing Oklar – Oklar in all his power, but hurt somehow, I felt, and about to release some terrible blow in his rage.’ Eyes now suddenly wide, Andawyr put his hands to his mouth in terror. ‘He was defenceless. I shouted to him to use his sword, but . . .’

He fell silent.

‘What happened?’ Oslang ventured after a moment.

Slowly, his eyes still wide, Andawyr shook his head. ‘I don’t know. Just as suddenly I was alone again

in the empty darkness, surrounded by the dying echoes of my own shouting. Quite alone, I don't know how long I stood there before I fully realized where I was, and what had happened, but when I did, I forgot Hawklan and everything else, and just ran. Ran and ran.' His hand came up to cover his face. 'Your precious leader ran like a frightened child. Who knows what cave lore guided me out of the depths and brought me towards the Pass? When I came to my senses, I could think of only two things. At no matter what cost, I must return and tell you everything and I must not use the Old Power for whatever reason – expect perhaps my own death. Just those two things.'

He lowered his hand and looked again at his friends. 'That was another learning, my friends. Travelling fearfully in the darkness inside the mountains, guided only by my cave lore. Travelling fearfully from shadow to shadow when I had to travel on the surface. And then the Pass, and one foot in front of the other, on and on, with who knew what at my back, for day after day. Outside, the endless . . . voices, the discourse. Inside, the darkness again. To be honest I can remember very little of the journey.'

'You were distraught and very weak when we found you,' Oslang said reassuringly. 'But all's well now.'

Andawyr nodded. 'Yes and no,' he said. 'I'm alive and I'm aware now of the danger, but I'm aware too of our weakness, and I've no idea of the fate of Hawklan.'

Abruptly his trials seemed to overwhelm him and his voice became almost desperate. 'At its finest the Cadwanol couldn't stand against Sumeral unaided, and if Oklar struck down Ethriss while he slept in that form then he'd have doomed him to millennia of darkness.'

'If the man Hawklan is indeed Ethriss, then such a blow might well have wakened him.' The speaker was Atelon, a Riddinwr and a newcomer to the ranks of the senior brothers. 'Perhaps Ethriss had Hawklan go there for that precise reason.'

Andawyr looked at him pensively for some time. 'That's true,' he said. 'And it's a timely thought. We should always remind ourselves that we're only mortals, and the subtleties and powers of the likes of Ethriss and Sumeral are well beyond our understanding. But I doubt Ethriss would volunteer his . . . host . . . his bearer . . . to the maw of Vrwystin A Kaethio, and while we might not have noted his passing from this age, we'd certainly have noticed his waking.'

Atelon bowed in acknowledgement.

'Then again,' Andawyr muttered softly, 'if Ethriss were gone from us wouldn't we surely have felt His presence by now? Rampant in triumph?'

He fell silent for some time, then abruptly he turned to Oslang. 'I don't suppose you sent anyone to Anderras Darion as I asked?' he said.

Oslang shook his head. 'No, I'm sorry,' he said. 'We'd no small problem with the eye of the Goleg that you brought back. And . . .' He hesitated. 'To be frank, as Ryath said, we doubted you. You passed through like a mountain storm, left us with a string of rambling suppositions and that abomination, and then you were gone. We all thought the unexpected encounter with the Goleg had unbalanced you temporarily and that after a day or so in the Pass you'd be back.'

Andawyr grimaced in self-reproach. 'Well, I can't criticize you for that, I suppose. I've been at the heart of these events and even I have difficulty in accepting their reality now I'm back here in our old familiar surroundings.' He slapped the arms of his chair affectionately. 'Still, comforting surroundings or no, a

new reality has come to pass and we must face it squarely.’ He looked at Ryath and smiled almost mischievously. ‘I know my tale’s strange, and lacks the niceties you’d appreciate, so I’ll not ask you if you’ve any questions, only – do you have any doubts?’

Ryath shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘You’re not what you were. I’ve got more questions than I can count, but I’m afraid I believe you utterly even though I’d rather not.’

‘Thank you, Ryath,’ Andawyr said, bowing. Then to the rest, ‘Do any of you have any doubts about my tale?’

Oslang shook his head. ‘No, Andawyr,’ he said. ‘Don’t be concerned. We too are not what we were. Controlling the eye of the Goleg shook some of us quite severely, and don’t forget, we saw the state you were in at the end of your journey, and listened to your ramblings for several days.’ He leaned forward significantly. ‘And don’t forget too how deep you were, even when we allowed you to wake again.’

Andawyr nodded and smiled. ‘Yes, of course,’ he said. ‘Forgive my arrogance in imagining that I was the only one who could learn anything new round here.’ Then he laughed outright and his sudden humour spread round the circle.

‘Look,’ he said, pointing to the window openings. ‘The sun still shines. Those hills and plains and the ocean over there teem with Ethriss’s great gift of life. Some power has arisen in Orthlund, as unseen and unsung as Sumeral himself. The Muster rides strong as ever to guard the Pass. The Fyordyn High Guard will guard the passes that breach their northern boundary . . .’

Oslang raised a staying hand. ‘There are rumours abroad of . . . strange . . . happenings in Fyorlund,’ he said. ‘That the High Guards of the Lords have been replaced by black-liveried guards such as you described in Narsindal.’

Andawyr inclined his head to catch this message, but his flow continued, redirected. ‘Yes, rumours, rumours,’ he said. ‘In that one word, perhaps you have the crux of our neglect.’

‘Neglect?’ Oslang echoed.

‘Neglect,’ Andawyr confirmed.

‘Why are we all here?’ he asked suddenly.

Oslang shrugged vaguely at this unexpected question. ‘We continue the work of our predecessors appointed by Ethriss against the Second Coming of Sumeral,’ he recited.

Andawyr accepted and dismissed the answer. ‘Yes, but why are we all here?’

Oslang scowled. ‘Really,’ he said. ‘What do you mean?’

Andawyr opened his palms wide. ‘We are all *here*,’ he said. ‘At least a quarter of us should be out in the world. Travelling, learning, watching, listening. How long have we been like this? Skulking in our hole in the ground. Sitting here staring out of the windows and listening to gossip and rumour is no way to increase our knowledge and even less of a way to fulfil our duty to watch for the Second Coming.’

There was some awkward shuffling around the circle. ‘I think you’re exaggerating,’ Ryath said, mildly indignant. ‘There’s usually someone out travelling. We’re all here now largely because of you . . .’

Andawyr rounded on him, mildly scornful. 'I'm probably the widest travelled one among us, but where do I get to? Round and about Riddin, and mainly northern Riddin at that. Gossiping with our neighbours, buying supplies.'

'And Narsindal,' someone said, defending his leader against his own assault.

'Yes, Narsindal,' Andawyr agreed reflectively. 'But apart from my recent escapade, how long ago is it since any of us travelled any distance? Too long by far. And who here can claim an undying interest in Mandroc lore?'

His humour faded and he screwed up his face as the significance of his complaint began to make itself felt.

'Why has this happened?' he said anxiously, almost to himself. 'When I was a student here I travelled with several of the senior brothers. We went everywhere. Up into Narsindal to study the place generally and to keep contact with at least some of the Mandroc families. South, right through Riddin. I've been through Fyorlund, seen Vakloss, bustling and busy – marvellous. We even trailed out to Narsindalvak once and saw the Watch patrols coming and going. Talked with the Commander there. I've been across to Orthlund. Seen little Pedhavin and its carvers, and Anderras Darion with its Great Gate standing silent and closed. I've caught the fisherman's ferries over into Eirthland . . .'

He stopped again and looked at the others. 'Most of us did the same, didn't we? In differing degrees. How did we suddenly come to be so . . . housebound . . . parochial . . . so tiny and fearful in our ways?'

No one volunteered an answer. 'I'm beginning to wonder if in some way His will has bound us even here,' he continued.

There were murmurs of denial from his listeners, but they were half-hearted. Andawyr nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm sailing near the truth, aren't I? Fine guardians of knowledge we are. Protectors of Ethriss's charge. Anderras Darion has stood open for twenty years, and we didn't know! Resources were marshalled somewhere to recreate a Vrwystin A Kaethio, and we didn't know! The eyes of Vrwystin A Goleg flew among us, and we didn't see them until one of them sat up and bit us! And we sit in lofty isolation, nurturing our existing knowledge like cows chewing cud. Gazing out over the countryside and waiting for rumours to arrive.'

He stood up, suddenly angry. 'In Ethriss's name, what have we become?' he shouted. 'What have we done?' Then equally suddenly his voice fell and reaching back he leaned heavily on the arm of his chair. 'What have *I* done? This is *my* fault.'

He lowered himself into his chair, his face shocked.

There was an uneasy silence in the room as the assembled brothers looked to each other for guidance. Andawyr's denunciation had welled up from nowhere and struck them like a stinging winter squall. Now their leader sat silent and stunned, seemingly overwhelmed by what he saw as his own guilt.

Ryath's voice cut through the tension, forceful and stern. 'Nonsense, Andawyr,' he said. 'You're over-simplifying again. And you're being too emotional. You're right about our neglect. It's a grim picture and all the more so because it's so blatantly obvious now.' He stood up and walked across to Andawyr. 'But you're wrong about your responsibility. It's been a collective neglect. We each know the duties of the Order, we each know we must fulfil them. You're our guide, not our keeper.'

Andawyr looked up at him, his face still pained. Ryath continued relentlessly. ‘As for the cause of this neglect, that’s irrelevant. Be it His hand or our folly, we’ve neither fact nor rumour to help us there. Suffice it that we see it now and our duty is to act, not to conjecture. You’re the only person who’s remotely suited to be our leader. Do what you’re best at – lead.’ He swung his arm around the watching circle. ‘Teach these your new knowledge, as you taught me. Help us correct our lapse, whatever its cause. Don’t compound it by wallowing in self pity.’

Several of the brothers gasped at the bluntness of Ryath’s last remark, and Oslang rose to intervene. Andawyr’s distressed expression vanished and for an instant his face became thunderous. Ryath grimaced as if anticipating a blow, but he held both his ground and Andawyr’s gaze.

After a moment Andawyr said sharply. ‘Sit down, Ryath. You’re talking out of turn again.’

Ryath resumed his seat, his face pale but satisfied. Andawyr glowered round the circle. ‘Does anyone else here agree with brother Ryath?’ he asked stonily.

Oslang raised his hand immediately, and one by one so did each of the brothers, some more tentatively than others.

Andawyr’s grim look gradually faded into one of resignation. ‘You’re right Ryath,’ he said quietly. ‘I am too emotional. I’m probably off-balance after everything that’s happened if the truth be told. I apologize to you all for my outburst.’

The tension in the room eased.

‘Let’s get down to business then,’ Andawyr said purposefully. ‘We’ll work out the details later, but these are my first thoughts. We must send someone to Anderras Darion as a matter of the greatest urgency to find out what’s been happening there and, if possible, what’s happened to Hawklan.’ He turned to Oslang. ‘Have a word with the local Muster Lines, they’ll probably be willing to help us across country.’ Oslang nodded.

‘Then I think someone’s going to have to footslog through the mountains to Fyorlund.’

‘What?’ said Oslang in disbelief. ‘It’ll be winter soon.’

Andawyr waved the objection aside. ‘Details later,’ he said. ‘It’s been done before. And we’ll have to tell Urthryn down in Dremark. He’ll probably need some convincing, but at least the Muster won’t need much sharpening up. Next, we’ll have to establish watching stones along the Pass.’ He paused and breathed out noisily. ‘That’s going to be dangerous at the north end, but we can’t avoid it. We must have some eyes into Narsindal.’

‘The felcis might help there,’ Atelon intruded.

Andawyr nodded. ‘Indeed they might,’ he said. ‘We mustn’t forget our ancient allies. They could prove to be invaluable.’

He stood up. ‘Brothers, forgive me. I’d like to go to my quarters. I need to rest and meditate for a little while. Could I ask you to stay here and begin planning these journeys immediately?’

He paused as he moved out of the circle towards one of the open doors. ‘Three things remain,’ he said.

‘As Ryath has suggested. If it can be taught, I’ll teach you all I can of my new knowledge, or at least start to teach it, though Ethriss knows how. Secondly we must begin to accept that we are at war, and in great danger. Sumeral felt my presence and will suspect our existence. And Oklar will know that it was no village bird catcher that bound the eye of the Goleg and struck down the keeper of his Vrwystin A Kaethio. They’ll be searching for us constantly now. We can look to some trials of strength and cunning. Be open. Be aware.’

‘And the third matter?’ Oslang asked.

‘Yes,’ said Andawyr slowly. ‘The third matter. While we seek to marshal our physical resources, we must remember that they will be as nothing unless Sumeral and His Uhriel can be truly opposed.’

The room became very silent.

‘Brothers,’ Andawyr concluded. ‘We must go to the heart of our duty. We must seek for the Guardians and awaken them.’

Chapter 14

The glow of the furnace further reddened Loman’s already flushed face and went on to paint his shadow grotesquely across the wall and ceiling of his forge. There, another shadow mingled with it to complete the painting and turn it into a small dark mountain range.

The acrid tang of hot metal filled the forge and the furnace murmured restfully to itself, the radiant stones occasionally chuckling and rearranging themselves in a small flurry of sparks.

Loman straightened up and wiped a grimy arm across his glistening forehead. He did not like to be disturbed when he was working.

‘What?’ he asked, irritably.

The mountains shifted ominously as Gulda, scowling, lifted her head to look at him beadily. The master smith rested the head of his hammer on his anvil and, leaning on it, met her gaze. ‘I beg your pardon, Memsa,’ he said, with painstaking slowness and great insincerity. ‘I didn’t catch what you said.’

‘I said, “Do you have any children around here who can sing properly?”’ Gulda repeated, echoing his tone and manner.

Loman looked at her carefully for a moment as if still uncertain that he had heard correctly. ‘Singers?’ he said tentatively. Gulda raised an eyebrow and fidgeted with her stick.

Loman sniffed, and applied his foot to a bellows pump, making the furnace roar contentedly. The radiant stones turned quickly from red to yellow and in their waxing light Loman smiled faintly. Gulda’s eyes narrowed.

‘What in the world do you want singers for, Memsa?’ Loman shouted.

Gulda craned forward crossly to hear him.

‘Don’t answer my question with another one, young Loman,’ she shouted. ‘And stop that noise.’

As asked, Loman stopped pumping abruptly, leaving the forge suddenly silent. Gulda, however, continued at full volume for a moment. ‘Just tell me. . .’ Loman looked at her innocently as the rest of her reply slid through an involuntary and incongruous diminuendo to a whispered conclusion, ‘. . . if you’ve any children round here who can sing well.’

He nodded thoughtfully. ‘Try Otaff,’ he whispered back, before she could recover fully. ‘He looks after the Festivals. Usually manages to wring some semblance of a tune out of the raucous little devils, though don’t ask me where he finds the patience. Not our strong point really, singing,’ he added pleasantly.

Then, smiling, he turned away from her and began rattling noisily through the metallic clutter littering a nearby work-bench. Gulda eyed his back suspiciously, then, muttering something to herself, turned and clumped towards the door.

She paused at the door as if to say something, but Loman was seemingly engrossed in some task and she thought better of it.

As she closed it behind her, Loman smiled to himself broadly.

‘Not in here, Memsa,’ he said, pumping the bellows mightily and placing a strip of metal on the glowing stones. ‘You might own the rest of the world, but there are more tricks to smithing than just shaping metal.’

* * * *

Although Loman had rightly anticipated Gulda in saying that they must seek out the Alphraan, that had effectively been the end of his contribution. Apart from wandering vaguely through the mountains, shouting, as one might search for a lost child, he had no other inspiration as to how it should be done, and he knew better than to voice such a proposal in front of Gulda. If these . . . people . . . existed, they’d been in the mountains for unknown generations and wherever they lived was hidden well beyond chance finding.

Gulda, however, had been little wiser than he, and their discussion into ways and means had soon foundered. ‘Is there anything in the book that might help?’ he had suggested eventually.

Gulda had pouted thoughtfully. ‘I’ll have another look, but I doubt it,’ she had said. And that had been that, for the time being.

Then, just a couple of days ago, stepping through the wicket in the Great Gate, Loman had glanced round to see a group of apprentices anxiously holding the bottoms of three long ladders. His first reaction had been to deliver an instant and severe rebuke for what he presumed to be some prank or other, but his eye had been drawn inexorably upwards, both by the sloping ladders, and by the intensity of gathered apprentices.

At the top, stepping resolutely from ladder to ladder, was Gulda. She was apparently examining some of the carvings on the Great Gate. Loman’s mouth fell open.

Recovering himself, he walked across to the group. ‘What’s going on?’ he demanded sternly. Startled, two of the boys spun round. Loman looked skywards. ‘Don’t let go of the ladder, young men,’ he said quietly. ‘Memsa will not be pleased.’

Unequivocal confirmation of this observation floated down from above, followed by, ‘Loman, get

yourself up here and look at this.'

A titter threatened to bloom out of the gathered apprentices but it shrivelled instantly under Loman's baleful gaze.

He examined the feet of the three ladders. They were well founded on the hard ground. 'There's nothing to fasten them to up there, sir, so we tied them together at the top and middle,' one of the apprentices volunteered.

As every student knows, nothing softens the heart of a teacher like a lesson learned. 'Well done,' Loman said with a smile, placing his foot on the first rung.

When he reached the top, however, he was less sanguine. He was not too disturbed by heights, but looking down the vertiginous perspective of the Gate, he could not forbear asking the obvious question of his neighbour. 'Memsa, what are you doing up here?'

As usual, however, Gulda ignored the question. 'Can't you climb a ladder without rocking it so much?' she said, then pointing to a section of carving, 'Look, here. This took some finding. For a raven, Gavor must have eyes like a hawk. Look, it's very interesting. Most informative.'

Loman looked closely at the area she was marking out with a long finger. It was quite small and, like the rest of the Gate, beautifully carved. However the symbolism of the carving that filigreed the Gate was both compact and intricate, and few could read it quickly or easily. 'It'll take a little time to work through this,' he said.

'No matter,' she said. 'I've got the gist of it. Enough to think about for now. Mark it out and get a casting for me. I'd like to study it more carefully.'

'Yes, Memsa,' Loman replied automatically, still peering intently at the carving. A small cloud moved in front of the sun, briefly throwing the Gate into hazy shadow. The carving in front of Loman danced into a new tale. He smiled appreciatively. 'A casting won't catch any of this, Memsa,' he said, waving his hand over the changing scene. 'It'll barely catch all the first-degree work.' He turned to her, but she was gone.

Looking down he saw her black form briskly descending down one of the ladders. 'It doesn't matter,' came her voice. 'It'll get enough for what we need.'

Seemingly it had, for after receiving the casting and nodding a cursory approval, Gulda had disappeared from view for a day or so, to reappear abruptly in Loman's forge with her inquiry about singers.

Since Gulda's return Loman had learned a lesson he had never mastered as a child. He knew now that information could be obtained from Gulda best by watching and listening. Direct questioning not infrequently left him feeling he was trying to catch hold of autumn mist.

Thus when, after directing her towards Otaff, he saw her returning later that day shepherding three young boys, he joined the little procession without comment. Gulda nodded brusquely to him, but said nothing.

Eventually he found himself sitting in a room with Gulda seated incongruously at a small keyboard instrument. There were countless such rooms all over the Castle and, looking round it, Loman had to admit to himself that he had probably not been in that particular one half a dozen times in his entire stewardship.

‘When was this tuned last?’ she asked Loman, moving her hands lightly over the keys as if dusting them.

He was obliged to shrug vaguely. ‘I’ve no idea,’ he admitted. ‘No one to my knowledge has ever played it seriously. Tirilen used to pound on it when she was small. It’s unlikely it’s ever been tuned.’

Gulda played a series of chords. The instrument’s tone was mellow and singing. Apparently satisfied and looking more than a little surprised, she struck a single note. ‘Boys, how’s this for pitch?’ she asked, inclining her head enquiringly towards them. They all nodded enthusiastically. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Fascinating. Still in perfect tune after all this time. Such craftsmen.’

She looked sadly thoughtful for a moment, then turned to the three boys and smiled. The expression carried Loman back immediately to the time when he had been her pupil. When she smiled like that, they were in for an exciting day’s learning. No one could teach like Gulda, when the mood took her. Sunny days and that smile meant new wonders to be seen and heard. Such a magical time. Unexpectedly he felt his stomach tightening in anticipation and he had a suspicion that this emotion was showing on his face also. He turned away casually and tried to scowl out of the window, but old happy ties would not allow him.

In the end he was to sit for over an hour, basking in warm memories of his own childhood, as he watched and listened to Gulda teaching again. At this distance he was willing to forgive the less harmonious lessons he had also had from her.

‘There’s an old tune I’m trying to remember,’ she began, confidently, to the boys. ‘Something like this.’ And with wilful awkwardness she poked inaccurately at the keyboard with one finger.

Loman recognized the tune immediately and was about to call out its name but his wiser nature silenced him. ‘We know it, we know it,’ the boys cried. ‘It’s the snowman’s song.’ One of them reached past her and, tongue protruding slightly, played the tune cautiously, self-consciously displaying the use of all five fingers.

‘I’ve not been learning long,’ he apologized when he had finished, but Gulda was fulsome in her praise.

Then she had them singing it. When Loman quietly left the room, the sound of the three voices was ringing like a silver bell in his head, the tune was leaking out intermittently through his gruff tenor, and its bouncing complicated rhythm was breaking his steady stride.

For many days the sound of the singing echoed round the Castle, ringing faintly along its endless corridors and carried by strange resonances through halls vast and small, far distant from the small room where Gulda was weaving her special magic. Coming across it unexpectedly from time to time, Loman would stop and listen. It seemed almost as if the Castle itself was singing.

As the days passed, however, Loman noted a change in Gulda. She was quieter, less forthright, than usual. Finally his resolve to ask no direct questions slipped. ‘What are you doing, Memsa?’ he asked. ‘Even my stone ears can tell those boys are singing beautifully. Why are you doing it and why is it disturbing you?’

Gulda sat down and rested her chin on her stick. She gazed into an unfocused distance for a long time, apparently not having heard the question. Loman once again had the feeling of mist slipping through his fingers when, very softly, she said, ‘Of all Ethriss’s gifts, music alone speaks directly to the soul. So many memories, so long, I . . .’ Her voice trailed away into another silence. Then, abruptly, ‘I think we’re ready now.’

‘Ready?’ he risked.

‘Get yourself and two of your people ready for a trip into the mountains,’ she said. ‘Starting tomorrow. Fully armed. I’ll be coming as well, with the three boys.’

Loman raised his eyebrows. ‘Why?’ he asked, bluntly.

Unexpectedly, Gulda looked doubtful, though her voice was firm enough. ‘We have to contact the Alphraan,’ she said. ‘At best they’re hampering our training, at worst they may seek us out and destroy us for bringing war back into their domain.’

Loman made to speak, but Gulda continued. ‘Besides, they’re in as great a danger as we are, and we need to be allies if not friends. They need to be told the truth. They’ll have to make the old choices that we’ve had to make, sooner or later, whether they like it or not. They’ll not be able to use their singing against an army. Least of all, His army.’

* * * *

With the exception of Gulda, the entire party sat down gratefully on the damp rocks.

‘This is the place?’ she asked.

Loman nodded. ‘We’ve been training all around here, except when we’ve needed to go up above the snowline,’ he said, pointing to white peaks rising above them from adjacent valleys. ‘This is about the centre of the area we’ve been using most of the time. But our problems haven’t been localized. They’ve occurred everywhere we’ve been.’

Gulda looked round reflectively. They were three days from Anderras Darion, and the plains of Orthlund were long behind them. Now they were standing on the wide jagged summit of a mountain that commanded an expansive view of nearby crags and valleys. A precipitous cliff face dropped away from them on one side, curving round in two sweeping ridges to join the peak to its lesser neighbours, as if it were resting its broad arms on them. In every direction mountains marched to the horizons. Loman and his chosen companions, Athyr, a veteran of the Morlider War, and Yrain, had anticipated a comparatively leisurely stroll as escort to an old woman and three young children. However, Gulda had confounded them by setting a relentless pace from the very start.

‘How does she do it?’ Athyr whispered as Loman waited by him while he re-fastened his boots. ‘I wouldn’t mind, but she doesn’t even seem to be hurrying.’

Loman shook his head. ‘I’ve stopped thinking about it,’ he said. ‘I’ll be surprised when she does something I expect. Don’t worry. She’ll stop when the children get tired.’

That indeed proved to be the case, but the pause was only to allow the three adults to pick up the three children.

‘Look on it as full pack training,’ she said, chuckling. ‘You’ve had plenty of time to rest these last few days, and I want these boys in good voice when we arrive.’

However, although the final ascent to their present position had involved no climbing, it had been long and steep, and even Gulda had relented. It served as little consolation to the three adults when the boys

ran ahead and scurried up the slope well ahead of them, closely followed by Gulda.

As they all rested, Gulda prowled round the summit. After a little while she poked her stick into a small grassy knoll. 'Here will do,' she said. 'Put your weapons here.'

Athyr and Yrain looked at Loman in surprise. 'What for?' Loman asked. 'What are you intending to do?'

'I'm intending to contact the Alphraan, or at least try to,' she replied.

Loman glanced round to ensure that the children were occupied. 'If they're here, then they may have killed four of our people already,' he said softly. 'Do you seriously want us to face them unarmed?'

'I don't think they've attacked anyone so far,' Gulda replied, equally softly. 'I think they've just tried to chase people away. We have to take a chance. If we come conspicuously disarmed then they'll perhaps be more inclined to see us as peaceful.'

'And the children?' Loman asked.

'Whatever happens, they won't harm them, *that* I'm sure of,' Gulda said. 'Do as I ask.'

Reluctantly, Loman unbuckled his sword belt and nodded to the others to do the same. Taking the collected weapons, he laid the belt knives in the middle of the knoll that Gulda had indicated and arranged the three swords in a neat pyramid over them.

Gulda watched the process with interest.

'Now the rest,' she said, when Loman had stood back, apparently satisfied. Loman's look of innocence barely reached his face before it retreated in disarray and he nodded again to the others resignedly.

Gulda walked around the resultant armoury of knives and other small fighting devices that Loman laid under the three swords, then she looked intently at Yrain.

'All of them, young lady,' she said eventually. Yrain held her gaze for a moment, then reached down and pulled another knife out of her boot. Standing up she offered it hilt first to Gulda who took it and laid it with the others.

As Yrain sat down again, she dislodged a large stone. It came to rest near her hand.

Gulda walked over to her and placed her stick on the stone. Yrain smiled up at her, pleasantly.

'No,' Gulda said. 'I commend your thinking and your technique, Yrain,' she said. 'And your caring. It's to your credit that you've learned so much so quickly. But no.' Her stick flicked the stone out of reach. 'If you want to become a true warrior you must understand that true defence doesn't lie in your knowledge of how to use weapons but in your knowledge of when to use them.'

She crouched low before the seated woman and looked into her eyes intently. 'Very occasionally in your life, you may have to fight. Very occasionally, you may have to run away. Mostly however, you'll have to watch, listen, talk, and above all, learn and understand. While you lean on your weapons or your technique you'll cloud your mind. You'll neither see, hear, nor explain, and you'll certainly never understand. You'll need both weapons and technique increasingly, and increasingly they'll fail you.'

Yrain's brow furrowed. 'I'm sorry, Memsa,' she said. 'I don't understand.'

Gulda smiled and stood up. 'I know,' she replied. 'Don't worry. You're not alone in that, but while you've the wit to realize it, you understand more than you think.'

'But if these Alphraan are dangerous?'

This time Gulda chuckled. 'Only we humans are truly dangerous, Yrain,' she said. 'Believe me, except in extremity, nothing that walks this world willingly attacks one of us other than our own kind. And if the Alphraan choose to meet us they'll be like nothing you've ever known. Try to see them with a true warrior's vision; a carver's vision. See them as they are, if you get to see them at all.'

She turned away and called to the three boys, currently clambering amongst the rocks. As they converged on her, laughing, she led them towards the edge of the cliff face and pointed her stick towards the snow-covered mountains.

'Now young men, in a moment I'll want you to sing our song,' she said. 'Just like we've rehearsed. I want you to imagine you're singing to someone up there, in the snow, so start as loudly as you can then they'll be able to hear you clearly.' She leaned forward and placed her arms confidentially around all three.

'But at the end, as soft as you can. Like you've practiced. Watch me carefully.'

Then she returned to Loman and the others. Her voice was low but her tone was unequivocal and authoritative. 'Whatever happens from now, say nothing and do nothing, except on my express command. Is that clear?'

Loman nodded. 'Yes, Memsa,' he said.

She walked back to the boys and settled herself on a rock, her hands folded over the top of her stick. Her eyebrows went up, together with a long finger, and then the boys were singing.

The jaunty tune that had woven its spell through the halls of Anderras Darion rang out into the clear air, still moist from recent rain. It echoed off distant rock faces, bouncing hither and thither to add a laughing shimmer to the busy stillness of the mountains. It was an old, happy tune, rhythmic and lively, and punctuated by hand-clapping in which Gulda, wedging her stick between her knees, joined in with relish.

A snowman made by some children sings of his happiness at the gift of his creation. He watches the children playing, sees the winter festival, sees the season's many moods, howling and fierce, bright and sharp, until finally a bird arrives to tell him that spring is coming. Gradually he melts, but even as he grows smaller and smaller, he sings continuously of his joy at being and at having been.

The end of the song was a long trailing diminuendo; the same line of farewell and thanks being repeated over and over again, each time a little softer than the last.

Slowly each boy in turn faded out of the song until only one was left. On and on he sang, softer and softer and softer, but without losing either pace or rhythm. His eyes were fixed intently on Gulda's expressive face and her gently moving finger as she guided him down this long final descent.

Then the song was finished; ended with the faintest whisper, in the middle of a line. Loman and the

others found themselves holding their breaths and leaning forward, fully as intent as the singer, as the last few words floated into the mountain silence.

No one moved. No one spoke.

Yrain felt a movement by her side. She turned suddenly, but something sent her sprawling on the ground, her hands over her ears, and her mouth and eyes wide in silent scream.

Before he could react, Loman was suddenly overwhelmed by a terrible fear. As a surge of panic swept through him, he tried to flee, but his body would not respond to his mind's prompting. A small spark of calm inside him managed to turn his eyes towards Athyr, but there was no help to be found there: the man's face was alive with terror.

With a further effort he sought out Gulda. She too, however, seemed to be affected, as did the three boys, though much less so. Then, disjointed and uneven, as if from a great distance and carried on blustering wind, Gulda's voice spoke.

'Was this small gift so poor that its bringers deserve such?' it asked. 'Our young!' The anger in her voice tore through the strange distortion that was pervading Loman's mind. 'And release the girl,' Gulda continued. 'She'll die if you continue. You've killed four of us by accident. Would you now do murder?'

Loman felt confusion whirling round him. In it were mingled many things: anger, indignation, fear, and then thanks and regret. Though he still could not move, he saw the three boys suddenly start to laugh and clap their hands. Yrain too seemed to be released from whatever pain she had been in, and his own terror eased, though neither she nor Athyr seemed yet to be able to move.

'Two.' A soft voice filled Loman's head. 'Only two. And we regret that. But you bring evil ways with you. Human ways. They carry inevitable consequences. Violent death is one of them. We want none of you. Take your weapons and go.' Every syllable of the voice seemed to be full of the most subtle, elusive, nuances, bringing far more to the content of the words than he would have imagined possible.

His fear abating slightly, Loman found that he was able to move his hand a little. With a prodigious effort he pushed it into the ground and tried to stand.

'Don't move.' Two voices gave him the same instruction. One, inside his head, but different from the previous one, the other, Gulda's, still strained, distorted and oddly coarse. 'We do not wish to harm you, but we do not want you here. Return to . . .' Loman thought then that he heard the words 'Anderras Darion', but in their sound was a subtle richness that described the Castle more totally than any he could have found in a lifetime's searching. Its beauty and awe took his breath away. 'Is it not wonder enough for you that you should take up arms to venture forth in search of a greater?'

'Don't presume to judge us, Alphaan,' said Gulda, her voice a little clearer. 'We've laid our arms aside and sought to bring you here with our small gift because we have grim news. News that affects us all. We must speak to you.'

'You are here because we would not allow you to use our mountains to practice for your war.'

'This is true,' Gulda replied. 'But only in part. By your choice we didn't even know you still lived. Had we known, we'd have sought your aid sooner.'

At the word aid, Loman again felt confusion around him. Into his head came images of compassion and

responsibility mingled with a sense of burden and fear and inexorable entanglement.

The sensations were again almost unbelievably subtle but a voice eventually said, 'It would have been denied, then as now. We have foresworn all weapons, all violence . . .'

'You bind these in violence,' Gulda said.

There was amused tolerance in the reply. 'They bind themselves, old woman, as you know. In their own fears. They have not your vision.'

'As you will,' Gulda replied. 'But you'll hear our news whether you wish it or no.'

'No, leave us.' Many voices rang in Loman's head.

From the corner of his eye, Loman saw Gulda raise her stick. As she moved, there was a sound like the rattling of countless iron chains. It stopped abruptly. 'Know that you cannot bind me, friends of Ethriss.' Her voice was suddenly clear. 'Hear the truth. Hear that He is risen again and that His Uhriel are abroad. If we prepare, and find again Ethriss and the Guardians, we may defeat Him before His poisons spread out into the world as before; but if we turn away then we shall fall, and what price then your kingdom under your mountains when Oklar takes on the mantle of Theowart?'

There was great irony in the word 'your' and her statement was followed by a long silence. It was as if the unseen speakers were gone; but still Loman found he could not move.

'You are powerful and skilled, old woman,' came a voice eventually. 'And there is an ancient strangeness about you which we do not understand. We rightly fear your kind. You were ever treacherous and faithless. Even now you lie to us. Sumeral and His Uhriel were crushed utterly. Swept from this world forever. All that remains of Sumeral is what is carried in the hearts of humankind.'

'There is some justice in that, Alphraan, but you never bore the burden that humankind bore. Your frailty was never thus tested. Know that He is come again and . . .'

'Enough!' many voices rang out again, angrily. 'What do you know of burdens, human? Of testing? Henceforth our mountains are forbidden to you. You must set aside your arms.' There was a pause. 'Not only will we not aid you, we will oppose you in your folly.'

'Sumeral's way was ever to divide those who would oppose Him,' Gulda said resignedly, bowing her head. 'Would you truly be His friends?'

'He is no more . . .'

There was anger still in the voices, but Gulda cut through it with anger of her own. 'You try my patience,' she said. 'Send your song to the north if you would know the truth. See what harmonies ring in your mountains there.'

There was a great turmoil in the voices. No words were spoken, but it seemed to Loman that the air rang with the pain of kin long lost – whole peoples, even. Then came a conclusion, though it was equivocal, despite its force. 'You are misled, human. He is no more. Go.'

Loman felt them withdrawing. In a teasing echo of the boys' song, the voices seemed to fade into some inner distance until finally he realized he was listening to his own breathing and the soft sighing of the

mountain breeze.

He could move.

‘They’re gone,’ someone said. Yrain and Athyr were on their feet immediately, clambering up on to the rocks in an attempt to see their departing captors, but apart from the shadows of the clouds and the occasional soaring bird, all was still.

Loman looked at Gulda. She was resting her forehead on her stick. The three boys were standing in front of her, concerned.

‘Didn’t we do it right, Memsa?’ one of them asked anxiously. Gulda looked up. Her face was sad, but as she looked at the waiting trio, she smiled radiantly. ‘It was beautiful, boys,’ she said. ‘You sang it better than ever. I was proud of you. Well done.’

Spontaneously the three boys stepped forward and threw their arms around her in a great tangle of affection.

‘Did you see anyone?’ Gulda asked, after a moment. ‘No, but we heard them,’ answered one of the boys.

‘They thanked us for our song and asked if they could sing it,’ said another.

‘And what did you say?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Loman joined the group. Gulda looked up at him. For an instant, he saw the striking and beautiful features he had glimpsed before, but they were gone almost before he realized they were there.

‘We failed,’ he said.

Gulda shook her head. ‘No. We’ve begun,’ she replied. ‘I could have wished for better, but at least they came and listened, that was a hopeful start.’

‘I felt they were divided amongst themselves,’ Loman conceded.

Gulda nodded. ‘Yes. They were. That also is hopeful, but . . .’ Letting out a deep breath she stood up. Yrain and Athyr joined them. ‘There’s no sign of them,’ Athyr said, bewildered. ‘It’s not easy tracking on these rocks but there must have been hundreds of them here. I don’t understand.’

‘Did any of you see *anything*?’ Gulda asked, looking around the group. All shook their heads. ‘Yrain, you were the first to react, what did you see?’

The young woman shook her head. ‘I can’t remember anything except a terrible noise. I’ve never been so frightened. Memsa, how do we deal with . . . creatures that can do that?’

‘Not easily,’ Gulda replied. ‘Not unless there are a lot of you. However, knowledge helps. We’ll talk when we get back. Gather up your weapons. Let’s be off.’

There was a cry of dismay from the three boys. Gulda raised her hands in earnest apology. ‘I’m sorry,’

she said. 'Let's eat – and then be off.'

When they had finished their meal they all fell silent, each pondering the day's strange events.

Gradually, Loman noticed that he was tapping his foot to the rhythm of the snowman's song. Someone, somewhere, was singing it softly. He looked round idly. The three boys were standing near the cliff edge. Casually he stood up and walked over to them.

As he neared them, they all raised their hands to wave to someone and he realized they were not singing.

Reaching them, he followed their gaze. On a distant outcrop he could just make out a tiny figure, waving back.

Abruptly the song stopped and the figure was gone.

'Go now,' said a voice inside his head.

Chapter 15

Eldric slumped down into a chair and put his head in his hands. 'This is madness,' he said. 'I can't allow it.'

Sylvriss raised her eyebrows. '*Can't*, Lord Eldric?' she said. Isloman hid a smile behind his hand.

Eldric looked up, flustered. 'An unhappy choice of word, Majesty,' he managed. 'I meant . . . won't . . . shouldn't . . .' He stood up and slapped his hands against his sides in frustration.

'Majesty, you can't,' he said. 'In your condition, and with winter coming on, such a journey would be madness.'

He turned to Isloman as if to seek an ally, then, bringing his hand to his forehead, he turned his back on both of them and stood staring into the fire to compose himself. When he turned round again his face was a picture of fatherly reasonableness.

'I'm sorry,' he said reluctantly. 'You both caught me by surprise. Can we look at your ideas a little more carefully?'

'Intentions, Lord Eldric,' Sylvriss corrected. 'Not ideas.'

Eldric affected to concede the point with a conciliatory gesture. 'Majesty,' he said soberly. 'Your pregnancy is proceeding well. You couldn't be in better hands than here. I'm sure you know that. Hylland's a fine and experienced healer; surely as good as you'll find in your father's house?'

Sylvriss leaned forward to interrupt, but Eldric continued. 'And it's a long way to Dremark at the best of times. Please ask yourself if it's fair to either you or your child to undertake such a difficult journey at such a time, on a whim.'

The last phrase slipped out inadvertently. It was as unhappy a choice of word as his earlier 'can't'. Sylvriss bridled. 'Lord Eldric, take care. You above all know I'm not given to idle fancies. Even less am I given to indulging them. There are admittedly strong emotional reasons why I'd like to return to my father's house for the birth, but there are powerful practical ones as well.'

Eldric lifted his hands in apology, but allowed as much doubt into his face as good manners would allow.

Sylvriss sat down beside him. ‘Eldric,’ she said simply. ‘You and the others are preparing to obey Rgoric’s last command; a command which I endorse. You must be in a position to dedicate your every effort to that completely. Almost certainly you’re going to have to lead Fyordyn against Fyordyn before Dan-Tor is driven from the country, and if the horror of that is to be kept to a minimum your forces must be overwhelmingly superior to his in every way; you know that. It’s going to be difficult enough to achieve this without squandering your time and resources tending a pregnant woman.’

‘Majesty, there are other pregnant women here . . .’ Eldric protested.

Sylvriss cut across him. ‘True,’ she said. ‘And while they’ll be well tended, they’ll not get a fraction of the care and effort that will be lavished on me, will they? That’s hardly going to improve morale, is it?’

Eldric gesticulated vaguely, at a loss to answer this reproach. Sylvriss nodded knowingly. ‘If I stay here, I’ll be a needless drain on vital resources and an extra concern to you when you’ll have far more serious matters to attend to.’

‘No, Majesty.’ Eldric had recovered himself. ‘Protecting you and your child, our King’s heir, is our willing duty. It will increase our resolve . . .’

‘Please Eldric.’ Sylvriss’s concerns showed on her face. ‘We know one another well enough not to bandy superficialities like this. I’ve not come to this decision lightly, but I’m quite resolved. I know the journey won’t be easy, but it can be done, and in the weighing I think it’ll be for the best. I know also that my leaving may give you some morale problems, but that lies in the telling of the tale, not the deed itself.’

She laid her hand on his arm. ‘We must look to the end of all this, Eldric. The very end. Not just the removal of Dan-Tor and the re-establishment of the Geadrol and such of the old ways as have not been destroyed utterly, but the destruction of Sumeral himself. If we look to less we will achieve less, and to achieve less than that will be to achieve nothing.’

Eldric looked into the Queen’s eyes. There was a quality in her voice that reached deep inside him. A fitting Queen for the King, he thought, both the one who was and the one who might have been.

‘Tell the people the truth,’ Sylvriss continued. ‘Tell them who Dan-Tor is. Tell them what he is, and who his Master is. And tell them that winning our country back from him is but a grim skirmish prior to a more terrible war – the destruction of that Master.’ Her voice became sad. ‘Perhaps it’s the hardest step we have to take, because we must take it alone. If Fyordyn must fight Fyordyn, then no outlanders can help in such a conflict without making the legacy of bitterness far worse.’ She paused pensively, then said more resolutely. ‘But tell them that when it’s done, the Orthlundyn and the Riddinvolk will ride to their side to face the greater enemy. Tell them that Isloman and I have gone to prepare our own people for this.’

Eldric sat silent for some time, staring out into the cold rain that a blustering wind was swirling and twisting around the courtyard outside. Occasionally a gust would rattle drops against the window like a frantic messenger trying to rouse a sleeping household.

‘It may be said that you fled in our hour of need, Majesty,’ he said reluctantly. Sylvriss bowed her head for a moment then looked at him again. She made no attempt to keep her fear from her face.

‘I know that,’ she said. ‘I told you this was no easy decision. I’m many things, Eldric. Riddinvolk and Fyordyn. A woman, a Muster rider, your Queen, a wife . . .’ She faltered. ‘. . . a widow. Now, soon, a mother. I’ve tried to order my needs and my duties honestly, but above all I must protect my child, at whatever cost.’

She held Eldric’s gaze again. ‘I’ve faced many trials over the years, Eldric,’ she said. ‘I don’t think I’d flee just for my own sake. But if the question is put to you, answer it with the question I asked myself – could I ask Rgoric’s unborn child to face the power that Dan-Tor, Oklar, launched against Vakloss?’

Eldric turned away and nodded. The question was central to the strategic and tactical debates that had been continuing for over a month since Rgoric’s Dith-Galar. The reports they had received from Vakloss told them that little or nothing had been seen of Dan-Tor since the fateful day of Rgoric’s murder, but gave no reasons. Was he wounded and dying? Had he been exhausted in some way by the terrible destruction he had wrought? Was he simply indifferent to the rantings of a few disgruntled Lords in the east? No consensus had emerged.

But the Queen’s remark brought to the forefront of his thoughts an idea that, because of the apparent inactivity from Vakloss, had been allowed to dwindle into insignificance in their deliberations. What if Dan-Tor should bring his army across the country and use his power to strike directly at the heart of the resistance to his will?

In the wake of this came, for the first time, two starker, more terrifying, thoughts. Firstly, that the very presence of the Queen might invite such an assault, and secondly, worse by far, the realization that Dan-Tor needed no army. What if he were actually coming here now! Eldric cursed his memory. Had not Dan-Tor struck at Hawklan unaided? And had it not been a subject of some amusement for years in the Geadrol that Dan-Tor often chose to wander abroad alone and unescorted?

Without comment he stood up and walked quickly to the door. Opening it he beckoned urgently to a waiting servant. ‘Get Commander Yatsu, immediately,’ he said. The servant ran off at great speed, impelled more by Eldric’s manner than his actual command.

Closing the door, Eldric turned back and looked at Isloman and the Queen. Both were staring at him in bewilderment and some mild alarm at this sudden action.

You could perish here at a wave of that creature’s hand, Eldric thought, and how prepared then would Riddin and Orthlund be? He cursed himself again.

‘You’re right, Majesty,’ he said briskly. ‘And I was wrong. I commend your clarity of vision.’ He paused and glanced out of the window. ‘But it’s still a difficult journey. If the winter comes early . . .’ His voice showed genuine concern. ‘Still, there’s nothing to be gained by delay – the winter comes only nearer as does your term, my dear. We must act immediately.’

The door opened without announcement, and Yatsu entered with Varak at his shoulder. ‘We were just . . .’ he began.

Eldric cut across him. ‘Double all the border patrols and put the castle and all outposts on battle alert immediately, Commander.’ Yatsu’s eyes widened questioningly. Eldric answered him bluntly. ‘In our concern to raise and prepare our army, Commander, we’d all forgotten that Dan-Tor likes to travel alone.’

For a moment Yatsu stood motionless and Eldric saw his own inner reproaches reflected in the Goraidin's eyes. Without a word he turned and left. Eldric nodded to Varak to follow him.

'Now, Majesty,' Eldric said, easier in his manner now. 'Your journey. Fortunately the mountains contain no dangers other than natural ones, but they're severe enough. With your permission therefore, I shall arrange an escort of two Goraidin and four good High Guards, if that's acceptable.'

Before the Queen could reply, he added, 'Could I ask you perhaps, to choose the horses?' Then, 'I'll see that one of the Guards is a serving healer.'

'A stitcher of wounds and gashes?' Sylvriss said unintentionally.

Eldric cleared his throat. 'Healing is healing, Majesty, but of course Hylland will choose the man.'

'I didn't mean to seem ungrateful,' Sylvriss said. 'But your sudden change of heart took me aback. You needn't worry about my health, I'm as fit as a brood mare.'

Eldric closed his eyes briefly at this unexpected allusion. 'Please, Majesty. There's the child to think of, and others can be hurt on such a journey.'

'Yes,' Sylvriss acknowledged thoughtfully, slowly adjusting to Eldric's urgency. 'And the horses might have problems.'

Isloman smiled as Eldric shot him a quick look of resignation.

'I'll need no escort,' he volunteered helpfully. 'A spare horse, perhaps, some supplies and a good map of the mountains will be sufficient.'

Eldric looked at him pensively.

'I'm no use here,' Isloman said, fearing that he was about to be subjected to Eldric's persuasions. 'I have to look after Hawklan, which means I can't even help with the training of your High Guards. And between us, Hawklan and I are hardly contributing a great deal to the preparation of your battle plans, are we?'

As if to highlight his ineffectiveness, the sound of urgent activity about the castle drifted into the room as Yatsu and Varak began to implement Eldric's order.

Eldric nodded. 'I understand, Isloman,' he said. 'Besides, it's been obvious for some time you've been growing increasingly concerned about your country and your people. To be honest, it's been thoughtless of me not to make arrangements for your return sooner, but Hawklan's presence seems to add something to . . .' He left the comment unfinished.

'Hawklan's presence may bring Dan-Tor down on you more surely than the Queen's,' Isloman said, echoing Eldric's earlier fears.

Eldric's expression agreed. 'Yes,' he said. 'I'm afraid you're right. And I'm afraid we're all going to have to sharpen our wits in future if we're missing such matters.' He clapped his hands and became brisk. 'However, you'll need help through the mountains. It's a longer journey than the Queen's and almost certainly you'll be caught by the winter. But I think one of the Goraidin and a High Guard will suffice,' he concluded.

Isloman shook his head, but Eldric brushed his intended refusal aside. ‘No,’ he said. ‘The safety of both of you is important.’ He looked at the Queen and then back at Isloman. ‘But I’m afraid it’s even more important that someone – anyone – must take the news of what’s happened here to the Riddinvolk and the Orthlundyn.’

His manner brooked no debate. ‘Looking to the end, as you rightly advised, Majesty, it’s vitally important that both your countries understand what has happened here, no matter what happens to any of us in the future.’ He leaned forward earnestly. ‘If possible, Riddin and Orthlund should act together in some way. At the very least they should establish good lines of communication with one another and with us here. We’ve restarted Goraidin training specifically with this in mind.’ He looked out of the window again at the grey obscuring rain.

‘We know nothing of His plans, His forces, anything,’ he said, half to himself. ‘Perhaps our torment here is just a diversion . . . a probe to test our strength and our will. Whatever it is, we know that only we can face it.’ He turned and pointed at his listeners. ‘But you mustn’t make the mistake of imagining that it’s the totality of His present purpose.’ He frowned. ‘We don’t even know how the western Lords stand in relation to Dan-Tor. If they’re his, then Sumeral could send forces across their lands and direct into Orthlund. They’ve taken a Mandroc patrol through unhindered already, haven’t they? Would the conquest of Orthlund take long, Isloman?’

Although quietly put, it was a harsh question and both he and Isloman knew the answer. Isloman remembered Hawklan saying that the only thing which might have stopped the Mandrocs marching through the length of Orthlund, was fatigue.

‘I can’t say,’ he replied. ‘There were plans for defence afoot when we left, but we’re not many, and we’ve no military tradition.’

Eldric nodded. ‘And once in Orthlund they could move across into Riddin.’

‘There aren’t many routes through the mountains,’ Isloman said.

‘There are enough,’ Eldric said curtly, ‘if my memory serves me. Enough for them to move quietly through, wait for a second force to be sent down the Pass of Elewart to draw the Muster north, and then attack their flanks or their rear.’ He shook his head. ‘While we keep our eyes so intently on Oklar, He could move around us and out into the world, leaving us as just a noisy irrelevance.’

It was a grim and chilling picture and, shifting uneasily, Isloman frowned. Sylvriss too, looked pale, and even Eldric seemed unsettled by his own impromptu analysis. He sat down and rested his head on his hand gloomily.

‘Ah well,’ he said with a sigh. ‘At least I’m starting to think straight again.’ He tapped the arm of his chair impatiently. ‘But I wish I knew more about . . . about everything in this mess . . . forces, dispositions, intentions . . . anything.’ His voice trailed off.

There was a brief, uncertain silence, then Isloman spoke, almost cheerfully. ‘Well, He knows no more about you than you do about Him, Eldric. That’s what war’s about; uncertainty. But you at least have your Goraidin like eyes and ears all over the countryside. And I’ll wager you have, at worst, the passive loyalty of many ordinary people throughout the entire land.’ His voice fell to a whisper. ‘And a great many people like Dilrap watching and waiting, and perhaps quietly acting. What servant of Dan-Tor’s could come so near the heart of your counsels?’

Eldric looked at him seriously for a moment, then smiled. ‘Ethriss protect me from optimists,’ he said, standing up. ‘But you’re right. I’m sorry. It was just a passing darkness. A patrol can be led anywhere by stealth but I find it difficult to imagine any of the western Lords allowing a Mandroc army over their land other than under the direst threat.’

‘And no one would attack through the Pass of Elewart unless they already held the north of Riddin in its entirety,’ Sylvriss added. ‘However, your reasoning was sound, and such a thing could come to pass if we aren’t vigilant. It confirms the rightness of our decision to leave. With Hawklan and me away, you’ll be less vulnerable, freer to take action, and easier in your heart to know that allies are being sought. I accept your escort – and the healer. We’ll leave tomorrow, if that’s possible.’

Eldric allowed himself a brief look of regretful resignation then bowed formally to the Queen and looked at Isloman. ‘And you, Orthlundyn?’ he asked.

Isloman nodded in confirmation. ‘We also,’ he replied.

* * * *

‘Farewell, Majesty,’ Isloman said, looking down at the Queen.

Sylvriss wrinkled her nose. ‘Don’t call me that, Isloman,’ she said. ‘It comes ill from you. I’m not your ruler, nor will anyone ever be. Muster woman is as much honour as I could wish from anyone, and Sylvriss will suffice.’

Isloman smiled awkwardly, then swung up on to Serian behind the mute form of Hawklan. He held out his huge hand. Sylvriss took it in both of hers. ‘Take care, Muster woman,’ he said. ‘You’ve been a rare companion. I’ll miss you.’

Sylvriss squeezed his hand. ‘And I you, carver,’ she said. ‘But we’ll meet again, have no fear. And guard your charge well. My heart tells me his worth is beyond measure.’

Eldric joined them. ‘A little chilly,’ he said, clapping his hands together. ‘But it should be a fine day.’

Around them the peaks of the higher mountains were already being touched by the light of the rising sun, while far to the west could be seen the remains of the clouds that had so peevishly shed their rains the previous day. Above them the sky was pale but hopeful, and Gavor, the merest black speck, circled diligently.

Eldric became solicitous. ‘You have everything?’ he asked anxiously. Both Isloman and the Queen reassured him patiently.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’ve asked that before, haven’t I?’

‘Only a dozen or so times,’ Isloman laughed.

‘Yes, I’m sorry,’ he said again. ‘To be honest, I’m not keen on partings, but I’m doing my best. I’ll miss you both very much, and Hawklan, and I’ll be mightily relieved when I hear you’re both safe with your own people.’

‘We’ll be relieved to send you that news,’ Isloman said. Then he reached into a pouch at his waist and

took out two small stone discs. 'I nearly forgot,' he said. 'A small gift for each of you.'

He handed one to Sylvriss and the other to Eldric. Sylvriss thanked him with a surprised smile, and Eldric grunted self-consciously. There was a brief, slightly awkward silence as each examined their gift.

'I'd have preferred to give you something a little better,' Isloman said. 'Miniatures aren't my strong point and I only had my knife point . . .'

His disclaimer was interrupted by exclamations from the two recipients.

'It's amazing,' said Eldric cocking his head on one side and repeatedly turning the disc to view it from different angles. 'It's Hawklan on Serian.'

'He moves as the stone moves,' Sylvriss said, imitating Eldric, her eyes wide. 'How have you done that? It's like the Crystal Room at the Palace.' Her voice faltered a little at the memory.

Isloman caught the hesitation. 'It's my hope for the future,' he said. 'Not my memory of the past. Make it yours as well.'

Sylvriss nodded and, still looking at the small carving, mounted her horse. Eldric gave his a last appreciative turn and placed it in his pocket. Then, without any further comment, he bowed to the Queen, saluted Isloman, and, clearing his throat, turned back to the castle.

Isloman and Sylvriss looked at one another for a moment, then Sylvriss urged her horse forward and clattered off through the open castle gate. Isloman watched her for a moment and then turned to Yengar who, together with Olvric, was in charge of the Queen's escort. 'I'd hurry after her if I were you,' he said, with a grin. 'She's liable to be halfway to Riddin before she remembers you're supposed to be with her.'

Laughing quietly to himself, he watched as the six men rode out of the courtyard in pursuit of their charge. Then he looked around at Eldric's mountain castle. In the increasing claustrophobia of their re-emerging wartime thinking, all had agreed that the departures of the Queen and Hawklan should be as inconspicuous as possible. Even their true destinations were not to be announced for several days.

However, in the shade of some of the windows Isloman could see Arinndier and the other Lords, making their silent farewells, together with Varak and Yatsu and such other of the Goraidin who were not out in the field.

Distant and dark-shrouded though they were, Isloman looked at each in turn and then raised his arm in a broad salute to them all.

Then he turned to his own escort; the Goraidin Dacu and the High Guard, Tirke. Both nodded to him.

Carefully he put his arms around Hawklan and took Serian's reins. 'Let's go back to Anderras Darion, Hawklan,' he said. 'Let's go home.'

Chapter 16

When the Guardians, Sphaera, Enartion, and Theowart, had formed the world as a celebration of their being, they found such joy in it that they bade the First Comer Ethriss to create others so that they in their turn might celebrate the miracle of being.

And with his three soul-friends, Ethriss created many others and taught them the Guardians' ways and gave them of their power so that they could create and take joy in being.

And amongst these was man.

But Sumeral, the Great Corrupter, saw the flaw that must be in all things, and hated it and all the creations of the Guardians, especially those of Ethriss. And He saw that man was possessed of greater power of creation than any other. So as the Guardians slept, He came to him and with soft words said, 'Blessed are the gifts of Ethriss that bring such joy unto yourself and your neighbour.' And He passed on.

But in the word 'neighbour' He laid a subtle snare, and discontent was born, and men began to seek him out, saying, 'You are wise. Tell us, are we as blessed as our neighbours?'

And Sumeral did not answer, but showed them the gift of the power of creation that Ethriss had given them, and said, 'In the use of this power will your joy be increased.' Which was both true and false, for though joy may lie in creating, it is in the totality of the creating and the created object that the true joy of being lies.

And men found indeed that joy was to be found in the power of creating, but under His guidance their creations were flawed, and knowing there was no true joy in them, men's discontent grew, and they sought Him out further.

But He dismissed them, saying again. 'I have told you. In the use of this power will your joy be increased. Trouble me not. Create yet more.' Though privily He would say to some, dropping His soft, sweet words into the gaping maw of their desire, 'If your neighbour's creations are more joyous, perhaps it is a flaw in the way of things that should be mended.'

And when they asked how this might be done, He said yet again, 'In the use of this power will your joy be increased.'

And looking on the perfection of His beauty, many men believed Him, and began to gather power to themselves not only to create yet more of His flawed designs but to mar the creations of their neighbours. And their discontent grew beyond measure, until the time came when many were utterly lost in bewilderment and followed His words blindly.

Thus His stain spread across the world, and the air and the sea and the earth became fouled with the poisons of His works, and many humbler creatures were slaughtered utterly. And He led His followers to create war, and wage it upon those who remembered the Guardians and the ways of true joy, for His own discontent grew also.

But in His arrogance and hatred He forgot the Guardians, until the clamour of war awoke them and they opposed Him. And the conflict was terrible, for men were now as skilled in the use of Ethriss's gift of creation as they were blind to its true purpose, and there was no limit to their awful skills.

Yet Sumeral feared Ethriss and the Guardians, knowing that in each of those who followed Him there lay still an echo of the truth of Ethriss's way and that the light of knowledge and truth must eventually destroy Him. So He took His three most cruel regents and taught to each a different portion of His skill in the use of the Power that had come from the Great Searing. And though He knew that their lust and folly would prevent their conspiring to overthrow Him, yet He kept from them the secret of life so that that which they desired the most, to be forever, would be always at His whim. And thus they were bound to Him

utterly.

These three He called His Uhriel: Creost, to whom he gave power over the seas and lakes and rivers, to bind Enartion; Dar Hastuin, to whom he gave power over the air and the skies, to bind Sphaeera; and Oklar, His closest and most favoured, to whom he gave power over the land and the mountains, to bind Theowart.

And when Ethriss learned that Sumeral had so instructed and bound these men, he knew that all being could be lost, for now the Guardians must oppose the Uhriel, and could no longer aid those few armies of men that stood against Sumeral's vast and cruel legions.

So, silently, he sought amongst the wisest of those who opposed Sumeral and taught them to understand the Power of the Great Searing so that they might learn further, unaided, and with their own skills grow to aid both the Guardians and the armies of the Great Alliance of Kings and Peoples.

And these he called Cadwanwr and together they were called the Cadwanol.

And silently, with the aid of Theowart, he built the Caves of Cadwanen for their home, a fortress under the mountains, so complex and intricate that its labyrinth of chambers and passageways could have swallowed an entire army and left the occupants undisturbed. Though in its deeper parts he came upon a mystery of which he spoke to no one save to say that the caves were without end.

For their further protection however, the Cadwanol filled the caves with myriad traps and deceptions created from the Old Power, as Ethriss had taught them, so that even he could not enter readily without their will. And he was pleased.

And in great secrecy, protected at first by Ethriss and then by their own skills, the Cadwanol learned and grew and prospered, aiding both the Guardians and the armies of men. And for many generations Sumeral was ignorant of the strange presence that so constantly disturbed His plans.

And when He learned of them, it was too late, for they were both cunning and powerful and through their efforts He could not then turn from His conflict with Ethriss nor could His Uhriel turn from their conflict with the Guardians.

Thus did the Wars of the First Coming become, for their greater part, the wars of men.

Yet the most terrible battles fought by the Cadwanol came in the aftermath of the destruction of Sumeral. For in His deep plunderings He had released from the rocks many strange creatures. Some, it was whispered, as fell as He and even older, though lacking His great power. Those He could win to His service, He did; and those He could bind, He did; but the remainder He ignored, trampling them underfoot or handing them to others for sport.

Thus when His spirit was struck down by Ethriss, and His body by the Fyordyn, many of these creatures fled back into the depths. Some to hide in fear, some to seek their old home and forget the horrors of the world they had been thrust into. Some to wait His Second Coming.

* * * *

Only the arrival of the felci saved the Cadwanol from destruction.

Appearing mysteriously one day from somewhere beneath the habited depths of the Caves of

Cadwanen, one passed through the many traps and deceptions that should have bound it, and presented itself to the Cadwanol, who were celebrating His passing.

Long-haired and long-tailed, with a sinuous body and a neck that ended in a pointed, inquisitive head, it looked more like a river creature than a cave dweller. But it waited for no curious outbursts from the assembled gathering.

Rearing up on its hind legs it said. 'Defend yourselves, wise men,' in its dark, and what was to become unmistakably characteristic voice, edged even in that grim moment with a touch of mockery. 'His allies live and gnaw at your roots.'

Then it turned and left before the Cadwanwr could recover. As they called after it in confusion, it turned and said. 'Hurry, or they'll be gnawing your bones soon. And my people are dying. We need your help and you ours.'

Then followed a terrible carnage in the uncharted depths of the Caves, as the Cadwanwr found themselves fighting the blighted remnants of Sumeral's fouler allies.

They came in great numbers, fighting with fang and claw, sword and axe, and His terrible weapons of fire. The felci in their turn opposed them with fang and claw, and the Cadwanwr with sword and spear, but in the dark and treacherous passageways they could not stay the onslaught.

Then, in their last extremity, their leader gave his life by using the fire of the Old Power.

For the close confined tunnels were choked with His creatures, and as he sent out the fire, it curled and flared around, and returning, consumed him. But as he perished he was transformed and he fell upon the enemy, sending a great light blazing through the ancient darkness, destroying those it fell upon and scattering the remnants, gibbering and blinded, into the darkness.

And as their leader's lingering sacrifice faded, the Cadwanwr pursued the retreating creatures, slaying many, until silence filled the caves again.

Then, saddened, they returned to their Caves and began to seal them against the return of such horrors. It was no light task, and they were assailed many times before the work was completed, and though each time they were attacked with diminishing force, their losses were sore.

It was many years before the depths were deemed to be free of these grim remnants of Sumeral's long reign.

* * * *

Oslang frowned a little as with a pass of his hand he sealed the heavy door. Andawyr noted the expression but made no comment; no one liked wandering about so deep below the mountains. They were very nearly at the lowest habited level of the Caves, and though nothing had stirred in the outer depths for generations, the bitter aftermath of the Wars of the First Coming were etched deep into the lore of the Cadwanol.

No bright summer light was brought down here by mirror stones. Only torches lit the passages and rooms and, bright though they were, they seemed to struggle against the oppressive mass of the mountains above.

Yet, paradoxically, the sensation that Andawyr and many of the others felt at this depth was not one of being burdened from above, but of being exposed, as if at a great height above some strange mysterious world into which a careless step might plunge them.

The two men walked for some way along a bare passage. One day, Andawyr thought, as he invariably did on the rare occasions he came down so deep, we must face this strangeness and push out further and deeper. But at the same time he set the problem comfortably low on his list of priorities. Then they were at their destination. Stopping outside a sealed door, Andawyr hesitated, but Oslang stepped forward purposefully and opened it.

The room was circular with a wide column at its centre. From the far side of the column, an uncertain blue radiance spilled round into the whiteness of the torchlight.

Andawyr grimaced and hesitated again. Oslang pushed him gently. Still reluctant, Andawyr moved round the column towards the source of the blue light.

It came from an alcove set into the column. Inside the alcove lay the sinister bird that Hawklan had inadvertently brought into Andawyr's hidden quarters at the Gretmearc. One of the myriad eyes of the Vrwystin A Goleg – Oklar's creature.

It was sitting motionless, but as Andawyr moved closer it burst abruptly into a frenzy of activity, its eyes and beak wide and its wing and claws beating frantically. The blue light surrounding it swirled.

Though no sound came out of the blue depths, both Oslang and Andawyr stepped back involuntarily, Andawyr lifting his arm across his face as if for protection, his eyes wide with fear.

Then, like an echo of the bird's reaction, Andawyr's face twisted into an expression of seemingly uncontrollable rage and he levelled his hand at the demented creature. A stream of white light came from it, striking the bird and sending it crashing into the back of the alcove where it continued to struggle desperately. Light still streaming from his hands, Andawyr stepped forward as if to reach in and throttle the bird.

For a moment Oslang stood stunned, then he seized Andawyr's arm powerfully. 'What are you doing?' he said, his voice hoarse with fear and disbelief.

The white light faltered, and Andawyr rounded on him angrily. But with a further effort, Oslang managed to drag the smaller man away. The light faded completely and almost immediately Andawyr's face became apologetic. He put his hand to his head. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'That awful – thing – I just want to ...' He drove his fist into his palm.

'I understand,' Oslang said. Then, with a faint smile: 'You always were inclined to be a little physical.'

Most of the tension faded from Andawyr's face and he too smiled, though sadly. 'No, you don't,' he said. 'And I pray you never do.' He paused. 'Why do you think I've put off coming down here so long?' Oslang did not reply; Andawyr had made little or no effort to hide his fear. Andawyr's expression became distant. 'I'm afraid that the Slip from the Gretmearc will trouble my dreams for a long time yet,' he said softly.

Oslang looked at his friend. This was the first time he had made any personal reference to his explosive and terrifying return journey from the Gretmearc. Without exception, the brothers of the Cadwanol had been concerned about his silence.

‘You faced the creature as it truly is, in the Slip?’ Oslang asked hesitantly.

Andawyr nodded. ‘Yes, of course,’ he said. ‘For the heartbeat that took, but . . .’

‘Some heartbeats can last a thousand years,’ Oslang offered.

Andawyr nodded again, his face distressed. Then his jaw became determined. ‘But I faced it. I was frightened beyond belief. I still am. But I didn’t flinch from it. I saw it, became it, and controlled it, until it too knew fear, I’m sure.’ He put his hand to his head. ‘The Slip seemed to last forever. Dreadful.’ He shuddered. ‘I felt I was becoming so weak. If it hadn’t been for Hawklan’s sustaining touch, I don’t . . .’ He did not finish the sentence. ‘And then suddenly I was here.’

‘You were indeed,’ Oslang said, eyes wide and eyebrows high. ‘Every warning in the place screaming out.’ He lifted his hands protectively at the memory.

But Andawyr was not listening. ‘I became it,’ he repeated. ‘Saw what it saw. Heard what it heard. So much and in so many places – I wonder . . .’

The two men looked at one another silently. Slowly Oslang’s eyes narrowed. ‘No,’ he said softly, anticipating his leader’s thinking. ‘It’s a corruption. We can’t use it ourselves. That’s His way. A trap baited with the lure of power for a good cause. It would bind us in some way, you know that.’

Andawyr pulled a wry face. ‘You may be right,’ he said. ‘But it sees and hears many things in many places and we’re woefully short of information. We’ve far greater knowledge of the Old Power than our forebears.’

‘True,’ Oslang said. ‘But that doesn’t mean we’re any wiser. He probably knows more as well. For all we know, you might have been allowed to capture this’ – he nodded towards the still struggling bird – ‘this thing, just so that you could be so tempted.’

The flickering blue light reflected on Andawyr’s face. He scowled. ‘Perhaps,’ he said. ‘But I doubt it. Oklar wouldn’t sacrifice such sight for any prize.’

‘Oklar will do what He tells him,’ Oslang said, bluntly. ‘And the binding of the Cadwanol would be no small prize.’ He suddenly raised his voice. ‘Good grief, you yourself pointed out how we’ve grown inclined to sit and wait for news to be brought to us. Who knows how that came about? What would we become if we controlled or thought we controlled *this*?’

‘Better informed,’ Andawyr said, his brow furrowed.

‘Stop it, you’re frightening me,’ Oslang said heatedly. He jabbed his finger at the bird. ‘With this bound here, Oklar’s as blind as we are. And I’d rather us both be blind than risk sharing his sight.’ His voice fell. ‘Even if we could use it, it would be like a crutch. It would atrophy what’s left of our true inner sight, and it would fail us in the end. You know that, don’t you?’

For a moment, Andawyr seemed about to flare up at this opposition, but Oslang’s gaze allowed no such excess. Gradually, the little man’s face relaxed and he slumped slightly. ‘Yes, I suppose you’re right,’ he said resignedly. ‘I’m sorry. It was just a passing thought.’ Then he stuck out his bottom lip pensively. ‘Even so, we may have no alternative one day,’ he said quietly.

Oslang grunted. 'We'll talk about it on that day, then,' he said firmly, laying a reassuring hand on Andawyr's shoulder.

He was relieved. Their brief confrontation had been oddly harrowing, but at last Andawyr had voiced his hitherto unspoken fears and desires, and that was highly significant. Mundanely, he said, 'Now perhaps you'd like to do what you came here for, and check our work. You've been putting it off for long enough and I've been very uneasy about it. We can't afford the risk of it escaping, especially today.'

Andawyr nodded and began looking round the alcove intently. The bird's frenzy heightened, but he ignored it. Then, seemingly satisfied, he turned his attention to the rest of the room, starting with the door.

As he reached it, there was a scratching noise and a voice called his name. He opened the door and the sinuous brown form of a felci slid in.

'Kristabel,' Andawyr said delightedly, kneeling down on the hard floor. With her tail as a counterbalance, the felci stood on her hind legs so that she was face to face with him. She cocked her head on one side, then reaching out with her forepaw she took his nose between her powerful claws and shook it gently.

'Andawyr,' she said, her voice deep and rich, and full of affection, though slightly ironic. 'I thought the nose was familiar.' Then her lip went back, revealing her formidable, rock-chewing teeth, and her silvery chattering laugh filled the room.

Andawyr gently cupped her head in his hands. 'Are you better?' he said anxiously.

'Yes,' she drawled, disparagingly. 'A lot of fuss about nothing. I've been rocked worse than that. It was only a thin vein I went through, that's why I didn't notice it until it was too late.'

Andawyr's face was pained. The felci were subterranean creatures with teeth and claws that could burrow through almost any rock. The thin vein that Kristabel referred to was cyffspar, a strange contaminant of unknown origin which in small quantities caused the felcis to hallucinate, and in larger quantities caused a convulsive and unpleasant death. It was, however, found only near the surface and as such was rarely encountered by the deep-burrowing animals.

'You were very fortunate,' Andawyr said. 'You're not normally so careless. What drew you so close to the surface?'

Kristabel dropped on to all fours and scuttled around the room. 'No idea,' she said, offhandedly. 'Just following my nose. Still it was all for the best, wasn't it? You were in a mess when they brought you back.'

'I'm in your debt, Kristabel,' Andawyr said seriously. The felci chattered to herself and, muttering 'Silly man,' stood on her hind legs to peer into the alcove.

'Oh dear,' she said, before Andawyr could pursue the matter, her voice heavy with irony. 'Still here, I see.' She chattered provocatively at the bird and thrust out a paw towards it. In the blue light her teeth glinted malevolently and her eyes turned into black pits. Unexpectedly the bird, still frantic, retreated to the back of the alcove. 'I think that's the last time you're going to be allowed to go to the Gretmearc alone, young man,' she continued, then, laughing: 'Such trouble you caused with your pet. Who's a naughty boy, then?'

Oslang intervened before Andawyr could rise to the felci's bait. 'The defences,' he said significantly, pointing his thumb at the trapped bird.

Andawyr nodded and continued the inspection that Kristabel's arrival had interrupted. 'They're excellent,' he said finally. 'You've all done a very good job.'

Oslang smiled.

'However . . .' Andawyr continued, lifting his hand.

'Keep away from my seal,' Oslang said sternly.

Andawyr looked at him reproachfully. 'However,' he repeated, 'a touch here,' – he ran his hand around the edge of the alcove, Oslang watching him intently – 'and here, should do it.' He stood back.

Slowly the flickering blue light steadied and the bird closed its eyes and became motionless. Kristabel made a disparaging noise and dropped back on to the floor.

'That's better, isn't it?' Andawyr said. 'And I'll add my seal to yours if you wish. Just to make sure none of us fall into temptation.'

Oslang ran his hand around the alcove as Andawyr had done. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, his voice awed. 'You could undo and reseal my work and I'd never know.' He turned to Andawyr. 'This work is amazing. How . . .'

Andawyr's hand rose to silence him. 'I've taught you all I can,' he said. 'You yourself have improved beyond measure even in this short time, but I can't give you the experiences I had to face. Just keep learning and you'll keep improving.' His manner became very serious. 'Trust me, Oslang. Everyone is stronger now than I was when I was tested. Should you be so tested yourself, you'll not find yourself wanting.'

Before Oslang could reply, Andawyr turned to Kristabel. 'What did you want, my dear?' he asked.

'Nothing at all,' the felci replied. 'But they do.' She looked upwards. 'They're all sitting around waiting for you, like little schoolchildren. I do think it's sweet the way they all follow you around. They're so excited.'

Andawyr levelled a cautionary finger at her. 'Behave,' he said sternly, opening the door. The felci laughed again and scurried out into the passageway.

As she loped off, another felci appeared from a side passage and deliberately bowled her over. There was a brief scurrying scuffle which ended with the two animals running off, side by side, laughing uncontrollably.

Andawyr watched them until they disappeared from sight, leaving only the lingering echo of their distant laughter. He shook his head. 'They're marvellous,' he said, smiling.

'But?' Oslang caught the doubt in his leader's voice.

Andawyr's smile broadened. 'But I can never escape the feeling that they regard us as pets,' he said. 'Kept here for their entertainment.'

Oslang affected a worldly indifference. ‘Oh, is that all?’ he said. ‘Personally I’ve never had any doubts about that whatsoever.’

* * * *

The atmosphere in the Work Hall was charged with expectation. The only members of the Cadwanol who were not present were those who had been given the responsibility of manning the Caves’ physical defences, and for the most part, these were the younger members of the Order.

The ceiling of the hall was domed, rising up in contrast to the floor, which consisted of tiers of broad steps tapering gradually downwards to end in a small central circular area. The whole was simple, restful and focussed.

Three sloping aisles radiated up from the central area and it was down one of these that Andawyr strode purposefully.

Reaching the centre, he looked round at his waiting brothers. By tradition, when the Order met formally, no one occupied the first tier. Thus the leader would be set beneath all those who had chosen him.

As he turned round, he held out his hands, palms upwards. ‘These recent weeks have seen profound changes in us all,’ he began. ‘I think now that I’ve taught you such of my own new knowledge, my new understanding, as can be taught in so short a time. More, I suspect, can be learned only through the passage of time or through terrible individual trial. Neither of those fall within my gift.’

He paused, and the silence of the mountains above seemed to fill the hall.

‘Soon, many of us must leave to start again the endless search for knowledge that Ethriss charged our forebears with,’ he continued. ‘But for all our vaunted knowledge and our new-found strength, we’re as nothing against the power of Sumeral and His Uhriel, and while we’re all here together, we must attempt the task that we’ve charged ourselves with – a task for which we have no guidance, but one which only we can undertake.’ He paused again, as if reluctant to take the final step into the beginning of what must be a new age.

‘Here, today, we must seek out the Guardians and waken them.’

The step taken, his voice became more matter of fact. ‘We know nothing of the fate of any of them after the Last Battle. Theowart, Sphaera and Enartion were rarely seen by men throughout the entire War of the First Coming, and it’s not recorded where they were during that battle. However, it is recorded that, like Ethriss, they were human in their form on the few occasions they were seen.’

He began to walk up and down, pausing occasionally to emphasize points with a jabbing finger. ‘Nor do we know anything of the fate of Ethriss. After the mêlée that followed the fall of Sumeral, he was gone. Some say he was struck down by Sumeral’s last spear cast, but . . .’ He shrugged.

‘And of course, we know nothing of the bodies of Sumeral and the Uhriel. They too could not be found after the battle. And so, my brothers. We have . . . nothing.’

He opened his arms wide as if to encompass the entire hall.

His voice fell. ‘Nothing that is, until I found myself pitched into conflict with an evil so ancient that

hitherto I'd only read about it. Nothing, until I found myself aiding a hunted man who could be Ethriss himself, dormant. Nothing, until I found myself held in Narsindal, touched and bound by a power that could only be Sumeral.'

He looked slowly round his audience. 'Brothers. If Sumeral and His Uhriel are among us, and are seeking the still sleeping form of Ethriss, then the Guardians will lie somewhere, waiting our call.'

Then his voice rose. 'Who doubts this?'

Interminable discussions over the weeks had laid low all possible doubts, and the Hall remained silent.

'Who doubts our will?' he continued, his voice still loud.

Again, there was silence.

Then finally, 'Who doubts our strength and our skill?'

Yet again no voices were raised, but the Hall filled with a murmuring rustle as all present raised their hands.

Andawyr laughed, and cut through the silence with a clap of his hands.

'Good,' he said. 'Our new knowledge has taught us an old lesson and given us a small measure of our ignorance. However, I don't share quite all your doubts.' The words he had spoken to Oslang earlier returned to him. 'I told you I've taught you all I can. And that more, much more, you'll learn for yourselves as time passes and circumstances change. But trust me . . .' He turned round again, gazing intently at his listeners. 'Whatever frailty you may feel within yourself, remember that as individuals each of you is stronger by far than you've ever been, and as an Order we're stronger by far than we've been for generations.'

He relaxed and smiled. 'Brothers, let me be prosaic. Amongst other things, we're farmers. In our answer to the need for food lies all our answers. We must till the fields we have, with the tools we've made. To do otherwise would be to starve.'

There was a ripple of movement around the audience.

'Now,' he said. 'Who here feels himself so frail that he will not give his best endeavour to this task?'

The movement stopped and no hands were raised.

Andawyr closed his eyes. 'Then the time is now, brothers,' he said softly. 'All words must cease.'

There were no precedents for what they were trying to do, nor any guidance to be found anywhere. Their main hope lay in the certain knowledge that Sumeral and the Uhriel had been awakened, and that therefore such an awakening was possible. Through the weeks of debate they had decided eventually that a raucous display of the Old Power was not the way. Had such a display been used to rouse Sumeral, then surely they would have felt it. And who could have done it? Also, to use the power to such an extent now would be to announce their presence to Him beyond all doubt, and risk bringing Him down upon them.

Someone, Andawyr could not remember who, had said, 'Perhaps it was some act of faith that awakened

them,' and from that chance remark had developed the idea they were now about to attempt.

Let there be a great silence. A man may sleep soundly through hubbub and uproar, yet wake suddenly at the lightest footfall. So might that not be the same for the Guardians, who had slept so long in the interminable clatter of the world they had formed?

As Andawyr fell silent each of the Cadwanol in his turn closed his eyes and entered into his own stillness, as if preparing for some great trial with the Old Power. Each took with him such knowledge as he had of the four Guardians and their domains.

Then, very slowly, each reached out to the other.

A joining of the minds of two or three individuals was not uncommon for certain uses of the Old Power, but it was no easy feat, being easily disturbed by the normal urgencies of daily life and the natural self-centred imperfections of the human personality. For virtually the whole Order to be joined thus would verge on the miraculous. Yet, under Andawyr's new-found strength and calm, it began, imperceptibly, to happen, until soon it was far beyond anything that had ever been achieved in the past. As each doubt came to Andawyr, he acknowledged it and let it pass unhindered.

There had been little difficulty in dealing with the problem of the cluttering pressure of daily routine, but when questioned about the possible effects of individual weakness, he had simply said: 'You know the gravity of our need. You know some of your imperfections. Let them, and such others as you find, fall away – sink from sight in the stillness we shall make. Trust me. You have both the strength and the courage to do it.'

At one point however, doubts and fears began to accumulate and cloud his clear stillness. He felt his own doubts begin to cling about him. Would they fail? Would he fail? Would he, who had had the arrogance to attempt to bring this about, destroy it with his own weakness? If that happened, such a joining could never be achieved again, and who then would even attempt to waken the Guardians? The stillness wavered.

Then, apparently irrelevantly, the thought came to him that if any force had, over the years, subtly dulled their wish to travel and seek new knowledge, it may not necessarily have been malign. How else could so many of the Order have been here, and been so rested, so introverted, to attempt this extraordinary deed? And if no external force had induced their seemingly inexcusable lethargy, was not this now a fitting atonement?

Andawyr's reproach about their neglect had struck cruelly at every member of the Order, including himself and, not being fully debated, had grumbled uneasily beneath the surface of their normal activities over the past weeks. Now, the unexpected appearance of this alternative interpretation of their seeming inaction spread through the merging minds like an absolving flux, trailing a great lightness in its wake and carrying all his doubts with it.

An act of faith, Andawyr recalled, and the lightness spread.

Then, without a perceptible change, the one mind became freely his and he allowed it to enter into the deepest stillness he had ever known.

But there was still an unease; the faintest ripple on the surface of this deep and silent lake.

What breeze blows yet? Andawyr felt the question form around him.

Expectation, he answered, after a timeless moment. And with sure ease, he let it go.

The stillness became almost absolute. That it was flawed here and there reassured him.

Into it he formed the names of the Guardians. And around each name was the totality of his mind's knowledge.

Share our stillness. Let us know your presence. You are needed. Your creation is threatened again.

Stillness.

Silence.

Then he was aware that he was listening to the Guardians.

‘ . . . cannot be as it was. All things are changed.’

How long had the voice – voices – been speaking? They were faint and distant – tired? Weak?

Vague images formed in his mind. Three figures, as faint and distant as the voices. Or was it one figure? That they had no reality, he knew. They were images; his mind needed to accept the reality of the voices.

He let them form and change in the stillness, and he listened. ‘We are not . . . as we were. We sleep and . . . do not sleep. We are . . .’

The emphasis of the last brief phrase eluded Andawyr, but he ignored the temptation to pursue it.

‘Understand . . .’

Then he was earth and water and air. Strong yet weak. Resolute yet fearful. Complete but incomplete. Lost. Searching.

Alone they were not enough. That thought was vivid. All could be lost. The sudden pain was unbearable. Life must fight where life was assailed.

‘Ethriss.’ A cry, a plea? A recognition?

For the merest instant, his mind, the mind of the Cadwanol, touched a stirring form. But it was bound. Hidden? He sought it again, but it was gone.

Then the voices too were gone. They would not return. Lingering in the distant echoes of their passing was the sense of their need. Ethriss had to be found.

* * * *

That evening, Andawyr and a few of the senior brothers sat in the Council Chamber. They had agreed before the attempt to wake the Guardians that they should meet and discuss whatever had been its outcome. However, while conscientious habit had brought them there, a meditative silence pervaded the room. The torches had been extinguished, and bright moonlight washed in through the window openings.

Andawyr stared out at the Riddin countryside, its familiar outlines subtly changed in the moonlight. An occasional night bird flew black across the tinted sky, to disappear into the darkness.

In the silence following the enigmatic passage of the Guardians, Andawyr had slowly guided the Cadwanwr back to the solid reality of the Work Hall until each was himself again. No one had spoken as the companionable silence of gathered friends gradually replaced the deep silence of their strange and unique communion. Then, without command, the gathering had quietly broken up.

Even now, so many hours later, the spoken voice seemed a coarse, inadequate means of communication.

That the joining of the minds of the Order had been a success was beyond doubt. A success the like of which had never before been achieved by the Order. But the contact with the Guardians had been strange and disturbing. What had they expected? Andawyr thought. The proud, armoured figures of children's tales? The icy disdain of creatures too far above humankind to concern themselves further? He did not know. But he had not expected the faint, almost whispering voices with their enigmatic words. Nor had he expected the strange ambiguities he had sensed. Least of all had he expected to be suddenly as they were, sharing their vision and their concerns, and worst of all, sharing their doubts and fears.

Yet he had shared. They had allowed it. Indeed they had brought it about, for he couldn't have achieved it. It had been thrust upon him. They had deemed it necessary that the Cadwanol understand something. Now each Cadwanwr must ponder what that was.

'What did it mean, Andawyr?' A soft voice echoed Andawyr's thoughts. It was Oslang's. Andawyr smiled in the moonlit darkness. Traces of the joining lingered still. Looking round he saw that some of the others were smiling too.

'It means that we're wiser than we were,' Andawyr replied. 'We've reached the Guardians, and they us. It was perhaps foolish to imagine that we could talk with them as if they were . . . ordinary people. But for all the strangeness of their words we know now that they live, my friends. They live. And we know that they, like we, search for Ethriss. We have allies that we knew nothing of.' He paused. 'But . . . ?'

'Put your faith in the Guardians, but keep your sword sharp,' Ryath said.

Andawyr chuckled. 'A Fyordyn expression I think,' he said. 'But apt. We've sought for guidance and it wasn't what we expected, but we needn't concern ourselves too much about that. It was guidance nonetheless and the lessons of today's work may be years in coming.' He paused thoughtfully. 'They may serve a purpose too subtle for our poor understanding. We shouldn't forget that we're their servants, not they ours.' Gently he slapped his hands together. 'The lessons of history, however, we know already. Tomorrow some of us go back out into the world, to listen and learn and teach.'

'And to search for this man, Hawklan?' someone said.

Andawyr nodded. 'Above all to search for him. He is Ethriss as I live. And he is vulnerable.'

He paused. 'He *must* be found, or we're all lost.'

Chapter 17

Despite his immediate concern about the long journey to Anderras Darion which lay ahead, and his

continuing concern about Hawklan, Isloman found the first part of the trek relaxing and pleasant.

There being no great urgency in their errand, the party was able to travel at a steady and unhurried pace for several days as they moved generally southwards, leaving Eldric's estate and passing through Arinndier's, Hreldar's and finally Darek's.

Maintaining the quiet secrecy of their departure from Eldric's, they travelled through the hilly grasslands that skirted the mountains, in preference to taking a somewhat easier route through the more fertile and populous plains below. They had no difficulty in avoiding such few people as worked this harsher terrain.

Only as they were about to move from Hreldar's estate to Darek's did they encounter any difficulty when, passing through a forest, a group of Hreldar's High Guards emerged suddenly and surrounded them.

'Whoops,' said Gavor, waking with a start.

The Guards had a driven and stern look about them and would have detained the group had not Isloman eventually shown them the document that Eldric had provided for such contingencies. It did not identify them, but it gave them unequivocal right of way and was signed by all four Lords. Suspiciously, the High Guards parted to let them through, but kept them in sight until they were well clear of Hreldar's estate.

As they rode away, Tirke gave voice. 'They'd no right to stop ordinary travellers like that,' he blustered. 'It's disgraceful. Lord Eldric would never have allowed such a thing. When we get back I'll . . .'

Dacu scowled. 'Shut up, Tirke,' he said angrily. 'Until you've something worthwhile to say.'

The young man looked set for an equally harsh response, but seeing the expression on Dacu's face he thought better of it and dropped back a little way sulkily.

'You seem upset,' Isloman said to Dacu after a while.

Dacu looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Yes,' he said eventually. 'I am, in a way. I was just thinking. Hreldar's High Guard used to be a fine troop once, then he turned them into virtually a purely ceremonial group. Quite a lot of Lords did actually . . . some kind of reaction after the Morlider War we thought at the time.' He smiled sadly. 'Now we can lay it all at Dan-Tor's feet, can't we? Anyway, we used to have some fun laughing at their fancy liveries and silly drill displays whenever they appeared at the tournaments, but now . . .'

'They've changed a little?' Isloman suggested.

Dacu nodded. 'They've changed a lot,' he said. 'And it's sad really. On the whole I'd rather have them as objects of mild entertainment than like that.' He inclined his head towards the now distant forest where the encounter had occurred.

Dacu's tone brought an old memory back to Isloman. 'I understand,' he said. 'I've not seen people looking like that since the height of the War. They looked very grim . . . weary inside.'

'Over-training,' Dacu said unequivocally, his face concerned. 'Just another reaction, I suppose. Too far one way, then too far the other. Balance is a difficult thing.'

Isloman agreed with this diagnosis, but both men knew that they could do nothing about it and that little

was to be gained by fretting over the idea. 'It'll settle down,' Isloman said reassuringly, then in an attempt to draw Dacu from his passing melancholy he appealed to his professional judgement. 'Mind you, they were quite impressive.'

The device worked. Dacu pursed his lips. 'Not bad,' he said, relaxing. 'Not bad at all.'

'Not bad,' said Gavor, mockingly. 'You never even saw them coming, dear boy.'

Dacu eyed the bird narrowly. He was about to make the excuse that they weren't actually in enemy territory when he caught the amusement in Isloman's face.

'Yes, all right. I'll admit that,' he said. 'And they hedged us in very neatly. To be honest, I'd never have thought that Hreldar's bunch could have been made so capable so quickly. It was a commendable effort. Still,' he added critically, 'they should've had their archers ready in case we made a dash for it.'

Gavor yawned disparagingly. 'Do you want me to have a look around?' he asked, condescendingly.

'No thank you, Gavor,' Dacu replied, courteously, but with an ironic edge in his voice. 'You husband what's left of your flagging energies for the mountains, old fellow.'

Gavor, who was indeed beginning to nod again, opened one eye and examined him narrowly. 'It's no trouble, dear boy,' he said menacingly through his closed beak.

Dacu chuckled.

However, Isloman noted, Dacu became noticeably more alert as they moved through Darek's estate.

'Don't worry,' Isloman said, patting his pouch. 'We've got Lord Eldric's pass, and we're still among friends, aren't we?'

Dacu looked straight at him. 'Yes,' he said. 'But we –I– made a mistake in that forest. I should've seen them coming. We'll have to sharpen up. There's no reason to think Dan-Tor will have men out looking for us in the mountains but I'd rather our safety rested on our wits than a piece of paper. It's unlikely to impress a Mathidrin patrol, is it?'

Isloman concurred. The Goraidin was correct. Should they have to fight or flee, he was burdened with Hawklan, and Tirke was of unknown and slightly suspect mettle. Eldric's last comment about the young man had been equivocal. 'He's a good enough soldier, and true enough deep down, I'm sure. He's quietened down a bit these last few months and been a great help to Jal, but . . .' His nose wrinkled uncertainly. 'He needs some rough edges knocking off yet. See what you can do on the way.'

Avoidance would thus have to dominate their progress. True, Gavor would be invaluable, but it had become an unofficial rule among the Goraidin that, except in emergencies, he should be used only for confirmation of their own observations.

'Where will we be when you leave?' Yatsu had asked some time ago. 'Lost, Isloman. Lost, if we start relying on Gavor for every little observation. We're all slow enough after all these years, without voluntarily neglecting our basic skills.' Isloman could only agree with this sentiment although Gavor subsequently began to affect an injured disdain from time to time.

Eventually the group came to the extreme south of Darek's estate, where, in a pre-arranged cache, they

found two pack horses and extensive supplies. Dacu looked at the supplies appreciatively. 'These should see us through the mountains, provided winter doesn't come too early,' was his immediate reaction. However he began to check through them meticulously.

Gavor 'helped'. As Dacu and Isloman spread the supplies out on the ground, he walked proprietorially among them, turning over for detailed scrutiny such packages and boxes as took his fancy, and wantonly discarding the less interesting ones.

Every so often he would find something of special interest and would execute a small hopping dance, saying, 'Ah, party time.'

Finally he alighted on Dacu's head, nodding and muttering knowingly as the Goraidin checked each item for the last time. Dacu glanced at Isloman, but the carver shrugged off any responsibility for the bird. In the end Dacu reached up to dislodge him, only to receive a sharp blow on the back of his hand for his pains.

'Careful, dear boy. You're making me lose count,' came the reproach.

When finally the supplies were packed to Dacu's, and Gavor's, satisfaction, Dacu walked to the top of a nearby rise and looked up at the peaks dominating their position. Directly south but still high above them lay the entrance to the pass that would set them on their way to Orthlund.

He stood for a long time in silence, then he looked at the sky, and sniffed the air. Isloman joined him. 'Any problem?' he asked.

The Goraidin shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Nothing special.' He paused. 'There's a chilliness about, though. I think we'll trim our rations. Just in case.'

Isloman looked at him quizzically. Sunlight fell warm on his face and bare arms and etched the mountain peaks sharp and clear against a blue sky. It was a splendid summer day with no hint of winter that he could feel. Yet who was he to dispute with this seasoned warrior travelling in his own land?

'Whatever you say,' he said. 'It'll do no harm.' He patted his stomach. 'We've been living well enough of late.' Then, nodding towards the mountains, he said, 'Shall we go? We may as well make the most of this weather while we can, and I'll wager it'll take us a large part of the day just to reach that valley.'

His estimate was almost correct and the evening found them camping only a little way into the valley after having spent the day toiling steadily up the long slope that led to its entrance.

As he had done on all other evenings, Dacu spread out his map and, in the gentle torchlight, they worked out where they should travel the following day. Isloman knew that Dacu was familiar with the earlier part of the route and that this was largely for the benefit of Tirke. He was impressed by Dacu's subtle patience. As with most things associated with the Goraidin, though, he found it was double-edged.

'The lad's unsure,' Dacu said to Isloman sympathetically, as they continued their journey the following day. 'And he's a long way from his own fellows. He's bound to be a bit spiky. It's important he learns as much as we can teach him on this trip.' Then, without any change in tone, came the harsh realism. 'Besides, if we get snow-bound we'll need no passengers.'

He was less impressed by Dacu's insistence that he and Tirke should keep their own journals of their daily travels. 'This is vital,' Dacu said, before any protests could be raised. 'It'll sharpen your powers of

observation, and the three books together will be invaluable to any . . . future travellers.'

Isloman noted the hesitation. 'Such as an army?' he asked.

'Such as an army,' Dacu confirmed, offering him a blank book. 'Or anyone who finds our bodies,' he added, with a laugh.

As each day passed, the terrain became more difficult and they rose steadily higher and higher. For increasingly longer periods, Dacu decided that they should walk rather than ride.

As they rose, the wind became stronger and more persistent and, when it shone, the sun less warm. Isloman became anxious about Hawklan. 'It's difficult to judge whether he's hot or cold,' he said, placing his hand on Hawklan's forehead. 'We're moving and keeping warm, but he's doing nothing. And this wind's deceptive.'

Dacu examined Hawklan similarly. 'He's unchanged,' was his conclusion. 'Don't fret, Isloman. if Hylland's never seen anyone like this, then no one has. I think if he was going to die it would've happened at the Palace gate or on your way to Eldric's. I doubt a little heat or cold is going to injure him.'

Isloman nodded his head, but seemed doubtful. 'Don't fret,' Dacu repeated, earnestly. 'You're probably too close to him to see clearly.' He blew out a noisy breath. 'I haven't mentioned this to anyone because . . . well, because it's of no real value in terms of nursing him, but every time I look at him, my guts tell me he's protecting himself in some way.'

He leaned forward and looked into Hawklan's face. 'I know I've said this before, Hawklan,' he said. 'But I don't think you were listening properly then, and you might be now. Thanks again for fixing my shoulder. It's fine now, and you taught me a lot.' He rotated his shoulder to demonstrate the point. 'If it's humanly possible, we'll get you back to your home, you know that, don't you? You can come back to us when you feel your friends and your own castle walls around you.'

Isloman listened in silence.

The next day, they came upon a broad valley, sunlit and sheltered. Across its floor, swathes of tiny white and yellow flowers decorated a soft springy turf. Wisps of grey cloud, like venerable, blowing manes, stretched out from the peaks of the mountains that shouldered into one another on either side to keep out the searching wind.

As they rode down into it, Dacu reined his horse to a halt. 'This is beautiful,' he said. 'Last time I was here, it was winter and almost impassable. I never dreamt it would look like this in summer.' He swung down from his horse. 'We'll walk,' he announced. 'Let the horses roam free. To burden another creature on a day like this would be an affront.'

Isloman laughed outright. 'I don't know about me being too close to Hawklan,' he said. 'But you sound exactly like him. I think you've been smitten with an attack of poetry. I hope it's not contagious – Tirke might catch it.'

Tirke looked at the two laughing men, uncertain whether to be indignant or not, but their good nature and the quiet calm of the valley forbade any such rancour and he too dismounted.

Gavor said nothing, but took wing and soared up towards the protecting peaks. As the party wended its

way along the valley, he flew high above them in wide graceful circles, resting on the warm flower-scented breezes that rose up to him. Occasionally, he tumbled over and over, falling precipitately out of the sky and laughing to himself.

The valley, however, was a brief interlude in what was proving, as expected, to be a relentless and hard journey. Tentatively, Tirke began to grumble. He wished it weren't so hot – or so cold. He fidgeted with his various jackets and tunics – took his gloves off – put them back on – wished the wind wouldn't blow in his face – or down his ear – wished there weren't so many flies – wished they were back in the valley – or in Orthlund – wished . . .

Dacu had learnt early in their journey that this weed was well-rooted in Tirke's personality, and he took the opportunity to grind a ruthless heel into it before it could blossom fully.

'I've told you once, Tirke,' he said, quietly, but very resolutely. 'Don't speak if you've nothing to contribute. The rule is, if you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it then try and get used to it. Above all, don't fret about those things you can't change, they'll cloud your mind and get you killed one day. Just concentrate on being here, and on what's going on around you.'

Stung, despite Dacu's quiet manner, Tirke's lip curled up and he opened his mouth to speak, but a brief conspiratorial shake of the head from Isloman changed his reply to a simple, if resentful, 'Sorry, Dacu.'

Then the clouds closed in, obscuring the distant mountains and truncating those nearby. Occasionally it sank down into the valleys to transform great open vistas into grey, silent and damp caves.

And the rain began.

As he fastened his cloak about him and pulled up his hood, Dacu looked significantly at Tirke. The young man affected a calmness he did not feel and copied the Goraidin's demeanour. Dacu winked at Isloman.

It rained intermittently for several days. Sometimes the rain would come down vertically through a thick obscuring mist, sometimes it would swirl and lash about as if it were trying to escape some driving demon. Small streams became fulsome and noisy, rushing underfoot or tumbling down from the heights above. The turf they walked on became sodden and clinging, and the rocks became blatantly treacherous.

Each night, after they had camped, they managed to cheer and warm themselves around the radiant stones that they had brought, and Dacu quietly instructed Tirke in the subtler arts of moving through the mountains in such conditions. Again, the man's patience impressed Isloman as he watched him reaching through Tirke's brittle façade to the truer man beneath. Each night also, Dacu made amendments to his map, which was becoming increasingly more inaccurate as they moved away from Fyorlund, and the three men wrote their journals of the day's travelling. Hawklan sat as silent witness to these proceedings.

As the days passed, the small caravan moved steadily through the grey dampness, but it became increasingly difficult for them to keep dry and warm. Tirke descended into a surly, repressed silence, and Isloman became more anxious about Hawklan. Dacu too became concerned. The weather was worse than might have been expected but the effect on the morale of his charges seemed disproportionate. And these were early days yet. There was worse terrain to come and, almost certainly, worse weather.

'We must try and find some proper shelter for a while,' he said eventually. 'Somewhere where we can dry off thoroughly and check the supplies. Keep your eyes open for any caves.'

The remark was addressed to both Isloman and Tirke, but it was directed primarily at Isloman, whose shadow vision was most likely to penetrate the shifting greyness that came and went around them.

Ironically, however, it was Tirke who spotted a shadow at the head of a scree slope towards the evening of the next day. Following his pointing finger, Isloman confirmed his discovery and the three men headed towards it as enthusiastically as the loose scree would allow. As they approached it, however, their euphoria faded. Apparently recently exposed by a rock fall, the cave seemed to be little more than a rather shallow alcove.

‘Still, it’s better than nothing,’ said Dacu, lighting a torch. ‘Let’s have a closer look.’

As he stepped inside he found that the shallow appearance of the cave was caused by a large boulder near the entrance. Stepping around it he held out the torch to reveal a spacious chamber with a dusty floor and walls which, apart from a few damp cracks, were quite dry. ‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘In fact, excellent. Well done, young man. Come on in. And bring the horses.’

Isloman carried Hawklan in as bidden, but Tirke hesitated just inside the entrance, pretending to adjust his horse’s bridle. He peered into the darkness where the chamber narrowed into a tunnel at its far end. ‘Are you sure nothing lives in there?’ he asked, as casually as he could manage.

Dacu chuckled to himself and increased the light of his torch. The darkness receded along the tunnel a little. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘The horses wouldn’t have come anywhere near it if there’s been anything wild here. Besides, look.’ He pointed to the dusty floor. ‘No signs of tracks, or of bedding or nesting materials. Nothing lives here.’ A small beetle scuttled away from the torchlight. ‘Nothing big anyway. Come on in.’

Still uncertain, Tirke led the horses into the cave and began unharnessing them. Dacu joined him, while Isloman began removing Hawklan’s wet cloak and checking to see how much water had soaked through to him. After a moment he pulled a face of appreciative surprise. ‘I wish my cloak was this good,’ he said. ‘He’s bone dry. Not even clammy.’

Dacu, occupied with the horses, grunted an offhand acknowledgement.

Isloman looked at the cloak he was holding and rubbed the material inquisitively between his fingers. It seemed in no way exceptional, and he wondered briefly where Tirilen had found it when she had searched for suitable clothes for Hawklan’s unexpected journey to the Gretmearc.

Later, dried, rested and fed, the three men sat in companionable silence around the radiant stones. Arranged round a separate pile of stones some distance away were their drying clothes, and the characteristic smell of these mingled with the smell of the horses to permeate the cave.

Gavor was perched on a rock near to Hawklan, and was sleeping soundly, emitting an occasional low whistle.

After a while, Dacu’s face became pensive.

‘Is anything the matter?’ Isloman asked.

‘No,’ Dacu replied doubtfully. ‘Just thinking that we’ve a long way to go, and there’ll probably not be many billets like this on the way.’

Isloman's eyes narrowed slightly. The comment was unlike Dacu. All in all they'd come through fairly well. The weather had been atrocious, but while the three of them had been soaked, their supplies had been unaffected, and Hawklan's remarkable clothes had kept him both dry and warm. There was enough sunlight locked in the radiant stones to see them some considerable way yet and this weather couldn't hold forever.

Or could it?

The thought came to him unexpectedly like a chill draught, and a small knot of black depression formed deep inside him.

Serian whinnied noisily.

'What!' Gavor woke suddenly. Looking from side to side, he flapped his wings urgently. 'Did somebody say something?' he asked.

The darkness in Isloman vanished as suddenly as it had come, and Dacu, too, smiled as if a burden had just been lifted from him. 'Yes,' Isloman replied. 'But not to you.'

Gavor floated down from his perch to land by the carver. 'Are you sure, dear boy?' he said. 'I could've sworn I heard someone calling out. Several people, in fact.'

Isloman was about to make a comment to the effect that it was probably Gavor's friends at Anderras Darion bewailing his protracted absence, but before he could speak the bird stumped off towards the rear of the cave.

'How far does this go?' Gavor asked, his neck craning forward as he peered into the darkness.

Dacu shrugged. 'I've no idea,' he said. 'Quite possibly for miles. There aren't many exposed entrances like this, but they say the mountains around here are riddled with tunnels, and the few I've ever found went further than I felt inclined to explore.'

Tirke looked at Gavor prowling the outer edge of the torchlight. 'Are you sure there's nothing living in here?' he whispered to Dacu, only half-jokingly.

The Goraidin's response was unexpectedly irritable. 'What, for pity's sake, Tirke? Some sierwolf the Cadwanol forgot to lock up? Don't be so stupid. You're making me angry.' There was a menace in the man's voice that made Isloman look up. Tirke edged away from him nervously.

Serian whinnied again uncertainly, and Gavor cocked his head on one side. 'There're some very strange echoes in this place,' he muttered to himself, returning to his vigil by Hawklan. 'Don't let me go to sleep again.'

A few minutes later, Dacu stood up and went to the cave entrance. Isloman joined him, pausing only to lay a reassuring hand on Tirke's shoulder.

'What's the matter, Dacu?' he said. 'The lad was only joking.'

Dacu nodded. 'Yes, I know,' he said regretfully. 'I'll apologize to him. I don't know why I did that.' His face became anxious. 'I'm beginning to wonder whether I'm up to this, Isloman, if I'm going to go over

the edge like that at the first bit of bad weather we run into.’

Isloman had little advice to offer. ‘Sleep on it,’ he said. ‘There’s something odd about this place. Gavor doesn’t normally hear things that aren’t there, and Serian’s uneasy.’

‘Dangerous?’ queried the Goraidin, old reflexes displacing his new doubts.

Isloman looked out into the darkness. Even his shadow vision could not penetrate far into the damp starless night, but he could hear the rain still falling steadily. ‘Not that I can sense,’ he said uncertainly. ‘But . . .’ He shrugged.

Dacu turned back to the heartening warmth of the radiant stones. Tirke eyed him unsurely as he approached.

Dacu met his gaze. ‘I’m sorry, Tirke,’ he said without any preamble. ‘I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that. It was wrong of me.’ Then, before Tirke could comment: ‘Isloman feels there’s something strange about this place, and I’m inclined to agree with him. Nothing dangerous, I think, but odd. It could be no more than the echoes you get in a place like this after we’ve been so long outdoors, but I’d like you to split the horses. Serian and mine at the entrance, the others at the back. They’ll serve us well enough as sentries. And we can keep the torches on low.’

‘I’ll sleep with my sword out,’ Tirke said, clambering to his feet to execute Dacu’s order. Once again, Dacu felt a bubble of irritation rising within him, but he caught it and crushed it.

‘If it’ll make you feel better,’ he said, forcing a mildly concerned acquiescence into his voice. Then, smiling, ‘But make sure you don’t roll over on it.’

Later, Isloman found himself leaning back on the rock wall, looking at the others, now all sleeping. Tirke was a little restless, but Dacu was as motionless as Hawklan.

He felt very relaxed and rested. Whatever tensions had mysteriously built up between Dacu and Tirke seemed to have evaporated and he was looking forward to the morning when they could all continue their long journey back to his home.

The cave was now illuminated only gently by the reduced torches and, as he gazed around idly, he began to work out plans for a wall carving which would use the subtle shading that the torchlight produced on this long hidden rock. Then, realizing what he was doing, he smiled and looked down at his hands.

The scar caused by his accident with Dan-Tor’s chisel was clearly visible. Probably always will be, he thought. But it had a healthier appearance now, and the stiffness that the injury had caused was long passed. The sight of it reminded him of the many strange and tragic events that had brought him to this place, but he was too at ease for the memories to offer him any burden. On an impulse, he took out his knife and, twisting round, began scratching softly into the rock.

When he lay down to sleep some while later, he was still smiling. As with the making of the gifts he had given to Sylvriss and Eldric, he had found the brief return to his craft profoundly satisfying. Drifting into sleep, his last thought was of Varak and the solace that he too said he had found in his wood carving. On the wall he had left a small intricate sketch showing Hawklan listening to the stooped and crooked form that Dan-Tor had adopted when he arrived at Pedhavin. Behind the figures was a hazy but powerful representation of Anderras Darion.

* * * *

Isloman was suddenly wide awake. Some caution closed his eyes to the narrowest slit almost immediately. Without moving, he could see the horses and the inert forms of Dacu and Tirke, and he could feel Hawklan by his right-hand side. But to his left, something moved.

Chapter 18

As Isloman had said, Yengar, Olvric and the four High Guards appointed by Eldric to escort the Queen to Riddin found themselves slipping further and further behind her as she galloped relentlessly away from Eldric's stronghold.

The two Goraidin exchanged concerned looks, but the High Guards, more used to Sylvriss by dint of their occasional Palace duties, seemed highly amused.

'You may as well slow down,' said Kirran, the most senior of the four. 'She'll stop when she's ready and if we keep on like this we're not going to last half a day.'

Yengar scowled, then blew out his cheeks in resignation. 'I suppose you're right,' he said. 'I'd forgotten how the Muster used to ride. Slow down. We'll trot, and hope she remembers us soon.'

Some while later they caught up with the Queen, now walking. She smiled as they fell in on either side of her. 'Sorry,' she said simply. 'I forgot.'

Yengar could do no other than respond to the smile with his own, but Eldric had given him charge of the group and the incident could not be allowed to pass unremarked.

'Majesty,' he said pleasantly. 'If you could manage to stay with us, I'd appreciate it. Particularly as we move further into the mountains. We've some difficult terrain to pass through and we can't afford to have anyone hurt through travelling carelessly.'

The Queen bridled a little. 'I don't ride carelessly,' she said, her smile fading.

'No, Majesty,' Yengar replied without a hint of apology. 'But *we* would if we tried to ride like you do.'

The Queen's smile returned. 'I accept your rebuke, Goraidin,' she said. 'I was wrong to do what I did. It won't happen again.'

Nor did it.

The following day the group collected supplies and pack-horses that Eldric had arranged, and began their journey into the mountains proper.

Eldric's stronghold being already in the mountains, there was, unlike Isloman's route, no leisurely overland approach. Indeed, the earlier part of the route was quite difficult, obliging the men to dismount and walk their horses quite frequently. Sylvriss however, on her Muster mount, was able to stay mounted for much longer, a fact which relieved both Olvric and Yengar who had had 'the delicacy of the Queen's condition' thoroughly impressed upon them by Eldric before they set off.

Again, Kirran, a married man with children of his own, was more sanguine. 'Don't fret,' he said. 'Babies are tougher than you think, and the Queen's a strong healthy woman with sound instincts. She'll not do

anything foolish.’ He nodded in her direction. ‘Look at her. She’s safer on horseback over these rocks than you or I’d be in a flat field.’

That, the two Goraidin had to agree with, but Yengar in particular found his concern for the unborn child remarkably persistent. Despite his training, he found himself constantly looking towards the time when they would ride down out of the mountains on to the plains of Riddin, and, he hoped, into the care of the Muster.

It was a dangerous way for a Goraidin to think, and he knew it. Quietly, he sought reassurance from Marek, the High Guard healer chosen by Hylland and Eldric to care for the Queen. Marek confirmed Kirran’s comments and told Yengar what he already knew.

‘I understand your concern, Yengar,’ he said. ‘But you’ll serve the Queen and her child best by helping her to feel secure. And that means doing your job, not constantly looking over your shoulder at her with a worried look on your face.’

Yengar gave him a reproachful look at this mild caricature, and Marek laughed. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘If you go around looking like that, you’ll have us all sick.’ Then, more seriously:

‘Listen, Yengar. For a man, I know a lot about pregnancy and childbirth, but it never fails to humble and amaze me. There’s a tremendous . . .’ – he searched for a word – ‘momentum for life to continue and survive. Sometimes against the most incredible odds. Believe me, in her present condition, the Queen’s personal resources are greater than they’ve ever been, and they were already considerable, as you know. The only thing that’s going to upset her is doubt about you, and your ability to get us through these mountains.’

He looked up at the peaks surrounding them, grim and harsh against a grey sky. Yengar nodded, but still seemed to be uncertain. Marek eyed him narrowly and then struck a blow he knew the Goraidin would appreciate. Leaning forward, he spoke slowly and with heavy emphasis.

‘If any problems arise with the Queen or the baby, I’m the only one who can deal with them, so you’d be better worrying about me, rather than her.’

A look of alarm passed briefly across Yengar’s face as this revelation unfolded in front of him. Marek contented himself with raising a knowing eyebrow.

Gradually, Yengar found himself more able to set aside his excessive concerns for the Queen, partly because of Marek’s comments, but mainly because of the conduct of the Queen herself. She continued to be able to ride over terrain that was forcing the men to walk, and when she did walk, it was generally because circumstances dictated a leisurely and cautious pace. In addition, she remained cheerful and helpful; a good travelling companion, he realized after a day or so.

The route to Riddin was used more frequently than the one being taken by Isloman’s party to Orthlund, but it was still little used and was ill-marked. Thus the two groups spent their evenings similarly: discussing the day’s progress, planning the following day’s, making notes on maps and, after some initial reluctance by the High Guards, writing daily journals.

As the days passed, they settled into an easy routine. At night, the Queen would superintend the bedding down of the horses, then, until they began to retire, she would share the men’s communal shelter. She talked freely about Dan-Tor and his years of scheming, and, to Marek’s relief, she talked equally freely about her husband and their happy times together.

Later, in the silence of her own shelter, as she drifted in and out of sleep, she would think also of Dilrap, alone and defenceless at the heart of Oklar's domain, except perhaps for Lorac and Tel-Odrel, sent back to Vakloss by Yatsu to continue the mission they had had to abandon to bring back the news of the King's murder. The memory of Tel-Odrel invariably made her clench and unclench her right hand as a small atonement for the blow she had struck him in her pain. Regret is a persistent thorn.

The images of Isloman and Hawklan too would come and go. She missed the carver's reassuring bulk more than she would have imagined, but the absence of Hawklan's strange presence left some deeper gap that she could not begin to fathom. It had the character of that left by the death of Rgoric, but it both heartened and frightened her. She had some measure of the power that had come out of Narsindal, but what might yet come out of Orthlund? And what would be the fate of those caught up in the meeting of these powers? Memories of the distant image of Vakloss raked by two converging scars of destruction persisted, rendered more vivid by the descriptions she had heard subsequently from the Goraidin.

Despite these many distractions however, her innermost quiet was preserved by the knowledge of Rgoric's child fluttering inside her. Other events would take their course independent of anything she did. Her concern now was to preserve her child. That, and to bring to the people of Riddin the news of Oklar's usurpation of the throne of Fyorlund and all that that might imply to them.

* * * *

Athyr reached the rocky outcrop that he had chosen as his observation post and, making himself as comfortable as he could, he leaned back to watch the performance of his students.

Shouldn't be too long, he thought. It had taken him longer than he had anticipated to reach his vantage point and it had been a peculiarly draining trek, but at least the attacking group would be well under way by now and he would have less time to stand around waiting.

Looking around, he soon found his fellow observers on nearby slopes. Yrain was looking at him, her hands raised high in what he judged to be mock applause at his slow progress up the hill. He waved a fist at her, then settled back against the hard rock to begin his vigil.

The exercise they were supervising was routine enough. The small attacking group was to penetrate a larger enemy group, remove a flag to confirm their success, and escape, preferably unnoticed. The enemy group had, of course, been advised of their intention and the terrain had been chosen for its lack of cover.

The only special features about the exercise were that it was being done in daylight and it was the first the Orthlundyn had undertaken in the mountains since the encounter with the Alphraan. Accordingly, many of Loman's Elite force were discreetly involved with it. Ostensibly they were there as observers, but Loman had instructed them secretly to be ready to evacuate the trainees quickly in the event of any action by the unseen mountain dwellers. Then, at Gulda's insistence, he told them to go unarmed.

From where he stood, Athyr could see the enemy camp clearly. It was well placed and well guarded. He nodded approvingly. The two observers who would subsequently report on the exercise as seen from ground level could be clearly distinguished by their bright yellow jackets.

Methodically he began scanning the surrounding terrain for signs of the approaching attack group. After two thorough passes, he began to frown. He could see nothing.

Somewhat reluctantly he reached into his pack and drew out the polished seeing-stone that would enable him to see distant images more clearly.

But even with this, another pass over the area again yielded nothing. He looked down at Yrain. She too was using a seeing-stone, and her face was concerned. The attacking group were all good students, and if they acquitted themselves well enough in such a difficult daytime exercise they would be eligible to begin training for the Elite corps. But they weren't this good! It was unlikely that they could have escaped detection by both him and Yrain under normal circumstances, and it was impossible that they should have done so when being sought through seeing-stones!

He glanced up at the sky. The attack group should be very near by now if the exercise was to be completed in time for them to return to their main camp before nightfall. He looked around at the other high observers. The result was the same. Most of them had resorted to using seeing-stones and were now searching randomly.

This was unbelievable. The attack group must be lost. Some elite group they'd make!

Athyr raised his fingers to his mouth to signal the others when a distant whistle reached him. It was Englar, newly appointed to the Elite corps and on his first exercise as an observer.

'Due east,' came his message. Turning his seeing-stone towards him, Athyr saw Englar confirming the direction with a pointing hand. He followed it to find himself examining the slopes of a mountain on the far side of the valley. Touching the edge of his seeing-stone he made the image larger.

There, excellently disguised and very difficult to see, were the members of the attack party. In three separate groups they were slowly and skilfully approaching a small plateau. A plateau they must surely be able to see was quite deserted.

Athyr felt his mouth dropping open in bewilderment. What were they doing? Before he could react however, a cry floated up to him from the camp below. Lowering the seeing-stone, he looked around for its cause. It did not take long. Down in the waiting camp there was a flurry of movement, and he needed no seeing-stone to see it was a fight.

He watched as the two yellow-clad observers converged on the conflict like angry insects. More cries and shouts drifted up to him, then, to his horror, he saw the turmoil spread as members of the group turned on the two intervening figures.

Furiously, Athyr thrust his fingers into his mouth and blasted off a series of shrill whistles. Englar and a couple of the other observers were to retrieve the attack group from the empty mountain they were assailing and the others were to get down to the camp and find out what in thunder's name was going on.

Glancing round, he was pleased to see that his last command had been anticipated and several of the observers were making for the camp as quickly as the terrain would allow.

When he himself finally reached the camp he was angry enough to face a cavalry charge. An extremely wide avenue opened up spontaneously through the trainees as he strode towards the waiting observers.

The look on Yrain's face however dispelled his anger almost immediately.

Taking his arm before he could speak, she said, urgently, 'We've got a serious knife wound. I've patched it up, but we'll have to get it back to the castle immediately. They're rigging a carrier now on one

of the horses. And I've told them to break camp,' she added.

Athyr winced. 'Who's been hurt?' he asked. Yrain shrugged. 'I don't know their names. Two lads from Halyt Green, I think.'

'Two?'

Yrain nodded. 'The other's got a badly cracked head. He'll have to travel back slowly.'

'Where are they?' Athyr said. Yrain indicated a small group standing watching them nearby. As they walked towards it, he noticed she was limping.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

She waved a dismissive hand. 'I twisted my foot coming down. It'll get me home if I keep my boot on and take it easy.'

Athyr frowned slightly. Yrain came from a mountain village and was as fleet and nimble as a goat. Such an accident was out of character. Before he could pursue the thought, however, he was standing by the two casualties. Both were unconscious.

Kneeling down, he gently examined the wounds and confirmed Yrain's diagnoses. He glanced around the wide and shamefaced circle of which he was now the centre. A large number of minor injuries became apparent.

'What else have we got?' he asked grimly, standing up.

'Nothing much,' Yrain said, affecting an indifference which Athyr judged to be for the protection of the gathered students. 'Cuts and bruises. A few bloody noses.'

'And your foot,' Athyr said. If Yrain wanted to hide some of the antics that she had helped stop, she could take a little of the odium.

'And a pair of disjointed fingers,' Yrain added quickly, deflecting the comment and deftly implicating one of her fellow observers.

Reluctantly a deformed hand appeared in front of Athyr. He took hold of it gently and shook his head resignedly. 'When are you going to learn not to use your fists, Tybeck?' he asked.

The man started to speak. 'Tirilen will be able . . .'

Athyr lifted a finger to silence him and smiled. 'No, no,' he said. 'Tirilen's got enough on her hands at the moment. This'll yield to field treatment, I think.'

The hand jerked back, like a startled animal retreating to its burrow, but Athyr's gentle grip forbade it and his smile turned into a grin. Suddenly he jerked his head forward as if to butt Tybeck in the face. Reflexively the man moved back and as he did so, Athyr gripped his wrist with his free hand and gave the damaged fingers a fierce tug.

'Don't cry out,' he said softly while Tybeck was still drawing in a very long breath. 'It'll set a bad example to the children here.'

‘Your concern’s very touching,’ Tybeck managed, through clenched teeth, hugging his throbbing hand to his chest.

‘My foot’s fine,’ Yrain said hastily.

* * * *

Ireck walked briskly down the corridor towards the hall where the weapons from the Armoury were being stored. He was a little late, but he knew he would probably be the first to arrive. Moving the weapons from the hall up to the impromptu armouries recently established at ground level was hard work and little relished.

Relished even less was the prospect of trailing behind Loman through the labyrinth to fetch more weapons from the Armoury proper, and that was what they would be doing later on when Loman had finished his meeting. Even with Loman’s close guidance, the winding journey through the whispering columns tended to produce sleepless and disturbed nights.

Still, Ireck consoled himself, such expeditions were becoming less frequent. Many more weapons would have to be removed in due course as the people armed, but when this last batch had been taken upstairs they would have sufficient readily accessible for their immediate training needs.

As he neared the hall, a sound interrupted his thoughts. Children? Playing? Singing? He frowned. Children played all over the Castle, and the Castle took their ringing voices and seemed to celebrate them. But Ireck had never known any to venture so far down. His frown deepened. If they were in the hall then there was every possibility that one of them might be hurt, playing amongst those arrays of lethal edges and points. And there was the labyrinth. Above all, children should not play near that. Concerned, he quickened his pace.

Turning a last corner he came into the hall suddenly and silently. There was a hurried scuffling, and he caught a brief glimpse of two small figures flitting behind one of the stacks of weapons that were arranged in neat rows across the floor of the hall.

He smiled to himself. ‘Come on, children,’ he called out. ‘There are better places than this to play in. You’re going to get hurt.’

‘Ho!’

A voice along the corridor behind him made him turn. Glancing around he could not see immediately where the call had come from.

‘Help me with this, will you?’ it came again. This time Ireck identified a nearby junction as its source.

‘Just a moment,’ he shouted in reply, then turning back to the hall, ‘Come on, you two, out of it. I can see you.’

‘Hurry up, it’s heavy,’ called the voice again, more urgently. With a last glance at the stack behind which he thought he had seen the children, Ireck turned and went to assist the unknown caller.

When he turned the corner, however, there was no one in sight.

‘Hello,’ he shouted, but there was no reply. The corridor was deserted. Puzzled, he looked up and down once or twice, then, concluding that the caller had managed whatever it was he had needed help with, he shrugged and turned to return to the hall.

As he did so, he caught again a fleeting glimpse of two small figures disappearing around a bend some way ahead of him.

Little devils, he thought with a smile. Still, at least they were away from the weapons and the labyrinth.

Perhaps he should have a word with Loman about keeping children away from here. But he dismissed the thought immediately. Apart from being impossible, such a ban would actively encourage the imps and then a real accident was highly likely. Better they be shown the dangers and allowed to come and go as they wished. *He would* mention that to Loman.

Still smiling, he strode forward towards the waiting weapons.

* * * *

‘What in Ethriss’s name is happening?’ Loman stood up and began pacing up and down the room. ‘Our best students attack the wrong mountain in broad daylight, and the others start their own personal war. What am I going to tell that lad’s parents if he dies of that knife wound?’ He levelled a finger at Athyr. ‘And he might well. Tirilen’s nearly unapproachable dealing with him. It’s bad.’

‘Don’t blame me, Loman,’ Athyr protested. ‘You know damn well what happened. I’ve done nothing but think about it since we got back. It must have been the Alphraan. It’s the only explanation that makes any sense. Even I couldn’t think of anything after I’d fixed Tybeck’s hand except, get away, quickly. It just kept going round and round in my head . . .’ He hesitated. ‘Like a bouncy little dance tune. Anyway, that’s exactly what I did.’

Loman nodded. Athyr’s forced march of the group through the night was already becoming a small legend. He slumped down into his chair again and started raking through the ashes of the discussion, looking for something that might enable him to avoid the consequences of Athyr’s conclusion.

‘And the attack group said they’d heard signals changing the location of the camp?’ he asked.

Athyr nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘But we sent none.’

Loman brought the terrain to mind. ‘Didn’t they see this new campsite was deserted?’ he said in exasperation.

Athyr looked unhappy. ‘They’re a bit confused about that,’ he said. ‘Some of them said the signals told them it was an ambush they were approaching. Others thought they heard voices ahead, and at least two thought they saw something.’ He extended his hands apologetically.

Loman changed tack. ‘And we’ve no explanation for the fighting at the camp?’ he said.

‘None,’ Athyr replied. ‘Tybeck and Jenna both say the same thing. One minute everything was fine, then all of a sudden this fight came out of nowhere. And when they moved in to stop it, they were attacked as well.’

‘What did Tybeck and Jenna feel?’ Gulda’s blue eyes fixed Athyr. He met her gaze squarely. He had

anticipated the question. ‘Surprised and then a little frightened,’ he replied, echoing the response he had received from both of them.

‘But no anger?’

Athyr shrugged slightly. ‘A little, obviously. Particularly when things started to get heated,’ he said. ‘That’s why Tybeck got a bit rough. But nothing at the beginning and nothing . . . unreasonable . . . at any time.’

‘How’s your foot?’ Gulda turned abruptly to Yrain. Slightly surprised, the woman leaned forward and rubbed it gingerly.

‘Sore,’ she said. ‘But it’s only sprained. It’ll be all right after a little rest.’

‘It’ll slow you down for weeks, and trouble you on and off for months,’ Gulda replied, coldly. ‘You were carrying that boot knife again, weren’t you? After I specifically told you to go unarmed.’

Yrain’s face clouded. ‘How did you . . .?’ Gulda’s long fingers flicked out to cut her short.

‘How did I know?’ she said. ‘I didn’t. Though I suppose I might have expected it. Suffice it that they made you face the consequences of your disobedience. I’ve told you before, Yrain. Think. And learn to listen, or you’ll die.’

Yrain scowled and Gulda’s eyes opened menacingly.

Loman, looking on anxiously, laid a hand on Gulda’s arm. ‘It’s bad enough that our people are fighting one another in the mountains,’ he said. ‘Let’s not us start quarrelling here.’

The two women subsided uneasily and for some time no one spoke. Loman stared down at the floor, and Gulda gazed out of the window at the motionless grey sky, high and pale.

Yrain, too, stared pensively out across the mountains. Surrounding the window was a large landscape carving, with a sweeping mountain range in the background. As she shifted her head a little she saw that these mountains coincided with the real mountains outside, bringing an eerie, disturbing perspective to the scene. The device was unusual, and familiar though she was with the intricate deceptions inherent in all Orthlundyn carving, she felt momentarily disorientated.

She shook her head to clear the impression as Loman’s voice brought her back to the room. He was talking to Gulda.

‘You’ve no doubts about what caused this, Memsa?’ he asked.

She shook her head. ‘None,’ she replied. ‘We know everybody involved far too well for there to be any other explanation.’

Loman rested his head on his hands. ‘This is ridiculous,’ he said. ‘Two men badly hurt, and who knows what kind of a morale problem. And all because of what?’ He waved his hands in frustration. ‘A troop of . . . of . . . singing midgets!’

A faint flicker of amusement lit Gulda’s eyes at this outburst, but travelled no further.

‘There must be something we can do, Memsa,’ Loman continued, more quietly. ‘We need the mountains for our advanced training.’

Gulda curled her hands over the top of her stick and rested her chin on them. ‘We may need them for access to Riddin before we’ve finished,’ she said absently.

Loman looked at her irritably. ‘True,’ he said. ‘But I’ll settle for access within a two day march for now, and worry about Riddin later. That at least will enable us to keep working.’

Gulda took the rebuke with uncharacteristic calm.

Loman looked at her again. ‘How did you break free from them when we went out with the boys?’ he asked.

Gulda’s long nose twitched and she did not respond at first. ‘I’ve got skills and knowledge I can’t teach to you, Loman,’ she said eventually. ‘Believe me, if I could, I would.’

Loman had little choice but to take this comment at face value, but his mind went back again to their encounter with the Alphaan. ‘You said if we went out in force we might be able to overwhelm them in some way.’ He tried to sound hopeful.

Gulda nodded tentatively. ‘Possibly,’ she said. ‘But I could have been wrong. They had precious little trouble with Athyr’s group, although we don’t know what that display has cost them.’ She fell silent again for some time, then she shook her head. ‘No,’ she said decisively. ‘It would be too dangerous. We simply don’t know enough about them. We can’t find them, surround them, attack their food supplies, menace them in any way. And they’ve shown quite clearly that they can control individuals very effectively. If we went in force we could suffer appalling self-inflicted casualties before we even made contact with them.’ She shook her head again.

The room fell silent. It seemed that such few avenues as existed had been explored as thoroughly as they could be, and that nothing now was left.

Loman wanted to say, ‘We can’t just sit here, doing nothing,’ but he bit back the words. This was no time for stating the obvious.

He looked down at his hand resting on the arm of his chair. Gently it was tapping out a rhythm. Consciously he stopped it, but the jiggling impulse remained, teasing his palm. Slightly irritated at this nervous tic he clenched his fist.

As he did so he became aware of its cause. Very faintly the sound of the snowman’s song seeped into the room. Despite his concern, he smiled and turned to Gulda. ‘The boys are still . . .’

Gulda raised her hand to silence him. She was craning forward and listening. Abruptly she stood up and walked over to the window. Throwing it open, she peered outside. The singing became slightly louder, but it was still faint and distant, although it seemed to echo around the mountains and the towers and spires of the Castle. Suddenly, it stopped, and after a moment Gulda quietly closed the window and returned to her seat.

‘They are divided amongst themselves,’ she said. ‘Balanced like a sword standing on its point. The least misstep and all will be lost.’ She looked significantly at Yrain.

‘They said we’d been misled,’ she continued. ‘But misled by what? And why should they bother with us at all? Our crawling over the mountains, for whatever reason, wouldn’t have affected them. Why did they watch? Why did they come to listen?’ She answered her own questions. ‘Because they know something’s amiss. They’ve had signs of their own, and they – some of them anyway, perhaps most of them – don’t want to face the truth. They don’t want to face the truth that is represented by the Orthlundyn training for war.’

Loman thought he felt a faint rumbling vibration but, glancing round, he saw that no one else seemed to have noticed it.

Gulda snapped her fingers. ‘For their own reasons, they doubt us – faithless and treacherous they called us,’ she said. ‘But they accepted our gift, poor thing though it was by their lights. Now we must give them another.’

She turned to Loman. ‘Have the remains of that . . . tinker’s . . . wares collected from the leaving stone. We’ll take them into the mountains for their consideration. Tirilen can come too, she . . .’

A frantic knocking on the door interrupted her. Grimacing, Loman strode over to the door and threw it open.

‘What?’ he demanded crossly.

The recipient of this greeting was a red-faced and very flustered junior apprentice. Loman repented his temper. ‘What’s the matter?’ he said, more gently.

The apprentice had obviously been running hard and, unable to speak at first, he gesticulated desperately to his interrogator.

‘Slow down,’ Loman said, crouching down, and smiling genuinely now. ‘Slow down.’

‘Master Loman,’ the boy managed eventually, reaching out and taking hold of Loman’s jacket urgently. ‘You’re to come now. Right away . . . please.’

Loman put his hand against the door jamb, to steady himself from this unexpected invitation. His smile faded slightly. The young boy was very distressed.

‘Where am I to go, son?’ he said. ‘And who sent you?’

‘Master Ireck, sir,’ the boy replied. ‘You’re to come downstairs. To the labyrinth. Something’s happened to it.’

Chapter 19

Isloman lay very still. There was another slight movement to his left. His first thought was to leap up and seize whoever or whatever it was, but this was followed immediately by others, more cautious. Tirke, he could see, was sound asleep, but so also was Dacu, and Isloman had learned both many years ago and very recently that Goraidin were sensitive sleepers. Furthermore, the horses seemed unconcerned.

Perhaps it was some small mountain creature curious about these strange intruders? But it didn’t feel like that. It was too still; no snuffling, no scuffling scurrying.

Tirke snorted and turned over noisily. There was another small flutter of movement near Isloman.

Taking the cue, he breathed out heavily and turned on his left side.

Through his flickering eyelashes, in the subdued light of the lowered torches, he could see a pair of booted feet. While his mind registered this observation, his eyes squinted momentarily to accommodate some visual oddity. They were near, yet they seemed to be some distance away. They're small! he realized. Like a child's.

Oddly reassured, Isloman opened his eyes and, not wishing to startle the visitor, said softly, 'Hello.'

Abruptly, the word seemed to swell inside his head until it became a bellowing roar that made him screw up his eyes and clamp his hands to his ears. But this merely seemed to trap the sound inside him. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the noise was gone, and the cave was silent again.

Opening his eyes cautiously he found himself being scrutinized by Dacu. The Goraidin was not moving, but his eyes were wide open and watchful, and Isloman knew his body would be relaxed and alert.

'What's the matter, Isloman?' he whispered.

Isloman sat up slowly. 'That noise,' he said, surprised at the question.

Dacu's brow furrowed. 'Noise?' he said. 'What noise?'

Isloman's brow mimicked Dacu's. 'The noise that just woke you up, presumably,' he said.

'You woke me up,' Dacu retorted, defensively. 'Thrashing about.' He glanced around the cave. Then, satisfied, 'You must've been dreaming.'

Isloman followed his gaze. Everything did indeed seem to be normal. Tirke was still sound asleep. Hawklan was silent and motionless though, at his head, Gavor was striving to open a bleary eye, and the horses were beginning to take an interest in the whispered conversation.

Gavor cleared his throat. 'What's the matter, dear boys?' he managed.

Dacu rolled over and settled himself down again. 'Nothing,' he said, his voice sleepy. 'Isloman was dreaming.' Gavor grunted understandingly; his struggling eye gave up and fell shut again.

'No,' Isloman protested softly. 'There was a child here, then a noise . . .'

'Go to sleep,' said Gavor and Dacu simultaneously. Isloman shook his head. He was certain he had not been dreaming, though the disorienting memory of the tiny feet immediately in front of his face, and the deafening sound that had rung in his head, were beginning to assume an unreal quality.

Reluctantly, he accepted the verdict of his companions and prepared to lie down again. As he did so, however, he looked once more at the place where he had seen the feet standing. It was immediately in front of the small carving sketch he had done before going to sleep. He himself had disturbed the dust that covered almost all of the cave floor, but running from the disturbed patch was a line of small footprints.

'Dacu,' he whispered urgently.

The Goraidin was awake immediately. Isloman pointed to the footprints. Dacu sat up and looked at them narrowly, without speaking. They were not particularly easy to see, but they were sufficient to confirm Isloman's observation. They formed a clear path to the rear of the cave where they disappeared past the horses and into the blackness beyond.

Dacu pushed back his blanket and moved forward to examine the footprints more carefully.

'Coming and going,' he said. Lighting a torch, he moved carefully along the little pathway. Isloman joined him. 'There are more here,' Dacu said as the torch illuminated the darkness at the rear of the cave. 'Three or four,' he concluded.

Crouching down, the two men looked at one another. The footprints, though faint, were quite distinct, and in places passed over the disturbance that had been caused by the horses. There was no disputing either their existence or their recent origin.

'But there can't be any children around here,' Dacu said, answering the unspoken question. 'We're well past the last of the hill farms.'

'Hawklan said Yatsu told him about Morlider War veterans who went to live in the mountains,' Isloman said tentatively. Dacu grimaced as if in pain.

'Men, Isloman,' he said briefly and dismissively. 'Men our age. And men alone. Above all, alone.'

Isloman felt the need to apologize for some awkwardness on his part but could not find the words. 'Anyway,' he said. 'Neither men nor children could have made the sound I heard.' Abruptly, Gavor's head came between the two men. He peered curiously at the little cluster of footprints. 'A sound, you say?' he asked Isloman. The carver nodded and Gavor returned to his scrutiny of the footprints.

Then, excitedly, 'Alphraan, dear boys,' he said. 'I knew I'd seen them when they brought down that feathered brown lump on our way to the Gretmearc, but Hawklan would have none of it.'

The two men stared at him. 'What are you talking about, Gavor?' Isloman asked.

Gavor ignored the question. His excitement had been replaced almost immediately by an air of concern. He looked across at Hawklan's silent form.

'I think we'd better leave,' he said anxiously. 'I don't know much about the Alphraan, but I know they're not keen on humans – and they can be very dangerous.'

Isloman looked sceptical. 'I still don't know what you're talking about, Gavor, but from what I could see of whatever stood next to me, it was only the size of a child. How could that be dangerous?'

But Gavor was half-flying, half-stumping back to Hawklan. Unceremoniously he bounced heavily on Tirke's chest on the way, pausing only to bellow, 'Get up, Tirke, you lazy sod,' in the young man's face, before passing on.

Tirke woke in a flurry of flailing arms and legs.

'What about the noise you heard, dear boy?' Gavor continued, ignoring the small eruption he had just caused.

‘What about it?’ Isloman replied, trying not to laugh at Tirke’s bewildered awakening.

Gavor began tugging the blankets that were covering Hawklan. ‘Well, what could you do except cover your ears?’ he said. ‘Could you fight? And how long could you have withstood such a noise?’

Isloman looked at him vacantly.

‘Will you please help me?’ Gavor asked in some exasperation, still struggling with the blankets.

Isloman stepped forward. ‘But . . .’ he began.

‘But nothing,’ Gavor said, his voice suddenly very serious. He thrust his head towards the rear of the cave. ‘Those things killed that . . . bird . . . creature when we were on our way to the Gretmearc. Or nearly killed it anyway. They did it with a noise. A noise, Isloman. And it was no hatchling, believe me. I was on just the edge of their song and it was frightful.’ He flapped his wings anxiously. ‘And I’ve read enough about them to know they don’t like people. Let’s go. Now. While we can. It’s not safe for Hawklan.’

Isloman looked at Dacu. The Goraidin glanced at the cave entrance. A greying light there showed it would soon be dawn. He nodded. Gavor’s concern was almost palpable and even in their limited acquaintance he had found the bird to be a consistently reliable, if irreverent, witness. Whatever had visited them that night had been decidedly odd, and there would be ample time to discuss it later. Certainly, nothing was to be gained by plunging off into the darkness searching for strange, possibly dangerous visitors, who, finding them asleep, had at least left them unmolested.

‘What’s happening?’ Tirke said, staring at Gavor and then at the two men in turn.

‘We’ll tell you later,’ Isloman said. ‘When we’re away from here.’

Tirke looked at Dacu, who nodded his confirmation. For a moment, he considered inquiring about breakfast, but the urgency in the two men’s calm but swift actions swept the idea aside. Whatever was making them break camp so urgently was not something he had any desire to stay and face.

Within minutes, the group were ready to move out. Isloman bent down to pick up Hawklan.

‘Stay . . . carver.’

The voice was soft and slightly hesitant, but quite clear. Despite its softness, however, there was an almost physical quality in it that made the simple request more compelling than any roared command. For a moment, Isloman felt unable to move, as though the voice had entered and spoken directly to his very limbs.

‘What?’ he said with a struggle, turning round and looking at the others. Both returned his look blankly.

‘What what?’ Dacu said incongruously.

‘What did you say?’ Isloman amplified.

‘Nothing,’ Dacu said, shaking his head. ‘Neither of us spoke.’

Isloman gazed around the cave, puzzled. ‘Someone did,’ he said.

Gavor flapped his wings noisily. ‘Let’s go, dear boy,’ he said anxiously.

Isloman stood up and looked again around the cave. Somewhere, something was calling, like a myriad unheard whisperings. He looked down at Gavor, who was becoming increasingly restless. Impulsively he walked towards the darkness at the rear of the cave, and spoke into it.

‘I’m sorry I frightened you,’ he said. ‘But you frightened me too. We didn’t mean to disturb you and we mean no harm. We’re going now.’

His voice seemed to echo strangely into some far distance, and then return to swirl agitatedly around him until it reshaped itself into, ‘Stay, carver.’

He turned and looked at his companions. They were looking slightly surprised, but this was obviously at his conduct rather than at anything untoward they had just heard. He turned again to the darkness.

‘You must speak so that my friends can hear you also,’ he said.

This time there was no echo. Just silence. He stood for some time watching and listening, but there was no response. Turning, he walked back to the others, feeling rather foolish.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Something odd’s going on here, but I don’t think it’s going to serve any useful purpose to inquire into it.’ He bent down and picked up Hawklan. Gavor flew up onto his shoulder.

‘Please stay, carver.’

This time the voice was clearly audible to everyone. Tirke gasped, and Dacu turned quickly, his eyes scanning the whole cave in one sweep and then peering intently into the far darkness; deeper now that the torches had been withdrawn.

He glanced at Isloman and with a flick of his head, indicated the entrance. Then he started, his face pained and his hands reaching up involuntarily towards his head.

‘Stop it,’ roared Isloman furiously. ‘Whoever you are and whatever you want from me, you’ll gain nothing by assailing my friends.’

Dacu straightened up and shook his head. His face was pale. ‘Isloman, let’s get out of here while we can,’ he said urgently.

‘No. Please stay,’ came the voice again. ‘We’re sorry. It won’t happen again.’

Isloman hesitated; there was doubt in the voice. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘What do you want?’

‘The bird knows us,’ the voice said. Or was it voices? Isloman thought. ‘We wish . . . to talk.’

Isloman lowered Hawklan to the ground gently and rested him against the cave wall.

‘About what?’ he demanded.

There was silence for a moment then from the distance came a sound like the passage of a long shallow

wave over a pebbled beach. As it reached him, Isloman felt his mind awash with sounds full of complex images of Hawklan and Oklar and Anderras Darion. There were subtleties and nuances in the sounds that were like those that could be found in the finest carvings. He recognized the signs; there were no words for what they wanted to say.

Looking round, he could see that Dacu and Tirke were similarly affected. Gavor was shaking his head and muttering something unintelligible but obviously derogatory. The horses too were suddenly restless. The Alphraan were keeping their word. Everyone else in the cave could hear what he was hearing.

He waved his arms. 'We don't understand,' he said. 'We haven't your skills. You must find the words, however crude, if you wish to speak with us about . . .' He bent forward and laid his hand on Hawklan's shoulder.

The sounds and the images faded into silence, leaving the three men looking at one another, bewildered. 'It's difficult,' said the voice plaintively, after a long pause.

Despite himself, Isloman laughed at the tone. 'I understand,' he said. 'But you can come down to our level; we can't rise to yours.'

There was another silence, then, 'Who is he?'

'Who is who?' Isloman replied.

'The one you carry. The one with Ethriss's sword that you've shown with Oklar outside Anderras Darion.'

In each of the words, Ethriss, Oklar, and Anderras Darion, came the crowding subtleties and complexities that had swept over the listeners before. To Isloman it seemed that each individual word was merely the glowing centre of a great sphere of shifting lights and shades of meaning. One day I shall carve such meaning, he thought.

'This is Hawklan,' he said simply, laying his hand on Hawklan's shoulder again. 'But how did you know of Anderras Darion and Oklar?'

Immediately his head was full of the sounds of amusement which seemed to focus on his surprise that they should be acquainted with Anderras Darion. Laced through it, however, were threads of distaste at the gaucherie of his own knowledge of the Castle as enshrined in his speech.

'We know of Anderras Darion,' said the voice, openly amused, but without amplification, then, almost grimly, 'We know of Oklar also. But why should you cut his image thus?' Isloman felt his eyes drawn to his carving. 'And who is . . . Hawklan?' The voice tested the sound, Hawklan, and found it wanting. 'And why does he carry Ethriss's sword?'

'Hawklan's a healer,' Isloman said. 'Perhaps much more, we don't know. He came with Gavor out of the mountains some twenty years ago. I cut what I cut on a whim, following the song of the rock. Dan-Tor . . . Oklar . . . came thus to us at Anderras Darion, bringing a corruption with him. When we sought him out in Fyorlund, he . . . hurt my friend, as you see. And many others far more cruelly. We're going back now to Anderras Darion to find help to oppose him.'

His last remarks, however, were swept away on a great, confining roar. It did not, however, overwhelm him as the previous noises had. Rather it seemed that many voices were quarrelling amongst themselves

and that he and the others were merely inadvertent eavesdroppers.

He looked at Dacu and Tirke. The latter seemed nervous and uncertain, but Dacu just pulled a wry face at him and shrugged his shoulders. Then he craned forward as if listening intently to the cacophony: Isloman half-closed his eyes and did the same.

Though most of the noise was unintelligible to him, he began to catch some semblance of meaning in it. It centred around what he took to be Oklar, and the images that swarmed around that name made him shudder. So vivid and accurate were they that he found himself again cowering behind the failing Hawklan at the palace gate as such of Oklar's power as was not being reflected back upon him by Hawklan's sword tore around them to rend its terrible pathways across the city. His mind was filled again with the roaring and screaming that dominated that memory, and his whole soul was filled again with the same terror.

But there was doubt and dissension in the noise of the Alphraan. It was a debate. An argument, in fact. Its content ebbed and flowed. The sound 'Oklar' was denied. It could not be, Oklar was destroyed, millennia ago, as were Dar Hastuin and Creost and Him. Terrible, hate-laden resonances in this last sound chilled Isloman even further. Then, images of human treachery and deceit were formed, and Isloman felt himself and his companions becoming the focus of the debate.

He began to feel alarmed. There were strange whispering elements threading through the debate. Elements that formed into a vision of him fighting with Dacu, fighting with such ferocity that both would probably die. Elements that showed Gavor and Hawklan crushed underfoot and the horses scattered, foaming and terrified, across the mountains.

Dacu, too, seemed to sense these sinister undercurrents and, catching Isloman's eye, nodded towards the entrance of the cave again. Isloman bent down to pick up Hawklan again.

'Stay,' said a voice abruptly, cutting with stark clarity through the whirling mosaic of sound. The debate faded as suddenly as it had arisen, but Isloman could not determine whether it had been concluded. The voice was not the one that had spoken previously. It was grim and serious, and though Isloman felt no restraint upon him, he waited silently. Gavor stood protectively in front of Hawklan.

'Oklar is dead,' said the voice, its tone unequivocal. 'He was destroyed utterly. Why do you profane our . . .' The word eluded Isloman. House? Life? ' . . . with his image? And from where did you steal the blessed Ethriss's sword?'

The judgement in the voice angered Isloman, and despite a feeling of vulnerability in facing this voluble darkness, he strode forward into it, holding his torch high and increasing its brightness.

'Oklar lives,' he said defiantly. 'I have seen him. Hawklan has faced him. The truth is in my work there' – he pointed to the carving, now clear and vivid in the bright torchlight – 'though it may be as far beyond you to see it as it is beyond us to understand your ways with sound.'

A murmuring began, as if to speak in rebuttal, but Isloman cut across it harshly. 'And how can truth be a profanity?' He brought the torch nearer to the carving, and moved it slightly from side to side. The images of Hawklan and Dan-Tor seemed to move, Hawklan with doubting uncertainty, Dan-Tor with cunning sleight.

'I've done better work, admittedly,' Isloman said critically. 'But it has its own song, for all it's only a sketch.' Then, turning back to the darkness he spoke angrily. 'Look at it. Look at it. Look as you'd

listen. The profanity is yours, if you would turn away from such truth.'

The debate broke out again, though this time it was like a malevolent whispering. Gavor flicked the sheaths from his spurs, and almost involuntarily Dacu laid his hand on his sword hilt. Serian's eyes whitened, and his forelegs flicked out as if in preparation for further movement.

'Would you threaten us . . . humans?'

There was a taunt in the voice, but also doubt, bewilderment even, in the word 'humans'. Isloman sensed that the actions of the animals had surprised the invisible speakers.

'We would leave you, Alphraan,' he said. 'We would go in peace back to Anderras Darion. I have to seek help for my friend, and we have to take the truth to those who will see its worth, and act accordingly.'

He turned away and started walking towards the entrance, signalling Dacu and Tirke to do the same.

'You're lying.' A voice hissed out of the darkness behind him like an arrow from an ambush. Isloman found himself unable to move.

'If Oklar lived, no man could face him.' There was blistering contempt in the word 'man'. 'Your friend . . . Hawklan,' – more contempt – 'is stricken because he stole Ethriss's sword. And you talk of the song of your scratchings. What do you know of song? You and your kind are as treacherous and faithless as ever. You must be punished for your blasphemy.'

But around the voice, doubts and debate still hovered. The carving was true, they said. Sketch it might be, but it was the work of a master craftsman. The voice denied them, swept them aside angrily.

Isloman forced his eyes to look again at his carving. Something helped him. As he gazed at it, it seemed that in Dan-Tor's eyes there gleamed a look of triumph. Isloman knew that it was no device that he had put there, but carvings invariably yielded more than their makers intended, and it should have been no great surprise. Nonetheless, the look struck deep into Isloman and released a great rage in him.

'No,' he whispered. The strange bonds holding him faltered. 'No,' he said again, louder. 'No. You may choose to be bound by your ignorance, but we will not.'

He was free.

Waves of sound billowed around him, almost in panic, but striding forward, he bent over Hawklan and unfastened the scabbard of the black sword. Then, holding the sheathed sword in his left hand, and his torch in his right, he strode into the darkness. The rear of the cave tapered into a wide tunnel.

Gavor stretched out his wings and launched himself after the retreating figure. 'Dacu, guard Hawklan,' he said. 'Tirke, bring torches.'

His tone was so authoritative that the two men moved to do his bidding without question. The torches however, were hardly needed, for Isloman stopped, only a score of paces down the tunnel. Gavor landed on his shoulder.

In front of them, the tunnel divided into four others, and down these, at the faint extremity of the torchlight, could be seen more junctions.

Isloman seemed inclined to go forward, but Gavor closed his claw anxiously on his shoulder.

Isloman nodded, then held out the sword. ‘Know this, you . . . sound weavers,’ he shouted. ‘Hawklan is no thief. He came from the mountains with Gavor, bearing the key and the word to open Anderras Darion . . .’

‘Anderras Darion is open?’ Voices cut across his outburst.

‘Is open? . . . is open? . . . is open? . . .’ echoed endlessly into the distance. Other sounds joined it. ‘The word . . . the word . . . the word . . .’ A whispering confusion began.

Isloman frowned and brandished the sword again. ‘This sword chose him, not he it.’

‘Chose . . . chose . . . chose . . .’ joined the mounting chorus.

‘Listen to me, damn you,’ Isloman shouted. ‘Oklar lives. All the Uhriel live.’ Sounds flooded out of the tunnels in front of him. He bellowed into it. ‘He too lives. Scurry through the darkness where you wish, hide where you will, but know that Sumeral is risen again, and to deny His being is to aid Him.’

Suddenly the sounds came together like a wind-tormented ocean and crashed over him in an irresistible tide. With a cry, he staggered backwards, dropping the torch and the sword.

Instinctively he closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears, but as before, this only seemed to trap the terrible sound inside him.

An impact winded him slightly, and part of his mind realized that he had fallen over. Somehow he opened his eyes. The torch lay some way from him, though it was undimmed, and the clarity its light gave to the scene seemed to stem the appalling, crushing, noise momentarily.

Rolling over, Isloman had a fleeting glimpse of his companions. Gavor, on his side, one wing flapping desperately and his wooden leg ineffectually sliding on the rocky floor as he tried to stand. Dacu and Tirke struggling with demented horses. Serian, his great head bowed low and shaking frantically from side to side. The whole scene juddered and shook as if his eyeballs were going to burst from his head. The only stillness in the scene was the dark shadow of Hawklan, resting against the wall.

He tried to rise, but somehow his legs were no longer part of him. He tried to cry out, but as his mouth opened to voice his feeble protest, the noise seized it for its own, like an awful predator and, thrusting it back inside him, began to crush every part of his body with it.

Briefly a great fear overwhelmed him as he realized he was helpless and about to die. Then, swimming in the tide that he knew was to carry him beyond, came a shimmering kaleidoscope of memories: his father and mother, and little Loman, picnicking in front of the silent, sunlit Gate of Anderras Darion; his first tingling excitement as the master carver in him began to stir; the grim and grimy-faced friendships and affections he found in the Morlider War; the welcoming grace of Hawklan, hooded and strange in the flickering firelight, as he rose to meet his wide-eyed visitors from the village. So many rich memories.

‘No,’ he made his voice cry out, and this time the flood moved around it as though it were a rock. He would not die other than in honouring both the pains and joys of such a life and in struggling to oppose the power that would deny such choices to others.

His left hand closed around the scabbard of Hawklan's sword, but as he lifted it, a final wave swept over him, cold and black, and everything was gone.

* * * *

All was silence. A great, deep, motionless silence from which all things had come and which lay yet at the very heart of all things.

And a great darkness. Not the darkness of fear, but the timeless, eternal empty darkness of beginning.

Only one thing disturbed the silence and the darkness.

Consciousness.

Is this death? it thought. Is this the great bane and wonder that all life strives to avoid while in its frenzy rushing towards it?

There was no answer. The silence and the darkness were, and were not. To know of them was to hear and see them, and the silence and darkness that could be heard and seen were not the true silence and darkness.

Consciousness.

The silence and darkness shifted, like a great deep ocean touched by the distant moon.

Rock song was there; faint and distant. Rock song?

Am I dead?

I?

The silence and darkness shifted again, and the consciousness knew itself.

It separated from the silence and darkness.

I am Isloman. A carver. From Pedhavin, in Orthlund. Slain by the Alphraan defending . . . Trying to defend . . .

Pain.

. . . failing . . .

More pain.

Something touched the pain and it was gone.

Rock song; faint, but close. And the smell and feel of rock. Against his face, under his hand.

His hand?

And the other hand?

It tightened around the scabbard of the black sword.

Hawklan's sword! It must not be lost!

Isloman's awareness rushed in upon him and, with a start, he rolled over and opened his eyes. A flood of images rushed in on him. Torchlight and moving shadows formed an unfocussed, ill-shaped background. But immediately in the foreground, a dark silhouette bent over him, hand extended.

Isloman raised his left arm to protect himself, but the figure caught it and laid it aside.

'It's all right, Isloman,' Hawklan said. 'It's all right.'

Chapter 20

Loman clattered down stairs and along corridors, struggling to keep up with the fleet-footed young apprentice who had brought him the message. At his side ran Athyr. Yrain, troubled by her foot, fell increasingly behind, accompanied by a reluctantly sympathetic Gulda.

It was a long journey, deep into the heart of the Castle, but each time they slowed down to a walk, the boy looked at them anxiously. 'Master Ireck said I was to ask you to hurry,' he would repeat after about a dozen more leisurely paces. Thus both men were breathing heavily when they came upon Ireck and a group of others waiting in the hall in which the weapons were being temporarily stored and which marked the entrance to the labyrinth.

Loman made straight for Ireck.

'I hope this is as urgent as your little messenger here made out, Ireck,' he began crossly. He was about to tell Ireck that the meeting he had interrupted was important, but immediately regretting his initial irritability, he reached for a threat at once more dire and less serious. 'Gulda's coming,' he said, flicking his thumb over his shoulder.

But Ireck's face was grim, and showed a mood impervious both to Loman's anger and his levity.

Loman began again. 'What's happened?' he asked seriously.

'We can't get near the labyrinth, to collect the weapons,' Ireck said simply.

'What do you mean?' Loman said.

'Just that,' Ireck said, frowning abstractedly at this response. 'We can't get near it. Sounds are coming out of it . . . it's spreading . . . reaching out.'

Loman looked at him and then across the hall. The neat stacks of weapons stood clear and glittering against the ominous gloom of the labyrinth's columns at the far end, like a field of golden, sunlit sheaves waiting under summer thunder clouds looming darkly on a near horizon.

He scowled, disturbed by Ireck's vagueness. How could they not reach the weapons? They were only paces away. But Ireck had received a severe shock by the look of his face, and anyway was not a man given to hasty comment.

Loman cut through his own conjectures and, without comment, strode off towards the weapons. He felt Ireck's hand brush his sleeve briefly as if to stop him. 'Be careful,' came his anxious voice.

Halfway towards the weapons, however, Loman needed no warnings. Crawling around his feet he felt the whisperings that were characteristic of treading too near the edge of the pathway through the labyrinth.

He stopped, and the sound of his footsteps mingled with the whispering and rose up around him mockingly. He felt his chest tighten and his mouth go dry with fear.

Slowly, face contorted with expectation, he placed another foot forward. A watchful expectancy came into the sounds hissing around him, and he seemed to feel a myriad tiny fingers plucking him forward. Horrified, he withdrew his foot quickly. A strange moaning sigh filled the hall, and he heard the group behind him shuffling further away.

Very cautiously, Loman stepped back until the whispering faded away. Then he stood motionless, his flesh crawling and his hands and face clammy.

Behind him he heard the group respectfully greeting the arrival of Gulda.

Without turning round, he said, 'Memsa,' hoarsely. He heard the soft clump of her stick on the hall floor as she approached, then he felt her dark form appear by his side. But his eyes did not waver from the waiting columns.

'What is it?' he said, still without turning.

Gulda moved forward a little, tapping her stick thoughtfully on the floor, then she walked to and fro across the hall just in front of him, her head craning forward, listening intently.

After two such patrols she clicked her tongue, then, without comment, returned to Ireck and the others. Loman moved after her, walking backwards for a part of the way, loath to turn his back on this frightening new manifestation.

'Are you all right?' Gulda said to Ireck.

'Yes, thank you, Memsa,' he replied. 'I think so. But it was a nasty shock. I just walked straight into it.' He slapped his hands together to demonstrate the impact. 'I can't remember how I got out now. I must have staggered back.'

Gulda looked at him carefully and took his arm gently. 'It'll take you a little time to recover fully,' she said. 'Perhaps a day or so. But the effects will fade, believe me.' Ireck nodded, almost reluctantly, Loman thought.

'When were you here last?' Gulda went on.

'Two days ago,' Ireck replied after a moment's thought. 'We moved those from over there.' He pointed to a wide gap in the nearest row of weapons. 'There was nothing wrong then that I noticed, though I didn't go near the labyrinth.'

Gulda nodded. 'Has anything strange happened here recently?' she asked. 'Anything at all.'

Ireck shook his head. 'Nothing,' he said. Then, as an afterthought, 'There were some children in here when I arrived. I'd forgotten that, but they . . .'

Loman caught Gulda's eye. 'Children?' he said, interrupting. 'Whose?'

Ireck nodded and then shrugged. 'I didn't see them,' he said, adding, slightly flustered, 'Well I did and I didn't. They were playing in here, then they hid when I came in, and scuttled off when I was distract . . .' He stopped suddenly and his eyes opened in realization. Slowly he pointed towards the centre of the stacked weapons.

'They were over there,' he said anxiously. 'Right over there. Crouching down.' He turned to Gulda. 'How . . .?'

She squeezed his arm reassuringly. 'What distracted you, Ireck?' she asked.

Ireck told her of the voice, and Gulda questioned him gently. No, he'd no idea who it was, or where he'd gone, or what he'd wanted. But the position of the playing children dominated his concern. 'It . . . this change . . . must have happened immediately after they left,' he concluded. 'They couldn't possibly have been so far into the hall otherwise. But I didn't hear or see anything.'

Gulda affected indifference. 'Children are children,' she said offhandedly. Then, briskly, 'Re-order your day, Ireck. You'll move nothing from here today.'

'But what are we going to do, Memsa?' Ireck asked anxiously. 'What's happened? We need more weapons. I doubt we've enough upstairs for all our training needs, and even with these here there won't be enough for any large distribution. We have to be able to get into the Armoury. We . . .'

Gulda patted his arm affectionately, and turned him towards the exit. 'Yes, you're right, Ireck,' she said. 'We do have a serious problem here, but it won't affect us immediately, and not all our training is weapons training, is it? The important thing is that we mustn't allow this to interfere with our overall intention, must we?'

Ireck nodded, but looked doubtful. He folded his arms as if to protect himself from something. 'It's a bad feeling, Memsa,' he said. 'The Castle turning against us like this.'

Gulda's face became stern. 'It's not the Castle, Ireck,' she said forcefully. 'Trust me. The Castle's protecting us as it always has and always will. Never think otherwise.'

She turned to the rest of the group, before Ireck could voice any doubts. 'I think I know what's happened here,' she said. 'But I have to think about it. And I have to talk with Loman. When that's done, then we'll all talk and decide what to do. In the meantime, we must continue with our work. Nothing must deflect us from that.' Her piercing blue eyes scanned her listeners, defying any argument.

As the group left, she instructed Athyr to accompany Yrain to Tirilen. 'The silly girl's foot needs attention,' she said. 'And there's nothing you can do here for the time being. Tell Tirilen that it's important I have Yrain fit and well again as soon as possible. I'm afraid we may have a rough time ahead of us, and I want no weak vessels with us.'

Then she turned to Yrain. 'Last chance, girl,' she said with a sudden power and grimness that made even Loman start. 'You do exactly what Tirilen says. And start *now* learning to listen. Either that or school yourself to the idea of making your contribution from your village infantry group.' Yrain's brow

furrowed and her mouth became a tight, rebellious line. Gulda bent forward towards her, blue eyes terrible. 'You should know by now I don't speak just to hear my own voice, girl. Your scatterbrained notions of independence are going to get someone killed eventually. Someone, perhaps, that you're fond of. Someone, perhaps, that *I'm* fond of, and . . .' Her voice faltered slightly. 'I've lost enough already. We all stand on each others' shoulders round here. In future, if you've any bright ideas of your own, spit them out so that we can all debate them, otherwise be under no illusions, *you are out*.'

The last three words were articulated slowly and came out like dagger thrusts. Yrain, already pale due to the pain in her foot, went paler still under Gulda's onslaught. Her mouth worked vaguely, as if she were searching for words, but all she managed was a very faint, 'Yes, Memsa,' before reaching out to Athyr for support.

'That was a bit severe, wasn't it?' Loman said when the couple had left, Yrain leaning heavily on Athyr and looking very young.

'No,' Gulda said, brusquely. 'She hasn't the judgement to use that kind of initiative yet. She could be a considerable asset, but if she can't learn what it means to be part of a team, as well as being an individual, she'll be a monumental liability. You can't fight properly if you're wondering what someone like that's doing instead of guarding your back, you know that. If she doesn't buck up, she goes.'

A flick of her hand ended the debate. Loman was not unrelieved. Gulda was right about Yrain, but he found the making of such decisions difficult and was quite willing to let Gulda carry the burden. He knew too, though, that the scene he had just witnessed was also to highlight for him this particular weakness in his leadership. He too must learn to accept the truly harsh responsibilities of his position.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other as the memory of Yrain's pain came to him briefly, then, dragging his mind back to the present, he turned to the labyrinth and said, 'It's the Alphaaran, isn't it? Children – little people, using sound like that. What have they done? And how?'

Gulda did not reply at first, but walked forward until Loman heard the sound of the labyrinth stirring. Then, as before, she prowled back and forth across the hall, as if making out a boundary or testing for a way through.

Cautiously he joined her. 'You don't ask why?' she said, stopping in front of him.

Loman replied without hesitation. 'They said they'd oppose us, and now they are doing so,' he said. 'Though why they should, defeats me. And I never dreamt they'd come down out of the mountains to do it. I thought they'd carry on as before, just interfering with our mountain training.'

Gulda nodded. 'We misjudged them,' she said. 'And now they've struck right to our heart.'

Loman frowned. 'What can we do?' he said. 'We're lost if we can't gain access to the Armoury.'

'Can't we make the weapons we need?' Gulda asked.

Loman looked at her in surprise. It was a peculiarly defeated comment. 'Given time,' he said. 'Smithing's not common in Orthlund. There's only a few of us capable of that kind of work, though I suppose we could bring on some of the apprentices more quickly in an emergency. But will we be able to get into the mountains for the raw materials?'

But Gulda was already waving the answer into oblivion, moving any from her brief lapse. 'No, no,' she

said. 'It was a foolish idea. Besides we may not have the time.' Her voice fell. 'Not if Hawklan's met Dan-Tor.'

She stood still and silent after this remark, and Loman turned his gaze back to the gloomy columns. With their concerns about the Alphraan, it was almost the first time that Hawklan's name had been mentioned since Loman had been hurled from the labyrinth.

The silence hung about them like a reproach.

'What do you think has happened to him?' Loman said hesitantly after some time.

Gulda shook her head a little. 'I've no idea,' she said quietly. 'I wish I had. My heart says he's not dead, and my reason tells me that Okl . . . Dan-Tor . . . has not had his way entirely, or his armies would have been at our gates by now. But what's happened, where is Hawklan . . . or Gavor?' She shrugged and fell silent again.

For a while the only sound in the hall was the sinister whispering of the labyrinth.

'But it makes no difference,' she said abruptly, banging her stick on the floor. The sound spread outwards like ripples in a still pond, to return almost immediately, transmuted by the labyrinth into a deep pulsating echo that filled the hall like a cavernous laugh. 'What we're doing is all we can do, whether Hawklan comes back to us or not.'

She turned round and walked a few paces away from the invisible new boundary that the labyrinth seemed to have set. 'If he comes back, he'll have urgent problems at his heels for sure, and he'll be none too pleased if we've been dragging ours. And if he doesn't come back . . .' She paused. 'Then at least we'll be ready to face whatever's brought him low.'

Before Loman could comment, she was stumping towards the archway that led from the hall. 'We've got a serious problem, Loman,' she said, as he came alongside her. 'The labyrinth's a fearful device, Anderras Darion's ultimate defence. If the circumstances so determined, it could spread its influence throughout the entire Castle.'

'What do you mean?' Loman asked uncertainly.

Gulda frowned. 'Exactly what I said. The labyrinth can reach out to protect all parts of the Castle if need arises.'

Loman's eyes widened in horror at this revelation. 'The entire Castle?' he exclaimed. 'And those . . . creatures can sneak in here and control it? I'll have a guard placed . . .'

Gulda overrode his concerns. 'They can't control it,' she said. 'No one can control it, except perhaps Ethriss himself. But they've tinkered with it very effectively in some way, and we have to face the fact that only they can undo their work.'

'Meaning?' asked Loman.

'Meaning that we'll have to find some way to talk to them again,' Gulda replied. 'Persuade them to allow us back into the Armoury.'

'Our talking and their listening are two different things,' Loman said sourly. 'They seem more interested

in stamping their own ideas on us than entering into a debate about the rights and wrongs of events.'

Gulda nodded, but her voice was sympathetic. 'They're an alien race, Loman. We know little or nothing of them, and even less about their history. A slim volume can hardly contain the accumulated lore of millennia can it? Who knows what roads have brought them to where they are now?'

Loman grunted. 'Well,' he conceded marginally. 'I'd rather talk than fight any day, but . . .' He stopped and looked back down the corridor. 'They've imposed their will on us back there, Memsa,' he continued thoughtfully, almost disbelievingly. 'We didn't do that to them, or even attempt to.' He stuttered slightly. 'We . . . we wouldn't even think of doing such a thing.'

'You've never imposed your will on anyone, Loman?' Gulda said knowingly.

'Not an adult,' he began, then crueller memories rose to mock him. He curled his lip in distaste. 'I've killed people though, if that's what you mean,' he said. 'But that wasn't the same. That was in extremity. To protect myself or others.'

'Perhaps that's what they think they're doing now,' Gulda replied. 'Preventing harm to us and perhaps themselves by denying us our weapons.'

Loman could not keep the scorn from his face. 'No one's that stupid, however alien their culture,' he replied witheringly.

Gulda shrugged. 'When you've travelled as much as I have you'll learn there are no limits to stupidity, particularly amongst human beings,' she said unequivocally. 'I've met peoples who believed that weapons made violence, and forbade their very existence.'

Loman frowned in disbelief. Gulda turned away from him and shrugged. 'While circumstances didn't show them otherwise, they were without insight into themselves, Loman,' she said. 'Quite beyond debate. *I have* seen it. Perhaps the Alphraan are the same.'

Loman's scowl deepened, then, abruptly, a great anger welled up inside him and burst out uncontrollably. 'Good grief, Gulda,' he shouted. 'I'm not interested in other people's follies, and I'm not interested in conjecturing about what the Alphraan might or might not be thinking.' He smacked his great fist into the palm of his hand. 'Whatever stupid ideas they've got, they've used their own weapons very effectively to deprive us of ours. To leave us perhaps defenceless. Nothing can justify that.' His anger mounted. 'Damn it, they've judged us! I won't be judged without any semblance of a hearing – least of all by strangers!' His voice rang loud through the corridor. 'We went to talk to them – to warn them. And they do this! It's tantamount to an act of war. We should go into the mountains in force and punch their arrogant noses.'

Gulda stopped and, straightening up a little, looked at him intensely. He met her gaze without flinching, his fists clenched and his jaw set. Suddenly she chuckled and, stepping forward, gave him an almighty smack on the arm. It was a comradely blow, but Loman staggered under its impact.

Gulda's chuckle turned to a laugh, a strangely young and musical laugh. 'He picked a good one in you, young Loman,' she said heartily. 'I'd never have said there was anything in you when you were little. You were such a scamp. Still, I suppose it was difficult, having the soul of a smith in a land of carvers.' She chuckled again.

Before Loman could respond to this unexpected and rather painful testimonial, she was off again.

The sudden change in Gulda's mood took some of the outward passion from Loman's anger, but like metal fresh from the forge, it was still dangerously hot even though it was not glowing, and it betokened a profound inner change.

Rubbing his arm ruefully, he followed after her. For a while they walked on in silence.

'I agree with you, Loman,' Gulda said eventually. 'Whatever their reasoning, what they've done is wrong, and wanting to punch their arrogant noses is a very understandable response. But you know well enough it won't be that easy. We must try talking first. We really don't have any choice, we know too little about them for conflict.' She looked at him sternly. 'And we'll be in a better frame of mind if we give them the benefit of the doubt for now. If we assume they're well intentioned.'

Loman managed to lay the excess of his anger to one side. 'I suppose you're right,' he said. 'But you don't sound too convinced about the probable outcome yourself.'

Gulda breathed out noisily. 'I'm not,' she said simply. 'I think their intentions are benign, but whether they're benign or malevolent, I don't think they'll listen, whatever we say. I think sooner or later we're going to have to punch their noses and, bluntly, I'm not looking forward to it.'

* * * *

As promised, Gulda gathered together Ireck and the other leading members of Anderras Darion's increasingly military complement, to discuss the matter with them fully.

'I don't think we can begin to understand their thinking,' she concluded. 'Suffice it to say that, for whatever reason, they obviously can't see our need.'

'Or won't,' someone said.

Gulda acknowledged the comment. 'Or won't,' she conceded.

'What shall we do, then?' Ireck said. 'How can we talk to people we can't see, and who won't listen?'

A hesitant hand came up from the rear of the seated group. It was Yrain. Loman signalled to her to speak.

'Memsas, you said before that you thought they were divided amongst themselves,' she began. 'That impression – your impression – is really all the information we have about their thinking. Perhaps we should work on that.'

Gulda looked up at her. Yrain faltered, but Gulda gave her an encouraging nod. 'Spit it out, girl,' she said, with a slight smile. Yrain flushed then leaned forward purposefully.

'I think we need to show them that their trick hasn't altered either our intentions or our possible effectiveness,' she said. 'I think we should send out as many groups as we can on survival treks. Send them out conspicuously unarmed. Show them all the usual stuff for surviving in the mountains, but . . .' She raised her hand, forefinger extended in emphasis. 'Incorporate part of the weaponless fighting training into the treks and add in some ambush techniques, trap laying, etc.'

'What purpose will that serve?' Gulda asked.

Yrain's eyes narrowed slightly. She struck off the points on her fingers. 'They'll be watching us presumably. It'll show them that we intend to continue training. It'll show them that we can use sticks, rocks, bare hands . . . anything, just as effectively as swords and bows. And if they're divided amongst themselves, as you think, then perhaps that might shift the balance in their debates.'

Gulda nodded, 'But not necessarily to our advantage, Yrain,' she said. 'It might only serve to confirm to them that they have wild and savage neighbours who are best kept well away from anything with a sharp edge. And what if they chose to extend their control by preventing these . . . survival treks?'

Yrain lowered her eyes briefly, but when she looked up her face was resolute. 'Frankly, I couldn't care less about what they think of us,' she said. 'If they can't understand what we'd be trying to show them, then they must be particularly stupid, so who needs their good opinion?'

There was some nodding of heads amongst the small audience at this forthright observation.

'Besides, Memsal,' she continued. 'We're supposed to be learning how to defend ourselves. We're supposed to be making up for the years of neglect that eventually allowed creatures from Narsindal to march into our country unseen and unopposed, and commit murder. We can't let these people treat us thus – deny us access to what's been entrusted to us for such work.' She glanced awkwardly at Loman. 'So far, for all some of the training has been harsh, it's been so much theory. Now, we have to act, and act as an army – deal with a real practical problem. If we take some knocks, we take some knocks, and that's it. We'll be the wiser for it. But we can't sit and do nothing. It would be a betrayal of Hawklan . . . of ourselves . . . everything.' She looked around, her face agitated. 'And for all we know, these Alphraan might be in league with Narsindal in some way. This action they've taken could be part of some deeper scheme.'

Several members of the group shifted uncomfortably at this suggestion. Gulda leaned forward and rested her head on her long hands, folded over the top of her stick. Then, in an echo of Loman's earlier sentiments, Yrain finished. 'The arrogant little devils have no conceivable right to do what they're doing.'

Several voices spoke up in agreement.

'And if they try to prevent us?' Gulda repeated, when the talking died down. 'Start attacking our training parties?'

Yrain frowned. 'They haven't done us any real harm so far,' she said.

'Except murder,' someone said.

'No,' Yrain said, wincing slightly as she twisted round in her seat to look at the speaker. 'When we first met . . . encountered them . . . with the children, they admitted two of the deaths and said they regretted them. We were helpless so they'd no need to make any such admission, and they sounded sincere enough to me.' She turned back to Gulda as if for confirmation. 'They said the deaths were the result of our own actions. I know it's no justification if they were interfering in some way to disturb concentration, but all the . . . accidents . . . happened to our people when they were doing difficult, dangerous, climbs.' She paused, hesitant to move too quickly past the shades of their dead friends. Then, almost apologetically, 'But there's no need for anything like that in what I'm suggesting. Really we'll just be lumping everyone's basic survival training together and bringing some of the ordinary training up into the mountains. If we keep away from too dangerous places, my feeling is that they won't be able to harm us even if they wanted to.'

Gulda lifted her head to speak, but Yrain, anxious to commit her every resource before execution, continued. ‘And if they do attack us in some way, then we’ll learn more about them, and what they do. And if we put a large number of groups in all at once, we’ll perhaps get some measure of their strength.’

The room fell silent as Yrain finished. All eyes turned to Gulda. She looked around. ‘What do you think?’ she said.

The debate was brief. Yrain’s sentiments chimed with most of those present. Despite a strong desire to ‘punch arrogant noses’, the dominant feeling was that far too little was known about this unexpected foe, and some form of peaceful probing was essential.

‘I agree,’ Gulda concluded. ‘We’ll get on with it straight away.’ She raised a warning finger. ‘But maximum safety though. Lots of good communication, observers, pre-arranged meeting places, etc, etc. I need hardly remind you that they succeeded in making a group of our better students miss an entire mountain. We must all be very alert. Whatever else they might be, they’re capable of some subtlety.’

As the meeting broke up, Gulda signalled to Yrain. The girl, supporting herself on a stick, limped across to her, her thin face suddenly anxious.

‘Tirilen said it would be all right to come,’ she began, before Gulda could speak. ‘The stick takes the weight off my foot . . . and Athyr helped me,’ she added hastily.

‘Sit down,’ Gulda said.

Without taking her eyes off her nemesis, Yrain nervously lowered herself onto a nearby chair. Gulda sat down opposite her and rested her head on the end of her stick again. Loman eyed her carefully, prepared to act as champion for the girl if need arose.

‘Well done, Ysain,’ Gulda said. ‘That was nicely reasoned and a step in the right direction.’ There was sufficient reservation in Gulda’s voice, however, to prevent Yrain’s relief overwhelming her concern, and she kept her eyes fixed on Gulda’s face.

Gulda continued. ‘This is going to involve some drastic changes to our training schedules,’ she said. ‘And I want you to work with Loman here on the details. We must treat this affair as being most urgent. I want the new schedules ready by this time tomorrow, designed for immediate implementation.’

Loman raised his eyebrows. ‘That’ll be difficult,’ he said. Gulda shrugged. ‘Just do it,’ she said simply. ‘You’ve defined the problem clearly enough yourselves. We’re in the dark, and we’re virtually defenceless. Yrain’s idea is sound and we’ve got no real alternatives.’ Her face became grim. ‘We don’t discuss it, but you know as well as I do that at any moment, a rider could come down from the north and tell us that the absence of so many weapons has changed from being an inconvenience to being a disaster. Just bear that in mind if you get the urge to go to sleep tonight.’

Loman nodded. ‘What will you be doing?’ he risked.

Gulda looked at him narrowly. ‘I’m going to prepare some touches of my own,’ she said. ‘To see if I can find a wedge for Yrain’s hammer to drive into the split in our neighbours’ opinions.’

Chapter 21

Clutching the black sword protectively to his chest, Isloman stared up blankly. Then he screwed up his eyes as if to penetrate some particularly obscure shadow. A torch moved, and Hawkklan's face came clearly into focus. He was flanked on the left by Dacu, tense and concerned, and on the right by Tirke, shocked and obviously struggling to keep control.

Briefly it occurred to Isloman that they were all dead and in some mysterious afterworld, but before he could fully register the scene, a familiar voice sounded gleefully by his ear. 'Get up, dear boy, get up. You're not hurt. He's back. He just woke up and chased them all away.'

'Hawkklan?' Isloman whispered, his voice sounding odd in his own ears after the noise of the Alphraan and the deep silence he had woken to. 'You're awake. How do you feel?' The remark seemed incongruous, but nothing else seemed to be able to get past the welter of emotions suddenly filling him.

'Fine. And you?' came an equally incongruous response. Without replying, Isloman took an offered hand and struggled shakily to his feet.

For a moment he simply stared at Hawkklan in the torchlight, then, with an action that had become almost a reflex over the past weeks, he reached out and placed his hand on Hawkklan's brow.

'Where've you been?' he asked, still struggling to quieten his mind at this seemingly miraculous development.

Hawkklan smiled slightly at the gesture and then shrugged. 'Here,' he said. 'All the time. But other places as well . . . I think . . . involved and not involved.' He shook his head. 'I can't really explain. It was like a strange fragmented dream. Not unpleasant . . . but not good.'

Isloman nodded, in the absence of anything more significant to do. Each word that Hawkklan spoke, and each movement he made, seemed to push the recent dark and fretful weeks further and further from Isloman's mind. As he looked into Hawkklan's green eyes, however, he thought he saw a glimmer of great sadness, but it was gone so quickly that he could not be sure it was not some trick of the torchlight.

Then Hawkklan's smile cut through all his uncertainties. 'Still,' he said cheerfully. 'I'm here now, without a doubt, and very glad to be so. We'll talk more later. Right now, we've other matters to attend to.'

Gently, he took his sword from Isloman's hand and fastened it deftly to his belt. Looking down at his hands he flexed his fingers, then his wrists and arms. 'How strange,' he said. 'After all that stillness. No stiffness. No stiffness anywhere.'

'Did the . . . noise wake you?' Isloman said, still searching for some point of stability.

Hawkklan turned to look down the tunnels facing them.

'No,' he said thoughtfully. 'It was a silence, not a noise. Something . . . someone reached out, and . . .' He hesitated. ' . . . brought me together again, here, now.'

'Silence?' said Isloman disbelievingly, remembering vividly the crushing sounds that had borne him to the ground and sent him into oblivion. 'Someone? I don't understand. Who?'

Dacu joined the conversation before Hawkklan could answer. 'It was very strange, Isloman,' he said, an unfamiliar tension in his voice. 'Tirke and I were struggling with the horses, when we saw both you and Gavor go down. We tried to get to you, but that appalling noise just got louder and louder . . .' He

grimaced at the memory. 'It seemed to be almost solid. I thought we were all going to die, then . . .'

'Then?' prompted Isloman impatiently.

'Then it was gone,' Dacu said. 'In an instant.'

'They stopped?' Isloman said.

Dacu shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Something stopped them. Swept their noise aside.' He paused as if scarcely believing what he was remembering. 'A great silence . . . no, more a silence and a stillness, seemed to well up suddenly from . . .' He gestured vaguely around the cave, and his voice fell. ' . . . from everywhere. It just rolled over that dreadful din, as if its sheer . . . intensity, power . . . rendered such a noise irrelevant.'

Abruptly, the tension faded from both his face and his voice and he began to smile. 'It was beautiful,' he said. 'I've sat in quiet stillness many times and found great solace, but this was far beyond anything I've ever known. And I didn't have to struggle for it. It was given to me, Isloman. Just given. Unbelievable. A gift. A gift to guide me forever. Whoever sent it to us has knowledge and understanding far beyond ours.'

He paused, obviously profoundly moved by the memory of the event. His manner was such that the peace of the stillness he had woken to returned vividly to Isloman. Who indeed could have created such a thing?

With an effort he brought himself back to the present. 'And Hawklan?' he asked.

But Dacu too seemed to be having some difficulty in abandoning his preoccupation. He looked at Isloman. 'Hawklan?' he echoed, then, nodding, 'As the silence faded, he just opened his eyes and stood up. Stood up as if he'd only just sat down. Walked straight across to you and Gavor.'

'And you didn't make this . . . silence?' Isloman asked Hawklan, knowing the answer.

'No,' Hawklan replied, shaking his head. 'I don't know what it was, or where it came from. I felt it and . . . heard it, in a way. And when it was gone, I was back with you. Whole again. As Dacu said, as if I'd never been away.'

He frowned slightly. 'It had something vaguely familiar about it, but . . .?' He shrugged.

'Who cares? Who cares?' Gavor boisterously interrupted the collective reverie of the group. 'You're back safe and well, and we can leave. Get back to Anderras Darion.' He flapped past Dacu's head, startling the Goraidin, and landed on Hawklan's shoulder, where he jumped up and down excitedly.

Hawklan reached up and touched the side of his beak with his forefinger. 'Not yet, I think,' he said. 'Not yet. We have allies to win here. We have to talk to the Alphraan.'

Isloman touched his arm nervously. 'Allies?' he said disbelievingly. 'I don't think so. I agree with Gavor. I think we should leave while we can. They nearly killed us just now, and even before that they didn't seem too inclined towards tolerance.'

'So I heard,' Hawklan said. 'But they're also in some doubt, if I'm not mistaken. We have to try and talk to them.'

‘Why?’ said Isloman, almost rebelliously, the memory of his recent helplessness returning to him. ‘If you heard, you know what happened. There was nothing any of us could do when they attacked us. We didn’t even see them.’

Dacu joined in. ‘Hawklan, you above all know how important it is that we get to Anderras Darion and tell your people what’s happening in Fyorlund,’ he said. ‘Isloman’s right. We’re defenceless against these . . . creatures . . . whatever they are, and there’s no reason to suppose they won’t come back and attack us again. We must leave.’

Hawklan nodded. ‘True,’ he said, looking at him. ‘But would you leave such an enemy on what might come to be your supply lines?’

Dacu turned away and looked towards the cave entrance, now brightening with the morning light. Then he turned back and met Hawklan’s gaze squarely. ‘My duty – our duty,’ he indicated Tirke, ‘is to bring accurate information from our Lords to your people, Hawklan, so that those who have to make decisions about supply lines and such matters can do so with some confidence. I’ve also to ensure that you and Isloman arrive safely. Neither of these will be achieved if we wilfully seek out someone who’s already shown themselves unwilling to listen and quite willing to kill us.’

Hawklan smiled slightly. ‘I accept your rebuke, Goraidin,’ he said. ‘You’re right. But if these people are uncertain . . . ill-informed. . . then they’re vulnerable also. Vulnerable to manipulation. Words from His agents to pander to their ignorance could turn them utterly against us, and who knows how far their domain extends under these mountains? Perhaps they’ve been watching us for days. Perhaps they could attack us at any point between here and Anderras Darion. I must try and speak with them while we’re here and while they’re prepared to come so near.’

Then, before Dacu could protest, he continued forcefully. ‘You and Tirke take the horses outside and get them loaded and ready to start.’ He looked at Isloman enquiringly. Resignedly, the carver nodded his great head. ‘Isloman and I will stay here for a little while and see if any of the Alphraan return. Whatever’s happened, after that strange silence they’ll be in a different frame of mind, I’m sure. With luck, they’ll be considerably less belligerent.’

Dacu was unrepentant. ‘I’d rather rely on solid information than luck, Hawklan,’ he said. ‘I think the risk is too great.’

‘So do I, so do I,’ Gavor echoed agitatedly.

‘A few minutes,’ Hawklan offered softly, but resolutely. Dacu looked from Hawklan to Isloman, and then nodded to Tirke to start preparing the horses.

‘A few minutes only, then,’ Dacu accepted, unhappily. ‘And take great care. We may not be able to come in and get you out if there’s trouble. And if we’re attacked outside we’ll have to abandon you.’

‘Yes,’ Hawklan said. ‘I realize that. You must do whatever’s necessary to get to Loman and Gulda at Anderras Darion no matter what happens.’

The two men stared at one another for a moment, then Dacu bowed slightly in acknowledgement and turned to help Tirke who was busying himself saddling the horses. Hawklan and Isloman joined them, and for a few minutes the cave was full of the reassuring sounds of preparation for travel.

Serian walked over to Hawklan and pushed him gently. ‘I’ll stay with you,’ he said. ‘The noise didn’t

trouble me badly as it did the others. I think they were actually trying not to hurt me.’ Hawklan reached up and embraced the horse’s neck.

Then with a last cautionary look, Dacu and Tirke left, and the four companions walked slowly to the rear of the cave until they came to the tunnel entrances.

They stood in silence.

‘Thank you,’ Hawklan said softly, after a while, looking at Isloman and Serian. ‘You saved my life, perhaps my soul, at the palace gate and afterwards. I’m sorry for what I led you to in my folly . . .’

Isloman took his arm. ‘We all followed you willingly, Hawklan,’ he said. ‘And in ignorance, not folly. I’ve thought about it a lot while I’ve been looking after you. I don’t think we could have done anything else. Dan-Tor’s deeds drew us to him inexorably. The important thing is that somehow we survived. And we’re wiser now.’

‘Not much,’ Gavor said caustically, fidgeting on Hawklan’s shoulder. ‘Otherwise we’d all be on Dobbin here and off over the horizon.’

Serian pawed the ground and eyed Gavor menacingly, but before the conversation could continue, another voice was heard.

‘Who are you?’ it said flatly.

‘I really think we should go now, dear boy,’ Gavor whispered into Hawklan’s ear, tightening his claw around Hawklan’s shoulder anxiously.

Hawklan gestured him silent and moved towards the waiting tunnels. He motioned Isloman to hold up his torch higher.

‘Stop this nonsense,’ he said powerfully.

Isloman stared at him. Not only was Hawklan’s response unexpected, but his voice had a commanding tone that he had never heard before.

‘You know who we are,’ Hawklan continued. ‘You’ve been listening long enough.’

There was a brief silence, then Hawklan continued, his voice now almost angry, as if wearying of tiresome children. ‘This is Serian,’ he said. ‘A horse of the Muster, a horse of great and ancient lineage who honours me by allowing me to ride him. This is Isloman, the First Carver of the village of Pedhavin.’ He pointed back to Isloman’s carving. ‘A Master, as anyone with an ounce of wit can see.’ Then he reached up and Gavor jumped onto his hand. ‘This is Gavor, who came with me out of the mountains some twenty years ago and has been my companion and shield ever since.’ Gavor flapped his wings noisily for the benefit of his unseen audience. Hawklan pressed on, ‘And I am Hawklan, bearer of the key and the word to open Anderras Darion. A healer, and now, these past months, bearer of the sword of Ethriss.’

Still there was silence, though Hawklan’s words could be heard echoing into the distance.

‘Are you not going to call us liars and thieves again?’ he said after a while, still stern.

‘We are sorry,’ said the voice after another long silence. ‘We were afraid.’

Hawklan’s voice softened. ‘You murder those you fear?’ he said. ‘Even when they try to run away from you?’

‘We are sorry. We were afraid,’ the voice repeated. ‘And confused. We did not wish to harm you, but . . .’ Sounds filled the cave. Although he could hear no coherent language, it seemed to Isloman that the sounds were full of regret and explanation. The voice re-emerged imperceptibly from the confusion. ‘The one among us who disturbed your . . . companions . . . no longer . . .’ Guides? Rules? Teaches? Isloman found himself again struggling with a sound that seemed to contain every possible shade of meaning centred around the idea of leadership.

‘His song here is ended,’ concluded the voice. ‘The . . .’ Great Silence? Stillness? – Dacu’s words! ‘. . . gave him a deeper truth, and he has chosen it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Hawklan said, his brow furrowing.

‘It is unimportant,’ came the reply. ‘We are not as you. Our ways are very different. We have not the . . .’ Words? Sounds? Patterns? ‘. . . gross enough to explain to you . . . nor do we wish to try.’ There was both distaste and regret in the voice.

‘We are sorry,’ it continued. ‘This has been another sad meeting. You may go if you wish, we will not hinder you. We too wish to return to our . . .’ Home? Heart? Warmth? ‘. . . and be free of the memories that have been awakened.’

‘We can part if you wish, sound weaver,’ Hawklan said, more quietly. ‘But more than memories have been awakened. Your days of peace too are ended. For the sake of each of us we must talk – as well as we can. Isloman told you only the truth, and you must hear it. All must hear it. Sumeral is awake . . .’

‘No!’ The voice was startlingly loud, but there was no angry denial in it this time; rather it seemed to be trying to shy away. But Hawklan’s tone held it.

‘Sumeral is awake,’ he said again, gently. ‘As are His Uhriel. He is unchanged in His intent and He is growing in strength. Derras Ustramel has been built again.’

‘How can this be so?’ asked the voice, still, Isloman sensed, struggling not to flee back to some deeper darker haven, where this terrible light could not shine. ‘He was slain.’

‘I don’t know,’ Hawklan said. ‘But He is with us again. We’ve seen His work and we here have all faced Oklar in his wrath.’

‘But you live.’ The voice was full of doubt and uncertainty. ‘None could face Oklar and live.’

Slowly Hawklan drew his sword. ‘This protected us,’ he said, holding it out. ‘Perhaps if I’d been more skilled, it might have protected others as well, but . . .’ He left the sentence unfinished.

‘Your pain is great,’ said the voice, unexpectedly compassionate.

Hawklan started slightly. ‘It will be lessened when the news of His coming is spread forth,’ he said. ‘Knowledge of Him is the beginning of our protection against Him. Ignorance is His greatest weapon and His greatest ally.’

There was a silence, then, ‘The great . . . stillness . . . that returned you here tells of ancient powers abroad again. But humans were ever treacherous and deceitful.’ The voice was almost despairingly frank. ‘How can we know the truth of what you say?’

‘I know too little of you and your history to defend my kind,’ Hawklan said. ‘We too are sometimes afraid and confused.’

‘And wicked.’

‘And wicked,’ Hawklan conceded. ‘But Serian and Gavor too have seen, and their sight is not easily deceived.’

There was no reply.

Hawklan pointed towards Isloman’s carving. ‘And how could even a Master Carver make such a likeness if he had not seen with his own eyes?’ he asked.

Still there was no reply.

Hawklan held out his sword again. ‘You know this is Ethriss’s sword. Could this above all things be deceived? Could this be found and wielded by a thief to work at His bidding?’

‘But who are you?’ the voice said again.

‘Twenty years a healer,’ Hawklan replied. ‘Now, a healer and . . . something else. I don’t know what – a focus for strange and dreadful events. As for who I was before I found myself in the mountains . . .’ He shook his head. ‘I too have only faith that I’m not the agent of some great evil.’

There was a long silence. ‘They’ve gone,’ Isloman said softly.

‘Good,’ said Gavor. ‘Let’s . . .’

‘Is it true that Anderras Darion is open?’ The voice interrupted him. It had changed in some way. There was a restrained excitement in it.

‘Your kin are in the mountains down there,’ Gavor answered unexpectedly, and rather impatiently. ‘Ask them.’

A babble of sound rose up around the group, making Gavor retreat hastily to Hawklan’s shoulder. For a moment both Isloman and Hawklan too looked alarmed. But there was no menace in the sound. The excitement had broken through some restraint. Isloman felt images form in his head. Images of family, joining, the ending of long separations, and many others. An embarrassed eavesdropper, he tried to turn away from the naked intensity of some of them, so poignant were they.

Gradually the sound merged into the single voice again. ‘Tell us of our kin . . .’ Soaring shadow? Sky prince? Isloman gave Gavor a sidelong look of disbelieving mockery as these images formed out of the sounds, but Gavor was stretching his head high, and ruffling his wings importantly.

‘They struck down a strange bird that was following us,’ Hawklan said quickly, before Gavor could get into his story-telling vein.

The babble began again. Struck down a bird? To aid a human?

‘Come with us,’ Hawklan said, cutting across it. ‘Come to Anderras Darion. See for yourself. Speak to others who . . .’

The noise stopped suddenly, and the voice spoke again, full of great sadness. ‘We cannot,’ it said. ‘The ways are long sealed since the felci went.’

Both Hawklan and Gavor started. In the word ‘felci’ came vividly the image of the sinuous creature that had set about the men attacking Andawyr’s tent at the Gretmearc. It was pervaded with a deep sense of loss. Also came images of isolation, of glories long decayed, ancient places crumbling, inaccessible.

‘You may travel with us,’ Hawklan said, frowning as he tried to encompass the many meanings in the Alphraan’s speech.

‘No,’ said the voice unequivocally. ‘Wait.’

There was another long silence. Absently, Hawklan replaced his sword in its scabbard, and then peered into the dark tunnels ahead.

‘You’ll see nothing,’ Isloman said. ‘Wherever they are, they’re well beyond my vision.’

‘We will come,’ said the voice suddenly. Thanks and expectation glowed around the words, though they were mingled with some fear and uncertainty.

Hawklan smiled. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘We’ll wait for you with the others while you . . . make your preparations.’

‘Do not wait,’ said the voice. ‘We will be with you.’

‘But . . .’ Hawklan began.

‘Do not wait,’ the voice repeated. ‘We will be with you. We do not need your help.’

The tone was final, dismissive almost, although again thanks hovered around it. With a resigned shrug to Isloman, Hawklan moved towards the cave entrance.

Dacu stood up from the rock he had been sitting on when Hawklan and the others came out into the overcast, but bright, morning daylight. ‘Take care on the scree,’ he called out needlessly. His voice sounded clear and simple in the cool air, after the disorienting and subtle speech of the Alphraan.

Hawklan raised a hand in acknowledgement and paused at the cave entrance to look around at the surrounding peaks, solid against the grey sky. Then he extended his arms and took a deep breath. ‘It’s good to be back,’ he said.

Without a word, Gavor launched himself from Hawklan’s shoulder and, dipping first low over the scree slope, rose high above his watching friends to settle on the air currents rising up the cliff face. He began to glide round in great arcing circles, pausing occasionally to fold his wings and tumble precipitously downwards before suddenly sweeping upwards again to join yet more of the pathways that only he knew. The mountains echoed back his laughter.

Hawklan watched him, and smiled. Then he looked at his hands and flexed them again. ‘Very good,’ he added softly.

‘What happened?’ Dacu said, when Hawklan and Isloman reached him. ‘We heard noises, but nothing that sounded dangerous.’

‘They’re coming with us,’ Hawklan said without explanation. Dacu looked surprised and then concerned. ‘How many?’ he said, glancing at the pack horses in some alarm. ‘We’ll have even less supplies now you’ll be eating again. And how are they going to travel?’

Hawklan laughed at the Goraidin’s blunt practicality. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I can’t answer any of your questions. They said they didn’t need any help, so let’s assume they don’t, or at least that they’ll have the wit to ask if they find they do.’

Dacu’s mouth tightened abruptly and, taking Hawklan’s elbow, he led him a little way from the others. ‘This is getting worse and worse, Hawklan,’ he said anxiously. ‘You and Isloman seem unconcerned, as if nothing untoward had happened this past hour or so, but frankly I’m struggling to keep my mind in balance.’

Hawklan reached out to him, but the Goraidin waved his hand aside almost irritably. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I’ll manage. I can’t say I’ve ever seen anything as strange as all this. Or heard,’ he added ruefully. ‘But I’ve seen worse, and both experience and training have taught me to see what I can see, even if can’t understand it.’

Hawklan nodded. ‘What’s the matter then?’ he asked.

‘You,’ Dacu replied brutally. ‘I can’t tell you how good it is to see you standing here, seemingly fit and well, as if the past weeks, with Isloman carrying you around like a great doll, had never happened. But they did happen, Hawklan, and I have to ask myself, have they had no effect on you at all?’

Hawklan lowered his eyes. ‘They did have an effect,’ he said, his tone enigmatic. ‘A profound effect. But not in the way you imagine, and not in any way that will jeopardize our mission.’

Dacu lowered his voice. ‘But you have jeopardized it, Hawklan. Twice now.’ Hawklan looked up, his face uncertain. Dacu continued the theme he had begun in the cave. ‘You took an unnecessary risk in staying in that cave to contact those . . . people. And you risked others with you. Others who are important to us. Now you’ve invited along a delegation to travel with us! With no thought for supplies, horses, anything. Who knows what their needs are? Or their intentions! We’re days from both Fyorlund and Anderras Darion and any semblance of help. What if these people are already His? What if they’re just coming with us to find out our strength before another attempt is made to capture you?’

Hawklan’s eyes suddenly blazed angrily. Dacu stepped back a pace under the impact of the gaze, but gritting his teeth he stepped forward again almost immediately. ‘Damn you, Hawklan,’ he said fiercely. ‘Don’t treat me like that. You know what we all feel for you, but I can’t allow my affection for you to stop me speaking out. *You know* I’m right.’

The anger had slipped from Hawklan’s eyes even while Dacu was speaking, to be replaced by a look of sadness and regret. He looked around again at the mountains and at the high circling Gavor. ‘It’s so good to be back,’ he repeated, very quietly. Then, his voice sterner. ‘I’m sorry, Dacu. You’re right. I apologize. The least I should have done was discuss the matter with you. I’m afraid I let my . . . euphoria

... cloud my judgement. Don't worry. It won't happen again. Lord Eldric appointed you Commander, and I accept his decision totally.'

Dacu's shoulders slumped slightly and his face looked pained. 'Enjoy the mountains, Hawklan,' he said. 'We've all been badly unsettled by what's happened. I suppose time will quieten us down.' He straightened up, 'Especially if we use it to make some distance.'

He walked across to his horse and mounted it, signalling the others to do the same.

Before the group moved off, Dacu looked back up at the cave. 'Keep your eyes open for our new . . . companions,' he said. 'We'll give them the benefit of the doubt, but don't turn your backs.'

Chapter 22

Dacu's injunction, however, yielded no results. As the party wended its way through the increasingly harsh terrain, no sign was seen of anyone following them.

'They must have thought better of it,' Dacu concluded, as they all settled down in their shelter for the night. 'We've been through some exposed countryside today, I doubt they could have hidden from us.'

Hawklan agreed, but looked puzzled. 'It's strange,' he said. 'They seemed quite determined to come with us once they'd made their minds up. Perhaps we moved too quickly for them.'

'No, dear boy,' Gavor said. 'No one's been following you that I could see. But they do live underground.'

Dacu was unconcerned. 'They're no loss,' he said dismissively. Then, repenting a little, he looked at Hawklan and held up the map he had just taken from his pack. 'I've marked the position of that cave as well as I could, and I've got my notes. When we reach Anderras Darion, your people will be able to send out a patrol, or whatever, and try to contact them again.'

'That won't be necessary, Goraidin,' said a voice, seemingly just outside the small shelter. 'We are here, as we said we would be, and we shall remain with you for some time yet.'

Dacu tensed momentarily then relaxed very suddenly. Reading his intentions, Hawklan leaned forward quickly and laid a hand on his arm to prevent him diving headlong out of the shelter in search of the voice's owner.

'Do you have shelter and food?' he said casually, still gently restraining Dacu.

'We have what we need,' came the reply.

'As we're travelling together, won't you join us?' Hawklan asked, sitting back. Dacu shot an agitated glance around the already crowded shelter, but his concern was unnecessary.

'No,' said the voice in a refusal that was so total it seemed to hang almost tangibly in the air. 'We must travel our own ways.'

Dacu looked inquiringly at Hawklan and then briefly at the entrance to the shelter again, but Hawklan shook his head.

‘The Goraidin has doubts about you,’ he said. ‘Great doubts. He rebuked me for inviting you to come with us.’

‘We heard.’

Dacu scowled and lowered his eyes to prevent them from reproaching Hawklan again.

Hawklan however, seemed unconcerned, even slightly amused, at the revelation. ‘If you heard, then you know his reasoning was sound, Alphraan,’ he said. ‘And you do little to lighten the burden of his responsibility by maintaining both a continual absence and a continual presence.’

The reply came in a strange combination of anger, resentment and genuine regret. ‘You own you know little of us, Hawklan. Do not judge us. Nor you, Goraidin. You above all should not so readily accuse us of being His agents. You, whose race proved such a rich vein for His mining.’

Dacu winced. ‘I don’t judge,’ he said angrily, stung by this cruelly accurate comment. ‘I have my duty, both to myself and to others, and I must speak what my head and my heart tell me to speak. You know as little of us as we do of you, but strange to our ways or not, surely you must realize it’s hard for us to be at ease with . . . people . . . who’ve tried once to kill us, who seemingly listen to our every word, and who constantly hide from us. They’re not the actions of allies.’

‘We are not your allies, Goraidin,’ said the voice immediately. ‘Except insofar as we are His enemies. The . . .’ Silence? Stillness that awoke? Still so many meanings clung around some of the sounds that the Alphraan used. ‘. . . reminded us that there are things beyond us all. That and other signs showed us that we must be prepared to learn.’ Images of Isloman’s carving and Hawklan’s sword formed in the words.

‘And it is hard for us to follow the ways to Anderras Darion, human,’ the voice continued. ‘Soon we will have to travel through . . .’ The four men in the shelter all craned forward intently in an attempt to identify what followed. The ancient places? Barren? Dark? Lost? Silent?

The meaning eluded all of them, but there was such a growing and chilling awfulness in the sounds that Hawklan called out, ‘Stop. We can’t understand you, your speech is far too subtle for us. But we feel your pain. What are you frightened of? We’ve only mountains ahead. Difficult and dangerous, but only if we’re careless. Join us if travelling on the surface distresses you so much. We’ll help you gladly.’

There was a long silence, then, ‘Our way to Anderras Darion is not your way.’ The voice faltered, as if struggling to find the correct words for a difficult explanation. ‘It is through . . . bleakness and . . . hardship . . .’ It gave up, and the shelter became silent again.

Hawklan nodded even though his listener was not there to see. ‘We are indeed different, Alphraan,’ he said after a while. ‘We must learn about one another slowly. We mustn’t allow our impatience and fear of each other to become His tools.’

There was another long silence, then the voice spoke again, hesitatingly, apologetically. ‘We do not eavesdrop on you, Hawklan, Goraidin,’ it said. ‘We hear you. It is difficult to do otherwise if we are to remain with you. And we have to learn to deal with the . . . crudeness . . . the inadequacies of your speech. That also is difficult.’ There was a hint of humour in the voice. ‘But patience at least is a word we both understand.’

Dacu looked across at Hawklan, his mind suddenly full of times in the past when he himself had wandered lost and frightened in strange places. ‘If our voices guide you,’ he said unexpectedly, ‘then

listen by all means. And speak should you need help . . . or whenever your heart or your head bids you.'

A strange, touching sigh filled the shelter. 'Thank you, Goraidin,' the voice said. 'Thank you.' And the sigh seemed to fade into the distance.

'Have they gone?' said Tirke, awkwardly breaking the peaceful silence that followed.

Dacu chuckled. 'Were they here?' he said.

Tirke grimaced at the remark as if he had been struck. He put both hands to his head. 'How do you all stay so calm?' he said, his voice trembling.

The three men exchanged glances. 'The same way you will if you get as far as we've got,' Isloman said, smiling uncertainly.

Tirke waved a protective hand. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I can't joke about it. I'm doing my best, but my head's whirling with everything that happened last night and this morning. I don't seem to be able to take it all in. Voices from nowhere, those terrible noises, then that strange silence. And Lord Hawklan suddenly awake . . . I . . .'

Dacu looked at him sympathetically. Tirke had been silent virtually all day, an uneasy and increasingly unhappy spectator at events beyond not only his control but his comprehension.

'Everyone's head is whirling, Tirke,' he said gently. 'Believe me – everyone's. You can't be witness to such as we've seen – and heard – and not be disturbed by it, perhaps to the point of doubting your sanity.' He leaned forward to emphasize the point. 'We're all shocked and disturbed in our different ways, and it'll be some time before we all get used to our new knowledge. All Isloman meant was that the only difference between you and us is age. Age and the changed perspectives that go with it. It's a big difference and one no one can do anything about it. But for what it's worth, you're sane all right, and you saw and heard what you saw and heard, as did we all.'

He took his journal out of his pack. 'Anyway,' he continued, 'if you want a small piece of advice, then just hold gently on to the simple things that you know are sound and real.' He waved the document significantly. 'Lord Eldric didn't send you with us as a stable-lad. He sent you because he values you and wants you to learn. Don't forget, you're a High Guard on special escort duty and under Goraidin command. Observation is the heart of our work. Armies may have to move across these mountains before this business is ended. Armies full of young men, like you, Tirke – uncertain, frightened. Think about them, and how you can help them with your eyes and ears now. Think about them whenever you get too fretful. Everything you've seen, heard and thought goes in here.' He tapped the journal and opened it. 'And you spend your days looking for things to put in it. For your own sake, for a time six months hence when you've forgotten everything that's so vivid now, and for their sake anytime, whoever they are.'

Hawklan watched the exchange in silence. Dacu was an astute and sensitive teacher. The combination of his reassuring manner and his few words had eased the young man's mind without in any way demeaning him. He remembered Lorac and Tel-Odrel consoling Ordan in the midst of the appalling wreck of Lord Evison's High Guard. He wrinkled his nose as the stench of that field returned with the memory. Realizing what he was doing he lifted his hand to disguise the movement as a yawn.

Were all the Goraidin like this? he thought. Certainly all those he had met showed that same astuteness and sensitivity, but these were attributes that could be put to many purposes. Attributes common to the

teacher and the torturer.

So who guided these men, and how?

They guided themselves, came the answer, as far as they were able. Just as the Orthlundyn must now be doing under the tutelage of Gulda and Loman. They saw into themselves, and chose their path. They looked squarely at the desperate, dark parts of their nature and determined to forge them into a tool subservient to their will – the only tool that could stand against the desperate and dark natures of others less disciplined or more malevolent.

Ethriiss's teaching. Ethriiss guided them yet. Even after countless millennia the great momentum of his teaching carried it forward still.

He looked around the compact shelter. Dacu was writing diligently, occasionally making sketches, or referring to his map and adding notes to it in a small, very legible hand. Tirke seemed to have taken Dacu's advice and was also immersed in his writing. He was assisted by Gavor, who, stationed by his left arm, was peering intently at the journal and giving occasional, unsought advice about spelling, which the High Guard took with a remarkably good grace.

Isloman was fighting a losing battle against sleep. After two abrupt and mildly explosive awakenings, he gave up, and with a brief 'good night,' lay down.

Hawklan looked at the carver. How many would have borne me the way you did, old friend? he thought. Or sat and talked to me, and taken me riding into the mountains when for all you knew I was utterly oblivious to everything?

Guilt formed like a jagged, painful crystal in his mind. Isloman had even tried to carry for him his responsibility for the decisions that had led to the disastrous confrontation with Dan-Tor.

A final, monumental yawn from the carver, however, interrupted his mounting introspection. It spread relentlessly round the shelter. First to him, then to Tirke and finally Dacu. With an effort, Gavor fought off the infection, but abandoned his pupil and, with great dignity, moved over to Hawklan to take up his customary guard position.

Hawklan lay down and, staring at the torchlit roof of the shelter, briefly reviewed the new knowledge of himself that had gradually been revealed during his eerie disembodiment. It offered him more questions than it gave answers, but he refused the lure, knowing that inquiry could only lead him into futile, endless searching.

Dominating all his thoughts was the simple knowledge that he was whole again. Back in a real and solid world where he must help in the preparation of the awful battle lines that were being drawn. And his contribution was clear. He must search for his true self and all the other knowledge that lay somewhere hidden inside him. Sumeral could not be fought by men alone. Other, older, powers were needed, and in some way he was the key to their release.

Only one way seemed to be open to him. After they had reached Anderras Darion, then, circumstances allowing, he would go where perhaps he should have gone at first. He would go to the Caves of Cadwanen and seek out Andawyr. Andawyr, who, in some extremity of his own, had twice reached out and sought help from him, and then had reached out a third and final time to support him as he had quailed before the terrible vision of Oklar unleashed.

This decision stood out in his mind like a thread of light disappearing into a forbidding future, like a familiar road wending ahead into the winter mist. Gradually, however, his thoughts became scattered and incoherent and, to the occasional rustling of Dacu's map, he drifted into sleep.

He seemed to wake almost immediately, refreshed and relaxed, and vividly appreciative of his new condition. It's good to be back, he thought again, immediately his eyes opened. He smiled to himself. This simple paean of praise would fade in time, he knew, as the memory of his strange . . . absence . . . receded. But for now, let it sing!

A small cautionary grunt reached him.

'Uh, uh.'

It was Dacu. Hawklan looked at him. The Goraidin, sleepy eyed, was running a hand through his tousled hair and gazing around the shelter, his face concerned. Hawklan followed his gaze and picked up his concern. The light was different.

He caught Hawklan's gaze and nodded. 'Not good, I think,' he said, and crawling to the entrance he opened it slightly and peered out.

A characteristic brightness shone in through the small opening. He opened it wider and thrust his head out.

'Not good, definitely,' he said, as he withdrew his head and closed the entrance. He puffed his cheeks out and blew a long pensive breath, as if it were to be his last opportunity for relaxation before a long and arduous ordeal. Then, indicating the two sleepers, he said, 'Wake the logs up, Hawklan. I'll go check on the horses and see how bad it is.'

A few minutes later he returned to find that Hawklan was having only limited success with his allotted task. He smiled maliciously, 'Come on, you two,' he said with blood-chilling cheeriness. 'You're going to miss the Winter Festival at this rate.'

Before either of the wakening men could reply, Dacu bent down, and with the same practiced skill that he had shown on every other morning, he began dismantling the shelter. It was the work virtually of seconds, and when it was finished, Tirke and Isloman found themselves obliged to complete the rest of their journey into consciousness as uncertain smudges in a bright white snowscape.

Isloman levelled a finger at Dacu and then drew it across his throat. The Goraidin clapped his gloved hands together and laughed, his breath steaming in the cold air.

Within the hour, the group had breakfasted and broken camp and were preparing to set off across the transformed landscape.

Hawklan cast about for signs of the Alphaeran but, as on the previous day, nothing was to be seen. He called out.

'We are here, Hawklan,' came a reply, faint at first and then abruptly quite loud, as if the speaker were standing nearby.

Dacu's brow furrowed, 'How do they do that?' he said. 'And where are they?'

'I told you, dear boy, they're probably underground somewhere,' Gavor said. 'That's where they live, according to the Gate at Anderras Darion. And for what it's worth, the Gate refers to them as Carvers of Sound.'

'Meaning what?' Dacu asked.

'I haven't the faintest notion, dear boy,' Gavor replied. 'And I wouldn't bother asking them. I don't imagine we'd understand their explanation, even if they felt inclined to give us one.'

'You've studied the Great Gate?' The Alphaan's voice cut across the conversation. It was excited, and sounded like several people speaking at once.

Before Gavor could reply however, Dacu gave the order to move out. 'Talk while you're flying, Gavor,' he said. 'We have to make progress as quickly as we can now.'

As Gavor flapped off into the grey sky and the party started to move off, Tirke looked around at the nearby mountains. 'It's not too bad,' he said. 'It's only a light fall, and fairly local. It'll probably thaw before the day's out.'

Dacu nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'But it's not a good sign. It's early, and we've the highest part of the mountains to pass yet. If there's any chance of it setting in before we reach them, we're going to have severe problems.'

'Nothing we can't cope with,' Tirke said, part question, part statement.

Dacu smiled. 'Something I'd rather we didn't *thave* to cope with if a little speed will see us clear,' he said.

Tirke nodded, and dropped back a little way. The whiteness around him reminded him particularly of his family's winter home in the northern mountains. He looked at the three men ahead of him and felt his spirits suddenly lift. He would be here only once. He would perhaps have such remarkable company only once in all his life. This indeed was a learning time.

As the day proceeded, Tirke's observations about the snow proved to be correct and large untidy areas of brown and green began to show through the thin layer of snow that had fallen.

Dacu looked relieved, particularly when the sun began to shine in the late afternoon, but he kept the party moving forward as fast as the terrain would allow, until well past sunset. Periodically he looked back towards the north, where solid banks of cloud were gathering.

There was little conversation as they prepared their camp that night in the torchlight. All were tired, and anxious to eat and rest.

Over a frugal meal, Dacu outlined his intentions. 'We've done well today, but from now on it's strict routine all the way. We rise before dawn – *well* before dawn – and we travel as fast as is safe until the darkness stops us. There's no chance of wearing the horses out over this kind of country.' He looked significantly at Hawklan. 'And if we meet any more strange happenings on the way, we note them and ride on.' Hawklan inclined his head in agreement and Dacu continued. 'This snow was too early and the sky to the north looks ominous to say the least. With hindsight, we may have dawdled too much, I don't know. But we certainly daren't risk any further delays. We'll probably be up above the snowline tomorrow and heading towards the highest part of our journey. That's going to be hard enough without

having to deal with fresh snowfalls.’

He looked around at his weary listeners and invited alternatives to this strategy, but none were forthcoming.

‘Good,’ he said, dousing his torch, and lying down. ‘First awake, wakes the others.’

The next day, after a dark and cold awakening, the party set off in the greying dawn to the accompaniment of a blustery wind and intermittent blasts of cold, driving rain.

Dacu glanced at Tirke and noted that despite the uncomfortable conditions, the young man seemed to be riding more easily. ‘How are you feeling now?’ he asked.

Tirke looked at him a little uncertainly. ‘Well, I’ll have to admit that this wouldn’t have been my choice of day for a canter,’ he said, pursing his lips. Then, acidly, ‘But if you old folks can manage it, I’ll do my best.’

Dacu laughed explosively, causing the others to turn to see what could cause him so much amusement in such circumstances.

‘Ah, you do speak a little of our language, Goraidin,’ said the Alphraan’s voice unexpectedly.

Still buoyed up by Tirke’s remark and the manner of its delivery, Dacu laughed again at this unexpected interruption. ‘Possibly, Alphraan,’ he said. ‘Perhaps one day you’ll tell me what I said.’

For an instant the air around them was alive with a sound like shimmering silver bells, and each of the men seemed to feel the seeping coldness of the day retreat a little.

‘Perhaps we have more than patience in common,’ said the voice. There was humour in the voice, but also another note that caught Hawklan’s attention.

‘What’s the matter, Alphraan?’ he asked.

There was a pause, then, ‘You cannot help us, Hawklan. And we do not wish to burden you.’

‘Speak,’ said Hawklan abruptly, his voice an odd mixture of impatience and gentle encouragement. ‘Let us be the judge of what we can and cannot do.’

Briefly it seemed to the riders that the sound of the wind became a whispered and secret debate, until the voice formed itself again.

‘In the highest part of the mountains lies our own greatest trial, Hawklan,’ it said. ‘Just as does yours. Already we are travelling along strange ways, where the song has not been heard for generations. Soon we will be at . . .’ The speech faltered and sounds came that formed complex images of fear and destruction and bleakness interwoven with longing; longing for lost kin, longing for more hopeful times, for . . . the felci? And . . . the Song?

Gradually the sounds and the images faded, merging imperceptibly into the voice again.

‘We are sorry,’ it said. ‘We forget that you do not speak properly.’

Despite the pain in what he had just heard, Hawklan smiled to himself at this comment.

‘Our trial will be the weather and the mountains and the weakness of our spirits,’ he said. ‘Perhaps also ill-fortune, looking at the weather. Share your trial with us.’

There was a long silence. The four men moved steadily forward into the lee of a large outcrop and gained a little respite from the constant shaking of the wind.

The voice returned suddenly. ‘We are coming near to that which was the . . . Heartplace . . . of the southern Alphraan . . . where the ways ran wide and long, and all could sing to all . . . and the felci kept alive the lesser ways.’

The voice was faint and hesitant and many of the words were ringed about by elusive subtleties of meaning. There was also a sense of discomfort, distaste even. Isloman bent forward, listening intently, then he rode alongside Hawklan. ‘Help them if you can,’ he said anxiously. ‘They’re struggling to tell us something precious to them that only their language can do justice to. It’s distressing them. They’re trying to carve in sand.’

‘Thank you, carver,’ said the voice, before Hawklan could speak. ‘In this, quite definitely, you cannot help. But your awareness eases our telling.’

‘What has happened to your Heartplace that you’re so afraid?’ Hawklan asked.

The voice burst out. ‘His creatures, Hawklan, His creatures.’ Hawklan turned his face to one side as if to avoid the blast of the terrible bitterness and anger that filled the words.

The voice continued, quieter now, but still pained. ‘When we fulfilled our bargain and the last of the Mandrassni were slain, we were a destroyed people, scattered and maimed terribly. But Ethriss had not forgotten us, even though his every moment was given to fighting His dreadful power. He sent us the felci and they spread his blessing through the ways. And over many generations, scattered families slowly came together to start anew, building our second . . . nation.’

The voice faltered. ‘All through these mountains it was, Hawklan. Great and splendid. Halls and ways such as had never been known before, even in the old days. Such a song . . .’ Again the voice faltered, and at the same time the riders found themselves moving from the lee of the rocks out once more into the full force of the wind.

When the voice spoke again, the bitter reverberations in each word were almost palpable. ‘But in our folly we ignored the world and the wars of man, thinking – knowing – that we had done all that could be asked of us to stem His corruption.’

Slowly and softly, as if to avoid disturbing this strange, disembodied telling, Dacu dismounted to begin leading his horse up a steep rocky slope. The others did the same.

‘And when He was defeated, and His Uhriel fell before the Guardians, the many creatures that He had made dread and powerful in His skills, fled into the depths of the mountains from where they had been taken.’ The voice was Gavor’s. All four of the men started in surprise.

‘Ah.’

A great sigh of gratitude surrounded them.

‘Thank you . . .’ Sky prince? ‘. . . For all our skills, we had not the words for that. You have indeed studied the Great Gate.’

Gavor preened himself nonchalantly. ‘I’m really getting to like these fine people’, he said. ‘They have such appreciation. And such a natural sense of respect.’

‘Gavor,’ Hawklan said warningly, concerned for the continuation of the tale.

The voice interceded. ‘No, Hawklan,’ it said. ‘Offer your friend no reproach. He has spared us the pain of the worst part of our story, for it was from your great victory – the victory of men – that the second destruction of our people came. Sumeral’s creatures were indeed dread and powerful, though they quailed before the wrath of men and they travelled far and deep to hide from it. Some came upon our Heartplace and, slaughtering all they found, made it their own, their . . . nest.’ There was such loathing in the voice that for the second time, Hawklan had to turn his face away.

‘And no one helped you?’ he said.

‘Faint songs came from the north of great battles in the ways there, but most men were content to entomb what they could not find and destroy.’ The voice was quiet and resigned.

‘Ethriss was gone, and none helped us because none knew of us,’ it said simply. ‘That was of our own doing and is our cruellest burden.’

The wind blew Hawklan’s hood back. As he tugged at it, Dacu spoke. ‘Could your people not defend themselves against these creatures?’

‘No, warrior.’ There was a bitter humour in the voice now. ‘Our wars against the Mandrassni had been so fearful, that we had turned utterly from violence, and such arts of war as we had were long forgotten.’

Isloman and Hawklan exchanged glances at this ominous parallel with the Orthlundyn.

Dacu’s face wrinkled in pain and bewilderment. ‘But how could you ignore the lessons that you must have learned so bitterly?’

‘You seek to judge us again, Goraidin,’ said the voice, though not unkindly. ‘You must wait until your own people have been utterly destroyed before you can begin to understand.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Dacu responded. ‘You’re right. I was judging you. I was wrong. But if my people were destroyed I think part of me would seek out vengeance.’

‘Ah.’ This time, the Alphraan’s sigh was full of realization and understanding. ‘Yes, Goraidin. Part of you would,’ the voice said, very gently. ‘Humanity was Ethriss’s greatest creation and his most flawed. That is why in each of you there is the darkness that yearns towards His way. Your balance is subtle far beyond our understanding.’

Then, a strange stirring urgency filled the air.

‘This has been a great learning for us,’ said the voice hurriedly. It was fading. ‘And a strengthening. But we must leave you now.’

‘What’s the matter – where are you going?’ Hawklan asked anxiously, leaning forward.

‘To our trial, healer,’ said the voice. ‘If our courage . . . and our fortune . . . holds, we shall speak again . . . on the other side of the mountain.’

‘No!’ Hawklan shouted. ‘Wait. We must help you.’

‘Gavor, if we do not speak again, tell our kin that we have gone into the ancient Heartplace. By your telling they will know the truth of our fate.’

‘No!’ Hawklan shouted again. ‘Stay with us.’

The voice was very faint now, for the first time seeming to be carried away by the wind. ‘We cannot, Hawklan,’ it said. ‘We will need our every resource.’ Then, fading utterly, ‘. . . where we go . . . Sumeral’s creatures . . . may . . . yet . . . live.’

As the voice disappeared into the increasing noise of the wind, Hawklan found himself gazing around, searching desperately for the unseen speaker, a sense of desolation pervading him.

The whole group had stopped, stunned by this sudden and unexpected departure.

Dacu was the first to speak, though not about the suddenly departed Alphraan. He pointed ahead. ‘We’ll need our every resource as well,’ he said. ‘If we’re to get past that.’

Hawklan looked up. Dominating the horizon was a mountain that overtopped all those around it. Its peak was hidden in mist but two broad, curving spurs ran down from its snow-covered shoulders to arc round like the arms of a great chair. Its grim presence however, offered no sense of comfort.

Instinctively, Hawklan turned away from it and looked to the north. There, another mountain dominated the scene. A growing mountain of heavy grey cloud, pregnant with the first of the real winter snows.

Chapter 23

For the first time since Hawklan had left there had been serious dissension among the Orthlundyn.

None could deny the vulnerability of their country as revealed by the visit of Dan-Tor and the subsequent slaughter of the High Guards by armed Mandrocs. And most agreed readily to the restraints placed on their ordinary lives by the need to build up sufficient skill at arms to mend this weakness. However, no small part in this agreement was played by Gulda’s organizing skills, which ensured that these restraints were modest and reasonable and that, for the most part, few had had to leave their homes and farms for any length of time.

Now, however, with the proposal for wholesale movement of almost all training into the mountains, the disruption promised to be considerable and, unexpectedly, Loman and his colleagues found themselves spending long hours first persuading village elders of the real threat raised by the Alphraan’s action, and then helping them in their turn persuade their villagers.

‘The Riddinvolk don’t have this much trouble, I’m sure,’ Loman said one evening, slumping into his chair and gazing up at the carved ceiling. By an irony, it showed a scene of an orator skilfully swaying a great throng. Pulling a rueful face, Loman closed his eyes. ‘I must have spent half the day up at Oglin just sorting out who should tend whose fields, who should feed whose stock, who should collect whose

stones from the quarry, mend this, mend that' – he slapped the arms of his chair and uttered a strangled growl – 'who should scratch whose backside . . .'

Gulda looked up from the book she was reading and, surprisingly, laughed. 'The Riddinvolk are different,' she said. 'They're born to it. Their whole society pivots around the Muster and has done for generations. They have their family homes and lands, but they're much more used to mobility and the kind of communal sharing that goes with it.'

Loman nodded. 'I know, Memsal,' he said more quietly. 'I know. I'm sorry. I'm only venting my frustration through the rafters. I'm just worried. This is taking much longer than I thought. It was hard enough changing the training schedules, but this reluctance, by people . . .'

He sat up, leaving his comment unfinished.

Again surprisingly, Gulda did not seem to share his concern. 'There's nothing else you can do, is there?' she said, her voice still mildly amused. 'You can't drag them up into the hills one at a time and make them train.' She laid down her book and looked at him. 'The Orthlundyn are every bit as mobile as the Riddinvolk, Loman, but in a different way.' A long finger rose to tap her temple. 'In here. In their minds.'

She turned her book over and gently ran her finger over its ornate binding. 'I'll confess, this delay is unsettling me a little as well,' she said. 'But it'll be for the best in the end. Once people accept the changes freely, they'll commit themselves to them, you'll see. In the long run, we may thank the Alphaan for what they've done. They've shown us again how vulnerable we are to the whims of outsiders, and also made us face the problem of the social upheaval that goes with self-defence.' She looked at him significantly. 'An item I fear we've shied away from previously if the truth be told.'

'That's what I keep telling people,' Loman agreed. 'And most of them agree eventually. But it's still heavy going.' With a dismissive wave of his hand, he changed the subject. 'Have you found your wedge yet?' he asked, leaning forward and looking at her intently.

'Oh, yes,' Gulda replied, returning to her book. 'I always knew what that would be. I just wanted to have a long talk with Tirilen about it first. Now she's reasonably happy about it, I'm simply waiting for you to tell me everyone's ready for the change. Then we're off.'

'Off?' Loman queried suspiciously.

* * * *

It was not a particularly warm day, but Loman and Athyr were perspiring freely as they trudged up the last and steepest part of the mountain where Gulda had first lured out the Alphaan with the singing of the three boys.

'At least you're not carrying the children today,' Gulda said, leading the way.

Loman risked a sour look at her back and then adjusted his pack.

'We might as well be,' he said. 'I don't know how that damned tinker carried this lot on his own.'

'He had more than that with him when he came, father,' Tirilen said, wilfully unhelpful. 'And *we* are carrying some of it for you.'

Loman looked at the small neat pack on his daughter's shoulders. 'I'm indebted to you, my dear,' he said acidly. 'There must be a good two to three bracelets in your pack.'

'Take no notice of him, Tirilen,' Gulda said. 'He's just getting old.'

With difficulty Loman remained silent. He judged he had little alternative if Gulda and Tirilen were going to conspire against him. Athyr grinned widely.

At the top, however, it was with some relish that Loman noted his daughter too was looking rather red-faced.

His glee, nevertheless, was tempered with deeper emotions. It seemed a long time since he had walked in the mountains with Tirilen, and while he, in many ways, had become younger over the past months, she had aged noticeably. Not in her appearance, but in her manner and demeanour. The quiet, slightly reserved young woman that had grown from the boisterous, almost raucous tomboy, now seemed to have developed into a much more solid, purposeful individual. He felt a strange twinge of regret.

He shook his head in self-reproach at this unexpected emotion, then gratefully lowered his pack on to the ground, and flexed his arms and shoulders. Athyr did the same. Gulda plumped herself down on a rock nearby and folded her hands over the top of her stick, though Loman noticed that, as previously, she seemed to be quite unaffected by the climb.

Tirilen, however, did not sit down immediately, but walked to the edge of the cliff that fell sharply away from the far side of the summit. There, she stood motionless except for her head moving gently from side to side as she gazed around the valleys and lesser peaks spread out below. The wind, strong and cold at this height, buffeted her and blew her hair awry, and eventually she pulled her cloak tight about her. It was a calm, unhurried movement, however, quite free from the hunched and hasty clutching that many others might have shown. Tirilen embraced the winter-presaging wind as readily as she would embrace the warm summer sun.

Loman watched her, his face impassive.

Unexpectedly, Gulda reached up and took his hand. He looked down and met her gaze. 'They have to leave, Loman,' she said softly. 'One way or another. Just as we left our . . .' She faltered. ' . . . parents, and they left theirs. The only way you'll keep her is to let her go.'

'I know,' Loman said. 'I understand.' Uncharacteristically, he sighed. 'I think I'm used to the idea of letting her go – but not my need to protect and care for her. It's difficult. And I get so frightened for the future.'

Gulda squeezed his hand. The caring and affection – or need for it? – in the contact were suddenly almost unbearable. 'Yes,' she said. 'That need I can't help you with. Take heart that Tirilen's well founded in her life. She's as ready to face and cope with its problems as she is to savour its joys. As for the future,' – she shrugged – 'sight of that is denied to us all, thank Ethriss. But at least your people aren't such innocents any more, Loman. They've been given the opportunity to think and prepare for some of the grimmer futures that might come to pass, and they've seen it and acted on it in a manner that barely fouls the present.' She looked pensive. 'In fact, I think it may even be enriching it.'

'Not for the people we've lost,' Loman said.

Gulda squeezed his hand again, 'You know what I mean,' she said. Then, releasing him, she clapped her

hand on her knee to signal the end of the debate. She stood up and, for an instant, Loman felt himself again in the presence of a younger, immensely powerful, almost frightening woman.

‘Anyway,’ Gulda said grimly. ‘You know well enough that the preparations themselves might prevent the very future they’re intended to meet. No Mandrocs – or anyone – could march through Orthlund now and be slowed only by fatigue, could they?’

Loman nodded. ‘Probably not,’ he said. ‘But . . .’ He waved his arm around the mountains. They had returned to the reason for their journey. Their lack of weapons.

Gulda flicked a long finger at the two packs they had brought. ‘Tip that lot out over there,’ she said.

Loman and Athyr did as they were bidden. Out on to the grassy knoll tumbled the decaying remnants of the wares that Dan-Tor had brought to the village in the spring. Tirilen turned at the sound, her face uncertain.

She walked over to the knoll and, opening her own pack, added its contents to the pile. All four looked at the results with distaste. Metal objects were pitted black and red, fabrics were frayed and mouldering, and wood was cracked and split with unpleasant damp and gaping fissures. The whole, even the children’s toys, exuded an almost tangible unhealthiness.

Unthinkingly touching the slight blemish on her throat, Tirilen crouched down and carefully picked up individual items. ‘They’re still getting better,’ she said after a while. ‘But it’s painful.’ She looked up at Gulda questioningly. ‘Are you sure this is necessary?’ she asked.

Gulda raised her eyebrows. ‘No, I’m not,’ she said. ‘But it’s all I’ve been able to think of.’ She looked around at the mountains. ‘It’s an obscenity to bring these things here, but some, perhaps most, of the Alphraan don’t seem inclined to listen, so they’ll have to see for themselves. That plus our new training exercises might make them think a little.’

Tirilen nodded reluctantly. ‘Before we leave, I’ll do what I can to make sure they don’t harm anything – or anyone – that happens on them by chance,’ she said. ‘But I’d rather have them by the Leaving Stone where we can all see them. It’s bad enough that they foul one patch of ground.’

Gulda laid a hand on her shoulder. ‘You can do no more,’ she said gently. ‘That’s why I asked you to come. That, and the fact that you need the mountains for your healing skills.’

‘Yes,’ Tirilen said softly, looking round and smiling. ‘I do. I hadn’t realized.’

Gulda gave a satisfied grunt and stumped over to the cliff edge where she stood for some time like an angry black cloud.

‘Alphraan,’ she shouted into the blustering wind. ‘We came to you before with a gift and a message. You took the one and ignored the other. Now we bring you another gift, and the same message. You’re divided amongst yourselves, that much we heard in your song, but the debate is not yours alone. Know the truth. Sumeral is awake and we must all –*all*– of us prepare to face Him. Know too that He cannot be hidden from. He will seek us out, each in our turn, when His strength is sufficient. And this may be soon. Nothing can prevent this and nothing can protect you except your willingness to protect yourselves.’ She levelled her stick at the pile. ‘Here’s our gift,’ she continued. ‘It’s what His agent brought to Orthlund. And far worse followed in its wake, which we’ll tell of when you want to listen. But for now, study these corrupted wares well. If in the face of these, the ignorant and foolish among you still

prevail, then so be it. You would not be the first in history to turn your backs to the knife.’

Her voice suddenly became more powerful. ‘But you cannot oblige others to do the same. You must release the weapons of Anderras Darion; the weapons of the Orthlundyn; Ethriss’s weapons. The Orthlundyn are a free people. They have made their decision and they accept its responsibilities. You have no right to do what you’ve done unless *you* are prepared to carry the burden of protecting them when His hordes come!’

Her voice seemed to echo round the surrounding crags, but as it faded no other sound could be heard apart from the wind swirling around the peak where they stood.

‘Not so talkative today,’ Loman said. ‘Do you think they heard?’

Gulda chuckled. ‘They heard well enough,’ she said. ‘Every word. And watched our every action.’

‘We’re leaving now,’ she shouted abruptly. ‘Tirilen’s healing will protect you and anything else from the random harms that might come from this . . .’ She pointed again to the pile. ‘And have no fear. In time we’ll return and take it back to the village. The people of Pedhavin know it was to their shame that they didn’t see these things for what they were, and they’ll both bear that odium and learn from it. But until we return, feast your senses upon what you find here, sound carvers. See what songs it inspires.’

Still there was no reply.

Gulda nodded to herself and turned away. Then, as if it were an afterthought, she turned back again. ‘Our people will be returning to the mountains soon,’ she said. ‘To continue practicing the skills – the awful skills – that must be acquired to face Him. Skills which may yet be used in time to protect you. They will carry no weapons, but you must watch and listen, and learn. And do not seek to harm those who are prepared to face the evils you would turn away from.’

Loman looked at Gulda sharply. Her whole speech had been delivered with what was tantamount to angry scorn, but the nuances in her voice during this last statement were strange and he was unable to tell whether it was a plea or a threat.

Before he could comment however, she turned away purposefully and signalled to him and Athyr to pick up the packs and prepare to leave.

Throughout their journey back to the Castle they heard no sound other than those of the mountains.

* * * *

Immediately on their return to Anderras Darion, Loman ordered the commencement of the new training exercises and, within days, large groups of Orthlundyn began making their way into the mountains to establish a series of temporary camps.

‘At least, I hope they’re temporary,’ Loman said to Gulda as they walked up the steep road to the Castle from the village. ‘It’s been a hard struggle to persuade everyone that it’s necessary, and there’re still some reluctant souls out there.’

Gulda stopped and turned round to look down at the village with its solid houses scattered about the slopes below. To the north, the sky just above the horizon looked grey and misty, but a pleasant sun shone on the village, cutting sharp shadows through its maze of streets.

‘Always different, always the same,’ she said, half to herself. ‘Poor Orthlundyn. Preparing for war again.’

She turned back and began marching towards the Castle. ‘They should be temporary,’ she said. ‘I can’t see the Alphraan taking kindly either to what I said, or to Dan-Tor’s wares.’

‘You were quite forceful,’ Loman said cautiously. Gulda’s speech and its blistering delivery had concerned him since they had come down from the peak, but he had found no suitable opportunity to comment on it.

Gulda chuckled. ‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I told them the truth and I told them in a manner that they couldn’t ignore.’

Loman looked at her. ‘With our people going out there, was it wise to risk making the Alphraan angry?’ he asked.

Gulda returned his gaze and pointed towards the distant path leading up from the village into the mountains. ‘There’s only one way the Alphraan could prove to be a permanent danger to us,’ she said.

Loman raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

‘By doing nothing,’ Gulda replied emphatically. ‘By just sitting quiet in their little holes and *doing nothing*.’

Loman frowned uncertainly. Gulda took his arm. ‘If they do nothing, Loman, what can we do?’ She did not wait for an answer. ‘Also nothing. We’ll be left with an Armoury we can’t get into, no way of getting weapons in any quantity, and no way of reaching the people who’re causing the problem.’

For all its brevity it was an apt summary of the grim outcome that could ensue from simple inaction by the Alphraan. It was an idea that had not occurred to Loman and it chilled him. He made no effort to reply.

Gulda continued. ‘Fortunately they’ve already shown themselves willing to make contact with us, just by interfering, so it’s important that we respond, and respond vigorously, to provoke response in return. We must keep them moving. Each time they respond we’ll learn more about them.’

Loman was torn. ‘And if their responses involve hurting some of our people . . . our friends?’ he asked.

‘People are getting hurt all the time,’ Gulda replied brusquely. ‘You can’t learn what’s got to be learnt and *not* get hurt at some time or another. You’ve been hurt often enough before now and come out none the worse for it.’

Loman looked angry. ‘It’s not the same,’ he said. ‘We’re using other people to . . .’ – he searched for a phrase – ‘. . . to test the heat of the furnace. And we’ve no idea what’s going to happen to them. You’ll forgive me if I feel for them a little?’

Gulda’s tone became hard. ‘It’s exactly the same, Loman,’ she said. ‘They’re all going of their own free will. They’ve all been told as much as we know . . .’

‘They were persuaded.’

‘They were told the truth,’ Gulda snapped back. Then, more softly, ‘School yourself to this kind of pain, Loman. There’ll be more, and worse, to come. Your concern does you credit. But there are times when you can’t allow yourself to feel for individuals too much, it’ll mar your judgement, and you’ll make mistakes that’ll plunge everyone into the furnace with a vengeance. You need balance in your compassion.’

Loman stopped walking. ‘That’s not balance, that’s callousness,’ he replied bluntly. ‘Training and organizing is one thing, but this . . . I’m not sure I can do it.’

Gulda tapped her stick on the hard ground, an ominous tattoo. ‘You can’t not do it, Loman,’ she said. ‘If you want to preserve all this.’ She swung her stick round in a sweeping arc to encompass the Castle, the mountains and the rolling landscape. ‘And all your friends. You’re Orthlundyn. You’ve enough shadow skill in you to know how a change in perspective changes a scene. Your perspective is changed now. You have a broader vision. You can’t see everything. No one can. But you can see more than many. Just play your part and think yourself lucky you’ve got plenty of good, sensible, capable, people around you to support you.’

Loman looked at her, his eyes penetrating. ‘Where did you learn all these things, Memsa?’ he asked abruptly.

Gulda turned away from him sharply, almost as if she had been struck, and started off up the road again without replying.

‘You’re right,’ she said, as he caught up with her. ‘It is callousness. But I’m right as well. We’ve no alternative.’ She turned and looked at him, her face unreadable. ‘No alternative that we can live with. The few have always fallen for the benefit of the many,’ she said stonily. ‘Always. Our pain is to accept that; to honour our own lives when we’ve helped deny them theirs. And our task is to make that few as small as possible. What that costs us personally is irrelevant.’

Without speaking, Loman walked off the road and across a small area of short springy turf sprinkled with bright flowers, to a jagged rocky outcrop. Standing on it, he could see the stream that bubbled out of Anderras Darion, cascading white and silver towards the river below. Beyond lay the village and the familiar countryside, small patches now scarred brown where fallow areas had been used for cavalry and infantry training.

Gulda had told him nothing he did not already know, but the speaking of it had changed it in some subtle way. He was at once profoundly free and profoundly pinioned.

He looked to the north and the habitual thought came – where are you, Hawklan? Isloman? What are you doing? When are you coming back? But even as the thought occurred he knew that their return would make no difference to his burden. Indeed it might well presage events that could make that burden worse. No, his greatest solace would lie in Gulda’s last statement. ‘Our task is to make that few as small as possible.’ As small as possible! That was a practical problem and would have practical solutions. That, he could apply his every resource to willingly.

He turned away from the scene and returned to the road. Gulda had gone on ahead, leaving him to his reverie, and she was now a tiny black insignificance moving along at the foot of the towering splendour of Anderras Darion.

* * * *

For several days, nothing untoward was reported from the mountains. The various camps were established without any serious difficulties, and training began almost immediately.

Visiting the central camp, Loman found Athyr well pleased. It seemed that an atmosphere almost of Festival had sprung up in the more spartan conditions of the camps, and training was being pursued more energetically than ever. The Orthlundyn were tackling with some relish the problems of using infantry phalanxes and cavalry in the difficult terrain, and were proving inventive in the development of techniques for ambush and unarmed fighting skills.

Loman recalled Gulda's comment that they might indeed be grateful to the Alphraan in the end. However, he detected a small note of reserve in Athyr's report. 'That's far better than we could have hoped for,' he said, when Athyr had finished talking. 'But what's bothering you? Injuries?'

Athyr shook his head. 'No, no,' he said. 'Only a few cuts and bruises among the more boisterous. Nothing that needs any special attention.'

'What then?' Loman asked.

Athyr bent down and picked up a small rounded stone. 'We made sure that no weapons were brought up here,' he said hesitantly. 'But . . . everyone's suddenly practicing stone throwing and slinging.' He raised his hands in premature denial. 'Not my idea,' he said, shaking his head.

Loman rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment, then the new spirit pervading the camp swept over him. 'Good,' he said, laughing. 'Encourage it. It's as effective as bowmanship in its place, and, round here at least, you're not going to run out of ammunition.'

Athyr looked heartened by this response, but cast his eyes around the surrounding peaks significantly.

'We told them we'd bring no weapons,' he said.

'We haven't,' Loman said. 'Nor will we. We told them we were coming here to continue learning the skills we need.' He waved his hand around the busy camp. 'These people made this decision for themselves. Let the Alphraan see where these skills derive from – from the hearts of ordinary people prepared to defend what they value. And let them realize truly what a weapon really is.' Then he laughed again. 'And you'd better start practicing yourself. As I remember, slinging's not exactly your strong point.'

Loman was still in high spirits as he prepared to leave the camp, but he had only just mounted his horse when a distant but powerful whistle made him look up. It was followed immediately by a cry from someone in the camp.

'Message.'

Athyr cast about for a moment and then directed Loman's gaze to a crag high above them. There a figure was waving two signal flags frantically.

Loman narrowed his eyes in concentration as he read the signal. It was brief and to the point. 'Fighting. Camp three,' it said. Then, 'Serious.' The routine noise and clatter of the camp had stopped at the first cry. Now it was replaced by a buzz of concern.

Athyr ran towards a small platform that had been built at the centre of the camp. Loman swung down from his horse and handing it to a young woman nearby, ran after him.

Before he reached him however, Athyr was already on the platform and banging an alarm bell. Loman suddenly found himself part of a general convergence on the platform, and when he reached it he had to push his way through a growing crowd before he could clamber up to join Athyr.

Athyr was looking up at the signaller again, but the man was peering intently through his seeing stone.

‘The message is confirmed,’ said a young man, who was already on the platform. He was pointing towards a second signaller on a more distant hill. Athyr nodded. ‘Keep watching,’ he said. ‘Interrupt me if you see anything else.’

Then he spoke to the crowd. His voice was stilted because he duplicated his words in a version of the High Guards’ hand language. He was not proficient in it, nor were his audience, but it was adequate. Loman had ensured that the hand language was taught to everyone as part of their routine training, though it had never been popular. Now, however, in the mountains, with the risk that sounds could be used to mislead and deceive, he had insisted that it be used as much as possible, particularly for urgent orders.

Gulda had made a similar contribution by unearthing the flag language for signalling. Initially, for some reason, it had caused intense amusement among the Orthlundyn, and Loman took some delight in remarking that it was the first time he had ever seen Gulda looking bewildered. However, it had been learnt diligently enough and like the hand language its value was abundantly clear now.

‘Be alert, all of you,’ Athyr said. ‘Reinforcements for the signallers, up there straight away. Duty patrol, mount up, Loman and I will ride with you to camp three.’ He turned to the young man, ‘Send a signal to all camps. Tell them what we’re doing. They’re to reinforce their signallers and they’re to wait until they hear from us. No one,’ he emphasized, ‘*No one*, is to leave any of the camps until we find out what’s happening.’

The young man picked up a pair of signalling flags but before he could begin his message, another whistle was heard. He looked up. ‘Fighting at camp six, also,’ he repeated slowly after a brief pause.

Athyr looked at Loman and then turned back to the now tense crowd. ‘First reserve patrol, mount up. I’ll come with you to camp six, Loman will go to camp three. Signaller, you send that as before. The rest of you – be alert,’ he repeated. He slapped his hands significantly. ‘*Andhand language*,’ he gestured.

Loman looked at the uncertain and concerned faces surrounding the platform, and felt very cold. We must keep the few as small as possible, he thought. Their needs come before mine.

Chapter 24

Within minutes of Athyr ordering out the two patrols, the interlinked system of flag messengers that had been arranged because of the risk to oral signals presented by the Alphraan had brought in further confirmation of fighting at camps three and six.

Thus instead of wending a leisurely way back to Anderras Darion, Loman found himself trotting at the head of the duty patrol. Alongside him was Jenna, one of the members of the elite corps who had been dispersed through the camps as observers.

‘Any new ideas about how to tackle this?’ he asked.

Jenna shook her head. ‘No,’ she said uncertainly. ‘If it’s like the last time, it came out of nowhere. No warning. No sounds. Nothing.’ She looked anxious. ‘It was frightening, Loman,’ she said. ‘It taught me more about real aggression – real personal threat – than any amount of training could.’ She paused awkwardly. ‘I’ve told you all this before, haven’t I?’ she said.

Loman smiled. ‘You have, Jenna,’ he said. ‘But it doesn’t matter. I understand. Speak your fears while you can. It was a hard lesson for you, but a worthwhile one, I’m afraid. It’ll take quite some time for you to get over it fully.’

There had been some debate before the camps were established about how to tackle this type of problem, but no satisfactory conclusions had been reached. Gulda’s opinion was that divisions among the Alphraan and the absence of weapons would prevent any great harm being done. She also had some hope that sheer weight of numbers might present them with problems. But hope was all they had; the whole point of the venture was to provoke and to learn. Thus Loman and all the other leaders knew that they would have no alternative but to make their own decisions as events occurred, and study the consequences afterwards.

The patrol rode on in silence for some time, then Loman dropped back a little until he was alongside the middle of the column.

‘Have any of you got throwing stones with you?’ he asked. There was some vague nodding and hand raising.

‘Get rid of them,’ he said. ‘All of them. Straight away. We don’t know what . . . difficulties . . . we’re going to run into at camp three, or even before, but the fewer potential weapons we have to hand, the better.’

The request caused little debate, though he noted that some were a little reluctant to part with what were obviously carefully chosen stones.

‘They’re lying about everywhere, anyway,’ said one of the riders casually as he upended his pouch.

Loman smiled. ‘True,’ he said, watching the small stones clattering into anonymity amongst their countless fellows strewn across the valley floor. ‘But they won’t be hand-chosen like those, and you’ll need to pause for a moment before you pick them up.’

The man frowned. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

Loman reflected the frown. His casual remark had set in motion an unexpected train of thought. He did not reply but instead rejoined Jenna at the head of the patrol. For a little while he rode with his head bowed pensively.

The memory of their first encounter with the Alphraan returned to him vividly. ‘They bind themselves,’ one of the voices had said to Gulda. ‘They have not your vision.’ And, at least in part, they seemed to have been amused by it. Surprised, even.

The harsh drumming of the horses’ hooves on the valley turf was relentless and determined. It echoed in his head disturbingly. There was a wrongness about what was happening, but it eluded him.

What are we going to find at this camp? he thought suddenly. An enemy, obviously, came the reply.

Obviously?

No, he realized. They were going to find friends. Friends being misled – used – by an enemy. An enemy that would almost certainly be unseen but who were capable of holding people immobile without even touching them. They had even held him. Him! Who could lift a man and his horse if he wished.

Still the horses pounded on and he felt the angry spur of the patrol's collective purpose.

But against whom could that purpose be directed? How could it be used against an enemy that could not be seen?

Then came the thought: and who would direct this purpose?

He raised his hand. 'Slow down,' he shouted. 'Slow down. Walking pace.'

There was some confusion behind him and Jenna turned to him, startled. She began to protest but he waved her silent. 'Just slow down,' he said quietly.

Then the rhythm of the hooves was gone, replaced by the uneven, soft treading of the horses and the relaxed creaking and rattling of tackle.

'If we go into camp three like cavalry, then we'll be seen as cavalry, and used as cavalry against our own people,' Loman said after a pause.

'What do you mean?' Jenna asked, almost whispering, concerned at this unexpected development.

'Halt and dismount,' Loman called out.

There was a brief pause as Jenna cast another quick glance at her companion before confirming the order.

Loman swung down from his horse and began walking with it. He signalled the patrol to break formation.

Jenna could not contain herself. 'What are you doing, Loman?' she said angrily, though still keeping her voice low.

'Thinking,' Loman said absently. 'Or rather, ordering my thoughts.'

Jenna's jaw tensed. 'There are people in trouble up there,' she said, pointing ahead.

'I know,' Loman replied. 'But they'll be in worse trouble if we go charging in like this.'

He felt Jenna's eyes searching his face and he raised his hand reassuringly.

'Listen, all of you,' he said, addressing the whole patrol. 'So far the Alphaan have hurt no one directly.'

A small bubble of protest started to form.

Loman punctured it. 'They've only made us hurt ourselves,' he said.

‘You all felt the excitement of galloping along to rescue our friends, didn’t you?’ he continued. ‘Action at last against these arrogant, interfering little people.’

The ensuing silence was uncomfortable, but no one demurred.

He looked round at his companions. ‘But ask yourselves this,’ he said. ‘How can that excitement – that righteous excitement – that indignation – be directed against an enemy that can’t be seen?’

He paused to let the implication sink in.

‘It can’t, can it?’ he said.

He pointed at one of the younger men. ‘You’re in battle,’ he said forcefully. ‘You’ve killed your man, but your sword’s been broken. More of the enemy appear and you can’t run. What do you do?’

The man smiled and shrugged, pleased to have such an easy question. ‘Take the dead man’s sword, obviously,’ he said.

‘Obviously,’ said Loman softly. Then, louder, ‘When you have no other choice, you take your enemy’s weapon and use it against him. That’s what the Alphraan do. They have no weapons except what we bring to them. They’ll take the weapon of our surging excitement and anger, and turn it on our own people.’

There were cries of denial. ‘No. It’s not possible. They couldn’t make us do that.’

‘They can, they have done, and they will again.’ Loman’s powerful voice stilled the hubbub. ‘It’s all they can do.’ Then, more quietly, ‘It’s all they need to do.’

Jenna nodded in agreement and an uneasy silence spread over the walking group.

‘What are we supposed to do then?’ one of them asked.

‘Mount up,’ Loman said. ‘But keep walking and stay out of formation.’

‘But what are we going to do?’ came the question again. ‘Abandon those at the camp? Stand off until they’ve finished . . . whatever they’re doing . . . and then pick up the remains?’

Unexpectedly, Loman smiled. ‘No,’ he said. ‘We’re going to counter-attack. We’re going to disarm our enemy.’

* * * *

Tybek breathed out as he sidestepped his charging attacker and, moving behind him, seized his shoulders. The man’s momentum carried his feet into the air and he dropped heavily on to his back.

Tybek heard the wind go out of him, but before he could bend down to check the man for injury, an arm came clumsily round his neck. He drove his elbow back somewhere into his new attacker’s midriff and then swung his clenched fist down to strike him in the groin.

Not him, he realized on impact; her. But the blow hurt nonetheless and when he turned round, the girl

was staggering away gasping in pain.

‘Stay back, all of you,’ he shouted. ‘Listen to me. Remember who I am. Remember who you are. There’s no danger here. You’re not being attacked.’

He linked arms with his neighbours again. A few of them seemed to have been unaffected by whatever had caused the sudden outbreak of violence, and after the first shock he had managed to gather them together in a cleft in the rocks.

With an effort he was maintaining an outward show of calm, but he was nevertheless very frightened. It had been exactly the same on the other exercise. No warning. Just voices raised in a quarrel and then mayhem. People he had known for years suddenly demented with rage. And this time it seemed to be worse than before. Those affected had stopped fighting amongst themselves and were now uniting against the others.

And when was anyone coming? He’d seen the signaller sending the news but that was . . .

He let the thought go. He had no idea how long ago it was. And he mustn’t look towards the end of this or he might not reach it. He must be here, now, deal with attacks as they happened. It would end sooner or later.

The watching attackers were still milling around at the mouth of the cleft, shouting abuse and threats, but they were also hesitating following the rapid dispatch of the first two individuals. As if mimicking them, Tybek’s own thoughts began to combine to assail him. What if they start throwing stones? What if they charge together? What if these here with me are suddenly affected? What if I am affected? Get in among them, Tybek, they’re only young, they don’t stand a chance against you, not with your technique.

He brushed the thoughts aside angrily. Stay calm, he intoned inwardly, followed by, ‘Stay calm,’ out loud to the five standing in line beside him. ‘They’re being controlled by the Alphraan. They don’t mean what they’re doing. Stay calm. They’re your friends and they’re in trouble.’

‘*They’re* in trouble?’ said a voice to his left. ‘They should be standing here.’

The small joke produced some nervous laughter and even Tybek was glad of its brief lightening. But the position was serious. Several people had been hurt, though he could not tell how badly, and it would not take much in the way of a change of fortune to ensure that someone would be killed. There was a limit to the care he could exercise in defending himself and the others.

The atmosphere suddenly changed. The attackers had found some courage from somewhere, or lost what was left of their control, and were starting to move forward. Their anger surged ahead of them, almost tangible in its intent, and Tybek felt the arm linking his, trembling.

No, please no, he thought.

The arm tightened. ‘It’s all right,’ he lied, gently loosening the grip and freeing himself for further movement. ‘Stay calm, and follow my lead. Whatever happens, keep together.’

He clenched his fist and then, irrelevantly remembering his easily disjointed fingers and Athyr’s injunction, opened it again. Glancing round, he identified various stones that he could scoop up quickly and throw. A few cracked knees would slow them down.

He rejected his idea. Such an action might provoke an identical response and, grouped as they were, they would be defenceless against such an attack. He would have to do what he could without weapons. While he used his superior fighting skills, there was nothing his attackers could imitate.

But in the end . . . ?

No, please no, he thought again.

The attacking group came closer. He scanned the familiar faces now distorted in rage. As he looked each in the eye, they retreated a little, but when the contact was broken, they began to move forward again.

Gradually they began to fill the cleft, breaking their line as they approached down the narrowing gap.

Terrible images began to form in Tybek's head. A few more paces and he would have no alternative but to take severe action to protect himself and the others.

And what would the consequences of that be? Quite possibly some would be killed. And young and inexperienced though they might be, their numbers alone could overwhelm him eventually.

When was someone going to come?

'No, please no,' he said out loud. 'It's me. Tybek. And your friends. Look what you're doing.'

But there was no response, his voice seemed to mingle with that of the mob and make it worse.

One of the leaders bent down to pick up a large stone.

That does it, Tybek thought. No more restraint now. People are going to die, and it's not going to be me or any of these if I can prevent it. Three quick strides and he could lay that one out and the two either side before they realized what had happened. Then. . . ?

He breathed out and relaxed both his body and his mind for the impending onslaught.

An eerie silence suddenly filled the cleft, then the leader's eyes signalled his intention to throw the stone.

'Ho, the camp!'

A cheerful voice rang out powerfully over the shuffling silent menace of the two closing groups. The would-be stone thrower faltered.

'Ho, the camp!' the voice repeated. 'Where are your look-outs, Tybek? All asleep again?'

A little ironic cheering floated gently in the wake of this remark.

The attackers began to look at one another uncertainly. Tybek craned up to look over their heads. Strolling leisurely between the neat rows of shelters was Loman, smiling broadly. Just behind him was Jenna. Then came a group of men and women laughing and joking as though they were arriving at a Festival Celebration.

Relief flooded through Tybek followed immediately by alarm. If Loman and Jenna were to be affected –

and all these others . . . ?

A hand opened, and a stone fell to the ground with a soft thud.

It's going! thought Tybek, his eyes widening. Just like before. Going as it came, no warning, nothing.

Loman caught sight of Tybek. Raising his hand in an airy salute, he strode forwards towards him briskly. The crowd parted silently to let him through.

'Didn't see you at first, Tybek,' he said heartily, placing his powerful arm affectionately about the man's shoulders. Then, with a monumental smile, he moved him gently but relentlessly back through the uncertain crowd causing it to move backwards and spill out of the narrow cleft. Tybek gaped as he saw that the other arrivals were also singling out friends and acquaintances and greeting them with tremendous warmth. The attackers too were looking increasingly bewildered.

'Hope we're not disturbing anything special,' Loman said loudly and jovially before Tybek could speak. 'But we were out on an impromptu rock and shadow hunt and as we were passing we thought we'd see how you were getting on. We've found some marvellous variegated stone just along the valley, ideal for miniatures – and the surface fissuring is unbelievable. You'll . . .'

Tybek found his voice. 'Loman, what are you blathering about?' he said. 'What do you know about rocks and shadows, you tin beater? And . . .'

He stopped, realizing what he was saying. With an effort he pulled his mind away from the wilful momentum of Loman's enthusiasm and back to reality. 'What's happening?' he asked anxiously. 'What are you doing, walking into the camp like this? Didn't you get my message about . . .'

'The fighting?' Loman said blandly. 'Oh, yes. That's why we came.'

'I don't understand . . .'

Tybek began, but Jenna joined them.

'It's worked, Loman,' she said. 'Look at them.'

Loman released Tybek and looked around at the dispersing crowd. Shock and confusion dominated.

'This is the way it was before?' Loman asked. Jenna nodded. Loman pulled a sour face. 'How many have been hurt?' he said, turning to Tybek.

'About a dozen or so, I think,' Tybek said hesitantly, still uncomprehending.

'Get the healer to look to those immediately,' Loman said to Jenna. 'Then start casually gathering them into groups. Talk to them as we agreed until they're more settled. Then see if you can get any of them to talk about what's happened – or what they think has happened.'

As Jenna walked off, Loman looked up at the surrounding mountains. Everything was still and silent, and except for a signaller standing high on a prominent ledge, there was no sign of any living creature. The sight of the signaller reminded him of something, but the thought refused to form and with a slight frown he turned back to the camp.

* * * *

Several hours later, as the sun dipped behind the mountains and low evening clouds began to form

around the higher peaks, Loman and Jenna led the duty patrol into the central camp. With them were Tybek and the others from camp three.

An anxious crowd headed by a young man wearing a duty officer's sash was waiting for them.

'No one's been seriously injured,' Loman said, before anyone could speak. 'There's a couple who'll have to go back to the Castle, but the rest can be tended here.' He smiled wearily. 'Leave them to the tender hands of Tirilen's trainees – that'll teach them not to fight amongst themselves.'

But neither the news nor the jest affected the crowd's concern.

'What's the matter?' Loman said, frowning.

'There's been serious fighting at camp six,' said the duty officer suddenly, as if anxious to be rid of his burden.

'How serious?' Loman said.

'We don't know,' said the man. 'The last message we got said, "send no more – Athyr", and then they stopped.'

'Stopped?' Loman said.

The man nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'The stations in sight of camp six stopped responding.'

Loman looked at Jenna, his face tense and pale. 'We never signalled back,' he said hoarsely. 'Told them what we'd done.'

Jenna looked down. 'He mightn't have seen it, on the move,' she offered after a moment, but the comment held no consolation.

Loman closed his eyes and bowed his head.

'I'll get the injured attended to straight away, Loman.' The duty officer's voice brought him back to the present. 'And make arrangements for the quartering of camp three, but what shall I do about Athyr?'

Loman rubbed his finger on his forehead absently, then looked up at the purpling sky. Some of the mountain top clouds were red in the glow of the unseen sun, others were now leaden and cold.

'Have all the signallers been reinforced?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Send this,' Loman said. "'Look at the evening light, Orthlundyn. Look at the shadows and the rock. Turn your minds to your carving.'"

The man frowned uncertainly. 'I don't understand,' he said.

'Just send it,' Loman said decisively. 'And tell the signallers to keep repeating it until they get a response from every station.' Still uncertain, the man looked up at him. 'Through the night, or until I countermand the order,' Loman said, anticipating the next question.

The man nodded to a nearby signaller who ran off immediately. ‘But what have I to do about Athyr?’ he asked again, turning back to Loman.

‘Nothing,’ Loman said, ‘Jenna and I will go to camp six alone, now. See that the night duty patrol is alert and that everybody else is bedded down early. Tomorrow could prove to be trying. I want everybody fresh.’

‘Do you want me to come with you?’ Tybek asked.

Loman shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Stay here. Tell everyone what’s happened, and if you haven’t had a signal from us by dawn, move out in force.’ He raised a warning finger. ‘But gently, Tybek, gently.’

* * * *

While the light held, Loman and Jenna maintained a steady trot, but as it failed they were obliged to slow down to a walk. For a while they had to strike their torches, but eventually a full moon rose above the peaks and filled the valleys with glistening silver light.

Above them, Loman’s message flickered from peak to peak, as torches replaced the daytime flags.

Jenna shivered, and wrapped her cloak about her.

‘Cold?’ Loman asked.

‘Inside and out,’ she replied. ‘Cold, sick, guilty, everything, Loman. And still frightened.’

He leaned over and laid his hand on her arm. ‘The fear, you’ll handle,’ he said. ‘I know you. As for the guilt – leave it for another time.’

Jenna made to speak but Loman shook his head. ‘I know we made a mistake in not signalling back what we’d done, but you were quite right, Athyr mightn’t have seen the message while he was on the move. And if he had there’s no saying he would have been as lucky as we were. Save the guilt, Jenna, until we know what’s happened, and until we’re both less tired.’

‘I’ll try,’ she said flatly. ‘But . . .’ She abandoned the sentence and for some time the two rode along in silence.

Reaching the end of a long incline, they found themselves on a broad rounded shoulder between two mountains. Halfway up one of them a signal light moved. Loman lifted his fingers to his mouth and whistled.

‘Any news from camp six?’ his message said.

The sudden piercing noise made Jenna start, and shook her out of her preoccupation.

The lights above faltered and, reacting to her immediate alarm, Jenna smiled. ‘You’ll frighten them to death, Loman,’ she said. ‘They probably think you’re Alphraan.’ Loman nodded and striking his torch waved it in a wide arc over his head. He whistled the message again.

‘No,’ came back the curt reply. Then, after a pause, ‘Good luck. Will keep sending your message.’

Loman acknowledged with another whistle and a wave of his torch then he peered down into the moonlit valley below.

‘How far’s the camp from here?’ he asked.

‘Not far,’ Jenna replied. ‘A couple of hours at this speed.’ She pointed. ‘It’s round that spur,’ she said. ‘It’s only just out of sight, but you’ll not see it until we’re almost on top of it.’

Loman nodded. ‘And the signal stations?’ he said.

Jenna indicated three well-spaced peaks. Loman glowered into the shining darkness, remembering his own helplessness in the thrall of the Alphraan. How many of his people were lying thus now? He clicked his horse forward.

A wave of anger washed over him at the thought of the signallers, bound and impotent in their high sanctuaries. But something diverted it into more reflective considerations.

There were inconsistencies in what had happened. The predominant weather in the mountains was cloudy, with mist and rain making visual signalling difficult. Presumably therefore the Alphraan had chosen such a clear day for their attack so that some form of investigating force would be drawn into the fray. Yet if this were so, why would they paralyse the communications from one and not the other?

Perhaps the weight of numbers was indeed presenting them with problems? Perhaps they had a strategy whose subtlety couldn’t yet be seen? It occurred to Loman that random and inconsistent behaviour was an admirable tactic for destroying morale. Perhaps again they *were* random and inconsistent, either through their nature, or because, as Gulda reasoned, they were divided amongst themselves?

‘Riders.’

Jenna’s whisper cut through Loman’s circling speculation. He felt his pulse start to race as he reined to a halt. ‘Where?’ he whispered in reply, as if fearful of what the dark shadows around them might hear.

Jenna pointed.

Loman leaned forward, his eyes intent. Slowly weaving its way along the valley was an unsteady thread of mottled light and shadow that slowly resolved itself into a long line of riders. It was too far away to form any judgement about their condition.

‘Halfway from the camp,’ Loman said. He looked again at the peaks which housed the signalling stations. Nothing. Just darkness.

‘They were in the shade before,’ Jenna said. ‘That’s why we didn’t see them sooner.’

Loman stared pensively at the distant riders.

‘Should we signal them?’ Jenna asked. Loman caught the flicker of the same request from above.

‘No,’ he replied to Jenna. Then taking her torch he dismounted and signalled a formal reply to the signaller. ‘No. Continue original message as ordered, but report the sighting and our actions back to central camp.’

‘Signals won’t tell us anything about them,’ he said, remounting and handing Jenna’s torch back to her. ‘If they’re hostile in any way, they’ll only lie. We’ll approach openly, as we did at three.’

‘And be ready to run?’ Jenna said.

Loman nodded earnestly, and the two moved forward again.

‘This is difficult,’ Jenna said, after a while. ‘I’m trying to be at ease, but I’m too tired and anxious to think about carving, or to look at the moon shadows. Or anything except . . .’ She nodded ahead.

‘Yes,’ Loman agreed reluctantly. ‘Me, too. I think that’s the best we can do this time. Be concerned. It’ll suffice. At least it’s not warlike.’

In the deceptive perspective of the mountains the route towards the approaching riders seemed like a gently undulating slope, but as Loman and Jenna moved gradually down into the valley, they found that the column disappeared for long periods behind large local variations in the terrain.

Eventually Jenna raised her hand. ‘We’d better wait here. We might pass them if we go much further.’

Loman agreed and they positioned themselves on a conspicuous outcrop washed with bright moonlight.

The mountains around them were patched with shining silver and subtle moon-hazed shade. Here and there, tumbling streams caught by the moonlight shone more brightly than they did on a summer’s day. The whole scene was hauntingly beautiful.

‘I can sympathize with anyone wanting to keep war and violence away from here,’ Jenna said, keeping her voice low, as if it were an intrusion.

Loman nodded. ‘Better here than in the villages,’ he said sadly. ‘At least the mountains are oblivious to our antics. They were here before we were, and they’ll be here when we’re gone.’

‘I know, but . . .’

Loman turned to her. ‘I understand,’ he said. But in his mind was the thought that just as the mountains were gradually changed by forces they knew nothing of, so might that not also be the case for humanity also? It was a dark, frightening thought, and he did not welcome it.

As if disturbed by its rider’s sudden unhappy preoccupation, Loman’s horse stirred slightly, its hooves scraping on the rock. Moonlight glinted off its harness, catching Loman’s eye like a brilliant evening star. He smiled and patted the animal gently. At the worst, he thought, if he couldn’t see his chains, at least he felt free. At the best, he *was* free.

Slowly the soft night noises of the mountains were joined by the faint clinking and rattling of the approaching column. But no voices could be heard.

Loman’s horse whinnied.

Jenna reached out and took Loman’s hand. The lead rider came over the rise immediately by them. His head was bowed. Behind him came the rest of the column, silent and ghostly in the white moonlight.

Chapter 25

The four men stood in silence for some time, staring up at the mountain that barred their way.

Tirke voiced the predominant apprehension. 'We don't have to go . . . over that, do we?' he asked, pointing hesitantly towards the mountain's cloud-covered peak.

Dacu chewed his bottom lip. 'Damn near,' he said, and, without further comment, he mounted his horse and rode forward. 'Come on,' he said. 'We must get as far as we can before that lot arrives.' He inclined his head towards the darkness shadowing the clouds to the north.

The others mounted and rode after him.

'There's no way round?' Isloman asked.

Dacu waved his hand in a sweeping gesture. The mountain rose out of a long series of high peaks and ridges which faded into the grey, rain-swept distance.

'Wouldn't west take us straight through to Orthlund?' Isloman said.

Dacu nodded. 'Just about,' he said. 'But it's precious little shorter and I've no idea if we can get through that way.'

'What do you know about this way?' Isloman asked, nodding towards the mountain. 'Did you ever get this far when you were training?'

Dacu shook his head. 'No,' he said, slightly surprised. 'Of course not.' He patted one of his pockets. 'But according to the map and what we could glean from the records at Eldric's, there's a way through up there.' He pointed up at the broad spur swinging down on the right hand side of the mountain.

Isloman looked at it. 'The map,' he said uncertainly.

A small spasm of irritation shone in Dacu's eyes. 'The map's fine, Isloman,' he said slowly. 'It's got us this far without any problem. There's a lot missing from it, but what it shows has been correct.'

Isloman frowned. 'So far,' he said. 'If the Goraidin never came this far south, then probably no one has for years. There could be anything around the other side of that spur.'

Dacu's jaw came out. 'I'm aware of that. But we've got our wits, haven't we?' He slapped his map pocket again. 'And no reason to suppose there isn't a way through when we get up there. At least we have some semblance of a route. Who knows what we'll run into if we turn west?'

Isloman turned to Hawklan. 'Do these mountains mean anything to you, Hawklan?' he asked.

Hawklan shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Nothing. But we've had no real certainty about a route since we came into the mountains. Why the sudden concern?'

The question was unexpectedly sharp and seemed to startle Isloman. For a moment he did not speak.

'I'm sorry,' he said eventually, slightly flustered. 'I've got bad memories of being lost in the snow . . . I . . .'

Hawklan rode alongside him and laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘I’d forgotten. But they were different times, Isloman. And you survived those against both the elements and an enemy. Don’t let the Morlider destroy you now, twenty years later. Not when you’re heading home with friends.’

‘I know. I’m sorry,’ Isloman repeated. ‘It was just a shock coming on that mountain so suddenly. It’s so big. Just give me a little time.’ Then he urged his horse forward to ride just behind Dacu at the front of the small procession.

For the rest of that day, the quartet rode on in comparative silence. Isloman’s unexpected moodiness gradually passed, unable to sustain itself against his natural disposition now its cause had been named, but the blustering showers confined everyone to their cloaks and hoods, and the absence of the Alphraan left them all with an indefinable sense of loss.

Dacu pressed forward steadily but relentlessly and by the end of the day they had crossed the valley and made good progress up the huge rocky spur.

Sitting in the quiet warmth of the shelter their spirits began to return, though concern about the following day’s travel and the fate of the Alphraan returning to their mysterious Heartplace, tended to dominate their thoughts.

‘I keep expecting them to interrupt at any minute,’ Tirke said, breaking a brief silence in the conversation.

Hawklan smiled. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It’s very strange. An entire people living as our neighbours for so long, and no one knowing anything about them.’

Gavor coughed.

‘Except the “Sky Prince” here, of course,’ he added with a laugh. ‘Or whatever it is they call you.’

Gavor was haughty. ‘I can quite see why they kept themselves to themselves, dear boy,’ he said. ‘They’re obviously people of considerable refinement and good taste. Unlike certain parties around here.’

‘Of course, your highness,’ Tirke said, fluttering his elbows and bowing.

Gavor looked at him balefully. ‘Would you like some more help with your journal, dear boy,’ he said loudly. ‘You seem to have forgotten it tonight.’ Dacu raised his eyebrows and Tirke glowered at his betrayer. ‘Oh, and don’t forget, there are two Ls in valley,’ Gavor added.

Hawklan called a truce, and a companionable silence descended on the group as Tirke dutifully worked on his journal.

After a while Hawklan yawned and lay down to stare contentedly at the roof of the shelter as it moved gently to and fro in the still boisterous wind. Occasional flurries of rain rattled against it, and each time Dacu inclined his head slightly, unconsciously listening for the change in tone that would indicate a change from rain to snow.

Catching himself at it, he smiled and shook his head. Then he pulled out the map and began studying it pensively. Isloman leaned across and peered over his shoulder. Dacu eyed him uncertainly, like a

schoolteacher expecting an impertinent question.

‘We’re about here, I presume,’ Isloman said, after a moment’s consideration. His large finger tapped the map gently.

‘Yes,’ Dacu replied. He made a small cross where Isloman had indicated, and wrote a number by it. Then, with a slow steady stroke of his pen, he joined the cross to another at the end of a line which wound down through the mountains from Fyorlund. It was a small, complete, and relaxed gesture that, to an eye like Isloman’s, told of years of discipline and practice.

Isloman smiled. ‘I’d forgotten how precise you all were,’ he said reflectively. ‘Except when it got really . . . grim . . . Commander Dirfrin kept his journal meticulously, just like you do. And he made the others keep theirs. They were works of art. I even used some of your drawing techniques in my carving plans.’

Dacu glanced at him without lifting his head. ‘Really?’ he said in soft and genuine surprise. ‘You surprise me.’ He waved a hand over the map. ‘This is just routine information recording.’

‘You misjudge yourself, Goraidin,’ Isloman said, leaning back. ‘It’s far more than that. It’s artistry – a kind of perfection.’

Dacu looked at his handiwork and then at Isloman to see if the carver was teasing him. But Isloman was quite serious.

‘Others depend on our precision,’ Dacu said, slightly embarrassed. ‘We can always yarn to each other about our exploits and our terrible sufferings.’ He laid his hand on his chest in self-mockery. ‘But these’ – he tapped the map and the journal – ‘must show only what is relevant to the needs of other people in other times.’ He looked suddenly thoughtful. ‘Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps it is like your carving. When it’s done well it shows none of the pain of its making.’

Isloman nodded appreciatively and looked again at the map.

‘Where’s this route around the mountain?’ he asked.

Dacu indicated a short broken line on the map. ‘It’s a narrow gully, apparently.’

‘Not far,’ Isloman said.

Dacu raised his eyebrows. ‘Not on the map,’ he said, reaching up to increase the brightness of his torch. Immediately, under the touch of the torchlight, the subtle colouring and shading of the map gave a look of solidity and depth to the mountains. The spur could be seen rising up steadily out of the green of the valley, tapering gradually into a narrow ridge that buttressed the peak. Other ridges and peaks in the vicinity also seemed to stand sharply out of the map.

Isloman was admiring. ‘Well, well,’ he said. ‘That’s very good. Whoever drew that knew his shadow lore. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hadn’t studied in Orthlund. The depth expression is remarkable.’

Dacu nodded. ‘It’s an old map,’ he said with a touch of sadness. ‘I doubt anyone knows how to draw them like this these days.’

The image of Dan-Tor, slowly, methodically, destroying the old ways of the Fyordyn, came to Isloman. ‘They will again,’ he said. ‘Your map shows the way back to those times just as it shows a way through

the mountains.’ He smiled. ‘Providing we use our wits,’ he added, mimicking Dacu’s earlier reproach.

A gust of wind shook the shelter and, with a yawn-stifled, ‘Good-night,’ Tirke doused his torch and lay down. Isloman looked again at the map. The difference in heights between Dacu’s latest cross and the broken line was now clearly visible.

‘It’s a lot higher up, isn’t it?’ he said.

Dacu nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Almost as high again as we’ve travelled today. Well into the snow, and probably the mist.’ He looked at Isloman. ‘Will you be all right?’ he asked.

‘I’ll manage,’ Isloman replied. ‘It was just a shock coming on it so suddenly. It just . . .’ His voice tailed off.

‘We’ve all got old wounds, Isloman,’ Dacu said quietly. ‘We know Dirfrin’s group had a bad time that winter. But better to admit the fear than let it fester.’

‘I know. But it’s never easy, is it?’ Isloman doused his own torch and lay down. ‘I’ll be all right. Don’t worry.’

Dacu opened his journal and, dimming his torch a little, began writing.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘I don’t think this gully’s going to be easy to find. Unless visibility’s good I think we’re going to need your eyes.’

* * * *

Visibility the next day, however, was not good. During the night the wind dropped, and when they woke it was to a motionless mist, tinted grey by the pending dawn. It had a characteristic chill.

Dacu allowed no time for conjecture. Rapidly he stripped the shelter to galvanize his charges, then issued a swift series of orders for the harnessing and loading of the horses.

‘What about something to eat?’ Tirke pleaded, struggling with his pack. Gavor anxiously added his own concern to the request.

‘You can eat as you ride,’ Dacu said, his breath steaming. ‘It’s going to snow today, beyond a doubt, and I’ll be surprised if this mist lifts much. We must move while we can.’

‘Which way?’ Hawklan said, when they were all mounted.

Dacu pointed a finger upwards. ‘For at least four or five hours, I should say, then we’ll have to move more carefully. We could have problems if we wander past the gully.’

They were able to ride for quite some distance and gradually the mist brightened and thinned as the unseen sun rose and reached out with its warming touch. The group’s unease lightened with it, but the chill remained.

Perched on Hawklan’s shoulder, Gavor looked at the silver droplets decorating his iridescent feathers. He shook himself, wreathing Hawklan’s head in fine spray.

‘Thank you, Gavor,’ Hawklan said with heavy irony, hunting for a kerchief.

‘It’ll freshen you up, dear boy,’ the raven replied, only mildly repentant.

‘Go and see what the weather’s doing,’ Hawklan said, casting a glance upwards. ‘See if you can get over this mist.’

‘Dear boy, I might get lost,’ Gavor protested.

‘Not while we’re carrying food, you won’t,’ Hawklan said unsympathetically. ‘Go on.’

With a martyred and dignified sigh, Gavor left.

A few minutes after his departure, the party found itself at the foot of a much steeper incline. Dacu dismounted.

‘We’ll have to lead the horses from now on,’ he said. ‘Be careful. Slow and steady will get us there. Rushing could kill us all.’

Slow and steady, however, was their only alternative, as the men had to make several journeys up and down each section of the incline to help the struggling horses. Hawklan took his guidance from Serian.

‘This is difficult, Hawklan,’ the horse said. ‘They’re good nags, but they’re getting frightened and it’s sapping their will.’

‘Reassure them,’ Hawklan said.

The horse chuckled. ‘Only humans lie, Hawklan,’ he said. ‘We’re much simpler souls. We only see the truth.’

Hawklan smiled at the reproach and patted the horse’s neck. ‘Goad them, then,’ he said. ‘There’s nowhere else we can go except forward.’

Gavor floated down out of the greyness. ‘My, you have been working hard, haven’t you?’ he said to the four men, who were steaming almost as heavily as the horses.

‘The weather, Gavor,’ Hawklan said, glowering at him.

Gavor became more serious. ‘Not too good, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘This mist is local, but it’s widespread and it’s not going to clear. The clouds are dropping. It won’t be long before the snow reaches us.’

Dacu was unsurprised. ‘If our information’s correct, this incline should ease after a while, then we’ll have to start searching for the gully. Let’s hope our luck holds for a little.’

As if in mockery of this prayer, a solitary snowflake tumbled silently out of the mist to land softly on his arm. Dacu looked up. Black against the grey sky, like the vanguard of a great host, more flakes twisted and turned purposefully towards him.

‘Let’s move,’ he said quietly.

For a further hour they struggled up the rocky slope, the horses slipping and slithering as the snow

thickened around them, slowly obscuring the uneven ground.

‘I can’t see any army making its way over this lot,’ gasped Tirke at one stage, as he and Dacu heaved one of the pack horses back on to its feet.

‘Armies can get over anything when they want to,’ Hawklan said, overhearing the remark. ‘Mountains and rivers are obstacles only to the will, and only the will falls before them.’ Dacu looked at him strangely. What quality was it in this man that made him at once so approachable and so frightening? He realized that at times he felt before Hawklan as he had when he first saw this mountain looming ahead of them, far bigger than he had imagined, and dominating their way forward, utterly oblivious in its ancient patience to their fleeting needs.

Yet Hawklan was also the opposite. He was wholly concerned with the needs of others.

As if catching his thoughts, Hawklan reached down and extended his hand to help Tirke over an awkward boulder. As they climbed, the snow began to fall more heavily and visibility became very poor. Gradually, however, the slope became less severe and eventually the horses were able to walk unaided.

Dacu halted and, crouching down, ran his gloved hand through the snow. ‘I thought so,’ he said. ‘Fresh on top of old. We’re up in to the permanent snow now. We’ll have to start looking for the gully.’

He peered into the silent grey anonymity around them.

‘Should we camp and wait to see if the snow stops?’ Tirke asked.

Dacu looked up at the sky. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘This is well set in and there’s a lot of daylight left yet. We must keep moving.’

‘But if we miss the gully, we could wander anywhere in this,’ Tirke said. ‘Up on to the mountains to the west – anywhere.’

‘True,’ Dacu agreed, walking over to one of the pack horses. ‘But we’re also too exposed here. If the wind starts blowing it’ll reduce what visibility there is, and give us some real problems. Not to mention problems for the horses. We’ll have to keep moving if only to find better shelter.’

Isloman, knowing what Dacu intended, put a hand on Tirke’s arm to forestall his next concern. ‘Don’t worry, Tirke,’ he said. ‘You’ll enjoy this. It’ll be a chance for you to build snowmen again.’

‘Here’s a present for you, Tirke,’ Dacu said.

Tirke looked at the proffered object suspiciously. It was a spade.

‘You do the digging and I’ll do the hard work – the thinking.’ Dacu smiled broadly and pulled a small book and pen from his pocket. ‘Later on, we’ll change round and . . . Isloman and Hawklan can do the digging.’ He laughed. ‘We’ll take here as base – build a big one.’

For the rest of the day, the group wandered methodically to and fro through the silence of the steadily falling snow, building cairns of snow under Dacu’s instruction to mark their passage. Dacu compacted a portion on each cairn and made a mark on it which he duly recorded in his book.

‘It’s just a simple grid,’ he explained to Tirke. ‘It’ll suffice in this light, and these cairns should survive a

day or so, with luck. At least we won't wander too aimlessly. The rest depends on good luck.'

Good luck, however, seemed to desert them, and although they came upon several rock faces and clefts through the day, none seemed to lead anywhere. As the light began to fade, the search became one for shelter.

'This'll have to do,' Dacu said wearily, lifting up his torch and peering around a cluster of large boulders lying at the foot of a rock face. 'It should be out of the wind if it picks up, and there'll be space enough for the horses behind the shelter.'

When the shelter was erected, Dacu permitted the issue of extra rations. 'It's been a hard day,' he said. 'And I don't think they'll be getting any easier. Time for a little self indulgence, I think.'

'Hear, hear,' said Gavor.

But it was difficult for the group to maintain any feeling of light-heartedness. All were tired and dispirited from the rigours of the day and the gentle tapping of the still falling snow did little to reassure them about the morrow.

'What are we going to do?' Tirke asked drowsily when they had all doused their torches and were drifting into sleep.

'Search, or wait and search,' Dacu said simply. 'It depends on the weather.'

'But if . . . ' Tirke began.

'No ifs, it's too long a word,' Dacu interrupted. 'Tomorrow we search, or we wait and search,' he repeated. 'Now, we're well fed, and we're warm. All we can do is rest. We know the decisions we'll face in the morning and there'll be time enough to debate them then. For now, go to sleep.'

Tirke muttered some vague protest, but his body had anticipated Dacu's command, and the muffled comment was only in response to some random shape floating in the pattern of his dreams.

Despite his tiredness however, Hawklan lay awake in the darkness, listening to the breathing of his friends and the occasional whistle or snort from Gavor. How long had he lain, and in what unknown darkness? he thought. How long before he had found himself wandering in the snow-filled mountains on his way to Anderras Darion?

But as ever, no answers came. Why should they? He would wake here in the morning and have no memory of either going to sleep or being asleep. For all the awareness he would have of the passage of time, it could have been a single night or ten thousand years. At least here I'll remember the previous day, he thought. The deep silence within him did not stir.

Knowledge had come to him while he lay immobile in Isloman's care after Oklar's assault, though he had no recollection of its coming. He found he had knowledge of the ruling and commanding of people, and of the many arts of war. And there was a knowledge that he had striven through his life to acquire these arts. Yet the knowledge was like a dying echo. The true sound was denied him still, and the names and the faces, the deeds, all the memories that should have been central to this life, were missing.

His mind told him that this new knowledge was perhaps no more than a coming together of all his recent experiences and the studying he had done before he left Anderras Darion, but his heart and his body

showed him it was too deeply rooted for that. He refused to search for the missing memories, however, sensing that such a search could lead him nowhere but into fruitless winding spirals.

But a darker image did concern him. An image of betrayal? Guilt? *His* betrayal. *His* guilt. Somewhere in his long and hidden journey to this time, he had shed a great and terrible burden. Or had it been taken from him? A burden of appalling suffering and thousands of lives lost through his folly.

Yet he was at ease here. How could such a burden have been shed? How could it not be carried forever, just as its consequences would spread ever outwards? Why was it lying somewhere, mouldering by the wayside of his life just as Dan-Tor's wares rotted outside Pedhavin? But above all, what was it?

What had he done? Who had he betrayed, or failed?

He seemed to hear faint clarion calls. The haunting vision of swirling blackness returned to him. Battling against endless undefeatable waves of unseen foes, under a dark flickering sky, with the air pulsating to sinister chanting and the ground moving unsteadily under his feet. He shuddered. Despair and guilt sapped him as much as they fired him. Then as he sank, something touched . . .

Hawklan opened his eyes, solidly in the present again, if present it was. Noises! Faint noises. Just outside the shelter? Familiar yet strange. He held his breath and listened intently. He could hear the snow still falling, though it had changed in tone indicating that the wind was beginning to rise. And one of the horses was a little uneasy, but not as though some prowler were in their midst. Yet the sounds seemed to be quite close – or were they? Hawklan became aware of another presence, listening.

'What's happening?' Dacu's whisper in the darkness startled Hawklan by its apparent nearness.

'I don't know,' Hawklan whispered back. 'Listen.'

The noises rose and fell, coherent yet unintelligible, and still both familiar and unfamiliar.

'It's the Alphraan,' Hawklan said, suddenly identifying the strange unfocussed quality in the sound.

'I can't understand what they're saying,' Dacu said.

Hawklan frowned slightly as the sound drifted into some echoing distance and almost vanished under the hissing snow.

'I don't think they're talking to us,' Hawklan said. 'I think we're eavesdropping.'

A great yawn filled the shelter. 'Dacu, dear boy,' came a reluctant voice. 'It's surely not time to get up yet.'

The two men shushed the bird, only to waken Isloman. Then there was a brief confusion of incoherent but very recognizable sounds which drowned out the faint noise of the Alphraan until eventually all four men were lying awake and silent in the darkness.

Slowly the sounds emerged again.

'What do they want?' Isloman whispered.

'I don't know,' Hawklan said. 'Just listen. There are images in the sounds.'

And images there were. Images of great determination. But also, images of defeat? And fear? Terror, even?

Hawklan's eyes opened wide in horror. Had another people followed him, only to be led to their doom?

The shelter felt suddenly suffocating. Without speaking, Hawklan struck his torch and, seizing his sword, threw himself headlong out through the entrance.

Blinking in the sudden light, Gavor flapped after him. As he stood up, Hawklan found himself calf-deep in fresh snow, surrounded by whirling eddies of snowflakes, twisting and spiralling around the little torch-lit enclave. A strong wind shaped their dance and Hawklan felt the cold strike through to him immediately. Chilled air rushed into his anxious lungs and woke him utterly. Fumbling with the torch, he fastened his sword belt awkwardly.

Gavor flapped up on to the top of the shelter, but before he could speak, Dacu crawled out of the entrance, followed immediately by Isloman and Tirke. Their torches brightened and broadened the small snow-laced sphere that they centred.

Dacu threw Hawklan's cloak about his shoulders.

'Be calmer, Hawklan,' he said quietly, though his voice and eyes were as chill as his steaming breath. 'Six paces here might mean your death.'

Hawklan made no response but offered him no resistance. The cloak was warm, and Dacu was only speaking the truth. But all around now were the sounds of the Alphraan and their fear was almost tangible.

'Alphraan,' Hawklan shouted suddenly. 'Where are you? I hear you. I'll help you.'

The sounds shifted. Hawklan called again.

'Yes. Help us, Hawklan,' said a voice around them hesitantly. It was set in a jabbering mosaic of anxieties and terrors. 'Our means fail our will. We will be destroyed.'

'What do you mean? Where are you?' Hawklan asked.

'Follow. Please, quickly. We will guide you.' The voice dwindled suddenly into a single faltering tone. It led into the blackness beyond the shelter.

Hawklan moved forward but Dacu stepped in front of him. 'What are you doing?' he said in alarm. 'Didn't you hear me before? You can't go wandering off in these conditions. Look around you, man.' He brushed the already thickening snow off the front of his cloak.

'They followed me,' Hawklan said. 'Now they're dying. I must go to them.'

Dacu placed a restraining hand on his chest. He was about to tell Hawklan that he had a duty to his own kind first, but it died on his lips. 'It could be a trap,' he said desperately, turning to Isloman for support. As he did so however, Hawklan quietly side-stepped him and strode off towards the darkness.

'Stay where you are,' he said, without turning. So imperious was his voice, that for a moment Dacu

faltered. Then he swore. 'Get your swords,' he said grimly to Isloman and Tirke, striking the beacon torch that topped the shelter. 'Gavor . . .' He was about to tell Gavor to follow Hawklan, but the instruction was unnecessary, Gavor was gone. He turned to Isloman. The carver looked at him. 'Be ready to hit your friend,' he said. 'Hard.'

Hawklan held his torch high and Gavor landed silently on his shoulder. The sound hung urgently in the air like a guiding rope, but his torch showed tumbled, snow-covered boulders ahead. Carefully, but quickly, he began to scramble over them and soon found himself dropping down into a wide cleft, which so far seemed to have been sheltered from the snow.

Hastily he began to make his way along it, occasionally slipping and stumbling on damp, lichen-covered rocks, Gavor fluttering ahead of him. The sound became more urgent.

'It could be a trap.' Dacu's voice returned to him, but he ignored it. The plea in the Alphraan's voice could not have been other than genuine. And even if it were false, he could do no other than follow such a call. People had already died simply because he existed. He could not risk more dying because of his actions.

That is a weakness, said the dark and cold part of his mind, but he thrust that aside too. As are you, in your blindness, he thought in rebuttal.

'I'm coming,' he said, in answer to some new unspoken urging in the hovering thread of sound.

The floor of the cleft began to rise and the wind began to tug at his cloak, though it carried no snow. He glanced upward, but the torchlight revealed only a little of the ragged uneven rock walls rising above him. It must be narrow at the top, he thought, if no snow has ever fallen into it.

As he looked back down again, a shadow caught his attention. Moving towards it he found it was a cave entrance. And the sound was coming from it. He frowned a little. He was certain he had not noticed it before.

'Trap,' came Dacu's voice again.

Muttering to himself, Gavor flapped up on to his shoulder. 'Steady, dear boy,' he said.

Hawklan nodded, then, drawing his sword, stepped inside.

Chapter 26

Loman and Jenna waited and watched, motionless, as the riders moved towards them, eerie in the moon's pale wash.

Loman grimaced as a catalogue of injuries manifested itself. But worse than the injuries was the awful, dispirited silence in which the column travelled.

'Athyr,' he said, almost whispering.

The leader started, then halted and looked around. For a moment his face was blank then an uncertain recognition lit his face. 'Loman? Jenna?' he said, his voice full of doubt. His tone reflected his appearance and that of the column which had stopped when he did.

No uncontrolled frenzy here, Loman thought. This was the retreat of a shattered force, waiting with timeless patience in the moonlight; ghostly, like ancient warriors sentenced to an eternal penance for some long-forgotten defeat.

Loman rode forward. ‘We’ve come to help you, Athyr,’ he said simply. ‘Are you all right?’

Athyr still stared at him, understanding coming only slowly. ‘Yes,’ he said after a long pause. ‘Now.’ He lowered his head.

Loman’s eyes narrowed in response to the pain in the gesture.

‘They let us go, Loman,’ he said. ‘It was . . . awful. We’ve got injured . . . and dead.’

Loman heard Jenna’s sharp intake of breath. She came alongside. ‘Who . . .?’ she began anxiously, but Loman lifted a hand to silence her.

Athyr’s eyes suddenly blazed, ghastly in the moonlight. ‘We couldn’t do anything, Loman. They used us like puppets. They . . .’

Loman reached forward and seized his arm in a powerful grip. ‘Later, Athyr,’ he said. ‘Whatever it was, it’s over for now. We must look to our charges.’ He nodded towards the waiting riders.

The look in Athyr’s eyes faded, but Loman saw a tiny flash of light in them that made him start. He looked again and then turned to confirm its source. In the distance, lights blinked from the three hitherto silent signal stations. They were moving very rapidly and their messages were barely coherent.

Once again, Loman rent the mountain silence with a piercing whistle to catch the attention of the nearby station. Then turning to Jenna he said, ‘Tell them to signal central camp to send healers and carriers to meet us, most urgent. And to get Tirilen and Gulda up from the Castle immediately.’ He glanced at the distant lights blinking desperately. ‘And reassure them as well as you can,’ he added. ‘Tell them what’s happening and that we’ll get them relieved as soon as possible.’

His voice was louder than necessary and, as Jenna jumped down from her horse and began scrambling up onto a nearby rock, his horse circled several times, in response to his agitation and his anxiety to bring some sense of normality to this unreal scene.

* * * *

‘Two dead. Seven very seriously injured, at least two of whom will definitely be doing no more soldiering, if they live. A dozen or more others fairly seriously injured, and everyone else – everyone – with one form of injury or another.’

Tirilen’s voice was neutral, though a deep anger showed clearly on her tired face.

‘And Athyr’s a mess,’ she added, the anger breaking through. ‘Gulda, I haven’t had time to talk to him properly, but I think you’ll have to help him; I suspect he’s beyond me.’

Gulda nodded. ‘I’ve spoken to him a little already,’ she said. ‘He’ll be joining us shortly. We’ll wait for him.’

She looked down and idly poked her stick into the trampled turf that formed the floor of Athyr’s

command post. Loman, Jenna and Tybek sat opposite her, watching her silently, while Yrain, who had come with her and Tirilen in their hasty trip from the Castle, sat next to her, head bowed.

The command post was a Summer Festival tent seconded for this special duty, and was incongruously decorated with pictures of bright summer flowers, dancing figures, rolling green meadows and forests, and all the paraphernalia of happy sunlit times. Now, a fine drizzle quietly formed tiny streams of water which ran down the sloping roof to drip steadily onto the ground below as if trying to form an equally tiny moat.

Gulda looked up abruptly and, at the same time, the tent flap was turned back to reveal Athyr, silhouetted against the damp greenness of the valley.

Gulda motioned him in gently.

He was pale and obviously still shocked, but he nodded a tight-lipped acknowledgement to everyone, and sat down next to Jenna.

‘Tirilen’s just given us the casualty figures, Athyr,’ Gulda said. ‘They tally almost exactly with those you outlined last night. You did well.’

Athyr almost winced under this praise. ‘I’d have done well if I’d had no casualty list to prepare,’ he said, his voice hoarse.

Instinctively, Jenna’s hand rose to comfort him, but a gesture from Gulda stopped her.

‘I’m the judge of what’s well done and what’s not, Athyr,’ Gulda said, her voice stern. ‘According to those I’ve managed to speak to, it could have been much worse. Your tactics were good and you got your people out in good order when they could easily have panicked and spread themselves all over the mountains.’

‘With a pinch of awareness I could have avoided it all,’ Athyr said.

‘With a pinch of awareness, we’d none of us be here today,’ Gulda said, suddenly angry. ‘We’d have smelt the presence of Sumeral at His very wakening, and crushed Him and His creatures before He could leach so deep again into the world.’

Athyr began to protest. ‘Loman managed to . . .’

Gulda cut him short. ‘Loman was lucky,’ she said, still angry. ‘Perhaps because of his awareness, or perhaps because the Alphraan chose him to make a point. Or perhaps because the Alphraan attacking camp three were less absorbed by their own rightness.’

She leaned back in her chair and waved the end of her stick in a series of small circles.

‘Round and round it goes, Athyr,’ she said. ‘We don’t know what happened, do we? We’re probing these . . . people. Probing to learn about them. And any probe gets blunted in use. Correct, carver?’

Athyr rounded on her. ‘They’re not tools out there,’ he said, pointing towards the door. ‘They’re people. Some of them are my kin. A lot of them are my friends, and all of them are – were – my responsibility.’

Gulda leaned forward and rested her chin on her hands folded over the top of her stick. She spoke slowly, her voice soft, but very powerful: ‘They’re both people and tools, soldier. Don’t think otherwise. You shape them, sharpen and hone them, care for them, and then when need arises, you use them. You use them as you’ve prepared them – as they’ve prepared themselves – to be used, and you use them thus before someone else smashes them.’

Athyr’s eyes narrowed. ‘You blunt a tool when you use it,’ he said savagely.

‘Then you re-sharpen it,’ Gulda snapped, reflecting his manner back at him.

‘But it’s changed, isn’t it?’ Athyr said, barely holding his ground against Gulda’s response, but before he could continue, she waved her hand around the small assembly. ‘We change all the time, Athyr,’ she said, less harshly. ‘And we’ve all been damaged, blunted, by what happened. You because you could do little or nothing to stop what was happening and realize now that your very arrival may have worsened matters. Loman and Jenna because they saw what you didn’t see, but didn’t tell you. Yrain, who conceived this idea. And me who agreed with it and underestimated the power, the control, and the will, of the Alphraan.’

She turned her head and looked at Tirilen. ‘And Tirilen. Who should be tending the routine mishaps of village life and sees clearer than she wants to what might soon be coming. Who can tell what pain she carries?’

Tirilen met her gaze steadfastly, and Gulda turned away.

‘I can’t stop you – any of you – reproaching yourselves,’ she continued. ‘But you must use your feelings of guilt as goads, not shackles. Any encounter that you survive has lessons in it that must be learned. And you start by being carvers. By looking at things as they are.’

No one spoke.

She continued. ‘Now you’re all at least a little rested, I want to go through everything that happened, in as much detail as you can manage. When we’ve done that we’ll talk to the signallers and everyone else from the two camps.’

‘Everyone?’ Loman said.

‘Everyone,’ Gulda confirmed. ‘We’re not the only ones who’ve been damaged by yesterday’s exploits, Loman, and we’re not the only ones who have to learn from it. None of you were controlled by the Alphraan. We have to speak to those who were.’ Abruptly, she changed direction. ‘What’s morale like now?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Loman said bluntly. ‘I’ve spent most of the night with Athyr and the others just organizing quarters for all these extra people.’

‘It’s uncertain,’ Tybek volunteered. ‘But those who aren’t still shocked are angry, and seem to be getting angrier.’

Both Loman and Gulda looked at him sharply. ‘No,’ Tybek said, anticipating their question. ‘I don’t think it’s the Alphraan doing it. That was very sudden . . . unreal somehow. This is colder, deeper. I have it myself. It’s Orthlundyn, all right.’

Gulda frowned. ‘That’s understandable,’ she said. ‘But it might prove to be just another problem.’ She shook her head to dismiss the concern and then pointed at Athyr. ‘The facts first,’ she said.

Athyr’s tale proved to be short. Like Loman, he had sensed some wrongness as he rode with the reserve patrol towards camp six, but unlike Loman he had not identified it. When they neared the camp, they saw a large crowd milling around and fighting, but when Athyr called a halt so that he could decide what to do, some of the patrol continued galloping and rode at full speed towards the camp.

‘Whatever fighting had been going on there before stopped almost immediately and the entire camp turned on the riders,’ Athyr said.

‘And you?’ Gulda asked.

‘For a moment I was just stunned at what had happened,’ Athyr admitted. ‘But I felt the rhythm of the riding trying to drive me forward too, and I understood what it was. Especially when it just faded away. I think they were showing us what they could do to all of us if they wished,’ he added bitterly.

Gulda nodded. ‘Go on,’ she said.

‘I sent a signal back, straight away,’ Athyr said. ‘I didn’t want anyone else charging along, making whatever mistake I’d made. I knew I’d have to deal with the problem on my own.’

A gust of wind shook the tent impatiently and a frayed fringe of raindrops splattered noisily on to the sodden grass outside.

Athyr’s listeners sat silent.

‘I had to stand off,’ he said reluctantly. ‘Even though we were out of range, some of them were slinging at us.’ He looked straight at Gulda. ‘You were right to forbid all weapons,’ he said.

Gulda did not reply.

‘All I could think of was to try and exhaust them,’ Athyr continued. ‘We split into six groups, and took turns at riding within range to draw their fire.’

‘Risky,’ said Loman.

Athyr shrugged. ‘Yes and no,’ he said. ‘We took some knocks.’ He rubbed his arm ruefully. ‘But there was no co-ordination in their fire, and we didn’t stand still, I can assure you.’

‘And it worked?’ Gulda asked.

‘Eventually,’ Athyr said, though his voice held reservations. ‘After about an hour, they stopped bothering to attack us, and started wandering about, looking confused. I dismounted and walked towards them very slowly, but all of a sudden they were demented again and I’d to run for my life, rocks bouncing all around me.’

He leaned forward and held up his hand, fingers extended. It was shaking slightly. ‘Five times that happened,’ he said, his voice hoarse again. ‘Five times. I’ve never been so frightened in all my life as on that fifth walk. By then I’d three groups ready to move to divert any fire, and a fourth group ready to dash in to try and reach me, but as I got closer and closer . . .’ He shook his head and left the sentence

unfinished. ‘Anyway, nothing happened. It was over, they’d had their fun . . . made their point . . . whatever. And we were free to pick up our dead and injured and leave.’

His mouth curled viciously.

Gulda looked puzzled. ‘Why didn’t they mount up and attack you?’ she asked.

Athyr looked surprised. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘All the horses were badly frightened when we finally got in, but . . . I don’t know. It never occurred to me. They just formed up along some natural . . . perimeter . . . and stayed there.’

Gulda nodded. ‘It’s interesting,’ she said. ‘I’ve spoken to some of the people from the camp. They said that some were affected and some weren’t, just like at camp three. But when the riders appeared, everyone seemed to be affected. They’ve all got different memories of what they thought they were doing, but their antagonism towards the riders was less than it had been to each other.’

‘Interesting’s not a word I’d choose,’ Athyr said. ‘Murdering little devils.’

Gulda accepted the rebuke with a gesture. ‘But I think we’re beginning to get some measure of them at last,’ she said. ‘I think . . .’

The tent flap was pulled back hastily and a large, burly figure strode in unannounced, his face riven with anxiety. Tirilen half stood. A brief spasm of pain on her face made Loman lower his eyes.

‘Tirilen,’ the man said urgently, ignoring the others. ‘Come quick, he’s bad again . . .’

Without speaking, but with a brief nod to Gulda, Tirilen walked straight towards the gaily painted entrance. The man turned aside and held it open for her as she passed through, then followed her. The flap, folded awkwardly, stood open for a moment until a light breeze touched it and it slowly dropped back to close out the damp coldness pervading the camp.

Gulda looked down at the ground and tapped her stick on it absently. There was a long uneasy silence.

‘Three dead?’ Loman said softly.

‘Soon, I fear,’ Gulda replied.

Barely had she spoken, than a loud cry of despair and anger reached them. Other cries formed around it. Gulda looked around the circle, her face pained. ‘I don’t know exactly what we’re going to do,’ she said. ‘But Loman’s approach will be essential. We must redirect that.’ She lifted her hand towards the commotion outside. ‘Or they will use it.’

Before anyone could pursue this, Tirilen returned, her face pale. She walked a few paces into the tent and then paused to look at her hand. It was bloodstained.

Loman looked at the woman who was now more than ever his and not his.

‘This obscenity must stop,’ Tirilen said, her voice shaking with emotion and her gaze fixing Gulda. ‘You and I will go and talk to these creatures, now.’

Gulda did not reply, but stood up and with a nod of her head, motioned Tirilen back to the entrance.

‘Where do you want to go?’ she asked as they stepped outside, but Tirilen did not answer. She simply fastened her cloak more firmly round her shoulders and pulled the hood forward purposefully against the fine, penetrating drizzle. Then she turned and began walking through the camp. Such few people as were wandering about stepped aside silently to let her pass, forming a wide, sombre aisle for her. Gulda looked at the retreating, green-clad figure for a moment, then, pulling her own hood forward, followed her.

Athyr looked anxiously at Loman, but the smith shook his head. ‘Leave them,’ he said softly. ‘Both of them are beyond anything we can help with. We’d better tend the living and make arrangements for burying our dead.’

Tirilen walked for a long time, tall and straight, though with her head bowed. Gulda, black and stooped, followed silently behind, unflagging.

At the end of a long grassy slope, Tirilen stopped on a small rocky outcrop. She pushed her hood back and gazed out into the mist. Rain dampened her face and gradually started to run down it. She looked at Gulda. The old woman returned her gaze without speaking, then held out her hand. It was a gesture of encouragement – or one seeking help.

Tirilen took the hand and held it for a little while before releasing it and, pulling her hood forward again, she set off once more.

Eventually she stopped and the two women stood at the centre of a mist-enclosed circle. Everywhere was silent and muted except for the barely audible hiss of the fine rain.

She gazed around. ‘Why have you done this?’ she said quietly into the greyness. ‘Why have you killed and maimed our people. Tell me so that I can understand, here.’ She laid the palm of her hand on her chest.

Silence.

Tirilen inclined her head a little. ‘You hear me, I know,’ she said. ‘I hear your very listening. Your pain whispers where you’d have it silent. Answer me.’

Silence.

She spoke again. ‘Whatever we were doing, be it wisdom or folly, it offered you no hurt. We raised neither sword, fist, nor even voice against you. Yet you make friend turn on friend. And now brother has slain brother.’

Gulda turned her head away, but still there was only the mountain silence.

‘Answer me!’ Tirilen’s voice suddenly shook with barely controlled emotion. ‘Tell me why, in your wisdom, you give my people this pain? Tell me how I am to bear it, who must enter into it to aid them? Tell me the words I can use to mend the cry you heard rise up from that man’s heart?’

The faint sounds of the rain seemed to shift and change imperceptibly. Doubts and regrets rose to surround the two women, though no words could be heard.

‘I need your words, your reasons, for what you’ve done,’ Tirilen said. ‘Not hints and vague nuances. If

you have no words or reasons, then leave us, Alphraan. Leave us to our own destiny. Bear your own guilt as best you can.'

'We have no guilt. We took no life,' said a voice abruptly. It was harsh with uncertainty, and doubts fluttered all around it. 'We did what was necessary.'

'Words and reasons,' Tirilen said again. 'Give me your words and reasons for this necessity so that I can carry them back to comfort those you have injured.'

'We will not be questioned,' said the voice.

'I don't question you,' Tirilen said with soft but unyielding purpose. 'This terrible blood debt is yours. It will question you forever. I asked you for comfort for those you have injured – and for myself. Whatever solace you have for yourselves will help my people too, because our burdens are the same. You willed the deeds, we committed them.' She opened her arms in a gesture of resignation. 'If you have no words of comfort, then tell me that and I'll disturb you no more.'

'We are not responsible for your vi – your people's violence,' the voice said hesitantly.

Tirilen shook her head. 'You are not responsible for our nature, but you cannot avoid your responsibility for what you did yesterday,' she said.

'We did not strike down any of your people,' the voice said. 'What was done was necessary to show you your folly.'

'Who are you to show us our folly?' Tirilen said reluctantly, as if not wishing to enter into debate. 'You, who've shunned us so completely for so long that we didn't even know you existed.' She paused, but the words forced themselves forwards irresistibly. 'But as we're ignorant of you, so are you ignorant of us. And as you know yourselves, so we know ourselves.' Her voice pleaded. 'And we need no one to show us the darkness that lies within us.'

'We are not responsible for your deeds,' said the voice again, hastily, a disturbing mixture of arrogance and doubt.

'No?' said Tirilen, still reluctant. 'Who but you released that darkness which we hold in gentle check as part of our own harmony? Who but you let it run unfettered in all its horror? If you cannot see the wickedness of that then content yourself with shunning us further. But leave us alone before more ill is done and the debt becomes beyond your bearing.'

'Do you menace us . . . healer?'

Tirilen lowered her head for a moment, then lifted it and threw back her hood, as if she needed the rain to cleanse her. She held out her bloodstained hand.

'How can I menace you?' she asked. 'A simple healer asking for help? I come for words of comfort.' She pointed in the direction of the camp. 'But can you not hear the anger you are unleashing?'

Silence.

Tirilen gazed around, blue eyes peering into the grey mist. 'Have you no words for me then?' she said. 'Nothing for the injured spirits of my people?'

Silence.

Tirilen opened her arms wide again. 'Accept then what comfort I can offer you,' she said slowly, tears mingling with the rain running down her face. 'For our pain is yours also, even if you do not yet feel it. We forgive you the blindness that led you to these deeds. May it pass from you before it harms further. And may you find peace.'

Suddenly, all around, the whispering returned. It seemed to pluck frantically at her very cloak, but Tirilen stood motionless. Then it rose in intensity until it became a vast babble, swelling all around to enclose the two women.

Gulda touched Tirilen's arm. Tirilen looked around again at the grey stillness that now seemed like a great domed cave, echoing with this tumultuous cacophony. Then, without speaking, the two women set off to return the way they had come.

As they neared the camp, angry voices reached out of the mist towards them, but when the motley array of tents and shelters loomed up to greet them, it seemed at first to be deserted.

The two women exchanged a significant glance.

'I'm going to look to my charges,' Tirilen said, businesslike. 'You look to yours.'

Gulda watched her until she disappeared from view behind a group of horses, then turned and walked towards the sound of the shouting.

As she neared the centre of the camp she found herself at the back of a large crowd. She scowled, unable to see what was happening over the heads of the people in front of her. Selecting a particularly large individual who was waving his fist in the air and shouting loudly, she swung her stick up and gave him a determined poke. The man turned, his brow furrowed angrily, then immediately identifying his assailant he stepped deferentially to one side, nudging the man in front of him as he did.

The nudge rippled urgently through the crowd which parted in its wake as Gulda strode through, swinging her stick purposefully from side to side like a farmer scything through a field of tall grasses. Reaching the platform that was the focus of the crowd she clambered up its makeshift steps to join Loman and Athyr.

The crowd fell silent as her stern gaze swept over them.

'Carry on,' she said incongruously to Loman after this inspection.

Loman gestured vaguely. 'We were waiting for you, Memsä,' he said. 'To see if you have any news.'

An angry voice rang out from the crowd. 'We were deciding what to do about those murdering . . .' It was stopped short by Gulda's levelled stick and piercing gaze, but several other voices rose to buttress its meaning.

Gulda looked at Loman. He shrugged helplessly. 'They're barely listening to me,' he said quietly.

'It seems nobody wants to listen today,' Gulda said. 'But you're not trying too hard though, are you?'

Loman waved the remark aside. 'I sympathize with them,' he said. 'And most of them need to get rid of their anger before they'll listen to any of my ideas about what we can do next.'

Gulda looked round at the watching, restive crowd and nodded. After a moment she held up her hand for silence.

'We've a problem, ladies, gentlemen,' she said. 'We – or rather, Tirilen – spoke to the Alphraan. Asked them why they'd done what they did, but they gave her no answer.' She looked round the crowd. 'They heard,' she continued, 'and some of them might have listened. But they gave no answer.'

'No more talking then, Memsa,' someone shouted before she could continue. 'Not after yesterday. They'll only listen properly when they've had a good hiding. We should be up in the mountains flushing them out, not debating here like a Guild meeting.'

Applause and cheering greeted this observation.

Gulda let it subside, then she looked at her adviser and nodded with exaggerated gravity. 'I'm half inclined to agree with you, young man,' she said. 'But only half. The other half tells me still that they're divided amongst themselves and that we should wait a little and let that division widen. And besides, flushing them out may present some difficult problems. Think about it for a moment. We know what they can do, but we don't know how they do it. They use weapons quite beyond our understanding, and very effectively too, although they seem to have some difficulty in dealing with large numbers of people. But that aside, how are we going to give them a good hiding when we can't even find them? And how are we going to fight people who make us fight amongst ourselves?'

The man looked at her impotently and offered no reply, but another pushed forward to the front of the crowd.

'Memsa, how long should we wait then?' he said simply.

Gulda stared at him. His eyes were anxious but determined. She bowed slightly, in acknowledgement of the aptness of the question then looked up into the mist.

'You heard, Alphraan?' she said. 'How long? How long before we know your will?'

The crowd fell silent.

Slowly, the babble that had surrounded Gulda and Tirilen rose up until it seemed to hover over the whole camp. It was like a myriad tiny voices all talking at once and it was laced through with doubt, recrimination, regret, grief, anger, countless emotions of every intensity.

Gradually however, one sound, angry and sour, wove through the confusion turning it into a single coherent pattern that finally became one voice. 'Leave us,' it said. 'Go from our mountains, and take your corrupted hearts and your corrupted wares with you. We will not allow your folly.'

'Have you learned nothing from those wares – His work?' Gulda said. 'Or from what you've seen here – our work. Or from the results of your own work? Did you learn nothing from Tirilen's blessing?'

'Go,' said the voice. 'We will talk with you no more. Go, or we will punish you further.'

Gulda's hand shot out to silence the angry gasp that rose up from the crowd.

‘If you will not talk now, then you leave us with no alternative but to pursue you until you will talk,’ Gulda said. ‘You understand that, don’t you? The Orthlundyn, of all people, cannot be dominated.’

Silence.

Gulda turned back to the young man. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

The man held her gaze. ‘Don’t be,’ he said softly.

Then the temporarily subdued anger of the crowd broke through, and for several minutes nothing could be heard over the shouting.

Gulda stood motionless, leaving Loman struggling to restore order.

‘You’re Orthlundyn,’ he shouted over the din. ‘And would-be soldiers. You’re supposed to be disciplined and ordered. Is this how you intend to behave when we meet a real enemy? Like a quarrelsome rabble?’

The noise subsided a little, but not to Loman’s satisfaction. ‘Attention!’ he thundered furiously. His voice echoed even through the mist and the crowd fell silent abruptly.

He leaned forward. ‘Have you learned so little?’ he said. ‘We have an enemy who can use our anger as a weapon against us, and you give them all this.’ He extended his arms and shook them powerfully, fists clenched. ‘Understand. Only your discipline and your knowledge that the man or woman next to you is disciplined also, will sustain you through the terror of battle and ensure you stand any chance of walking unhurt from the field. If this is how you behave when someone opposes you just with words, how are you going to behave when arrows and stones are falling around you? When horses and angry men are charging you?’

Gulda moved to stand next to him.

‘What we will do is this,’ he continued, more quietly. ‘We’ll consolidate into three large forces, and carry out a methodical search of the mountains until we find where these people live. Then, equally methodically, we’ll take possession of their domain just as they’ve done of ours.’

A hand went up. Loman nodded.

‘If we go in large groups, and they take control, couldn’t the damage be worse than before?’ asked the questioner.

‘I don’t know,’ Loman replied. ‘But we’ll go in as the duty patrol approached camp three. We’ll go in as free of anger as we can. We’ll go in doing what we do best.’ He smiled a little. ‘Or at least, what *you* do best. You’ll go in like carvers. Listening to the rock song. Using your shadow vision.’ He bent forward and his voice fell almost to a whisper. ‘Full of the great silence of your craft.’ He raised a finger. ‘The Alphaan can’t use a weapon that we aren’t carrying.’

Doubt rose up from the crowd, but no one demurred. The manner of the rescue of Tybek at camp three had been circulating freely.

‘But we don’t know where they are,’ the questioner said.

Loman straightened up. ‘The Alphraan have remained hidden because we’ve never looked for them,’ he replied. ‘Why should we?’ he added with a shrug. ‘We didn’t even know they existed. They probably hide the entrances to their . . . caves? . . . tunnels? . . . in some ingenious way.’ His voice rose. ‘But can anything be so cunning or subtle that it can deceive the shadow vision of the Orthlundyn?’

No answer was needed, but another hand went up.

‘And when we find them?’ asked the new questioner.

Loman made an airy gesture. ‘We’ll continue to reason with them until they agree to return the arsenal and leave us alone.’ He looked at certain individuals in his audience. ‘No vengeance,’ he said darkly.

Then he raised his hand to forestall any further questions. ‘I don’t know whether this is going to work,’ he said. ‘But I think it’s the best we can do, and it has a clear rightness to it. However . . .’ – He looked round the crowd – ‘There may be a price to be paid, I can’t deny it. If any of you wish to walk away from this, then do so now – without reproach. But those of you who choose to stay must accept that you’ll be under military discipline. Once committed, we’ll pursue this wherever it takes us.’

No one moved.

Loman nodded. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘All patrol company leaders come to Athyr’s command post immediately so that we can work out details. The rest of you – carry on with your normal duties and try to think quietly about what we have to do. Try to put aside your view of yourselves as fighters and warriors about to face an enemy.’

He lowered his head for a moment and when he looked up, his face was oddly sombre. ‘This is a sad, unnecessary skirmish in a battle against a far greater enemy than these . . . neighbours of ours. We’ll settle for peace with them, but I’d prefer their friendship and help. Sooner or later they’ll have to stand by our side or His. There’ll be no other place for them. Let us show them the value of our friendship and our ways, before He shows them the power of His shackles.’

The following day, the Orthlundyn quietly buried their dead, and three days later, the first of the three forces left the central camp in a loose and casual formation, with Loman and Jenna at its head. A watery sun shone through high thin clouds, and the mountains stood sharp and clear in the cool, moist air. But in that same air, rising and falling menacingly, rang also a faint but definite warning note.

Chapter 27

Hawklan stared along the tunnel that stretched ahead of him. It went far beyond the light of the torch he was carrying. The walls were dry and smooth, and the floor was covered with dust much like that in the cave in which they first encountered the Alphraan.

The guiding sound was clearer here though, with increasing frequency, it wavered as if its source were wearying. Its urgency was now clearly audible.

Gavor tapped him with his wooden leg. ‘Come on, dear boy,’ he said, his curiosity overcoming his reservations.

Hawklan, however, needed no encouragement. He strode forward a few paces and then almost immediately broke into a run, obliging Gavor to extend a wing from time to time to steady himself.

As he ran, Hawklan felt the strange sound almost pulling him forward, although it was growing increasingly weaker. The tunnel twisted and turned and he found himself passing by side tunnels and through elaborate junctions where groups of tunnels met. Although he did not slacken his pace, part of him, hard and calculating, took note of these, telling him that this headlong dash was unwise and that he may yet have to return this way in flight.

Then suddenly, as if in confirmation of this counsel, everything was gone. The sound stopped abruptly and the walls and roof of the tunnel disappeared. The impetus of his chase, however, took Hawklan some way into the silence before he skidded to a halt, startled and alarmed. Gavor tumbled off his shoulder with an oath but, with a great flapping, just managed to regain his equilibrium before striking the ground.

He landed, flustered and indignant, just outside the circle of light cast by Hawklan's torch. 'Really, dear boy,' he muttered irritably, moving quickly back into the light.

But Hawklan was not listening; he was gazing round into the darkness. Wherever he was, the light of his torch seemed at first to be insufficient to illuminate more than the ground beneath his feet.

Gradually, however, he began to detect faint shadings in the blackness. To one side at least, there were shapes that might be part of a wall, while overhead he sensed rather than saw a vast echoing roof-space hidden in the gloom. Behind him, his footprints in the dust led towards a deeper darkness that was presumably the mouth of the tunnel he had just run along.

He had come into a large cavern. Or was it a great hall of some kind? The vague images told him nothing further.

He stood uncertainly for a moment, then asked, 'Where are you?'

His voice echoed distantly and gave him an impression of the immensity of his surroundings far more vividly than his eyes were doing. For an instant, he felt more exposed and vulnerable than if he had suddenly found himself on a mountain top.

Then he repeated his inquiry, more forcefully.

'We are here, here, here . . .' said countless voices all around him, echoing about the unseen chamber.

The suddenness of the sound and its confusion made him start and he raised his sword into a defensive position.

'Trap,' he mouthed softly, unconsciously voicing Dacu's words as they came to mind again, though he felt no real menace. Gavor flicked the sheaths off his spurs and, extending his wings, floated off into the darkness and began circling just outside the dome of light-formed by Hawklan's torch. Hawklan too began to turn round slowly in anticipation of some attack.

But nothing came. Nor did the aura that shimmered around the still echoing voices indicate any threat. They spoke again. 'We are here, here, here . . . Help us, Hawklan, help, help . . .'

Hawklan lowered his sword. 'You startled me,' he said, as if his action might have caused some offence. 'You must guide us. Your voices are everywhere. We don't know which way to go. We're lost.'

As the last words left his mouth the voices began to cry out in fear and despair. Hawklan gazed around, seeking some guidance, but nothing stirred in the darkness and his inability to focus clearly on anything began to disorient him.

‘Stop it,’ he roared, swinging his right arm in a wide arc, making the black sword hiss menacingly. The sound rose up, cutting through the swirling pandemonium as if it were as sharp as the edge of the sword itself.

‘I can’t help you if I can’t see you,’ he shouted. ‘I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s happened. You must speak to me properly.’

The noise fragmented briefly then came together as a single voice again, though it was strained and fearful.

Near complete panic, Hawklan sensed.

‘Can you hear us now, Hawklan?’ said the voice. ‘To speak thus is difficult when . . . has happened.’ Hawklan turned away from the noises of death and horror that filled the darkness.

‘Stop it,’ he shouted again, though this time angrily. His voice boomed and echoed, and the noises stopped abruptly. ‘Tell me what has happened,’ he repeated into the silence, his voice still angry. ‘And tell me so that I can understand. Is it easier for you to face this – thing – that has happened to you on your own than it is to talk simply to a human being?’

There was a brief silence, then, ‘Follow, Hawklan. We forget the inadequacy of your language. Violence is not our way. It has . . .’ The voice struggled. ‘It has . . . unsettled . . . us.’

Hawklan was mollified by the effort in the voice. He moved cautiously towards it, still feeling disoriented by the darkness. Gavor floated down to land silently on his shoulder.

‘What is this place?’ Gavor asked.

‘One of the . . . Halls of the Song,’ replied the voice. ‘One of the Halls of the Great Song.’

The fear was still in the voice, but it was submerged for the moment under layers of excitement – of awe and wonder.

‘This is your Heartplace?’ Hawklan said, still moving towards the voice.

‘No,’ said the voice. ‘But the Heartplace is near.’ A note in the voice made Hawklan pause. Anger? Distaste? Not quite either. Resentment? That was it: resentment.

‘But you asked me here,’ he said defensively, though no words had reproached him.

Sounds of surprise and contrition surrounded him briefly. ‘You hear more than you know, Hawklan,’ said the voice, this time very close. ‘We are sorry for what you heard.’

Hawklan peered in the direction of the voice but still he could see nothing. ‘It pains you that a human should come near your Heartplace?’ he said. ‘Even to help you?’

‘Yes,’ the voice replied simply. ‘We are sorry,’ it said again. ‘But you give us hope too. We have many

things to learn. Help us, please.'

The voice moved on, and Hawklan followed it quickly, until he found himself at the foot of a broad flight of steps. They were small, as though they had been built for children, and, like the floor he was standing on, they were covered in dust.

'Up,' said the voice ahead of him. Hawklan hesitated and frowned slightly. There were no tiny footprints in the dust to indicate the previous passing of his guide.

'Please tell me where you are and what's happened,' he said yet again, starting up the stairs.

'We are here, Hawklan,' said the voice, without further explanation. 'As we neared our Heartplace, His creature attacked us and . . .'

It fell silent. Hawklan tightened his grip on his sword, and quickened his pace. The steps wound around a wide bend and then divided into three separate flights.

'What was this creature?' he asked.

The question was ignored. 'We could not defend ourselves,' said the voice, along the central of the three flights. 'There were killings.' A terrible grief slipped briefly into the voice.

'Songs were ended . . .'

 The voice faded into a long sigh and then became silent.

Hawklan found himself on a wide landing, facing several tunnels. 'Which way?' he said impatiently into the silence.

There was a long pause. Hawklan thought he heard distant noises rising up faintly from below, but he dismissed them.

'We cannot ask this of you,' the voice said abruptly, very close. Startled, Hawklan spun round, expecting to see his guide standing nearby, but still there was nothing.

'What do you mean?' he said, bewildered by this unexpected statement.

'It is our Heartplace. Its cleansing is our burden,' said the voice, gabbling almost.

They fear to be in your debt, said the cold pan of Hawklan's mind.

His anger burst out. 'Stop this nonsense, and answer my questions,' he shouted. 'What kind of a creature is it that's attacked you? And where is it?'

His angry voice rolled into the tunnels facing him and faded away without echo.

There was a long silence, then a strange high-pitched scream came from one of the tunnels. Gavor tightened his claw on Hawklan's shoulder. 'Dear boy, I think perhaps we ought to . . .'

But Hawklan was not listening. He was running forward, following the dying thread of the scream. Gavor relinquished his perch and flew a little way behind him.

Then they were in an open space again.

Hawklan stopped and Gavor floated down a few paces from him.

There was a fearful, breathless silence around them, and Hawklan noted smells; vaguely familiar animal smells mingling with a retching sweetness that stirred dark shadowy memories in him.

Something nearby was watching and waiting, he knew. But what? And why? And most important of all, where?

He peered intently into the darkness, holding the torch high, and his sword horizontally in front of him.

‘Look,’ Gavor whispered very softly, tapping the floor with his wooden leg.

Hawklan looked down. As far as the torch shone, he could see that the dust which overlay the floor here too had been disturbed by countless tiny feet.

Cautiously he bent down to examine the footprints.

As he leaned forward, every part of him suddenly sensed the attack rushing towards him, but before he could move, a great weight crashed onto his shoulders, knocking him to the ground and sending the torch and the sword rattling in opposite directions.

Distantly, Hawklan heard Gavor cry out in alarm and then rage, but his immediate preoccupation was with whatever had dropped on him. It was large and heavy and its snarling breath stank inches from his face. He had a fleeting glimpse of bared yellow fangs and green eyes, cruel in the now faint torchlight, as the creature recovered from its jump and launched itself at him again.

Instinctively he threw up his hands to protect himself and then rolled over desperately in the direction his sword had fallen. He was not fast enough, however. The creature landed heavily on him again, and he felt powerful, bone-crushing jaws beginning to close around his upper arm. He cried out as they tightened pitilessly and in sheer terror smashed his free hand into where he presumed the creature’s head was.

The blow landed with some considerable force, and the grip on his arm slackened momentarily, but before Hawklan could react, the jaws seized him again. A deep growl underscored the creature’s intent.

Hawklan twisted and turned to escape the relentless pressure, trying frantically to gain some point of leverage to use his own weight against the creature. Abruptly, as if tiring of this irritating prey, the creature shook its head from side to side violently. Hawklan felt himself almost lifted off the ground by the creature’s strength, and somewhere he heard himself screaming at the pain in his arm. The darkness around him was flooded with a myriad bursting colours.

Stay conscious, some inner voice shouted through his terror.

Then a blast of air in his face returned him to the present.

He heard a familiar voice, raucous with fear and rage, and caught a glimpse of Gavor above him, wings thrashing, attacking the attacker.

The creature gave a cry of pain and released Hawklan to deal with this new assailant. With an immense beat of his wings, Gavor rose almost vertically into the air screaming abuse. The creature leapt after him, a muscular, purposeful shadow in the darkness. Hawklan heard the loud snap of the powerful jaws

closing just short of his friend's legs.

Free of the terrible grip, he rolled over and felt the creature stumble as it landed heavily on his moving legs. He recognized the sound of claws scrabbling on the floor as it tried to regain its balance.

Even chances now, the thought came to him, unexpectedly calm through his fear and pain. As he rolled over again, a tiny light, bright in the darkness, caught his eye. The sword hilt, he realized, catching the light of the distant torch.

Another roll and his hand closed around it. Then the momentum of his movement was helping him swing up on to his feet though he was crouching and unsteady and, strangely, the sword felt heavy and awkward in his hand. Something was amiss, he sensed, but there was no time to debate it; he could just make out the shape of the creature rushing towards him.

Raising the sword high, he stepped back with the intention of turning sideways to strike the creature as it passed him, but his retreating foot sank into something soft and yielding. A repellent smell filled the air, and his foot skidded from under him. As he fell, the creature hit him full in the chest, accelerating his already heavy fall.

He felt the sword slip from his hand as his arms extended reflexively to beat the ground in an attempt to spare him the worst of the impact. It clattered into the distance and for an instant he was glad to be rid of it. It was not helping him. Now, in some awful way, he was free; unrestrained.

He heard rather than felt the wind go out of him as he struck the floor with the creature on top of him, but his arms, bouncing off the hard floor, reached up automatically to protect his head from the descending jaws.

Teeth seized his sleeve but his free hand reached up and struck the creature's chest. It was an inadvertent blow and had no effect on the assault, but Hawklan pushed as strongly as he could in a desperate attempt to prevent the creature gripping his arm further. He could feel the creature's feet digging into him as it struggled for purchase, and he could feel too its enormous strength and terrible murderous intensity.

Abruptly, the creature yielded and released his sleeve. Freed, his hand jerked back towards him in reaction, hitting him in the face, while the other almost lost its contact with the creature as it twisted and lunged forward again. He managed to keep hold sufficiently, however, to slide his hand up and stop the creature's renewed rush by catching its throat. But his position was too weak for him to apply any pressure and, in any case, he knew that his one hand would make little impression on the powerful muscles he could feel under it.

The creature's breath enveloped him and he felt warm saliva dripping on his face. He sensed Gavor landing heavily on its back, but nothing now could divert it from its prey. Scrabbling to steady itself further, the creature thrust one of its feet in Hawklan's groin.

Blackness welled up inside Hawklan at this new pain, but in the far distance he felt the stirring of an ancient and frightening desperation.

No, it began to say.

But before it rose to possess him fully, there were lights around him, and voices, shouting. Then a flash of steel and a dreadful thud, followed by a piteous howl.

Hawklan felt the life under his hand quiver and begin to fade. Then the weight on top of him was gone, and the howl ended abruptly as two more heavy blows fell.

Hawklan's ears were filled with the sound of his heartbeat and his breathing as he looked up at the ring of concerned faces forming around him. Dacu, Isloman, Tirke.

'Is he all right?' he heard one of them say distantly.

He closed his eyes and nodded. Hands reached down and pulled him up gently into a sitting position. A kerchief wiped his face.

The hands helped him to his feet and for a moment he leaned on someone shakily and breathed deeply to quieten himself. As he did so, he became aware of shimmering, triumphant sounds of elation and joy all around him.

The sounds of the Alphraan's rejoicing, however, formed a macabre backdrop to the grim features of his friends and the mosaic of pains starting to spread through his body.

'Some chase you led us, Hawklan,' Dacu said, wiping blood and matted fur from his sword.

Hawklan nodded and rested a hand briefly on the Goraidin's shoulder. Partly still for support, partly in gratitude and apology. Then he flexed his fingers and tentatively felt his throbbing arm. His heavy tunic had protected him from the creature's rending teeth, but its molars had taken some toll. 'It's only bruised, I think,' he said hoarsely but with some relief. 'Nasty, but it should be all right in a day or two.'

Dacu looked doubtful but Hawklan waved his concern aside. 'Let's have a look at this creature of His,' he said anxiously. It was a peculiarly frightening thought that Sumeral's creatures could be alive and seemingly thriving so long after His passing and so near to Orthlund.

The four men circled the fallen creature. Its eyes were wide and staring and its mouth was agape. The Alphraan's happiness filled the air.

Pain returned to Hawklan's face. 'Is this the creature that killed your people?' he asked, looking up into the darkness.

No clear answer came, but the sounds told him . . . yes, yes, yes, His creature, sierwolf, sierwolf . . . Then they danced away again.

Hawklan knelt down by the carcass and laid a hand on it.

'Stop it,' he said softly but intensely. The sounds wavered. 'Stop it,' he shouted angrily.

The sounds faded and twisted into questions.

'This is no corrupt creation from some ancient time,' he said softly again. 'This is just an ordinary wolf.'

There was a brief pause, then, 'It killed, it killed,' said the voices defensively.

Hawklan ran his hand across the wolf. He nodded. 'And it would have killed me too if it could,' he said. 'It's half starved. But it's no creature of His.'

Isloman knelt by him. 'But it's not winter yet, why should it be starving? And even a pack of wolves won't attack a grown man unless they're threatened or desperately hungry.'

Looking at the dead animal, Hawklan felt again its terrible total commitment to its struggle. He had had to fight for his life but there had been no corruption there. Isloman was right. The wolf's action made no sense even allowing for its hunger. Animals didn't fight like that . . . except . . .? He turned the animal over gently and put his hand to his head in dismay.

'It couldn't be helped, dear boy,' Gavor's voice was subdued. 'We didn't have any choice.'

The wolf was a female; a nursing female.

'We were both a threat and food,' Hawklan said very quietly. 'That's why it fought like that. It must have been a late whelp. Wandered in here and got lost.' He wrapped his arms around himself and shuddered. 'Its young will be in here somewhere.' The sounds around them faded to become a single voice again. 'It did kill,' it said. 'Three of us.'

Hawklan remembered his foot slithering from under him. He looked at his boot. It was smeared with blood and flesh. He grimaced. 'Yes,' he said. 'But for its family, Alphraan. For its family. Not from some ancient malice.'

Tirke handed him his black sword. Hawklan thanked him and looked at it thoughtfully. The twining threads and stars in its hilt twinkled and shone in the torchlight. Ethriss's sword it might have been, but now it was his beyond a doubt. Yet it had not aided him this day?

No ancient malice. His own words returned to him. That was why the sword had left him to his own destiny, he realized. His arm started to throb.

'Then we are all the less for this meeting,' the voice said sadly.

Hawklan nodded again. 'Listen,' he said. Out of the darkness came a faint scuffling and a whimper.

'They're over there,' he said, pointing.

After a brief search, the four men found themselves looking down at two small wolf cubs cowering at the back of an alcove lined with dead vegetation and the she wolf's own fur. They were thin and obviously frightened by the torchlight, but healthy enough and curling back their lips to reveal puppy-sharp teeth.

'We will tend them,' said the Alphraan, the voice unexpectedly close and gentle.

Hawklan looked surprised. 'Thank you,' he said. Then he hesitated, awkwardly. 'I'm sorry about your people, Alphraan. I was harsh. I judged.'

'Do not reproach yourself, Hawklan,' said the voice. 'We followed you freely and soon we will have our Heartplace again. But for your guidance and help, and that of your friends, we might have dwindled forever. Now we hear awakenings. No song ever truly ends.'

'There may be other creatures here,' Hawklan said, pointing at the wolf's simple den. 'If she got in, then others will have. And she must have found something to eat and drink down here.'

‘When we regain our Heartplace, we will send to the kin we left and start to make it whole again,’ the voice said. ‘Then we will listen carefully for other creatures and learn their songs . . . and make them welcome as of old. Only our ignorance and fear made us behave as we did. We are chastened. The ancient rape of this place lies deep in our lore, Hawklan. His creatures are ever alive in our songs . . .’

A quivering excitement suddenly disturbed the voice.

‘It is found,’ it said. ‘The Heartplace is found.’ Then the darkness was filled again with the shimmering sounds of rejoicing, though this time they were free of the angry triumph that had tainted them previously.

‘Come, humans,’ the voice rang out through it all, full of laughter. There was a brief tremor of doubt in the sounds but it was swept away.

Hawklan, however, noted it. ‘If this is your most precious place, we’ll not intrude,’ he said. ‘We must continue on to Anderras Darion and we still have a difficult journey ahead of us. Will you travel with us again?’

‘Of course, of course,’ said the voice, almost dismissively. ‘But this is truly a new beginning. Come to our Heartpl . . .’ The voice and the sounds suddenly faded, to be replaced by a hushed awe.

‘Hawklan,’ said the voice softly. ‘They were here. His creatures. We have found them. Come.’

Hawklan looked at his companions.

‘There is no danger,’ said the voice. ‘They are truly dead. Come.’ And a silver tone sang out through the darkness, solid and strong, to guide them.

‘Come on, come on,’ Gavor said, jumping up and down impatiently. Dacu motioned Hawklan forward.

Following the sound, the four men found themselves walking along a tunnel that was broad and spacious, and free from any sense of oppression. Its finely hewn walls were riddled with circular openings of all sizes.

As before, there were elaborate junctions and side tunnels and at each of these Dacu paused and made a conspicuous mark in the rock with a small metal spike.

‘The Goraidin has doubts about us,’ the voice said, slightly amused.

‘The Goraidin has survived to be this old by having doubts,’ Dacu replied unashamedly. ‘And I’m not too impressed so far by the way you cope with emergencies. I can’t risk our being lost down here if you panic and run.’

‘Oh,’ said the voice simply. There was a thoughtful pause, then, ‘But there’s no danger now. There was only the poor wolf.’

Dacu grunted non-committally, but made no other comment.

There was another pause. ‘The scars in the rock mar the song,’ said the voice tentatively.

Dacu stopped. The comment made no sense to him but he had noticed that the texture of the walls was unusual, as if it had been finely carved in some way. He moved on without speaking, but at the next

junction he made a large mark in the dust with his foot.

Gavor chuckled, but before he could speak the tunnel suddenly opened out, the walls curving away, and the roof soaring upward beyond the reach of the torchlight. Ahead of them an ornate stone balustrade came into view, while on both sides the tunnel was transformed into what appeared to be wide curving balconies. The four men stopped, but Gavor continued, flapping up on to the balustrade and peering over the edge. He looked intently from left to right.

‘Hurry up, dear boys,’ he said. ‘Bring the torches.’

The torches, however, made little difference to the visibility. Their light showed the walls curving up and over for some height, and to Isloman, leaning perilously over the balustrade, they revealed various levels of balconies below. Beyond the balustrade however, the light disappeared futilely into the vast darkness.

Yet for all its gloom, the atmosphere of the place was open and light; uplifting, Hawklan felt.

‘You are at the edge of our Heartplace,’ said the voice, very softly, and full of wonder.

‘Bit dark,’ Gavor muttered prosaically.

The voice was amused again. ‘Soon it will be on its journey back to its old splendour sky prince,’ it said. ‘With songs and lights such as you have never seen. But come this way.’

The four men followed the voice, leaving Gavor talking to himself about the ‘discernment and fine sensibilities of these people.’

Like the tunnel they had just walked along, the wall to the balcony was full of circular openings of many sizes, and there were frequent side tunnels and large sweeping alcoves.

Then the balustrade itself turned away from them, and the sound led them on to what was apparently a bridge spanning the dark abyss fringed by the balconies. It rose up in a gentle curve and was intercepted by other spans arching in from the darkness both above and below.

‘Remarkable stonework,’ Isloman said. ‘Very unusual. I’ve never seen the like. There’s a lot to be learned here.’

Hawklan nodded, but seemed to be preoccupied in keeping well away from the rather small balustrades that protected each edge.

Then they were on a wide circular plateau. The sound drew them forward until they came to a central structure. It seemed to be the base of a great circular tower, though the wide arched openings that penetrated it gave it the appearance of being the roots to a massive, symmetrical tree.

The sound faded into nothing.

‘Here,’ said the voice. ‘See His creatures.’

There was no alarm in the voice, and Hawklan stepped through one of the openings. The others followed, Gavor keeping a discreet distance to the rear.

Hawklan let out a long, slow breath. There, white in the torchlight, were three skeletons lying in the

scattered debris of what must have been an ancient den.

He knelt down beside one and examined it silently. It was the size of a large man, or a small horse. The images clashed in his mind.

‘What . . . was it?’ Tirke asked.

Hawklan stared at the skeleton, his face pained. ‘An obscenity,’ he said. ‘It looks like the worst of many things forced into a single frame – men, animals . . .’ He grimaced. ‘Nothing like this ever came into being naturally. Even so long dead, there’s no harmony in it. It must have been bred like this. And over many generations. It’s appalling.’

‘What was its purpose?’ Dacu asked.

Hawklan turned and looked at him. He’ll be a fine example to the Orthlundyn, he thought, for although the man felt the awe of this almost unbelievable place and the eerie presence of these remains, his Goraidin mind still cut straight through to the heart of their need. If it was bred, it was bred for a reason and that reason should be known. What had been, could be again.

Hawklan turned back to the skeleton. ‘Powerful legs,’ he said. ‘Probably very fast and capable of running on two legs or four. Large taloned hands, with opposing thumbs to grip and tear.’ He shook his head. ‘And these,’ He reached out cautiously to touch one of the creature’s glittering teeth. His hand twitched uncertainly, as if the cruel jaws might suddenly spring open and seize it.

All three watchers started at this involuntary gesture. Hawklan smiled apologetically and lifted the errant hand to hold his damaged arm. There would have been no brave struggling against this creature. These hands would have held him powerless and these teeth would have torn his arm off effortlessly.

‘Its purpose was killing,’ he said simply. ‘And if its spirit was as racked and distorted as its body, terrifying its victims also.’

Dacu’s eyes narrowed and he nodded. It was not an unexpected conclusion.

Hawklan stood up and looked around. Something about the place was disturbing him slightly, but it took no clear shape, and he dismissed it.

‘We are finding others, different,’ said the voice.

‘Leave them,’ Hawklan said.

‘They pollute our . . .’

‘Leave them,’ Hawklan repeated more firmly. ‘Please. Later we’ll need to study them.’ He looked round at the clutter of the creatures’ den again. ‘We must learn what we can from both their bones and the places they lie.’

‘Very well,’ the voice said after a brief pause, mildly injured.

Hawklan smiled. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘They’ve lain here for generations. A week or so will cause no further harm, surely?’

‘No,’ the voice agreed reluctantly.

‘We must go now,’ Dacu said. ‘Unless there’s anything else we need or if we’re needed here. We’ve still got a long journey ahead of us and we haven’t found the gully to take us across the mountain yet.’

Hawklan nodded.

‘We will guide you,’ said the voice. ‘There are ways through the mountain for even your horses.’

Dacu looked around the strange circular enclosure for a moment, and then shook his head.

‘Thank you, but no,’ he said. ‘We must travel outside. The route may be needed for others in the future – many others. It must be well drawn.’

‘You speak of armies?’ asked the voice.

‘Quite possibly,’ Dacu replied.

There was a pause, then the voice said sadly, ‘You tear us . . . friends.’

‘No,’ Hawklan said. ‘Don’t be distressed. You’re right in your feelings. None of us wants such a thing, but Dacu is correct. We must learn about the mountains just as you must learn about the ways that lead around and from your Heartplace here. Who travels them in the future is for the judgement of other times and other needs.’

‘Yes, you are right,’ the voice said. ‘Indeed, what we learn now may forestall the grimmer needs,’ it added, mildly triumphant.

Hawklan laughed. ‘Indeed, indeed,’ he echoed. His laughter was caught up and swirled around into seemingly endless distances. ‘But we must go now. It’s night and snowing outside. We must tend to our horses and our camp.’

‘We will guide you at least to there,’ said the voice, friendly, but brooking no debate. ‘We have found a swifter way to the gate through which you entered.’

Hawklan looked at Dacu. The Goraidin nodded, and between thumb and forefinger delicately held up the small spike he had used to mark the rock on their journey through the tunnels.

‘We should prefer you to continue to make your marks in the dust, Goraidin,’ said the voice, mildly reproachful. Dacu raised his hands in acknowledgement and the voice dwindled again into a single guiding tone.

As they followed it along another wide tunnel, Hawklan noted that all around them gentle sounds were growing. Shifting and changing, they built and intermingled until they were like a warm and welcome summer breeze enveloping the four men.

‘They’re coming from some of these,’ Tirke said, running a finger around the edge of one of the circular openings that decorated the walls.

‘A small gift to thank you,’ said the voice, riding on the breeze. ‘And perhaps to sustain you until we speak again.’ Strange sounds permeated the voice. It was struggling with its true language. ‘But we shall

be ever in your debt, for what you have returned to us,' it managed eventually.

None of the men spoke, each sensing that their speech would jar and rend the calm that was pervading them.

A tiny worm of doubt wriggled inside Hawklan, however. Something about the ancient bones they had found – and the remains of the old nest.

He frowned. There were many mysteries about this place and its history. For the time being he should act as Dacu would and confine himself to what was immediately relevant; to what would bring them to Anderras Darion safely and open up a route from Orthlund direct into Darek's estate and thence to the other eastern Lords.

'What's the matter, dear boy?' Gavor said softly.

Hawklan shook his head. 'I'm not sure,' he said.

'Let it go then,' Gavor said bluntly. 'It'll come when it's ready.'

Hawklan nodded. 'I suppose so.'

The tunnel eventually opened into a wide stepped balcony that took them downwards and wound round almost a full circle until it became another arched bridge to carry the four over some unknown depth.

Tirke looked tentatively over the low balustrade into the darkness below.

'Ancient rocks down there,' Isloman said casually, following Tirke's gaze.

Ancient! The word acted like a focus and Hawklan found himself looking again at the bones of Sumeral's long-dead creation lying amidst the wreckage of its nest. He stopped.

'They weren't that old,' he said out loud, making the others start. They looked at him, puzzled. 'The bones,' he said, by way of explanation. 'They were very old. But not ancient. Not going back millennia, to whenever . . .'

Abruptly the silver tone that had guided them stopped, leaving a strange gap in the still-flowing stream of sound that pervaded them.

A pulse replaced it; an ominous pulse. Hawklan strained forward. It was the sound of heavy running feet.

Suddenly a wave of horror washed over him and he felt his flesh crawl as every hair on his body stood erect. Both his eyes and his mouth opened wide. One to peer deeper into the darkness beyond the torchlight, the other to shout a warning. But the warning never formed. Before it could, a stooping figure surged into the light. Powerful legs drove it forward, straight towards the motionless men, large taloned hands reached out to grip and tear, and glittering teeth framed a red maw from which an appalling scream began to sound.

Chapter 28

Hawklan watched in horror as the creature came straight and purposefully towards him.

In an instant he saw that it was thin and weak and old, but he saw also that under its long fur rippled muscles and sinews more than powerful enough to dispatch him and the others with little or no effort. And its age too seemed only to have heightened the malevolence that shone red and bloody in its eyes.

In the same instant he saw also that the bridge was too narrow and crowded for him to side-step and that in any event it was too late – the creature was too near and moving too fast.

Suddenly, without breaking its headlong charge, the creature stood up fully on its hind legs and raised a terrible clawed hand. It was a head taller than Hawklan.

Gavor leapt off Hawklan's shoulder powerfully. Not in fear, but to leave his friend free to move. Catching the driving impetus of this movement, Hawklan stepped back and, turning, drew his sword. It swung up in a glittering black arc as he took another step, then down and up again as he turned to face the creature. The upward stroke cut a great diagonal gash across its torso.

Without pause, Hawklan stepped back again and, spinning round, brought the sword down to cut a second gash across the first one.

Despite these two desperate wounds however, the creature came relentlessly forward, carried by its own momentum and intent, but, clear now of his friends, Hawklan suddenly stepped sideways and drove the sword into the creature's flank as it passed by him.

The impact of the blow sent the creature staggering over the low balustrade. Still screaming in rage, it twisted as it fell and the clawed hands lunged out to seize the coping of the balustrade.

So fast had Hawklan's three blows been, that even Dacu had scarcely been able to draw his own sword before the battle was finished. He came to Hawklan's side as the healer stepped forward, raising the black sword to deliver a final blow that would send this abomination into whatever depths lay below.

The creature's scream had become a strange whimper and its claws were scraping desperately across the stone coping as it struggled to save itself.

'Kill it, man,' Dacu said desperately, his eyes wide with horror as he looked in disbelief from the creature to Hawklan.

Then Isloman and Tirke were there, white-faced and stunned.

Hawklan looked down at the creature. He could see the two terrible wounds he had cut beginning to open and disgorge the creature's entrails. The creature looked at him, then, releasing the coping with one hand, held it out to him, its eyes full of fear.

Hawklan watched, unable to move, as the other hand screeched across the coping and, with a brief choking mewl, the creature disappeared into the darkness without a sound.

Slowly he lowered the sword and then slithered to the floor. He was trembling. His hand involuntarily began to nurse his damaged arm again.

The balmy sounds that had been bathing them since they left the Alphraan's Heartplace were silent, and all that could be heard was the hoarse breathing of the four men. Gavor dropped silently on to Hawklan's shoulder.

‘Thank you,’ Hawklan said, softly, reaching up and touching his friend’s beak. Gavor did not reply.

‘What was it?’ Tirke asked shakily after a long, unsteady silence.

Hawklan lowered his head. ‘The last of its breed,’ he said quietly.

He looked at his sword, gored and steaming from his last dreadful thrust. He turned away as the smell wafted in his face.

‘Clean it in the snow,’ Dacu said, looking at the sword then at an inadequate kerchief he had pulled from his pocket.

Hawklan nodded. ‘I wonder how many other remnants of the First Coming are still with us?’

No one spoke.

‘The last of its breed?’ The Alphraan’s voice was soft and hesitant.

Hawklan nodded again. ‘Yes,’ he said sadly. ‘Without doubt. No great victory there, just a pathetic end to a grim song, as you might say.’ He looked up. ‘You’ve lost another, have you?’ he asked.

‘Your guide,’ the voice replied.

‘I’m sorry,’ Hawklan said.

‘It was not your fault,’ the voice said. ‘But we will lose no more.’ There was a new note in the reply; one of determination. It continued. ‘We sink ever deeper into your debt, Hawklan. It is not possible for us to repay you in like manner, but we are with you now, utterly . . .’ The voice slipped into its own language and the four men were surrounded by sounds which told them of past doubts set aside and the pledged and immutable allegiance of an entire race.

Hawklan stood up – he was still shaking. ‘Thank you,’ he said, simply. ‘But there is no debt, just a common need. Pledge yourself to facing that by our side.’

The guiding sound returned, its note now ringing and purposeful.

Once or twice as they followed it, Isloman thought he glimpsed a tiny figure in the distance, but none of the others saw it, and even his shadow vision did not enable him to see any detail.

Then they were at the mouth of the tunnel that had first led them into the mountain.

‘We will be with you,’ said the voice. The guiding note faded until it became the low moaning of the wind in the narrow cleft.

‘Storm’s getting worse,’ Dacu said briskly, anxious to get back to some semblance of normality and watching the light flurries of blown snow floating past them. The four men paused briefly to fasten their cloaks before stepping out of the tunnel and heading back towards their camp.

As they moved along the narrow cleft, the wind strengthened and its low moaning changed gradually into a buffeting, echoing reflection of the storm raging outside.

Eventually they found themselves walking through drifting snow and then at the foot of the rocks that had sealed the cleft. Hawklan bent down and cleaned the blade of the black sword with handfuls of snow. It gleamed in the torchlight, but Hawklan looked in distaste at the despoiled snow lying at his feet.

Dacu pulled them all together.

‘Turn your torches up and hold on to one another tightly,’ he shouted, struggling to make himself heard above the noise. ‘It’s not far to the shelter and its beacon’s lit, but we can still miss it in this weather. I don’t particularly want to spend the rest of the night huddled behind a rock in a snow shelter. And be careful where you tread,’ he emphasized. ‘The rocks on the far side will be well covered by now.’

His comment proved timely as they rose up over the top of the rocks; hooded figures, eerie in the flowing torchlight, stumbling awkwardly through the screaming wind, and whitening rapidly in the driving snow.

Gavor thrust his head out from Hawklan’s cloak, muttered, ‘Good grief!’ and withdrew quickly.

Feeling cautiously for each foothold, the group slowly struggled down the slope.

When they were all safely down, Dacu peered into the snow-streaked gloom beyond the torchlight.

‘Douse your torches,’ he said after a moment. ‘And don’t move, whatever you do.’

The blackness closed around them, leaving each alone and isolated in the screaming wind, clinging to Dacu’s last command and trying to set aside the memory of the creature that had surged out of the darkness to be slain by Hawklan scarcely an hour past.

Gradually a faint unfocussed glow began to form, at some indeterminate, swirling distance. It was the beacon torch on their shelter.

As soon as they were back inside, Isloman struck the radiant stones and the four men sat in a strange unreal silence until the warmth and the familiarity of their surroundings seeped into their unease.

‘There’s precious little left of the night,’ Dacu said eventually. ‘But I suggest we get what sleep we can. We’ve still got to get over this mountain.’

Tirke pulled a sour face. ‘Why can’t we go through the tunnels like the Alphraan suggested?’ he asked.

Dacu was conspicuously patient with him. ‘You heard, Tirke,’ he said. ‘We need a surface route that anyone can travel. Not one that needs others to guide them through underground chambers and passageways.’

Tirke looked unconvinced.

‘We may have to bring an army into Fyorlund this way,’ Dacu went on, irritated slightly. ‘Can you see thousands of men, women, horses, tramping along those tunnels? Over those bridges, walkways . . . whatever they were? Not to mention pack animals, supply wagons, all the equipment that’s needed. I doubt the Alphraan would be our friends for long then.’

Tirke ran his hand down his face wearily and lay down. ‘I suppose so,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t

think.’

‘Go to sleep,’ Dacu said, repenting his hasty tone. ‘You’re entitled not to think after a night like tonight.’

Tirke stared up at the roof of the shelter, moving as the wind shook it.

‘I don’t think I can go to sleep,’ he said. ‘And to be honest, I’m not sure I want to.’

Hawklan looked at him. ‘Talk about it, then,’ he said encouragingly.

‘There’s nothing to talk about,’ Tirke said. ‘Every time I shut my eyes, I see that – thing – roaring and screaming out of the blackness. I see myself paralysed – with surprise as much as fear. And you – twisting, turning – no effort, no hesitation, as if it were all just part of . . . of . . . a Festival dance . . .’

He lifted himself up and rested on one elbow. His eyes opened wide, surprised, and his words seemed to force themselves out as if against his will. ‘I don’t know which was the most frightening. It, or you,’ he said.

Dacu and Isloman turned abruptly to look at the young man and then at Hawklan. Dacu caught Hawklan’s eye and raised his eyebrows appreciatively. Hawklan nodded.

Tirke suddenly looked stricken, realizing what he had said. He began to stammer out an apology. Hawklan raised his hand to stop him. ‘No, Tirke,’ he said. ‘I understand. It was a perceptive remark. Trust me, you’ve no need to fear your dreams while you see that clearly.’

He lay back, nursing his still painful arm, and Gavor took up sentry duty by his head. ‘I did what I did because I’d no alternative,’ Hawklan said. ‘And I did what I did in great terror, but nevertheless wilfully and thoughtfully, to halt its attack as quickly as possible. It was old and demented, but even a passing blow from one of those hands would have killed. I had no alternative,’ he repeated. ‘However, for what it’s worth, Tirke, it was no effortless ballet.’ He sat up slowly. ‘I remember years and years of relentless training to attain the understanding that would enable me – my body – to face such a foe and to move thus.’

Isloman looked at Hawklan intently, and Gavor inclined his head.

‘You remember?’ Isloman said softly, his voice almost awed.

Hawklan turned to him. ‘Yes,’ he said. Then, with a slight shrug, ‘No faces, names, places – but the toil? Yes, I remember that.’

Isloman was tempted to press the matter, but realized it would avail him nothing. Hawklan had told him all he could.

Dacu, on the other hand, seemed relieved that such a skill could be acquired by effort rather than the mysterious intervention of some ancient force. ‘I was going to ask you where you learned to use a sword like that,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen some fine swordsmanship but never the like of that. Perhaps when we reach Anderras Darion you’ll instruct me?’

Hawklan laughed a little at Dacu’s straightforward bluntness then bowed an acknowledgement. ‘I’d be honoured, Goraidin.’ He turned back to Tirke and said, ‘I’ll instruct you, too.’

Gavor chuckled ominously.

The following day Dacu, as usual, awoke first. There was an odd quality about the light, and the shelter was very warm even though Isloman had extinguished the radiant stones before they had all finally retired.

He muttered softly to himself then opened the entrance a little to confirm his diagnosis. Then he started to wake the others. He had intended to do this gently, but each in turn sat up rapidly at his touch, familiar by now with his normal method of rousing the camp.

‘It sounds as though the wind has dropped,’ he said. ‘But we’re buried – at least in part.’

Isloman’s eyes narrowed with a brief spasm of anxiety while Tirke’s widened in frank alarm. Dacu was reassuring. ‘It shouldn’t be too bad,’ he said. ‘We were well sheltered. It’s probably just some eddying, but we’ll have to dig our way out slowly and cautiously.’

He looked at each of the others in turn. ‘Everything is slow and cautious in these conditions,’ he emphasized. ‘Not only will the terrain be disguised completely, but if you go rushing around you’ll sweat, your sweat will freeze on you and we’ll be heading for some real problems then. Just remember we’ve still a long way to go.’

It took them only a little time to dig their way out of the shelter and they emerged to be greeted by a soft misty snowscape. Everywhere was silent and still and large parts of the stern mountain scenery had been transformed by a swaddling whiteness. The sky to the east was a dull red, but to the north and west dark heavy clouds hung expectantly, and the peak of the mountain they stood on was still lost in the mist.

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Tirke, his breath steaming.

‘It is,’ Dacu agreed. Without speaking, Gavor flapped off into the cold silence, black and clear against the misty haziness.

Hawklan took Tirke’s arm. ‘Come and help me feed the horses,’ he said. ‘Then we can eat.’

The horses had fared better than the shelter, Dacu having taken greater pains to place them well in the lee of the rocks. They were standing quietly together, scarcely touched by the snow that had eddied round and buried the shelter.

Hawklan examined each of them briefly and then consulted Serian.

‘They’re all right,’ the horse said. ‘But we should move soon. The weather’s liable to change again quickly and this is not good country for us.’

Hawklan smiled when Dacu subsequently offered him the same opinion.

‘This weather’s unseasonable,’ Dacu said. ‘It seems to be confined to the high peaks, but I wouldn’t like to say it was temporary. It could be the beginning of a very bad winter.’

He shrugged and set the grim thought aside. ‘Anyway, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find the gully in these conditions, but we must use every moment to look for it. I don’t want to spend another night here if it can be avoided. Amongst other things, we haven’t enough supplies for the horses to be away from grazing for too long.’

Thus, after a brief meal, the party struck out again.

Dacu was pleased as he looked at the small hummocks in the snow which marked the positions of the cairns they had made the previous day. It had been a useful day's work after all, even though it now seemed a very long time ago.

He did not spend much time in reflection, however. The heavy clouds that dominated the horizon, dominated his thoughts also. Today was a day for being completely in the present. Each step must be taken with the right balance of speed and caution if progress was to be made. Both too slow and too fast would present equally serious problems.

'This way,' he said, pointing up and across the slope in the opposite direction to the previous day's search. 'We'll make for that skyline there. We should be able to get a better view of the area than here.'

Dwarfed by the massive bulk of the mountain, the four tiny figures and their tiny horses began their painstaking way up its broad flank. High above, soaring in the cold winter air, Gavor watched their slow but relentless progress. The sun was beginning to appear, red over the eastern peaks, but to the north, great snow clouds still lowered and he could see swirling squalls in some of the distant valleys.

* * * *

With typical thoroughness, Gulda had divided the region around the central camp into sectors and sub-sectors. Now, with equal thoroughness, the Orthlundyn were surveying them; painstakingly – ruthlessly, even – in an atmosphere that could only be described as alarmingly disorienting: a bizarre mixture of battle frenzy and children's game.

Loman was in charge of the most northerly of the three groups.

The strange warning note that had greeted their departure from the camp had stayed with them for some time, rising and falling monotonously, then it had stopped abruptly, only to be followed by some form of attack, as various riders suddenly began to suffer headaches, others began to hallucinate, and, inevitably, tempers began to fray for no apparent reason.

Gulda's words to the departing force, however, had been unequivocal.

'If anything untoward happens, it is their doing, and theirs alone. Remember that it is an influence from outside, just like the sun and the wind, and just knowing that will help you find a way to protect yourself from it. And remember above all that the Orthlundyn *do not fight one another*, nor ever have.' She spelled out her last words very slowly and with great emphasis as if dinning it into her audience in such a manner that it could do no other than remain in the forefront of their minds.

Thus Loman had ridden straight to the group first affected and repeated Gulda's words. 'It's *sthem*,' he said earnestly. 'You have no headache except what they've given you . . .'

' . . . If you use your carver's vision you'll see the truth of what you think you're seeing . . .'

' . . . They're frightened of us. We must show them our friendship even though they've hurt us. Our real enemy lies elsewhere. . . '

It had not been easy, but as others joined in with Loman's gentle chiding, the unseen assault had gradually abated, and the predominant atmosphere slowly became one of laughter and pleasantness.

Similar attacks had, however, continued intermittently throughout that day, passing in waves through the ranks of the riders. But they were mercilessly chivvied by Loman and everyone else who was unaffected, until Loman allowed himself a brief note of triumph. ‘They can’t cope with the numbers, after all,’ he said. ‘We have them.’

‘No,’ said a voice very close to him. ‘We are withholding our power because of our concern for your people.’

Loman looked at Jenna, but she appeared not to have heard anything.

The voice spoke again: ‘We will do this if we have to,’ and an ear-splitting shriek filled Loman’s mind. He jerked backward, his face grimacing with pain and his hands clamped to his ears.

Jenna started at this violent and unexpected movement. ‘What’s the matter?’ she cried out in alarm.

The noise left Loman as suddenly as it had come and, white-faced, he lurched forward in reaction to his previous movement. Jenna reached out and took his arm to steady him. ‘What’s the matter?’ she repeated urgently.

Loman did not reply immediately. Instead he fumbled inside a pouch on his belt and eventually retrieved a metal bracelet. For a little while he looked at it intently. It was a delicate, intricately woven piece of work that he had made many years ago for his wife and which he had subsequently given to Tirilen. He had done far better work since, but it contained such youthful intensity and so many memories that it never failed to move him.

‘They’re learning,’ he replied eventually, carefully replacing the bracelet. ‘Using one of the Goraidin’s tactics – attacking the enemy’s leaders.’ He described what had happened.

Jenna frowned. ‘I heard nothing,’ she said.

Loman nodded. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘I think they made a mistake. There was a sense of great effort in the sound – desperation, almost. I’ve a feeling that it hurt the sender as much as it hurt me. I don’t think it’s something they do either lightly or easily.’

And so it had proved. While the disturbances continued to come and go, neither Loman nor anyone else again experienced such a violent, direct attack.

Despite this, however, the search for the Alphraan themselves, or the entrances to their caves, seemed to be proving fruitless. Various caves were discovered, but they were all shallow and empty.

Loman was openly puzzled. ‘We have our shadow vision and we have seeing stones. We’ve been methodical and thorough. How can we have missed anything?’

He could almost hear Gulda’s voice ringing in his ears. ‘You haven’t been thorough enough,’ she would say.

He reined his horse to a halt and, dismounting, called the various section leaders to him.

‘Perhaps they don’t come out above ground after all . . .’

‘Perhaps they’re smaller than we thought, and need only tiny openings . . .’

‘We can’t be fast*and* thorough . . .’

‘Perhaps there just aren’t any entrances around here . . .’

Loman nodded as suggestions were put to him, but he could not avoid the feeling that he was missing something.

‘Pass me the map,’ he said eventually.

Jenna retrieved the document from his horse and spread it out on a nearby rock. Loman stared at it pensively, running his finger slowly along the route they had taken. It stopped a little way from the bright red dot that marked the location of the central camp.

‘This is where we had our first . . . difficulty, isn’t it?’ he said. There was general agreement. He continued. ‘Let’s mark on here where each of the others occurred.’

This took some time and considerable debate but eventually Loman found himself looking at four distinct and separate clusters of dots. He smiled. ‘I think we’ll go back a little way,’ he said, resting his finger on the nearest of the clusters to their present position. ‘We’ll go back, and we’ll search this area*every* thoroughly.’

No sooner had he spoken than angry voices rang out from somewhere within the ranks of the waiting crowd. One of the section leaders jumped up on to a rock to locate the source of the problem, then, scowling angrily, jumped down and made to run towards it.

Loman caught his arm in a powerful grip. ‘Gently,’ he said. ‘Very gently. If you go rushing in you know what might happen.’

The man stared at him angrily for a moment, then lowered his eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I just forgot.’

Loman indicated two of the others. ‘Go with him,’ he said. ‘The rest of you, get back to your people and tell them what we’ve found and what we’re going to do. And tell them to be particularly alert. I think we might have trodden on some toes at last and things might start getting very peevish. Jenna, send a signal to the other two groups telling them to do the same as we’ve done.’

Loman was correct about the response of the Alphraan. The return journey proved to be eventful, with spasms of anger and disorder rippling through the riders far more frequently and severely than before.

Loman smiled, however, as he struggled on his rolling mount to mark these incidents on the map. They were completely random now.

Too late, little people, he thought, too late. You’ve given yourselves away.

He passed his new information to the section leaders immediately, together with his interpretation. The more everyone knew about what was happening, the better able they would be to withstand what must surely become increasingly virulent and desperate attacks.

Finally, though not without some minor injuries, they came to the point which lay at the centre of the small cluster of dots on Loman’s map. He looked up at the peak that dominated the scene, then

dismounted and climbed up onto a jutting rock.

The Orthlundyn gathered round him, drawn to this powerful solid figure like a myriad planets around a small but massive sun. Loman pointed up to the mountain.

‘Our friends are up there,’ he shouted, his voice echoing. Some jeers and cheers rose up from the crowd. Loman focused on it. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I wasn’t being ironic. These people have lived peacefully as our neighbours for generations. For all they’ve troubled us lately – imposed on us, in fact, and worse – they’re our friends. Friends we’re having a disagreement with at the moment, to be sure, but friends nonetheless.’

Some of the jeering turned to outrage. ‘They’ve killed our people, Loman. What kind of friends do that?’ someone shouted. There was a considerable chorus of agreement.

Loman gestured an acknowledgement of this, then strode forward to the very edge of the rock and looked straight at his inquisitor.

‘Friends who’re frightened, confused and can’t understand what’s going on,’ he said.

‘It’s not through want of telling,’ someone else said angrily. ‘They just don’t want to listen.’

Loman turned to him. ‘I can’t excuse what they’ve done, you know that,’ he replied. ‘But do all your friends at your Guild meetings listen when you try to tell them something? Are there none who take a deal of persuading on certain matters?’ It was an apt and homely point and took the edge off the crowd’s response to the man’s angry denunciation.

Loman spoke again before anyone else could interrupt. ‘And take care with your anger, all of you,’ he said. ‘It has no part to play in today’s proceedings, you know that too. Our anger is their most potent and dangerous weapon. Be what you are, Orthlundyn – carvers, craftsmen and artists, who see truth. Ask yourselves what anger can possibly achieve here?’ He allowed a brief pause, then continued almost savagely. ‘What do you want to do? Drag them from their holes and kill them? One for one?’

The crowd was silent under his reproach.

Loman turned to look up at the mountain. ‘Alphraan, we know you can hear and see us,’ he said. ‘And we know your homes – or the entrances to them – are on this hill, and on others nearby. We come in opposition to you, but in peace. We will do you no harm, but *wewill* find your homes and deny them to you, as you have denied our Armoury to us. And *weshall* possess more and more of your property until you release the Armoury and agree to interfere with us no further.’

‘We will prevent you,’ said a voice.

Without turning, Loman held out his hand to quieten an angry murmur that this comment brought from the crowd.

‘I beg of you, please don’t,’ he said. ‘You know you can’t control a host this size. At the best you’ll simply cause more deaths and injuries before we find you. You, who purport to be doing this to prevent death and injury. And do you really want these people surging into your domain, raging and demented, their darker natures unfettered by you yourselves?’

‘Be warned, human,’ the voice said, after a pause. ‘Do not threaten us.’

‘You’re wasting your time, Loman,’ said someone behind him.

Loman raised his hand again, requesting a little further patience.

‘Voice,’ he said. ‘I don’t know how you speak to us in this manner, or how you hear what we say. But I dispute your authority to speak for the Alphraan. I cannot see that any rational people would be so stupid as to allow this tragic farce to continue in the light of our conduct and of our reasoning.’ He turned round suddenly and looked at the assembled Orthlundyn. ‘Do I speak for you, here?’ he shouted. There was a brief pause, then a great roar went up that rang around the mountains.

Loman turned back to the mountain. ‘Voice, would your people speak thus for you?’ he said quietly.

There was no reply.

‘I thought not,’ Loman said. ‘Anyone who would intimidate a free people wouldn’t scruple to intimidate his own kind.’ An angry hissing filled the air. ‘Do not judge us, human,’ said the voice. ‘Our ways are not your ways.’

Loman turned back to the Orthlundyn. ‘Ponder your ways then, leader of the Alphraan,’ he said dismissively, over his shoulder. Then, to the crowd. ‘Section leaders to me for a planning meeting. The rest of you’ – he smiled – ‘rest. While you can. We’ve got some stiff walking ahead of us shortly.’

It took little time to plan out the proposed search of the mountain and, within the hour, the first parties set out. Loman stayed in the valley, watching intently, as the tiny lines of figures moved painfully slowly across the lower slopes of the mountain.

He turned to Jenna. ‘This must be the strangest army in all history,’ he said, almost jovially. ‘Military intention, military tactics, and yet everyone obliged to treat it as some kind of Festival picnic.’

Jenna smiled nervously. She was finding the ambivalence of the venture less easy to accommodate than Loman seemed to be. ‘It’s impossible,’ she said reluctantly.

‘No,’ said Loman easily. ‘Just slow, and, I hope, very boring. But we’ll stay here until every stone and every blade of grass on this mountain has been examined at least twice. It’ll . . .’

‘Signal.’ The interruption came from a young man standing nearby, watching the same scene through a seeing stone.

Loman held his breath.

‘First sector cleared,’ said the young man.

Loman looked both relieved and disappointed. ‘Send the next group up to cover the same area,’ he said.

Jenna looked up at the sky. The watery sun had disappeared, as the clouds had thickened through the day. She frowned a little. ‘That’s a wintry sky,’ she said. ‘And the sky to the north’s been looking very heavy for days.’

Loman did not reply, but the mention of the north brought his brother and Hawklan to mind. Almost

without realizing what he was doing, he looked up, half expecting to see Gavor soaring black against the dull grey sky. With difficulty, he set the thoughts aside. Time alone could answer the questions that they posed.

Gradually the light faded and Loman called a halt to the search. 'Camp where you are,' was his signal. 'Relax and rest, and look forward to a good day's shadow hunting tomorrow.'

As the darkness deepened, unrelieved even by starlight, the mountain slowly disappeared from view except for a twisted skein of camp lights twinkling like a carelessly thrown necklace. Loman leaned against a rock and stared up at the lights. Distant voices floated down to him through the stillness, enlivened occasionally by splashes of laughter. He smiled.

'Listen, Alphraan,' he said softly. 'Listen to the sounds of the people you persecute.'

There was no reply.

The following day was again overcast but visibility was still good and there was no wind to disturb the searchers other than a light breeze.

No trouble was reported as the morning progressed and Loman eventually became weary of just watching and waiting.

'I think I'll go up and see how morale is,' he announced eventually.

'Yes. I don't want to sit here all day either,' Jenna said acidly. 'I'll come with you.'

Loman cleared his throat self-consciously.

They were able to ride part of the way but had to leave their horses as the terrain grew steeper. The mountainside was alive with people, searching, making notes, laying out markers, moving equipment in anticipation of another night's stay on the mountain. Briefly, Loman felt a qualm when he realized that this considerable effort was being undertaken at his behest and on his whim.

No, he thought sternly. Definitely not a whim. It was a reasoned judgement based on the clear actions of the Alphraan and confirmed by the changes in their responses subsequently. In any case, even if he were wrong, future searches would definitely be necessary and much would be learnt from this exercise. The qualm was crushed.

It did occur to him that the Alphraan could be deliberately misleading him, but he doubted it. They're on the run, part of him said, with almost hand-rubbing glee. He crushed that too; if they were panicking, then they'd be particularly dangerous as the necklace began to tighten.

When he and Jenna finally reached the highest of the search lines, the terrain that could be walked over was predominantly rock. They had decided at the outset that the scree slopes and rock faces of the mountain were to be left for the time being. Climbers were far too vulnerable.

Loman looked out across the valley. The base camp could be seen, toy-like, far below. Neighbouring peaks sat solid and patient like wise old women pretending to sleep while in reality watching the antics of the giddy young folk around them. It was a calming sight, a sight to correct the perspective, and Loman stood looking at it contentedly for several minutes.

Eventually he turned and looked at the tumbled landscape immediately around him. He much preferred scrambling over rocks such as these to plodding up relentlessly steep grass slopes. However, it could not be denied that the huge jumbled masses of boulders offered far more nooks and crannies in which to conceal cave entrances.

One of the section leaders waved a greeting and, coming forward, echoed his thoughts. 'It's going to be much slower now, Loman,' he said. 'It'd be a help if we knew how big a hole these people need for access.'

Loman looked at the man. 'We will, soon,' he said. 'Take your time. Don't let anybody rush. Any doubts – check again.' He smiled. 'We're going to have to look Gulda in the eye and tell her we searched this mountain thoroughly,' he added significantly.

Jenna looked up towards the rocky skyline that obscured the summit of the mountain. 'This is going to take at least two more days,' she said.

Loman followed her gaze. 'Probably more,' he corrected.

The woman's eyes flickered around the neighbouring peaks involuntarily.

'You're thinking it's impossible again, aren't you?' Loman asked.

Jenna shook her head and mouthed a definite 'No' while allowing her eyes and face to say 'Yes.'

Loman laughed.

Suddenly a cry rang out, one of fear and pain. The section leader spun round looking along the ragged line of searchers for the source of the cry.

'There!' cried Loman, pointing. Over to their left, the line had broken and people were converging on a man who was staggering dangerously across the rocks. Loman and Jenna joined the movement, but as he strode out, Loman felt a twinge of anger at this interruption to the search.

Then the man fell, heavily, and his cry became one of anger. Loman stopped suddenly and reached out to stop Jenna and the section leader. For a moment he watched the small, concerned crowd growing around the fallen man and felt the swirl of anger in him struggling to grow similarly.

'It's a trap,' he said, forcing a calmness into his voice which was radically at odds with the turmoil he felt inside. 'Go back and stop anyone rushing into this,' he said to the section leader. 'Get as many people as you can. Tell them what's happening and remind them to walk here as calmly and quietly as they can manage. Tell them to look at the scenery . . . talk about their carving – anything. Just so that they're quiet in their minds when they get here.'

'But the man might be hurt,' the section leader protested, trying to move forward.

Loman took his elbow and gently turned him round, away from the scene. 'He probably is,' he said. 'But there'll be worse if we don't stop this before it starts. Can't you feel the anger in yourself already?'

The man looked at him uneasily for a moment, breathing unsteadily. Then he moved to intercept others who were running almost compulsively towards the stricken man.

Loman forced down his irritation again and looked into the valley. Down there they had all been together; a large crowd and, for the most part, happy. There they had successfully withstood the Alphraan's assaults. But here, they were spread out. Without the great stabilizing reservoir of people around them, individuals could be attacked and used as a focus to draw more and more people into an ever greater conflict.

Loman actually felt it happening as he heard increasingly angry voices coming from the group around the fallen man.

'Call out to them, Jenna,' he said softly. 'Tell them they're under attack and to stay as calm as they can until we get more people there.'

Jenna did as she was bidden. At the sound of her voice, several members of the group around the stricken man turned angrily, confirming Loman's analysis.

Jenna's voice started to rise in pitch until Loman took her arm gently. 'They don't mean it, remember?' he said. 'It's the Alphraan. Tell them the same. Tell them the obvious. We can attend to whoever's been hurt when everything's calmed down.'

Loman glanced around. People were gathering behind him. He felt afraid. How many could the Alphraan affect at once? They'd wrought havoc in camp six. How effective would the Orthlundyn's own awareness of the nature of the attack be as a defence against it? If this crowd slipped out of control . . . up here! He forced the thoughts aside. It was up to him to see that this *did not* happen.

'We're being attacked,' he said to them quietly. 'Just remember that we dealt very successfully with many such assaults when we were in the valley yesterday and, by staying calm, we'll deal with this one too. We must be getting very near to their . . . homes . . . now, so this will probably be the first of many attempts to drive us away.' He looked at the crowd intently. 'Set aside any feelings of anger you have, no matter how justified they seem. Remember that we're dealing with a frightened people now, and that calmness and gentleness are our only weapons.'

Angry voices came again from the group around the fallen man. Loman felt his own anger begin to rise in response to the sound, then, unexpectedly, it slipped from him.

He started to move forward. 'Are you going to persist in this, Alphraan?' he asked. 'Are you not going to cease until more terrible deeds have been done? Until more people have been killed?'

'We will not allow you your weapons, human.' The Alphraan's voice was fraught and vicious. 'We will not allow you to scar the world with your evil and treacherous ways again.'

Loman looked surprised. He had not expected an answer to his question. 'We?' he said ironically, still continuing forward. 'I still don't believe you speak for your people, voice, but let that pass. I won't debate the rights and wrongs of our actions with you further. You've heard enough to appreciate them fully, even though you seem to prefer not to listen. And you've heard and seen enough to know that, as promised, no matter what the cost, we will protect ourselves and we will move ever into your domain until you release the Armoury and agree to leave us alone.' A wisp of anger floated into his voice, but it was his own and he used it. 'We are preparing to fight against the monstrous will of Sumeral Himself. Did you think that we would yield so easily to your petty tyranny?'

A sound formed in the air that might have been the beginning of a reply, but Loman dismissed it with a wave of his arm.

With the Orthlundyn walking silently behind him, Loman reached the fallen man. The group around the man had fallen silent at his approach, and Loman looked at each in turn. ‘Well done,’ he said encouragingly. ‘Their will is failing, just as ours is growing in strength. All will be well soon.’

Then he bent down and examined the injured man. He’s got a nasty gash on his head, but I think he’s just unconscious,’ he said after a moment. ‘Take him down to base camp, gently.’

As the man was carried away, Loman turned to the silent, watching people around him. ‘Somewhere around here is one of the entrances to the Alphraan’s . . . our neighbours’ domain,’ he said. ‘Look for it, carvers.’

Before anyone could move, a terrible screech rent the air. ‘Never, human!’ screamed a voice – many voices – cracked with rage.

Loman staggered back under the impact of the appalling sound, his hands to his ears. Only instinct enabled him to keep his balance on the uneven boulders. He cried out in pain.

Around him he could see the crowd was similarly affected, people staggering and stumbling on the unforgiving rocks. They were his responsibility, but all he wanted to do was flee this place – to run and run until he was free of this dreadful pain. Yet his feet would not respond and, oddly, there was a quality in the sound which encouraged him to stand and oppose.

But there was also desperation. This was a last effort.

Here, smith, you are re-forged or marred forever, he thought.

Then the quality of the sound changed. It lapped around him, mocking, taunting, tearing at him. It unearthed old and fearful memories which rose up and threatened to send him fleeing blindly across the mountainside until he crashed to his death over some unseen cliff.

But it woke another memory. A memory of trials faced and survived.

Loman stood up straight and took his ineffectual hands from his ears. ‘No, Alphraan,’ he said, though he could not hear his own words. ‘You may destroy me, but I will not die whimpering. I will not die dishonouring all those who have made me what I am.’ He opened his arms as if to receive the assault. ‘I have walked the labyrinth, and its ancient power had judged me no enemy. I am not afraid of your petty malice.’

Then, as if moving against a powerful wind, but without bowing, he began to move slowly forward. The sounds filling him became unbearable, and he felt consciousness slipping from him.

‘If I fail, others will follow,’ he said. ‘They will follow always, until you have released what you have unlawfully bound.’

He took another step forward, somehow still managing to keep his balance on the uneven rocks.

‘Tirilen . . .’ he thought as he felt his last ties breaking under the terrible onslaught.

But the sound changed again. Abruptly it became loud and shrill, though, Loman realized, it had moved from him. The blackness receded and he was standing again amongst his friends surrounded by a

deafening, but harmless clamour.

He looked around. The crowd had been scattered somewhat, but all were now motionless, listening spellbound to the noise rising and falling about them. For even though no coherent language could be heard it was patently a furious argument.

Loman grimaced as he felt anger, frustration and resentment all around him, mingling with regret, fear and denunciation. It seemed to go on interminably, then, as if cut by a sword stroke, it stopped suddenly and for a moment there was silence. Loman stared around in disbelief, thinking briefly that the sound had destroyed his hearing. But before he could speak the noise swelled up again.

This time however, it was profoundly different. This time it was full of disbelief; a disbelief that turned gradually to wonder and joy. Despite his recent ordeal, Loman felt a lump in his throat as he found himself the inadvertent witness to a great rejoining: the coming together again of a family that had been so long apart that each half had thought the other to be perhaps no more than a mere myth.

The poignancy was almost unbearable, and, feeling intrusive, Loman turned to walk away. As he did so, however, other sounds began to impinge on him. A frantic whistling from all sides.

Loman felt again the weight of the mantle of responsibility settling on his shoulders. He looked down into the valley.

Sound signals! What are they playing at? he thought.

Then the content of their messages impinged.

‘Hawklan is coming,’ they said. ‘Hawklan and Isloman, from the north, with two riders.’

Loman looked north, fumbling in his pouch for his seeing stone. As he did so a familiar voice spoke behind him.

‘Well, well, dear boy,’ it said. ‘You do look trim. Been exercising?’

Chapter 29

Sylvriss rode forward and led her mount delicately out to the edge of a rocky outcrop. Her cloak was wrapped tight about her but her hood was thrown back and her face was flushed, as much with exhilaration at the progress they had made over the last few days as with the chilly air.

She looked out over the northern plains of Riddin. Home, at last, after all these years and so much turmoil. Admittedly, Dremark was far to the south, and the north of Riddin was sparsely populated, but soon she would be down there with her escort, and it would be only a matter of time before they encountered a patrol from one of the Muster lines.

Yengar joined her. ‘Your country, Majesty,’ he said, part question, part statement, his breath steaming.

Sylvriss nodded. ‘Ties of birth and family bind tightly, Yengar,’ she said. ‘But so do those of marriage and the loyalty of the Fyordyn, my people.’ She turned to him as she emphasized the word ‘my’.

‘I belong to both Fyorlund and Riddin now,’ she said. ‘Dan-Tor brought me and Rgoric together for his own unseeable ends – probably to corrupt Riddin as he has corrupted Fyorlund – but it was an error,

and we'll give him full measure of it before we're through.'

The mention of Fyorlund drew her eyes to the distant snow-covered peaks behind which that country now lay. The snow had caught them unawares, slowing their progress and making the journey difficult and laborious, but, being past the highest peaks when it arrived, they had encountered no special dangers.

Yengar followed her gaze and spoke her thoughts. 'The snow's early, Majesty,' he said. 'I fear that it's the beginning of a long winter. I doubt there'll be any way back to Fyorlund before the spring, except for hardy souls.'

Sylvriss looked at him, her mind full of thoughts of Eldric and the other Lords, facing the unknown power of Dan-Tor and ignorant of the fate of her and of Hawkklan and Isloman.

'Messages could be sent?' she asked tentatively.

The Goraidin looked at the mountains again. 'Oh yes,' he said quietly after a moment. 'But not easily and not without considerable risk. But troops?' He shook his head. 'Not in any worthwhile number.'

Sylvriss nodded. The harsh reality of the Goraidin's simple comment briefly dimmed the joy of seeing her home at last.

Still, she thought, there would be plenty of time for debating tactics and strategy when they got to Dremark. And at least Eldric and the others were preparing for war. They were not sitting in their castles in guileless innocence anymore.

She looked again at the land spread out below her. 'Come on,' she said, easing her horse back from the edge. 'Let's go and find the Muster.'

They had to spend one more night camped in the mountains, but the following day saw them leaving the last of the great crags, and venturing out over the empty, rolling countryside.

During the whole of the day the group moved steadily southwards. Although the weather was cold and overcast, they were all happy to have left the difficult mountain terrain behind and, for the most part, their progress was at the trot.

Towards evening the sinking sun broke through a gap in the distant clouds, and for a while the landscape was flooded with a brilliant yellow light, peculiarly at odds with the greyness of the low clouds overhead. The riders' shadows stretched and wavered, long across the short harsh grass.

'We've seen no one all day, Majesty,' Yengar said. 'It's really quite eerie. I seem to recall that Riddin was quite a bustling place.'

Sylvriss smiled. 'The last time you were here, you were fighting a war,' she said. 'There were all manner of temporary camps here then. But this isn't a very fertile region. It's scarcely worth settling. And, as I remember, the war blighted what little settlement there was. Such villages as were here had to be abandoned or were simply destroyed. I'm happy to be here now, but it's not a happy place for the Riddinvolk generally. Too barren, and too many bad memories.'

Yengar nodded. Bad memories he could understand. That was why the place seemed eerie, he realized.

But Sylvriss had been a young messenger in those days and knew of the region's condition only from the words of her father and his advisers. The countryside itself touched no old wounds in her. If anything, it reminded her of times of bright and youthful excitement when she had thundered, invulnerable, hither and thither from camp to camp at the behest of the line leaders.

'Don't worry,' she said, turning to Yengar and laughing a little. 'There'll be people enough as we get nearer the River Endamar. And once we've been seen, the news will be known all the way to Dremark almost within the day. I hope you weren't intending to reach there quietly.'

Yengar shook his head. 'No, Majesty,' he said. 'The bigger the escort the better, as far as I'm concerned. I doubt we need to protect you here.'

A fine drizzle was falling when they finally halted and made camp for the night. As she had done throughout the journey, Sylvriss tended the horses while the men erected the shelters, then she joined them for their meal.

Relieved to be away from the constant concern that had necessarily pervaded their journey through the mountains, the group were soon in high spirits, their laughter ringing out into the damp darkness like a celebratory carillon.

Abruptly, the entrance to the shelter was torn open.

The group's good spirits tempered their immediate surprise.

'It's the Muster!' Sylvriss exclaimed delightedly, struggling to get to her feet in the confined space. But Yengar laid a restraining hand on her arm. He was watching Olvric's hand.

Nearest to the entrance, Olvric was peering out at the unexpected visitor. He was smiling, but his hand, behind his back, was signalling.

'It's armed men, but it's not the Muster,' Yengar whispered urgently to Sylvriss. 'Follow Olvric's lead until we find out who they are and what's happening.'

Sylvriss's face went white but she controlled her expression and nodded. Her thoughts were suddenly in a turmoil. Armed men, but not the Muster? It was unlikely that Olvric would be wrong. But who could they be? Surely Dan-Tor's treacherous arm couldn't have reached this far?

Olvric stepped out of the shelter and looked at the newcomers. As one of them made to speak, Olvric raised a hand in apology and looking up into the rain, bent down to the entrance again.

'Pass my cloak, please,' he said waving his hand towards it. Marek handed it to him.

Sylvriss heard Yengar catch his breath. 'Morlider!' he hissed, almost in disbelief. 'At least twelve of them.'

Sylvriss felt her stomach turn over, and for an interminable, dreadful, moment, she thought she was going to faint. But sterner resolves buoyed her up as her mind cut through the questions about how and why the Morlider should be there, to the certainty that she had not battled alone against Dan-Tor for so long, to become a squealing victim to any fish-stinking brigands.

Yengar caught the light in her eye, and motioned her to silence.

‘Be discreet, but keep your hands by your weapons,’ he whispered to the others as, with wilful awkwardness, he struggled to his feet. ‘Look pleasant and watch for commands.’ Then, crouching, he stepped through the entrance to join Olvric.

‘It’s the Muster,’ Olvric said to him brightly, then turning to the semi-circle of watching men, ‘You gave us quite a fright,’ he said. ‘We haven’t seen anyone all day. We were beginning to think that the Muster didn’t patrol this far north.’

A large, bearded individual holding an axe stepped forward. He was a little taller than Olvric but considerably heavier and his whole demeanour was menacing. He seemed, however, a little taken aback by Olvric’s affability.

‘The Muster patrol here, have no fear,’ he said. ‘But who are you, and what are you doing here?’ His voice was as rough as his weather-beaten face and his accent confirmed his origins.

‘We’re travellers from Fyorlund,’ Olvric said, affecting to ignore the drawn weapons. ‘To be honest, I’m afraid we’re a little bit lost. We were hoping we’d run into you,’ he added confidentially, wiping the rain from his face, and pulling his hood forward.

The man scowled and knocked back Olvric’s hood roughly. ‘No need to be afraid of the water,’ he said. ‘Let’s see your face.’ Olvric stepped back a little and contrived to look bewildered, but otherwise made no response. Then the man pushed him to one side and, bending forward, peered into the shelter.

Following Yengar’s order, the four High Guards managed to return his gaze with interested courtesy, but Sylvriss, her face flushed, kept her head bowed.

A second, younger man stepped forward. There was a curl to his mouth which, combined with his blond hair matted wet across his forehead, conspired to give him a vicious, unstable presence.

‘Anything worthwhile, Drago?’ he asked.

The bearded man did not answer, but pointed to Sylvriss. ‘You,’ he said roughly. ‘Woman. Here. The rest of you stay where you are!’

Despite her best endeavours, Sylvriss’s feelings showed briefly in her expression as she stood up.

‘Don’t look at me like that, woman, unless you want your face reshaping,’ Drago said, raising a ham of a fist towards her. ‘Come here.’

Olvric stepped forward. ‘Now look . . .’ he began, but the blonde man turned suddenly and, with a spectacular flourish, produced a large knife. He placed the point under Olvric’s chin. ‘*Weare* looking,’ he said, his face expectant.

Olvric, looking alarmed, turned as if in appeal to the others standing around. Yengar watched the manoeuvre: his comrade was assessing the extent and strength of the force ranged against them. While Sylvriss and Olvric had been attracting attention he had surreptitiously done the same, forcing discipline and experience to master the familiar fear and self-reproach that were even now tearing his stomach with griping pains and making his whole body shake. He was glad Olvric was there. Both deliberately and instinctively he began to relax his body, to free it for movement.

As Olvric had signalled originally, there were at least twelve of them, all with weapons drawn; too many to be tackled at the moment, without putting the Queen at risk. In addition, there was no telling how many more might be out in the darkness awaiting events. They were a mixture of young and middle-aged men and unmistakably Morliders both in their features and their random array of clothing and arms. Yengar noted, however, that those who were not hooded had a driven, harassed look about them.

They're running and hiding, he thought. But this revelation told him little else. What was such a small group doing so far from the coast? In the war, the Morliders had sent deep penetration groups inland to gather information, but this couldn't be the case here. These were making no attempt to disguise themselves, and had refused to accept the pretence of being Muster riders that Olvric had offered them.

A more chilling thought occurred to him. Had they been separated from an army in some battle? It seemed ridiculous. If the Morliders had returned in force again, some message would surely have reached Fyorlund? But it could have, he realized. The normal route for messengers from Riddin to Fyorlund was further south and led into the estates of the southern Lords – whose loyalty was unknown! The fear in his stomach twisted again – they could have led their Queen into the middle of a war!

These conjectures flooded through Yengar's mind in the brief moments it took Sylvriss to step out of the shelter and face the man Drago. Other thoughts came even more quickly. What was to be their fate? Prisoners? Hostages? No. Twelve men would not burden themselves with six and a woman. Victims? Possibly. Some Morliders had a reputation for a rudimentary chivalry and a sense of honour; others hadn't. Yet these were talking; had their intent been purely murder, they would have waited until the camp was asleep. He looked at them again. Bedraggled and dispirited, they were beyond doubt hunted, but they were far from defeated. They probably just wanted supplies, he decided cautiously. Here was a bargaining space. The only serious problem would be Sylvriss. What danger was she in? Still . . .

Yengar noted that his fear had changed. The trembling that had been his initial response had diffused itself through his entire body, and he knew that he was now free to respond immediately to whatever threat presented itself. Two stray thoughts fluttered momentarily across his mind: one, that he was too old for this kind of thing; the other, that he was now wholly himself and had never been better equipped. He ignored both, and stepped forward.

'Commander Drago,' he said. 'Is this the way the Muster treat strangers? Weapons and threats?'

Drago ignored him. He looked Sylvriss up and down appraisingly.

'Fyordyn, eh?' he said to Olvric, without taking his gaze from Sylvriss.

'Yes,' Olvric said nervously. 'We're only servants, sir. On our way to join our Lord down here, but the snows caught us in the mountains and . . .'

'Servants?' said Drago, showing his teeth and reaching out to grip Sylvriss's cloak. 'In clothes like these?'

Olvric looked surprised. 'We have a kind and generous Lord. He looks after us well,' he said.

Drago turned to him scornfully, then threw open Sylvriss's cloak. 'A very kind Lord indeed,' he said sarcastically. 'Who expects a pregnant "maid" to drag herself over the mountains to tend to him.'

Eyes blazing, Sylvriss wrenched herself free and pulled her cloak about her.

Olvric retreated from his story hastily before the Queen could speak. 'It's *this* child,' he said confidentially, man to man, but looking suitably contrite at the exposure of his deception. 'We're taking her to friends in Riddin to get her away from his wife.'

This version provoked some obscene laughter from the watching men, and even Drago chuckled. 'Well, she's ours now. And the kid,' he added, almost reluctantly, Yengar thought. 'Still, we've no time to play the fool with you, whoever you are,' Drago went on. 'We need horses and food.' He swung his finger between Yengar and Olvric, at the same time pointing his axe into the shelter. 'Don't give us any trouble and you'll not get hurt.'

The blond man turned sharply. 'Are you crazy, Drago?' he burst out. 'We can't leave them alive. They'll tell the Muster we've been here.'

Drago shook his head. 'The Muster probably know near enough where we are,' he rasped. 'If they find corpses, they'll be out in real force and we'll have no chance. Do as you're told. Get the horses.'

'We could hide the bodies . . .'

'Do as you're told, Symm,' Drago erupted suddenly and furiously. 'You and that stinking knife will get us all killed yet.'

The blond man's face contorted with anger, and he turned the blade towards Drago.

Drago looked at him icily. 'Use it or put it away. Count of three,' he said softly but without hesitation. The hand holding the axe went behind his back, leaving his front seemingly defenceless.

'One.'

Yengar and Olvric watched intently. Symm did not move.

'Two.'

Symm's eyes flickered over the watchers, most of whom had taken a pace backwards. He swallowed nervously.

Drago formed the word 'three', but Symm's left hand went out before he could speak it. 'Peace,' he said, his voice hoarse and bitter. Drago did not move.

Slowly Symm replaced the knife in its scabbard, his jaw working.

'My friendship for your father won't save you if you do anything like that again,' Drago said angrily. 'You give me one more problem, Symm, and the Muster'll find *your* corpse. Now get those horses and start looking for food.'

The blond man nodded to some of the others, and they wandered off into the darkness.

Drago took hold of Sylvriss's arm. 'You're ours now, woman,' he said. 'Don't be frightened. No one's going to hurt you if you behave.' His tone was incongruously paternal.

Sylvriss caught Yengar's eye and in response to his urgent appeal she remained silent.

‘If you’re running from the Muster, you don’t want her with you,’ Yengar said. ‘She rides like a duck and has to stop and rest every two minutes. That’s why the snows caught us. She’ll hold you back.’

Drago looked at Sylvriss uncertainly. ‘She doesn’t look like the complaining type to me,’ he said. Then, taking her chin roughly, he turned her face so that the torchlight from the entrance to the shelter fell on it. A tremor went through her body and Drago tightened his grip as if he were shaking a wilful dog.

‘No,’ he said confidently. ‘Look at those eyes. This one doesn’t complain. She’s more likely to knife you in your sleep.’

‘Either way,’ said Yengar with a shrug. ‘She’s a problem.’

Drago looked inclined to agree, but, ‘It’s the new Chief’s law,’ he said resignedly. ‘It’s more than my neck’s worth not to, especially as she’s pregnant. We need the breeding stock.’ He dismissed his hesitation. ‘Anyway,’ he said scornfully, ‘I don’t need advice on how to handle women from some Fyordyn servant who can’t even find his way across dry land. I’ve not met a woman yet that couldn’t be brought to heel with a whipping if need arose. You save your concern for yourselves. It’s a long way to anywhere from here.’

Yengar was about to reply when there was a crash nearby, followed by a series of colourful curses. Suddenly a brilliant light flared up. Yengar turned away quickly, but not until he had caught a glimpse of a man picking himself up off the ground while another, holding the unusually brilliant torch, was reaching down to help him. Various other individuals were struggling to harness the now startled horses.

‘Put that out,’ Drago thundered. ‘It’ll be seen miles away.’

The light dimmed, then vanished and a reproachful voice came out of the darkness. ‘Drago, we can’t see a damn thing out here,’ it said.

Drago was unsympathetic. ‘Neither can I now, you fish head,’ he said angrily, screwing up his eyes. ‘Just get those horses here.’

Yengar and Olvric exchanged glances. That torch . . . ?

But that would have to be considered later. Now, other thoughts were more pressing. Losing the horses would be bad enough, but the Morlider couldn’t be allowed to take the Queen.

Yengar took a chance. ‘How long is your ship going to wait for you, Drago?’ he said. ‘If the Muster know you’re here, they’ll be patrolling the coast for it. Can you really afford to burden yourself with this?’ He nodded towards Sylvriss.

Drago’s eyes narrowed.

‘I was a cadet runner at the end of the war,’ Yengar said, answering the unspoken question. ‘And I’ve got kin in Riddin. I know something about your people and I know how the Muster work. It’s an ill tide that’s brought you here, but if you’ve not hurt anyone there’s a fair chance that even now they’ll let you reach your ship and leave. But if they see you’ve taken a woman . . .’ He looked significantly at Drago and pitched his voice in the tone of a friendly adviser. ‘I don’t know what law obliges you to take her, but I’d put the law of survival above it if I were you.’

Drago looked uncertain again, but before he could speak, Symm and the others returned with the

horses. Their appearance seemed to decide him.

He looked distastefully at the horses. 'I don't like these things,' he said. 'But they'll be quicker than walking and might even confuse the Muster at a distance if they think we're still on foot.'

He thrust his axe into his belt, and took Sylvriss by the arm. 'You'd better ride with me,' he said, pulling her forward. Then, turning to her, 'I don't know how you behave with these minnows here, lady, but you give me any trouble and you'll travel unconscious across my lap.' He offered her his fist again in token of this promise. 'It's your choice. Now mount up.'

Head bowed, Sylvriss walked to her horse and, with elaborate clumsiness, hoisted herself into the saddle. Yengar noticed her whispering to the horse in the process.

Drago reached up and prepared to join her, but as he did so, Sylvriss cried out and tugged on the reins. Screaming, the horse reared and spun round several times, knocking Drago to the ground and scattering both men and horses. Then she was gone, the sound of her horse pounding into the night.

Yengar had expected the Queen to take some action once she was mounted, but even so, the suddenness of her response left him gaping momentarily.

Angry roaring from Drago brought Yengar back to the present. There would be no more debate now. He swung round and struck the nearest man in the face with the edge of his clenched fist. The blow did little harm but it stunned the man sufficiently for Yengar to seize the large knife that was thrust in his belt.

Olvric was less considerate. Symm's eyes lit up savagely at the change in temper of his leader and he strode towards Olvric, purposefully reaching for his knife. He drew it with the same elaborate flourish he had used before. It was obviously a habit he had cultivated for the purpose of intimidating his victims, and as such it was a mistake, as Olvric demonstrated by delivering a brutal blow to his jaw in the middle of the performance. The impact sent Symm sprawling face downwards on the ground and there was a quality in the sound of it which told Yengar that Olvric had used his iron knuckle protectors.

Instinctively, the two Goraidin moved back to back, but they were joined almost immediately by the four High Guards who had tumbled out of the shelter as soon as the first blow was struck.

Swords were handed hastily to the two Goraidin, and the six men formed themselves into a close circle.

Recovering quickly, the Morlider formed a larger, more hesitant circle around them.

'You're High Guards, all of you,' Drago snarled contemptuously. 'I should've smelt it.'

He pointed to Yengar. 'Cadet runner.' He spat. 'If you were anything, you were one of Rgoric's infantry. I should've cut you all down when you crawled out of your hole.'

Yengar made no sign.

Drago's fist opened and closed. 'I lost kin and friends at the hands of your people,' he said.

'As did I at the hands of yours, Morlider,' Yengar replied, unable to keep his own anger from his voice but still searching for a peaceful conclusion to the confrontation. 'Do you want us both to lose more here? You shouldn't have come then, and you shouldn't have come now. Take the horses and go while you've the chance.'

‘Not until I’ve settled my debts,’ Drago replied, hefting his axe. ‘Old and new.’

‘That woman you manhandled was no Fyordyn Lord’s plaything,’ Yengar said. ‘She’s a Muster officer and the daughter of one of Riddin’s most respected homes. She also knows the country round here – she’ll have the Muster down on you within hours. Run while you can.’

Most of the Morlider seemed inclined to agree, but Yengar knew that having been humiliated by a woman, Drago would have to make some mark on his adversaries, no matter what the consequences. The question was, what?

The answer became immediately apparent as the big man drew his axe and pushed aside the man to his right to leave a space in which he could swing it. Yengar knew that when he threw it, he couldn’t fail to bring someone down.

‘You should’ve brought your shields, High Guard,’ Drago said.

Olvric spoke in the battle language. ‘Yengar, feint straight at him, then take the man on his right. I’ll feint left and then deal with him when you move across. When we go, the rest of you keep together, charge the opposite side of the circle. Get out into the darkness and hide until they’ve gone. No stupid heroics. Your duty’s to the Queen. Find her and get her to Dremark.’

The four Guards acknowledged the order.

Drago grimaced at the meaningless chatter, but said nothing. His arm started its upward journey, the honed edge of his axe damp and glinting in the rain-streaked torchlight. Yengar felt the movement, as well as saw it, and he knew that Olvric would be responding the same way. Just before the axe reached its zenith, the two of them would surge forward across the treacherous wet ground, to strike at both Drago and the man to his right who was preparing to follow his leader’s example. There would not be even the briefest hesitation, nor any pity; that could mean their deaths. The man had committed himself to this path and had thus placed his own life as forfeit in the game.

The arm and its lethal burden seemed to continue upward for an eternity. Though Yengar knew he would be giving no outward sign, he felt both his body and his mind tilting towards the balance point.

Then it was there!

‘Stop!’ A powerful voice cut through the intensity.

Drago faltered, and the moment was gone.

Yengar almost lurched forward, then he turned in dismay. The voice was Sylvriss’s. What’s she doing? he thought desperately. She’ll get us all killed and herself taken for sure.

Slowly Sylvriss emerged out of the darkness and stood at the edge of the torchlight, horse and rider a strange shadowed vision.

‘Drago,’ she said. ‘I’m Sylvriss, Queen of Fyorlund, and daughter of Urthryn, Ffyrst of Riddin. I will excuse your offence against my person because you know little better, but your presence here offends against our laws, and I cannot excuse that. I command you and your men to lay down your weapons.’

For a moment, Drago stared at her, seemingly awed. But that moment, too, passed.

‘Woman,’ he said, ‘all I can see is a fool on a horse. You should’ve kept on riding. When we’ve dealt with your “servants” here, we’ll deal with you, Muster wench or no.’

Sylvriss rode forward, more fully into the light. She raised her hand.

The Goraidin and the High Guards saw it first; torches flickering into life out in the surrounding darkness. Yengar looked round quickly. The lights were all around them, each swaying from side to side gently.

Drago followed his gaze, then spun round, his face both fearful and livid. His massive hands twitched around the shaft of his axe.

‘Lay down your weapon, Morlider,’ the Queen said again. ‘Unless you want a dozen arrows in you.’

The lights moved nearer to each other. The circle was closing.

Yengar had seen the Muster in action, both as mass cavalry and individual skirmishers. Their speed, manoeuvrability and discipline were awe-inspiring, and in his mind they were always associated with pounding irresistible power. But subsequently his memory of them would come to be dominated by their silent approach out of the Riddin darkness that night; strange, towering shapes shifting and changing in the swaying torchlight. Yengar felt primitive childlike fears stirring inside him faintly at the sight of these eerie, menacing night creatures advancing unhurriedly but relentlessly towards him.

Whether Drago felt the same is a matter of conjecture, but with an oath he threw down his axe. Following his example, his companions threw down their weapons also.

As they did so, the circle closed and the Morlider found themselves torchlit and exposed, between the words of the High Guards and an impassable wall of silent riders.

Drago looked at Sylvriss. ‘I knew you were trouble as soon as I looked at you, woman,’ he said.

‘Watch your tongue, sea thief,’ came a voice from just behind Sylvriss. The speaker edged his horse forward. His cloak glistened with rain, and the torchlight threw grim shadows on an already gaunt face.

Drago stared at him, unrelenting. ‘For now, horse rider,’ he said unrepentantly. ‘But our time’s coming soon.’

Sylvriss raised her hand and spoke to Drago again.

‘The line leader tells me you have indeed hurt no one during your . . . visit,’ she said. ‘We will therefore escort you to your ship and allow you to leave.’ She looked at the still motionless figure of Symm, and at the man Yengar had struck, now gingerly checking his nose and teeth and wiping away the blood that still flowed from his nose periodically. ‘We’ll tend to your injured for you, as well,’ she said.

‘No,’ said Olvric sharply. ‘They mustn’t be allowed to leave. They must be kept here.’

Yengar nodded in agreement.

The man by Sylvriss leaned forward. His face showed his fatigue. ‘You’re free with your orders, Fyordyn,’ he said coldly. ‘It’s not our way to feed and house these scoundrels. And it seems you’re as

disregardful of your Queen's will as you are of her safety.'

Olvric's eyes narrowed slightly, and Yengar laid a hand on his arm gently. 'That's a fair reproach, line leader,' Olvric said after a moment. 'We were remiss in our guard and will account for it to our superiors in due course. But we'd not expected to find Morlider wandering loose, least of all so far inland when the Muster patrol the coast so thoroughly.'

His tone was acid and the line leader's jaw twitched angrily.

His horse took half a pace forward.

'Enough,' Sylvriss said severely. 'I don't intend to hold a debate in the pouring rain, and in the middle of the night. We're all tired and cold. With your permission, line leader, I suggest we make camp unless there's any pressing reason why we should be elsewhere. We'll have time enough to talk tomorrow.'

Still glowering at Olvric, the line leader reined his horse back. 'As you wish, ma'am,' he said.

The following day dawned to a clearer sky but a chill wind blew down out of the snow-covered mountains and rattled the tents and shelters of the hastily rigged camp.

Their immediate task completed with the capture of the Morlider, the Muster was effectively stood down and the line leader made no effort to rouse his riders early following their recent prolonged riding.

Pulling his cloak about him he left the tent which housed the captives and walked towards the Fyordyn's small shelter.

Discreetly he eased back the entrance flap and, crouching down, peered inside. As he did so, a hand moved quickly in front of him. He caught a glimpse of a knife but, before he could react, the blade was resting against the side of his neck, and the edge of the hand pressing against his throat. The contact of the hand had a purposeful reality in it more awful than the cold blade, and while he sensed no real danger, he knew that an unpleasant death could be less than a breath away.

'Don't move,' said a soft voice needlessly.

Without turning his head, the line leader cast a sideways glance at his captor. 'I was coming to apologize anyway, Goraidin,' he said. 'A night's sleep makes a difference.'

The knife disappeared and Olvric laughed.

'It does indeed,' he said. 'The Morlider caught us both by surprise, I suspect.'

The line leader nodded his head in agreement, then shook it to decline Olvric's beckoned invitation to enter.

'We must talk,' he said simply. 'Will you join me for a meagre portion of cold field rations?'

'Oh, dear,' said Yengar, sitting up. 'Too long in the saddle eh, line? Does that mean it's going to be short commons all the way to Dremark?'

The line leader looked appreciative. The Fyordyn would decline to eat well while their rescuers fasted; it was a heartening gesture.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Perhaps only for a day. I’ve sent messengers out with the news of the capture of the Morlider and asking for more supplies. I told them to make no mention of your arrival. I thought that best until I’d spoken with you. The unexpected arrival of the Ffyrst’s daughter with such a small escort obviously betokens trouble somewhere.’

Olvric nodded.

‘Be quiet and shut the door,’ someone said sleepily.

The two Goraidin exchanged a glance and then joined the line leader outside. Before leaving however, they folded back the entire front of the shelter.

As the three walked through the wakening camp, the line leader introduced himself. ‘I’m Girvan,’ he said. ‘Girvan Girvasson, brother to Girven, head of the third house of Orness in the Decmill of Westryn, cousin to Rannag, daughter of . . .’

Yengar laid a hand on his arm. ‘Please forgive us,’ he said. ‘But Riddin lineages bewilder us Fyordyn at the best of times and, to be honest, both Olvric and I have difficulty beyond our own first cousins. Girvan will suffice.’

Girvan looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then he nodded significantly. ‘I take no offence,’ he said. ‘I seem to remember some such problem with Fyordyn in the past.’ He wrinkled his forehead in concern. ‘It must make your lives very difficult,’ he added.

‘We manage, Girvan,’ Yengar said. ‘We manage.’

Girvan led them to one of several large tents. Inside was a scene of modest chaos as its occupants were rousing themselves and preparing for the day with varying degrees of stoicism and dignity. They all stopped and stared as the two Goraidin were ushered in, but the brief unease passed as Girvan appeared behind them.

‘Riders,’ Girvan called out. ‘I need to talk to our friends.’

Without debate a space cleared around what Yengar took to be Girvan’s sleeping area. Girvan beckoned to a young woman nearby. ‘Lennar,’ he said. ‘Could you fetch us whatever the cook’s managed to scrape together this morning?’ He held up three fingers.

The woman nodded and smiled, and pushed past them to reach the entrance. As she passed Yengar, she looked him up and down curiously. Yengar smiled uncertainly then started, as with a resounding thwack her hand landed on his behind. It was followed by some laughter and applause from the other Riddinvolk. Yengar felt himself blushing.

‘Lennar!’ Girvan said with stern paternalism, then reassuringly to Yengar. ‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘She’s just skittish. You’ll have no problem while we’re in camp. Sit down, sit down.’

Yengar did so, quickly.

Girvan came straight to the point. ‘Why are you here, Fyordyn?’ he asked. ‘With the Ffyrost’s daughter – your Queen. And why do you ask us to keep these Morlider – something we’ve never done.’

Yengar looked around the tent. People were coming and going, stowing their equipment and generally preparing to break camp. None seemed curious about their line leader's private conference. He realized it was a protective habit that the Riddinvolk must have developed through spending much of their lives in such communal quarters.

He turned back to Girvan. 'We can't tell you why we're here,' he said. 'At least, not yet. The Queen must tell her father first.'

Girvan frowned. 'Yes, I forgot about your . . . elaborate . . . ways of discussing things,' he said. 'But I asked for a reason. I've patrolled here for years and seen little more than the odd soul who's lost his way from the Gretmearc. Now, within a few days of one another, one of the old men from the Caves comes and tells us he has an important message for Urthryn; Morlider land for the first time since the war; and you appear, presumably out of some little used route through the mountains, escorting your Queen, no less.' He looked intently at each of the two men. 'The lines of the house of Orness are responsible for patrolling the northern borders,' he said. 'I want no precious secrets, but I need to know what trouble is following you so that I can dispose the lines properly to meet it.'

'Yes, I understand,' Yengar said. His Goraidin training told him he must give this man the information he needed to answer these legitimate concerns. 'As far as we know, no danger follows the route we took. Certainly no army, especially now the snows have arrived. It might perhaps not go amiss if you increase your vigilance of the more usual routes from Fyorlund, but again, I doubt any force will be coming. As for your old man and the Morlider, I know nothing.'

Lennar appeared with food. Girvan looked at her severely and she contented herself with accidentally brushing against Yengar as she reached across to hand a plate to Olvric.

Clearing his throat, Yengar answered Girvan's other question.

'We asked you to keep the Morlider because they too raised questions which should be answered,' he said. 'For one thing, they were too far inland for such a small raiding party.'

Girvan coughed, and pulled at his ear. 'That was my mistake,' he said awkwardly. 'We delayed because we didn't believe the first reports we got, then we accidentally cut them off and drove them this far in. It was fortunate for us all that Sylvriss ran into us when she did otherwise we might have ridden past and lost them for days.'

'That's one problem dealt with,' Yengar said, looking relieved. 'Their appearance here made no sense at all. But there are other matters. Their leader, Drago . . . spoke of a new chief; of wanting . . . breeding stock.' He wrinkled his face in distaste at the expression. 'Of their time coming soon,' he concluded.

Girvan shrugged. 'Words,' he said. 'Rhetoric. He was blowing air in front of his men. Probably didn't like Sylvriss getting the better of him – they've some very strange ideas about women, you know.'

Both the Goraidin shook their heads and said 'No,' simultaneously. Olvric spoke. 'You're a veteran, if I'm any judge, Girvan,' he said. 'Why did your country ask for help twenty years ago?'

Girvan looked at him, but there was no accusation or offence in Olvric's manner.

'There were too many of them,' he answered simply.

Olvric nodded. 'Far too many,' he said. 'And from what we know about them, their islands are

crowded with people. They can want breeding stock for one thing only. Fighters. Armies.'

Girvan looked uncertain. Olvric leaned forward. 'Drago knew he probably wouldn't reach the coast undiscovered, yet he was so concerned about his new Chief, that he was prepared to slow himself down and also risk being punished by you by taking a pregnant woman with him.' He reached out and took the line leader's arm. 'And they have a torch, the like of which we thought existed only in Fyorlund, and which betokens no good. We have to question these people, Girvan. Find out what's going on. I fear that our troubles and yours may be the same.'

Girvan looked from Olvric to Yengar and reached his decision. 'I'll have the watch on the coast increased,' he said. 'And give orders that Morliders are to be captured and taken to Dremark.'

Chapter 30

The Morlider War had been fought mainly in the north of Riddin and following its dreadful conclusion the various allies had said their sad farewells on the battlefield and departed directly for their homelands. Thus neither Yengar nor Olvric had ever visited Dremark.

It was unlike anything they had ever encountered in Fyorlund. Where Vakloss stood high on a solitary hill, dominating the surrounding countryside and dominated itself by the Palace, Dremark was spread over the floor of a lush valley, its centre being overlooked by those outskirts that rose up the valley sides. Where Vakloss had tall, haughty buildings, bedecked with elaborate and colourful wood carvings, Dremark had wide, open streets and smaller, simpler buildings whose plain white walls were decorated with expansive painted murals showing, inevitably, horses and horse riders: horses grazing on rolling countryside; horses in battle, from travelling columns to cavalry charges; horses working in the fields; horses in Festival celebrations and parades and, above all, in the Helangai, a fearsome game played at the least excuse and with monumental zest by seemingly all the Riddinvolk.

Girvan's line had played it once on the journey from the north, shortly after they had crossed the River Endamar. It seemed to Yengar to be almost like an act of thanksgiving now that they were leaving the harsher pastures of the north behind them.

The principle of the Helangai was simple enough: a large, weighted bag, suspiciously man-shaped, was to be picked up and carried to an agreed place on the field. It could be played anywhere, and by any number of riders, and would sometimes last for days, ranging far and wide across the countryside. Apart from outright murder and maiming, however, there seemed to be no rules, although Yengar noted that anything which threatened to injure the horses brought swift dismissal from the field for the offender.

He and Olvric watched it for a little while from the edge of the field, but with their unerring instinct for survival, soon retired to a nearby, higher rock to watch the remainder of the game in a combination of amazement and bewilderment.

At one point, Lennar, circling wide, rode by them and stopped to wipe perspiration from her flushed face. She waved enthusiastically to Yengar. 'Get your horse. Join in,' she cried.

Yengar declined the invitation as politely as he could, but freely cited cowardice as his excuse.

'It's only a little knockabout. Nothing serious,' the woman declaimed, puzzled, but seeing Yengar was not to be persuaded, she was soon swept into the fray again.

Olvric chuckled.

‘Shut up,’ Yengar said brusquely, staring intently at the mayhem swirling in front of them.

Olvric’s chuckle turned to a barely stifled and prolonged laugh.

The journey to Dremark had been hard on Sylvriss’s escort. They had neither the mounts, the skill, nor the endurance to keep up with the Muster line for any distance once they moved beyond a leisurely trot. Girvan was thoughtful about his guests and tried to keep the pace moderate, but even the Goraidin were more than pleased when at last they came to the top of a ridge and saw Dremark sprawling below, peaceful in the autumn sunlight; the silver thread of a river running through it.

The city streets were busy, but their width and the sense of spaciousness afforded by the relatively low buildings lent it a relaxed and pleasant air. Girvan had sent the captives in discreetly, by post-wagon, and had equally discreetly sent a personal messenger to Urthryn to tell him of the unexpected arrival of his daughter and of her wish to enter Dremark unnoticed. Thus their arrival was that of an ordinary Muster line accompanied by a few strangers, and attracted little or no attention, although one or two passers-by stared at Sylvriss awkwardly, trying to place a long-forgotten face.

The murals fascinated the Fyordyn, as did the practice of the Riddinvolk of grassing the roofs of their buildings and sweeping them down to ground level in long continuous ramps.

‘Look, horses on the roofs,’ Kirran exclaimed delightedly, when the nature and function of the architecture became apparent. ‘These people are splendid.’ Then, gazing round: ‘It’s bigger than it seems from above, but these buildings still seem small. I wonder where they all live.’

‘Below ground,’ Sylvriss said, catching the remark. ‘Most of our buildings go at least twice as far below ground as they go above it.’

Kirran snapped his fingers. ‘I remember someone telling me about it,’ he said. ‘Fascinating. But what a strange way to live.’

The Queen smiled at this inadvertent discourtesy. ‘No,’ she said, laughing. ‘It’s very cosy. Personally I found it quite difficult to understand a people who chose to live high in the air on top of a hill, especially when their winters were so long and so cold.’

Kirran, realizing his mistake, began stammering an apology, but the Queen waved it aside, still laughing.

Then, accompanied by Girvan and one or two other riders, they were riding slowly into the city estate of Urthryn, the Ffyrst of Riddin and father to Sylvriss.

Despite the comparative warmth of the day, the Queen pulled her hood forward.

The extensive parklands of the estate were calm and peaceful after the bustle of the streets. Here and there, horses were grazing, and a few individuals were quietly tending the gardens. They paid little heed to the passing riders. The surrounding trees were rich with the yellows and golds of dying leaves and the whole was redolent with the soft scents of autumn.

The buildings at the heart of this quiet estate were taller than most of those the Fyordyn had seen in the city, but they had the same simple elegance although, conspicuously, their walls were undecorated. A small group of people stood at the foot of a broad flight of steps that led up to a wide patio which fronted the largest building.

As they drew nearer, Sylvriss urged her horse forward. Girvan signalled to the others to stop, and, as if at the same signal, the waiting group by the steps divided, leaving a solitary grey-haired figure watching the approach of his long-absent daughter.

Yengar and the others looked on in silence as Sylvriss dismounted and stood in front of her father. They stood for a little time looking at one another and, perhaps, talking, then without haste Urthryn opened his arms and the two embraced.

Girvan nodded his group forward, and the standing watchers too, converged on the couple.

* * * *

Later, after they had eaten and been shown their quarters, the two Goraidin found themselves alone with Urthryn and Sylvriss and two of Urthryn's closest advisers.

Yengar saw his Queen's face in her father's vividly as, smiling, he ushered them into a large, light room and waved them towards a circle of high, cushioned couches.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' he said, pausing in the doorway. 'There's another who should be joining us here, I believe. I won't be a moment.'

When he returned, he was accompanied by a tall man with a high domed head and a long narrow face. He was wearing a long, plain robe secured by a rope about his waist.

'May I introduce you to Oslang,' Urthryn said. 'He's from the caves, up north.' He cleared his throat. 'To be honest, I was on the verge of politely throwing him out, but after listening to Girvan and my daughter, his story is just one among three wild tales now, so I thought we'd hear them all together.'

Oslang bowed slightly. 'Thank you, Ffyrst,' he said. 'My brothers and I knew that it would be difficult to persuade you of our news, but you've been patience itself. I'm just glad that other signs have appeared without any real hurt having been done to your people.'

Urthryn grunted non-committally and eased himself stiffly onto a couch. He addressed the Goraidin. 'We've heard Girvan's tale about the Morlider,' he said, indicating his advisers. 'And confirmed the immediate action he's taken about the coast watch. That's only sensible.' He leaned forward and waved a finger at the Goraidin. 'But I must admit, I'm not keen on the idea of housing and feeding these beggars, to put it mildly. Sets a bad precedent.'

Before either could reply, he waved the topic aside. 'However, we can talk about that later.'

He turned to Sylvriss and extended his hand to encompass Oslang and his two advisers. 'You remember Agreth and Hiron don't you?' Sylvriss nodded and smiled at the two men. 'I'm afraid they've weathered about as badly as I have, but we're still all here.' He tapped his head. 'I don't think you ever met Oslang,' he went on. 'Funny sticks, the cave people. Have to be, to live up there; but harmless enough, and fine healers, without doubt. And they're not usually given to excessive foolishness. At least, in the past they weren't,' he added significantly. 'So tell me your tale again, girl. And you, Fyordyn. And you, Oslang. And let's see if between us we can't find out what's going on.'

His heartiness, however, was forced, and an anxiousness came through in his voice which even the mellowing qualities of his sing-song Riddin accent could not disguise.

It took some considerable time for the whole tale to be told, not least, Yengar thought, because of the disordered way in which the Riddinvolk proceeded, with frequent interruptions and questions, and seemingly endless repetitions. However, even he had to concede that amazement could understandably override ordered procedure when Oslang referred to Hawklan's part in his own telling.

When eventually all had been said, Urthryn looked repeatedly from his daughter to the two Goraidin and then to Oslang. Finally he looked in some despair at his advisers.

'I'll be honest, lads,' he said after a long silence. 'If I didn't know the people who were telling me all this, I wouldn't have given it two minutes' stable room.'

The two men nodded.

'It takes a lot of believing,' Agreth said, rather helplessly.

'A lot?' Urthryn exclaimed, standing up. 'You always did have a gift for understatement, Agreth.' He walked to the door and spoke to someone waiting outside.

Returning, he sat down again and scratched his head. 'I've always thought having kings and lords and suchlike was no way to run a country. But you seemed to manage well enough, and we've all got out own ways . . .' He shrugged off the digression and looked at his daughter again.

'Rgoric poisoned and murdered.' He shook his head and grimaced bitterly. 'I can hardly believe it yet. I must admit, I never liked that long brown streak, Dan-Tor, but I'd never have thought . . .' He shook his head again. 'And as for all this business about Sumeral being born again, and Dan-Tor being one of the Uhriel – Oklar – smashing a city with a gesture of his hand? It's children's tales we're talking,' he concluded without conviction.

Sylvriss spoke, very quietly. 'It's war we're talking, father. Civil war in Fyorlund . . .'

'And who can tell what kind of a war against Narsindal?' Oslang finished Sylvriss's comment.

Urthryn looked up and stared at him, businesslike now.

'I'll need to know more of your part in this, cave dweller,' he said bluntly. 'We've always taken you for a bunch of harmless eccentrics, living in your caves up there, by Elewart; studying your lore and doing your healing. We're a tolerant people, and we've always left you alone. You did no harm, and we've had some fine teachers and healers from you in the past. But now, you're up to your necks in this nonsense in some way.'

Oslang sat motionless.

Urthryn continued. 'If I'm to believe that this ancient . . . demon, or whatever, has suddenly reappeared, and is already wreaking havoc in Fyorlund' – he looked at Sylvriss – 'and, seemingly, I must for now, then I want to know what – or who – brought it back.' His eyes narrowed. 'Was it some shenanigans by your people, Oslang? Meddling with things they ought to have left alone?'

Oslang met his gaze squarely. 'No, Ffyrst, it wasn't,' he said simply. 'I'll tell you about our Order with pleasure when the need arises, but it hasn't yet, and when I tell you it'll be for you and your closest, most trusted aides only. The longer it is before Sumeral knows of our existence, the better.' He looked

significantly at the others in the room. ‘Suffice it to say for the moment that we are students of lore,’ he went on, ‘and teachers, and healers. But we’re more as well. And, like all of you here, we too have failed in our ancient duty.’

Urthryn frowned angrily, but Oslang continued.

‘We became introverted, parochial, neglected our duty to be out in the world, watching, listening, learning. The Fyordyn let slip their duty to watch both Narsindal and their very government. Your people, Ffyrst, the least offenders thus far, let Morlider land unhindered and unseen.’

Urthryn bristled, but Oslang waved a mitigating hand. ‘I make no judgements,’ he said, hastily. ‘There are seemingly sound reasons for all these things, but they’re irrelevant except insofar as they should be learned from. What is relevant is the dreadful whole they make.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Urthryn said, taken aback slightly by Oslang’s unexpected conclusion.

‘If the Lords can’t restore Fyorlund, or if the country is seriously weakened by civil war, then an army from Narsindal could walk straight through it and down through Orthlund, probably without resistance, unless the Orthlundyn have taken Hawklan’s advice to heart.’ It was Olvric. He had not spoken before, leaving the telling of their news to Yengar. Now his voice was cold. ‘And if the Morlider land in force they’ll fully occupy the Muster, as they did before, and an army could march down the Pass of Elewart to attack your rear leaving Riddin wide open . . .’

Urthryn interrupted. ‘No, no, no,’ he protested loudly, gesticulating violently. ‘Too fast. Too fast. There are too many ifs here, Goraidin. Nobody’s mentioned armies yet. And one Morlider raiding party doesn’t make an army.’

Olvric was unabashed. ‘What else but an army slaughtered Lord Evison and his men, and gutted his castle?’ he said, an anger pervading his voice that was made the more chilling by its very restraint. ‘An army that included heavily equipped Mandrocs! Infantrymen! Evison had no doubts that Sumeral had risen, and you, above all, knew his worth as a fighter and leader. He did you service enough.’

Urthryn turned his face away at this reproach.

Olvric continued, less severely. ‘Consider, Ffyrst. In the Mathidrin, Dan-Tor has built up, armed, and trained thousands of men; unknown to us all. My belief is that they’re the officer corps of Sumeral’s army. Some of them are just ruffians, admittedly, but some aren’t. The group that chased Yengar and me half across the country were very capable.’

Yengar nodded in agreement.

‘As for the Morlider,’ Olvric went on, ‘you’re right. One raiding party – if it was a raiding party – doesn’t make an army. But their leader said some ominous things, and they had torches with them that are like Dan-Tor’s globes. Twenty years ago they couldn’t even make an ordinary torch or prepare radiant stones; they still used fire of all things! We asked you to keep them captive so that we could question them, and get some facts, but there’s enough already to sketch out an overall pattern of strategy, and my every instinct tells me . . .’

A knock at the door interrupted him.

‘Come in,’ Urthryn said.

The door opened to reveal Drago escorted by two large men in Muster livery. Urthryn motioned them forwards.

‘You’re not the only one with instincts, Goraidin,’ he said to Olvric. ‘I thought we’d be needing this one eventually. Let’s question him together.’

Drago scowled as he caught this remark, then laughed scornfully. ‘Question?’ he said. ‘You?’ He laughed again, then struck his chest with his clenched fist. ‘I’ve sailed through seas with waves twice the height of this building, through winds that’d pull your hair out by the roots, seen lightning burn half my crew to blackened cinders and known weather so cold it’d freeze your eyelids shut. What could you do to make me answer your questions?’

At Urthryn’s signal, the two guards ushered Drago to an empty seat and pushed him into it. He looked oddly incongruous, seated, rugged and blustering, in the midst of the quiet elegance of the Ffyrst’s chamber. His bombast faltered slightly, however, as he caught Olvric’s eye and his manner became at once quieter and more resolute.

‘And, anyway, what could you do to me that the Chief couldn’t do ten times worse with a flick of his hand?’ he asked.

‘Which chief’s this, Drago?’ Yengar asked casually. ‘Your tribe’s?’

Drago scowled indignantly and struck his chest again. ‘I’m the chief of our tribe, Fyordyn.’

Yengar looked puzzled, then shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, disparagingly. ‘You might have your own ship. Perhaps even be your chief’s right hand. But you’re no chief. The few I met in the war bent the knee before no one, and you were so scared of yours you were prepared to burden yourself with a pregnant woman when anyone in his senses could see it was folly.’

For an instant, Drago looked as though he was about to leap at Yengar, but something restrained him.

‘The war was twenty years ago,’ he said. ‘Things have changed since, as you’ll find out soon enough, believe me.’

‘You mean your raiding parties will sweep ruthlessly across Riddin, except when they have to run back to their chiefs with any pregnant Muster women they come across?’ Yengar said, chuckling.

Drago’s eyes blazed, but again he restrained himself.

‘Raiding parties!’ he sneered. ‘Our *armies* will sweep across Riddin, because we won’t quarrel amongst ourselves this time and because we’ll not have to flee after our islands.’

‘I don’t want to rake over dead ashes, Drago,’ Yengar said, almost offhandedly. ‘I appreciate you’ve had to make your own excuses about why you lost, just to be able to live with yourselves. But lose you did, and you’ll lose again every time you come. Let’s be honest: your people are brave, but they don’t have the skills to cope with disciplined troops.’ He gestured towards Urthryn. ‘The Muster are more active than ever now, and if you come in force again, our people and the Orthlundyn will be over the mountains without any delay this time.’ He leaned back, relaxed. ‘And even if you’ve got faster ships, you’ll still have to leave when the tides carry your islands too far away. Everything’s against you.’

Yengar's manner had become increasingly disdainful and casual as he spoke but, unexpectedly, Drago did not rise to his subtle taunting.

'That was twenty years ago, High Guard,' he repeated, shaking his head, knowingly. 'I told you, things have changed. We've learned how to fight your way.' He waved his hands about. 'In lines and squares. And our islands aren't moved at the whim of the tides anymore.'

Yengar turned to Olvric. 'I said there'd be no point talking to him,' he said. 'He's just an under-chief of some kind. Blustering because a woman bested him.' He shook his head in amusement. 'Armies!' he said to himself with a chuckle. 'Lines and squares. Morlider Infantry!' Then, with a laugh, and his hands holding imaginary reins, 'It'll be Morlider Muster next.' His manner was cruelly infectious and the laughter spread round the group.

'And how do you defy the tides, Drago? How do you stop your islands floating away?' he managed after a moment. 'All line up on the shore with oars, and row?'

Drago leapt to his feet furiously as the laughter rose around him. The two guards restrained him, although he did not struggle. 'You'll sing a different song when our fleets land and when we cut through your precious horses without even breaking step,' he shouted. 'As for the Fyordyn and the Orthlundyn, let them come – as fast as they like. We'll deal with them when they get here and then we'll take their lands too.'

Yengar pulled a face of mock concern. 'Riddin, Orthlundand Fyorlund,' he said. 'Things have changed. Your chief must be quite a big talker.'

Surprisingly, Drago's anger fell from him, and for an instant he looked frightened. 'I wouldn't be too free with your abuse, if I were you,' he said, sitting down again.

Yengar's mood changed with the Morlider's and he looked sympathetic. 'He frightens you, Drago?' he said, seriously.

Drago looked at him uncertainly. 'All leaders frighten those they lead, Fyordyn. Even in your country.'

Yengar made no comment but leaned forward, concerned. 'Drago, look around,' he said. 'We're none of us children. We know something of your ways. Your tribes are fiercely independent. You said yourself that they quarrelled amongst themselves even during the war. It's just not possible for one tribe to do what you've described, however fearsome a leader they might have.'

Drago did not reply.

'And, realistically, do you seriously expect us to believe that you can stop your islands following the flow of the tides?' Yengar concluded.

Drago looked down. 'I don't give a damn whether you believe it or not,' he said softly. 'You'll find out soon enough when his heel's on your neck as well.'

Yengar looked at him shrewdly. 'Ah,' he said. 'That's it, is it? One of the tribes on your island has conquered the others and forced you into some kind of alliance.'

Drago turned away from him.

‘What’s this chief called, then?’ Yengar continued. ‘Which tribe did he come from?’

‘I’ve said enough,’ Drago replied. ‘I’ll tell you nothing further. Take me back to my men.’

Yengar and Olvric exchanged glances. Yengar’s casual and seemingly irrelevant probing had yielded all it could for the moment; another approach could now be tried.

‘Let him go,’ Olvric said caustically. ‘He’s just another loud-mouthed ruffian, full of wind and sea-water. They’re all the same.’ He gestured towards Sylvriss. ‘One good woman’s worth a dozen of them, fancy new chief or not.’

Drago’s eyes narrowed at Olvric’s tone. ‘You won’t be so brave when you look into his face, Fyordyn,’ he said menacingly.

Olvric sneered. ‘Nasty stare, has he?’ he said. ‘Well, it wouldn’t take much more than a stern look to intimidate someone who lets his men do infantile tricks like Symm did with his *biig* knife. How’s his toothache, by the way?’ He smacked his fist into his hand and laughed scornfully.

Drago gripped the arms of his chair, goaded by Olvric’s tone. The Goraidin sneered again and, holding out his hands, palms upwards, mockingly beckoned him forward. Drago snarled at this further taunt then leapt up before his two guards could prevent him.

Three strides would have brought him to Olvric, but he had scarcely completed one when he staggered backwards as if a great blow had struck him in the chest.

There was a collective gasp from everyone in the room. No one had touched him.

Olvric, half standing, in anticipation of Drago’s assault, gazed in amazement at the sprawling figure. For all his size, the Morlider would have been no match for Olvric, and the intention in their impromptu interrogation had been for Yengar to intervene and rescue Drago from Olvric’s brutality.

Now the Morlider was struggling to rise as if a heavy weight were pressing down on him.

‘Get up slowly, Drago, and take your seat again.’ The voice cut quietly through the confusion. It was Oslang’s.

Urthryn looked at him sharply.

The two guards, as stunned as everyone else, bent down to help Drago, but he shook them off angrily and staggered to his feet unaided, his face riven with fear and rage. He pointed a shaking hand at Oslang and his mouth opened and shut several times before he managed to speak. Yengar frowned in sympathy with the man’s massive distress.

‘You’re the same,’ Drago managed eventually, his voice hoarse and cracked. ‘I’ll . . .’

Oslang lifted his hand and Drago fell silent. ‘Take your seat, Drago,’ he said again, gently.

The Morlider did as he was bidden.

Oslang caught Urthryn’s eye and looked quickly at the guards. ‘It’s all right, lads,’ Urthryn said to them. ‘You can wait outside. I don’t think there’ll be any more trouble.’

As soon as the two men had left, however, Olvric made a brief signal to Yengar then, drawing his knife, he swung round and held it to Oslang's throat. The movement was hypnotically fast, and no one reacted except Yengar who, at the same time, drew his sword and levelled it at Drago.

Urthryn started up, but Sylvriss restrained him.

'Explain,' Olvric said grimly. 'Very quickly. Make no movement. If I feel any force acting on me, I'll kill you without further warning.' Oslang's eyes widened in terror at the simple unemotional resolve in his voice and in the cold steel against his throat.

'I'm sorry,' he managed after a moment. 'It was a reflex. He startled me when he jumped up. I didn't mean to . . .'

His voice faded.

'Goraidin, you abuse your rights here,' Urthryn said angrily, but still Sylvriss restrained him, though she too was wide-eyed and anxious at this sudden development. Yengar and Olvric had been so sensitive to her needs on their journey, tendering her many subtle kindnesses, yet now they were threatening this seemingly harmless old man. But was he harmless? Something had knocked the Morlider down. She realized abruptly that it was the Goraidin's very sensitivity that gave them such appallingly clear vision and the freedom to act on it.

Olvric ignored Urthryn's outburst, his gaze never once wavering from Oslang's frightened face. 'The only person we know who can deliver a blow at a distance without a weapon is Dan-Tor,' he said quietly but coldly. 'This one just did the same. Perhaps he too could raze a city if he wished. We can't afford the risk of him being one of Dan-Tor's lackeys. I'll give him the opportunity to explain himself, but a hint of any such power again and he dies.'

'Please . . .'

gaspd Oslang.

'Are you here to do Dan-Tor's will?' Olvric asked simply.

'No,' Oslang replied, swallowing. 'Truly. We oppose him and his Master, utterly.'

'But you use his weapons,' Olvric pressed.

'Yes – no – they're not his weapons. They're anyone's. Anyone with the knowledge of how to use them,' Oslang replied. 'You could kill friend and foe alike with your dagger, couldn't you, Goraidin?'

Olvric did not reply.

'You'll not face Dan-Tor, let alone Sumeral, with any chance of victory without those beside you who can use the same power,' Oslang gasped. 'You must have learned that already.'

Olvric's eye narrowed, then he withdrew the knife. Oslang slumped forward and buried his face in his hands. He was shaking violently. Only Sylvriss and Yengar noted that Olvric's hand too was shaking as he sheathed his knife.

When Oslang sat up, he was white-faced and still trembling. 'Forgive me,' he said, almost plaintively. 'I'm a student of lore, not a warrior. I feel sick – let me have a moment to recover myself.' He looked at Olvric. 'You're a terrifying man, Goraidin,' he said softly.

‘I take no pride in it,’ Olvric replied. ‘It’s one of the more unpleasant aspects of our calling. But it’s saved my life and others’ before now. Another aspect is to use my instinct and it’s that which has saved your life. But we still need an explanation from you.’

Oslang nodded. ‘In a moment,’ he said, still disturbed.

Urthryn looked on doubtfully, still angry at the Goraidin’s savage threat to his guest. Only his daughter’s silent support for Olvric had restrained him from calling to the guards waiting outside. Yet he too was alarmed by the demonstration of power that Oslang had inadvertently given.

‘I’ll have the Morlider taken away before we do any more talking,’ he said. ‘We can deal with him later.’

‘No, Ffyrst,’ Oslang said, anxiously. ‘With your permission I’d like to ask him something.’

Glancing first at Olvric, Urthryn nodded his assent.

Drago, still with Yengar’s sword at his breast, looked at Oslang like a trapped animal.

Oslang cleared his throat. ‘Why’ve you come here, Drago?’ he said gently. The Morlider did not reply. Oslang looked puzzled. ‘Just twelve of you, in that little boat. Your raiding parties used to be much bigger.’

Drago shot an anxious glance at Urthryn. ‘You have our boat?’ he asked.

Urthryn nodded, then in response to the almost paternal concern in the man’s voice said, ‘Don’t worry. It’s unharmed. We want you away from here as soon as we can. Just tell us why you were here. Did you get lost or something?’

Drago seemed grateful for Urthryn’s news about his boat but curled his lip at his last remark. ‘Lost,’ he said. ‘I’m Morlider. I don’t get lost at sea. For what it’s worth to you – which is nothing – we were here looking for suitable landing places for our fleet.’

Urthryn’s eyes widened at this unexpected admission.

Drago looked at him. ‘I’m not a fool, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘I know what I’ve told you. But it’ll make no difference. Not this time.’

Urthryn seemed inclined to pursue the matter but Oslang spoke again. ‘Tell us about your new chief then, Drago,’ he said casually. ‘You’re a quarrelsome and fractious people if history tells aright. I’d be interested to know about a man who could bring together not only the tribes of one island, but the tribes of all the islands.’

Drago started. ‘I said nothing about that,’ he said defensively.

Oslang shrugged. ‘What else could you have meant?’ he asked. ‘You allied yourselves after a fashion last time when chance brought you together. Now I presume what Yengar said is true: one of your chiefs has taken over an entire Island. He’s also persuaded some of the other islands to join him in another assault on Riddin.’ He looked impressed. ‘It’s not the first time that a strong man has brought disparate tribes together,’ he went on. ‘And I don’t suppose it’ll be the last. But it’s rare, and the men who achieve it are usually fascinating people. Is he a young man? A great fighter in personal combat? Or is he a

thinker? An organizer?’

‘It’s more likely to be an old woman,’ Olvric inserted acidly.

Drago gritted his teeth, and levelled his finger at Olvric. ‘If you were my greatest friend, High Guard, I’d drag you behind my ship for the sharks before I’d wish Karios’s attention to fall on you,’ he said viciously. Then, suddenly, he looked desperate, as if the very mention of his leader’s name were likely to bring some dire punishment down on his head immediately.

Oslang raised his hand gently and when he spoke his voice was low and thoughtful, almost rhythmic. Drago leaned towards him attentively, as if he were listening to a voice that none of the others could hear. His anxious look gradually faded.

‘It sounds to me as though your leader is a fearsome fighter, Drago,’ the Cadwanwr said. ‘A man who cut his way up through the ranks of the tribe unexpectedly. A younger son perhaps? Killed his brothers?’

Drago shook his head, his manner becoming increasingly relaxed and calm. ‘He’s not one of us,’ he said. ‘I’ve no idea where he came from. A boat brought him from the battle shore during the war.’

‘A slave has taken charge of your people?’ Oslang asked in amazement.

Drago shook his head. ‘No, no,’ he said. ‘He was a healer. He saved my old chief. Dragged him out from under a pile of bodies on the battle shore, got him to a boat and back to his ship and then nursed him until he was well again.’

Oslang nodded his head steadily. ‘And then?’ he prompted.

Drago shrugged. ‘He just became part of the tribe. Doctoring people, then advising, then tending to tribal matters when the chief was sick again.’

Yengar and Olvric exchanged glances at this brief telling, with its similarities to the progress of Dan-Tor through the government of Fyorlund.

‘Your chief’s illness kept recurring?’ Yengar asked.

Drago did not seem to hear him. Oslang repeated the question.

The Morlider nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Fighting fit one minute. Down the next. But never bad enough to be set aside by acclaim.’ He grinned, as if at old memories. ‘Any sign of any real opposition to his authority and he was out, axe swinging. Soon put paid to anyone looking to take his place.’

‘How did this Karios become chief of all the islands, Drago?’ Oslang asked softly.

Drago frowned, as if confused. ‘The chief was murdered,’ he said. ‘His other advisers were jealous of Karios. They turned on him for some reason . . .’

‘Don’t you know?’ Oslang probed gently.

Drago hesitated, then shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I was at sea. It was all over when I got back.’ The alarm came back into his face. ‘It’s as well I was,’ he said. ‘A lot of the chief’s men died that day, one way and another, fighting for or against him . . .’ He fell silent.

Oslang prompted him gently.

‘They say Karios protected him with his own body,’ Drago began again. ‘But there were too many attackers, and although they were all killed in the end, it was too late.’

‘And Karios took command?’ Oslang asked.

Drago nodded. ‘He was the only one who could,’ he said enigmatically. ‘But he was changed.’

‘In what way?’ Oslang asked.

Drago looked up, his eyes fearful. ‘He had . . . power,’ he said, as though the words were being dragged from him. ‘Terrible power.’ Then, anxious at even this slight betrayal of his leader, ‘But he uses it only on his enemies, those who oppose him. He’s changed many of our ways . . . for the better.’ His voice became strident. ‘Now we’re one people. He’s united us. Promised us our old country back.’

Oslang’s gesture prevented Urthryn intervening. Drago’s voice dropped and he became confidential.

‘He has power over the waves,’ he said. ‘Now the islands move *at his* will, not the whim of the tides.’

He fell silent again.

Oslang, now seemingly fully recovered from Olvric’s threat, went pale again at Drago’s last remark. He moved his hand gently from side to side, and the Morlider leaned back in his chair and fell asleep.

‘What have you done to him?’ Urthryn said, his voice low in amazement.

Oslang, preoccupied, started slightly. ‘Oh. Just deceived him a little,’ he said.

‘You have some surprising skills,’ Olvric said.

Oslang looked at him nervously. ‘He was frightened and alone,’ he said. ‘And his ways of thinking are simpler, more primitive than ours. Even so, it wasn’t easy. Have no fear, it’s not a device I could use on you.’

Olvric raised an eyebrow. Sylvriss looked between the two men. ‘You must understand, Oslang,’ she said. ‘Dan-Tor smashed houses, streets, people, with a wave of his hand. We’re ordinary people. We’re frightened enough by swords and spears, but these – powers – that you and he seem able to use, take us far beyond that fear and our thinking becomes primitive in its presence.’

Oslang looked at her. ‘I do understand, lady,’ he said. ‘And I’ll explain as best I can, but you must understand also: Sumeral will have to be opposed both with swords and spears, and the Old Power.’ He turned to the two Goraidin. ‘You know that, don’t you? You’d not have let me go if you hadn’t already asked yourselves how an army of men could stand against the destructive force that Oklar used against Vakloss.’

Olvric eyed him narrowly. ‘Have *you* the power to oppose Dan-Tor’s strength?’ he asked.

Oslang smiled ruefully. ‘To oppose, yes. To survive, no,’ he said, looking round at the others. ‘Not alone. Any more than you could oppose a cavalry charge and live. My skills, like those you possess –

riding, fighting, ruling – are such as can be acquired by one man with a lifetime’s hard study and practice. Dan-Tor’s . . . Oklar’s . . . were acquired over generations, under the tutelage of Sumeral Himself. I’m little or nothing compared to him, but there are many in our Order and such skills as we have between us we will ally with yours to oppose Him. Your swords, our knowledge, are all we have, be they inadequate or no.’

Olvric leaned forward to speak, but Oslang continued. ‘Now we have another consideration. Now we must ask whose power is it that can move the Morlider islands against the ways of the ocean?’

This abrupt reversion to Drago’s remark brought an uneasy silence to the room.

‘No riddles, Oslang,’ Urthryn said, cutting through it. ‘Let’s hear this tangled saga to its end, then we can debate conclusions.’

Oslang nodded an acknowledgement, but it was Olvric who spoke.

‘Karios barely disguises his real name,’ he said quietly. ‘He’s Creost the second of the Uhriel. He could be no other. Who else could oppose the tides? And his rise to power and his control over such a people parallels almost exactly that of Oklar over the Fyordyn.’ In an uncharacteristic show of emotion, he put his hands to his head. ‘Every step we take along this road sinks us further and further into ancient horrors.’

No one seemed inclined to dispute Olvric’s opinion, and the room become silent again.

Then Urthryn leaned forward and conspicuously pinched himself.

‘Just making sure I actually woke up today,’ he said, smiling broadly. ‘Unfortunately, it seems that I have.’

He sat back and surveyed his guests. ‘I said before, it was children’s tales we were listening to and I’ve not changed my mind. However, children’s tales or no, they appear to be true.’ He looked at his two advisers who had remained virtually silent throughout. ‘However ludicrous it all seems I can’t doubt either my daughter’s word or the words of two Goraidin. That, plus this fellow’s tale,’ he nodded towards the sleeping Drago, ‘and Oslang’s party tricks, set aside any serious doubts we’re entitled to.’

Agreth spoke. ‘I fear you’re right, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘I’ve been waiting for an opportunity to laugh all this to scorn; it defies reason. But, as you say, the witnesses are too weighty by far. We can’t do other than accept what they say at its face value, ridiculous though it seems. I think all we can do after that is find out from Drago here what the strength of the Morlider is, when their invasion is due, and then make plans accordingly.’

Urthryn nodded. ‘That’s our major problem for sure. If they come in force they’ll outnumber us as before, but if they’ve learned to fight in “lines and squares, like the Fyordyn”’ he mimicked Drago’s harsh accent – ‘then we’ll have desperate problems. We’ll have to defeat them as they land. If they get any kind of a foothold, it’s going to be grim indeed.’

He turned to Olvric and Yengar. ‘Can you stay and advise us, Goraidin?’ he asked.

Yengar looked relieved. ‘Yes, Ffyrst,’ he replied. ‘But we can’t advise you on how to deal with Creost. Even now, Lord Eldric and the others go in fear of Dan-Tor – Oklar – approaching alone, and destroying their strongholds as easily as he did Vakloss.’

Urthryn turned to Oslang and then back to the two Goraidin. ‘Can you three work together in some semblance of peace and trust?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Olvric replied without hesitation. ‘He frightened me badly when he knocked down the Morlider, but neither before nor since did I feel any evil in him.’ He extended his hand to Oslang. ‘I won’t apologize for what I did,’ he said. ‘You know I’d no alternative, don’t you? But I’ll accept any rebuke you care to offer me, and if you wish’ – he looked quickly at Yengar, who nodded – ‘we’ll share our knowledge with you, and work with you in every way to defeat this abomination that’s leached back into the world.’

Oslang took the hand. ‘I’ve no rebuke for you, Goraidin,’ he said. ‘I’m just glad I survived, and glad you’re on our side. I’d be honoured both to teach you, and to learn from you.’

‘Good,’ Urthryn said vigorously, clapping his hands and looking increasingly businesslike. ‘We’ll have to sort this out with the heads of the Houses and the Decmills before we call a Moot, but for the time being we can double the coastal patrols – and tell the fishing villages that the Morlider are near again.’

Hiron intervened. ‘We’ll have to make arrangements for looking after the villagers,’ he said. ‘They won’t go to sea once they hear that.’

Urthryn nodded. ‘I’d forgotten about that,’ he said, his eyes wrinkling in self-reproach. ‘But we can’t *not* tell them.’ He fell silent.

‘Why won’t they go to sea?’ Yengar asked.

‘Their boats can’t outrun the Morlider ships,’ Urthryn said, almost offhandedly. ‘Some of the villages lost nearly all their menfolk as slaves just before the war started. The fishing’s never really been the same since.’

Yengar grimaced and looked angrily at the sleeping Morlider. Innocent fishermen – fathers and sons – snatched away from their families to slavery! A host of feelings swept through him quite suddenly, but dominating them was one he had not felt for a long time. Satisfaction. Satisfaction that he, at least, could fight; that on occasions he had been able to put his skills, sometimes his sharp steel, between such innocents and their harrowers; that perhaps he might be able to do so again.

‘We have Drago’s boat,’ he said. ‘He and his men can’t be allowed to return to their island yet – not knowing what he knows now.’

Urthryn looked uncertain ‘It’s not our way, Goraidin,’ he said.

‘Times are changed, Ffyrist,’ Yengar replied. ‘And many of our ways will be changed whether we like it or not. I think you have enough disadvantages against this foe without him knowing in advance that he may be facing Fyordyn, Orthlundyn, *and* someone who can use the same power as their new leader.’

Urthryn nodded. ‘I suppose you’re right,’ he said, reluctantly. ‘But what do we need their boat for?’

‘Have your fishermen learn how to use it,’ Yengar said. ‘Make more if you can. A good sea-borne signalling system might ease your fishermen’s minds and also give you several extra hours of warning.’

Urthryn nodded again, his face more optimistic. ‘Hiron, will you see to that as soon as we’re finished

here. And the extra coastal patrols. Oslang, can you talk to . . . question . . . all the Morlider, separately? Find out as much as you can about this new leader and his plans?’

The two men bowed their heads in acknowledgment.

Urthryn hitched himself up in the chair. ‘Now,’ he continued, ‘that’s a start made towards dealing with the Morlider. But it was no easy task fighting them the last time, and it sounds as if it’s going to be even worse now, for all we’re forearmed.’ He reached out and took his daughter’s hand. ‘We’ll have to work out our strategy and tactics and so on, but it seems to me that we’re going to have precious little left to help you with your problem in Fyorlund,’ he said. ‘And as for Sumeral . . .’

Sylvriss laid her hand over his, and looked at the two Goraidin. ‘Only the Fyordyn can solve their immediate problem, father,’ she said. ‘There’s going to be pain and horror enough with kin fighting kin without one side calling on Outlanders for help. I came here to have Rgoric’s child in safety and to tell you what’s happened before news from any other source reached you.’

‘But we can’t stand idly by,’ Urthryn said.

Sylvriss’s voice became resolute. ‘When the weather permits, send messengers to Eldric. Tell him we’re safe, and what’s happening here; it will stiffen his own purpose. Tell him also that you’re sending one of your advisers to Orthlund, to Anderras Darion, to enlist the help of the Orthlundyn and to find out what’s happened to Hawklan.’

‘Hawklan,’ Urthryn said, as if testing the name. ‘He slips through this tale like a binding thread. And he’s made a considerable impression on you, considering you’ve only seen him unconscious.’ There was a gentle, fatherly taunt in his voice, but Sylvriss did not respond in kind.

‘He lies near the heart of this, father, I’m sure,’ she said, intensely. ‘It seems he started Oslang’s people towards their awakening. He faced Oklar’s wrath, and lived – or at least didn’t perish. And while he was amongst them, he won the loyalty and obedience of the Goraidin. He’s no ordinary man.’

Urthryn looked at his daughter keenly.

‘Oslang, what’s your view on the worth of this man?’ he asked.

‘He is the heart, Ffyrst,’ Oslang said immediately. ‘The leader of our Order, Andawyr, is even now journeying to Anderras Darion to discover his whereabouts.’ He paused and looked reflective. When he spoke again, it was half to himself. ‘It seems Sumeral tests us with his lieutenants. The Fyordyn must face Oklar, and the Riddinvolk, Creost. If either fall, then both fall, and Orthlund will stand alone. If we prevail, then my heart tells me that it will be Hawklan and the Orthlundyn who lead us against the Dark Lord Himself.’

Chapter 31

Dan-Tor gazed down from the high platform that had been built on top of the temporary structure now serving as a gate to the Palace. On either side of him, resplendent in full dress uniform, stood Urssain and Aelang, while behind him stood Dilrap, together with several other senior palace officials and Mathidrin Commanders.

In front of them, disappearing into the darkness, the two great avenues that the unleashed Oklar had cut through the City were lined with crowds, upturned faces mottled and seething in the harsh light of the

globes that illuminated the immediate vicinity of the Palace.

An excited clamour rose up around the high-placed watchers.

Dan-Tor stepped forward and placed both hands on the guard rail at the front of the platform. For a moment he looked up and down the crowd, then he raised one arm high above his head.

The noise from the crowd fell, and a rippling motion passed through it as though it were corn bowing before the wind as heads turned expectantly away from the Ffyrst to look into the darkness that shrouded the further reaches of the two avenues. The globes dimmed and the hush deepened in response, then, faintly, a distant sound percolated through the residual murmur: an insistent, pulsing rhythm.

Slowly it drew nearer and grew in intensity until it seemed it was shaking the very ground. The noise of the crowd grew with it, and then, abruptly rolling out of the darkness, came the clamorous din of horns and trumpets, their sound harsh and brazen. At the same time, lights began to appear, eerily, like uncertain fireflies.

One by one, raggedly but rapidly, they flickered into existence, spreading down the long, unseen perspectives of Oklar's handiwork until they formed two vast wavering carpets of light.

A great cheer went up from the crowd as the bearers of this light came into view: rank upon rank of Mathidrin troopers.

Relentlessly, following the insistent beat of their pounding drummers, the two great streams of men moved forward until, reaching the large open area that now fronted the Palace, they began, amid much raucous shouting of orders, to spread out and merge together to form a single glowing mass surrounded by the cheering people.

Behind them, in even greater numbers, followed men and women, wearing the dark brown livery of the new Citizen's Militia; and finally came the various local troops of the equally new Youth Corps, stern, spruced and front-faced.

A little behind Dan-Tor, Dilrap gazed down at the spectacle. Apart from those playing instruments, everyone was carrying a blazing torch or a standard or flag of some kind.

The sight chilled him, as did the pounding, braying din that filled the night, not least because he himself found he was once again exhilarated by its massive, primitive splendour.

And yet he could see the heart of the corruption in these great rallies flickering even in the torches that illuminated them. The revealing light of the traditional sun-fed Fyordyn torches could not have produced such a sight, nor could the garish hand-globes that emerged from Dan-Tor's workshops; their light was inhumanly penetrating. Only naked flames could achieve what he was watching now. Flames guttering wantonly; tainting the air with their smoke and destroying what fed them to produce a light too unsteady to serve any fine purpose, and an uncontrolled heat to be scattered pointlessly into the night. It typified the new spirit of Dan-Tor's Vakloss, and it was appalling.

Surreptitiously, Dilrap turned his attention to Dan-Tor. Since his fateful encounter with Hawklan, the Ffyrst had become more stooped in his posture, his head leaning forward slightly, like a leashed animal trying to pull away from some restraint that Hawklan's fearful arrow had imposed on him. The memory drew Dilrap's eyes downwards. There, as ever, was a small but growing stain in the rough-hewn boards

of the platform, as Dan-Tor's blood dripped slowly but unceasingly from the barbed head of the Orthlundyn arrow.

Dilrap winced inwardly at the sight and then at his own response. It troubled him that he should have even the slightest sympathy for this . . . creature, that had so painstakingly corrupted Fyorlund, poisoned and then brutally murdered its King, and destroyed hundreds of its people with a mere gesture. How could he conceivably have any pity for it?

He had asked himself the same question many times but had found no answer. Perhaps Dan-Tor, stooping and more careful now in his movements, reminded him of Rgoric?

It troubled him also that part of him responded to, perhaps even relished, these huge rallies. But how could he have any trait in common with this Uhriel, this abomination?

Even as he stood there, it came to Dilrap that he and Dan-Tor – Oklar even – shared a common humanity, with all the rich and varied mixture of bonds and freedoms that that implied. Didn't the pounding hysteria of the rallies only mirror his own urge to lash out and crush into nothingness everything that Dan-Tor stood for? Yet he was a poor torturer; he would willingly annihilate Dan-Tor, but he found it difficult to harden himself to the man's continued suffering.

Not tonight though, he thought. This was Dan-Tor at once at his least and most human. Least, in that his stoop had gone and he stood now straight and tall like some terrible parasite drawing sustenance from the barbarous energy of the scene before him. Most, in the subtle understanding and callous cynicism he would show when he spoke once again to the people.

Cutting across Dilrap's thoughts, Dan-Tor extended both arms, and the crowd fell silent.

He paused.

The only sound that could be heard was the guttering of the countless burning torches.

'Soon,' he began. 'Soon, my people.'

Your people? Dilrap thought witheringly.

'Soon we will be ready to strike a blow against our enemies. Against the treacherous Lords and their minions, skulking in the eastern mountains.'

A great cheer went up. Dilrap presumed that, as usual, the Mathidrin had been well tutored in their responses, and those among the crowd who did not believe knew well enough what to do and when to do it.

'Soon you will be able to witness these traitors being brought before you in chains to hear your verdict on their perfidy and dishonour.'

Dan-Tor spoke slowly but with great force, and he paused at the end of each sentence. His voice was rich and sonorous, and reverberated across the crowd, strangely magnified. Dilrap noticed that when Dan-Tor spoke in this manner he would hold his hand to his wounded side as if the very act of speaking caused him pain, though nothing showed either on his long brown face or in those terrible eyes.

The Ffyrst raised his hand after a moment, to still the cheering. 'Only for a little while now need I ask

you to curb your righteous impatience,' he continued. 'We must not misjudge the cunning, the strength or the will of our enemies. We must wait until all our strength is full ripe before we strike. But the time *will* be soon.'

The cheering rose again. Dan-Tor nodded understandingly. 'Do not forget, my people. There is no depth to which our foes would not stoop to seize the crown and crush you under the heels of their High Guards again. Did they not bring an Orthlundyn assassin to draw me from my King's side so that he would be alone; sick and defenceless against the ruthless ambition of Eldric and his son?'

His voice began to rise. 'But by the will of some greater protector than I, they failed. Their murderous lackey missed his mark . . .'

He struck his chest with his hand.

' . . . and seeing his failure, showed his true nature – not just that of a murderer, but that of a foul meddler in forbidden and long-forgotten arts.'

Then, arms pounding forward with each word along the two great avenues that he himself had smashed through the city, his voice reached a terrible peak. 'See what the Orthlundyn wrought across your fair city in his spite and fury.'

The crowd roared.

Dan-Tor allowed the clamour to continue for some time, then extended his arms to beat it down. 'Yet even as his City – the heart of his kingdom – was being thus destroyed by a terrible and ancient power, your King was fighting. Fighting his last and greatest battle.'

His voice fell abruptly. 'I, above all, knew that even in the darkest moments of his illness, Rgoric's thoughts were ever and only for his people. Tormented though his body was, his heart was yours, and his spirit was that of the line of kings that stretches back unbroken to the Ir . . .' He faltered and lowered his head as if overcome.

Say it, you black-hearted demon, Dilrap thought viciously.

Say it, say the Iron Ring, and may the words themselves tighten around your evil throat and choke you.

Dan-Tor recovered, but left the sentence unfinished.

'Alone,' he said, still softly. 'Faced with a terrible and unexpected peril and seemingly abandoned by his closest aides.' He lowered his head again, affecting self-reproach. 'Rgoric reached into his innermost depths and found that ancient spirit: unbowed, undiminished. Found it – and found the sword by his side could still fashion the will of that spirit.'

His voice rose steadily. 'And his hand, though long weakened by illness, took that sword and fought. Fought as it had not fought in twenty years. Fought against the youth and power of Jaldaric. Fought against the age-hardened treachery and cunning of Eldric. Fought to his bitter and tragic end, dying, cut down at the foot of his own throne.'

The crowd's roar became one of fury, the zealots among them now captured utterly by Dan-Tor's words.

He raised his voice above their clamour. ‘Assailed and wounded myself, I returned too late to save my king – our king – but I saved Fyorlund’s crown. And with his last strength, Rgoric held it out to me and implored me to accept the burden he had borne so long. “For my people,” he said. And with his dying breath he imposed on me a further duty. “Seek out and destroy those who have so cruelly destroyed me,” he said. “Save my people. Lead them to the truth.”’

Dan-Tor paused, waiting for the moment that would catch the crest of the crowd’s frenzy. Then, into a momentary lull, he almost whispered, ‘I am Fyordyn. How could I not accept?’

The roaring swept up around him again. ‘How could I not?’ he thundered over it. ‘And how can you not accept that same burden? Vengeance must be ours. Vengeance for Vakloss, smashed by an alien intruder at the whim of the Lords. Vengeance for your friends slain in that same terrible moment. And ...?’

His voice disappeared under the great cry of ‘Vengeance for Rgoric. Vengeance for Rgoric. Vengeance for Rgoric.’ Over and over, it filled the night air.

Dan-Tor’s arms stretched out again and suddenly, amid the tumult, the drums began to beat and the trumpets and horns to sound; louder and more raucous than before. The Mathidrin, the Militia, and the Youth Corps began to divide and execute a series of elaborate marching and counter-marching exercises, the rhythm of their iron shod feet underscoring the brutal rhythm of the music. Dan-Tor stepped back from the front of the platform.

Different this time, Dilrap thought, as the party on the platform began to relax. A strike against the enemy soon, he had said. Soon!

How soon?

Dilrap let the thought pass; Dan-Tor would give no further clues that night. He glanced at Urssain and Aelang, heads close, smiling knowingly as if at some private jest. For all the sinister power these two exercised, he suspected that the Ffyrst’s announcement had been news to them. He would just have to watch and listen; watch events and listen for the meaning behind the words.

His train of thought led him to Tel-Odrel and Lorac and the other agents of the Lords currently in Vakloss. His eyes flickered over the crowd. He knew that it would not be possible to see anyone clearly from such a height in that grotesque mixture of subdued globelight and flickering firelight, not to mention the haze of smoke that was accumulating in the still night air, but it offered him a small comfort to know that they would be there.

For there they would be, beyond doubt, as they had been at all the other rallies. Indeed, Dilrap had hoped when these rallies began that the Goraidin would be able to stop Dan-Tor’s progress with another single arrow. He had stood on the platform, almost holding his breath, waiting for the Goraidin’s messenger to come singing out of the darkness to strike down Dan-Tor as he stood exposed to view. But, gently, the Goraidin had disabused him: good archers though they were, the nearest houses were too far away for a safe shot, especially at night; Dan-Tor might well be wearing body armour now; indeed, could an ordinary arrow even injure him? Who knew what strange protections such a creature might have? And the price of a failed attempt? It would surely cost those Fyordyn under Dan-Tor’s sway what few liberties they still had left. No, the Goraidin must do as Dilrap did: watch and listen.

And that is what they would be doing now: watching, listening. They too would have noted the change in emphasis from previous such speeches. Shorter than many, and no mention this time of the enemy within;

no calls for the people to ‘Be vigilant. The Lords have many friends and sympathizers amongst us.’ No corrosive insinuations: ‘Look around you. How many of your friends and neighbours are not here tonight? How many of your work-mates? Have these people no wish to hear what we intend against our enemies in the east? No wish to support us in our work?’ Followed invariably, with voice lowered and bony finger jabbing the air, by, ‘If they are not here, where are they? What are they doing?’ and then, ‘Be vigilant. Listen for the words of doubt and treachery that will inevitably betray those who lapse from honour. Bring their names forward so that they can be reasoned with and given the opportunity to admit their error before it spreads and corrodes us all.’

Perhaps more than anything, Dilrap was grieved by the harvest that these seeds yielded: the growth of secret informers whispering and denouncing, settling old scores, real and imagined; the growth of the Citizens’ Militia, a grotesque imitation of the High Guards, peevish and strutting at its best, savagely vicious at its worst – a haven for the self-righteous, the unrepentant ignorant and the petty. But worst of all was the Youth Corps – the ‘next generation of Mathidrin’ as Dan-Tor called them. Dilrap knew already of several people who had been denounced to the Mathidrin by their own children.

The next generation!

Fighting *now*, against today’s enemies, was grim enough for Dilrap, but the thought that Dan-Tor had his eyes on some distant future, that his vision was one of a rule that would last for generations, chilled Dilrap utterly.

Yet at the same time it stiffened his resolve. Dan-Tor’s towering intent would be but the foundation for His plans, and if the one could be undermined at its inception, then so perhaps could be the other. And Dilrap was sure that Dan-Tor’s hold on the hearts of the Fyordyn was far less than the rapturous hysteria of the rallies seemed to indicate.

Dilrap understood fear, and it was fear that held the Fyordyn silent and acquiescent; fear of the naked brutality of the Mathidrin holding the streets, and fear of the knocking at the door in the dark hours of the night that would leave houses greeting the morning empty and deserted.

And tightening the bonds of fear was ignorance: ignorance of the truth of the fate of their King and Queen, and ignorance of the deeds and intentions of the Lords. It was ignorance which fed the whispering web of lies and mistrust that grew daily, bringing rumours of unseen violence and horror from the dark heart of the Mathidrin’s power, the Westerclave; bringing rumours of massacres of innocents by High Guards in distant estates, and rumours of Orthlundyn armies massing on the borders, led by a terrible warlock Lord. It was ignorance that brought the darkness and confusion through which only Dan-Tor seemed to offer a way.

Yet other threads mingled with the choking gossamer of this web – threads based no less in ignorance but with a truer, sounder, feel: Dan-Tor had poisoned the King for years and had murdered him when he attempted to regain his power and released Eldric and Jaldaric; the Queen had fled to the Lords for safety, carrying Rgoric’s child inside her; and, sibilant under these, were whispered words such as ‘Mandrocs’, ‘Narsindal’ and, softest of all . . . ‘Sumeral, risen again’ . . . and was not Dan-Tor, Oklar, His erstwhile lieutenant, come to prepare a way for Him? And was it not Dan-Tor who had destroyed the city to silence the accusation of the strange Orthlundyn?

But the darkness dominated. Fear of unknown informants, unheard denunciations and silent arrests seeped into every aspect of the people’s lives, cracking apart old friendships, straining and even destroying families. Yet the very darkness itself hid the opposition to their new ruler that bubbled within many of the Fyordyn, so that it waited, silent and watchful, until eventually his step would falter.

A voice roused Dilrap from his reverie.

‘The people grow more enthusiastic with each demonstration, don’t you think, Secretary?’

The voice was Dan-Tor’s, normal now, and it brought Dilrap sharply and coldly back to the present.

‘Indeed, Ffyrst,’ he said, bowing and stepping forward. ‘Your spirit fires us all.’ He looked down at the interchanging columns and ranks of marchers with their swaying banners and blazing torches.

Dan-Tor watched him intently, but without the awful eyes of his true self. ‘Yet you yourself do not seem inspired by the sight of our growing army,’ he said.

Dilrap did as he always did when opportunity allowed, he spoke as much of the truth as he dared.

‘I’m not a military man, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘I find the prospect of war frightening and these displays of your power quite overwhelming.’

Unexpectedly, Dan-Tor almost sneered. He waved a dismissive hand across the bellowing scene in front of him. ‘This is not my power, Dilrap,’ he said. ‘This is the puny ranting of a crushed people. When they have destroyed the Lords, then you will begin to see my power: the true power.’

Dilrap said nothing, but held his breath close. His stomach turned over. Why does he talk to me like this? he thought. Why does he come so near to saying who he truly is?

Abruptly, Dan-Tor turned. Dilrap’s chest tightened. But the Ffyrst ignored him. ‘Stay here and watch,’ he said brusquely to the people around him, then he strode from the platform. Dilrap bowed hastily, as did all the others, then, turning back to the crowd, he gripped the guard rail and, closing his eyes briefly, let out as long a breath as he dared.

When he opened his eyes, Urssain was standing beside him. He looked at the Mathidrin Commander. The man was changing perceptibly. Learning from his master, Dilrap thought. He was becoming less surly, and seemed even to be developing a peculiar charm at times. It made Dilrap’s flesh crawl. Urssain as an ambitious thug was bad enough, but at least it had a certain honesty. Now, with his greater authority and power allowing more rein to his true nature, the civilized veneer he was affecting was repellent in the extreme.

Ironically, though, it made Dilrap feel easier with the man. It gave him a measure of the Mathidrin’s monstrous ego. It was a weakness. Dilrap had begun looking for weaknesses in the moths that fluttered around Dan-Tor’s dangerous flame. As Urssain learned from Dan-Tor, so, inadvertently, Dilrap followed the example set by Sylvriss, by wilfully ingratiating himself into the favours of anyone who could be remotely useful. This he did not by obsequious fawning, but by simple straightforward courtesy and by ensuring that where favours were sought, they would be granted if possible. But always he left a gentle, unfelt, barb in his debtor. ‘I’m sure you’ll be able to do something for me one day,’ he would say, smiling, and waving his hand airily, while his eyes said, equally dearly, ‘These are difficult times. We who see this reality must help one another when need arises. Be prepared.’

It would have been an ineffective device once, when he was Rgoric’s flustered and flapping Secretary, but now, because he had not only survived the demise of Rgoric but also retained his old office, and because Dan-Tor would speak to him alone on occasions in conspicuous privacy, it was assumed that he had the Ffyrst’s ear and that he was thus a man to be both courted and feared. In reality, no one had

Dan-Tor's ear, and Dilrap was meticulous in never claiming such a privilege; but equally, he did nothing to disabuse people of the idea. It was far too valuable a misunderstanding. Indeed, it left even Urssain uncertain.

'Is the Ffyrst angry, Secretary?' Urssain asked.

Dilrap looked at him enigmatically, but did not reply. This was another device that he was finding increasingly valuable. What was not said could not be argued and could not be repeated or distorted.

'He left so suddenly,' Urssain tried again, following the lure. 'I thought his speech and the marching went down well.'

Dilrap turned away from him and looked down at the still marching figures. 'The Ffyrst is the Ffyrst, Commander,' he said. 'Who can tell what he's thinking?'

Urssain nodded. 'It's just that he spoke to you,' he said affecting a casualness that Dilrap could smell was far from the reality of his inner feelings. Dilrap's earlier suspicions returned. I wonder if this is the first he's heard of this imminent assault on the Lords, he thought.

'Just a small administrative matter,' Dilrap said off-handedly, then, turning to the Mathidrin, he smiled nervously and attacked. 'I didn't realize your battle plans were so advanced, Commander. I thought your intention was still to fight a defensive war – letting the Lords move to Vakloss, rather than risk moving across country to attack them on their own territory.'

Urssain's eyes narrowed briefly at this unexpected observation, then he remembered his new persona and Dilrap's uncertain status. 'I can't discuss that with you, Dilrap,' he said, managing a nice balance of menace and regret.

Dilrap looked understanding, and bowed his head respectfully. 'Of course,' he said. 'And I'm sure I wouldn't understand it if you did. The sooner the whole business is over, the better, as far as I'm concerned. Then we can get on with running the country properly.'

We, noted Urssain. Sooner or later, Dilrap would have to go, without a doubt. If only he could be certain of Dan-Tor's response to such a deed.

He gave Dilrap a curt bow and returned to Aelang.

You didn't know, did you, Commander? Dilrap thought with some glee. Your precious leader prods you along like cattle, doesn't he?

He looked again at the weaving mass of Mathidrin, Militia and Youth Corps below him. He had no concern for the Mathidrin; let them take their chances against the Lords' High Guards. But the Militia? That was only a sad aberration. Didn't he himself respond to the drama of Dan-Tor's rallies? And he knew what the creature was! How could weaker, less knowledgeable souls resist such rousing blandishments? But it would be tragic indeed if they came to be pitched into battle.

He pushed the thought away painfully. The fate of the members of the Militia was in their own hands and in any event was beyond his control. Once battle lines were drawn, many terrible things would happen, and they would only end when the conflict ended. It was his self-appointed duty to ensure that the Lords knew as much as possible about the Mathidrin so that such an end came as swiftly as it could.

When he next saw Lorac or Tel-Odrel, he would give them his impression of Urssain's response to Dan-Tor's announcement, but he could still tell them nothing in answer to the question that concerned the Lords most. How could Dan-Tor's – Oklar's – terrible, city-wrecking power be faced and overcome by ordinary flesh and blood?

He turned, and with a pleasant bow to those around him, made his way down the long winding stairs into the glaring globelight of the courtyard.

* * * *

Part of Urssain told him that he would be happier pottering about Fyorlund as he used to do, surviving on a judicious mixture of small-scale thieving and occasional employment. It was only a small part however, and only made itself heard with any force when he was facing the prospect of speaking, or worse, questioning Dan-Tor, as now. At all other times it was well submerged, lost under his desire to attain the goals that Dan-Tor had shown him at their very first meeting: goals of wealth and power.

Now, however, it was proving extremely alluring even though he knew it was an illusion, and a foolish one at that. His itinerant life held charm only in retrospect and in any event could not have been pursued in these troubled times. Besides, he was trapped; willingly, admittedly, but trapped nevertheless. He could go nowhere now but where Dan-Tor led; knives waited in every other direction.

He took a deep breath and crushed the foolishness utterly. Walk forward, he forced himself to think. Better I hold this position than someone else.

Gradually he took control of his unease. It was not, after all, unfamiliar; he had never relished talking to Dan-Tor. Against the likes of Aelang and the other senior Mathidrin officers he would risk cunning for cunning, steel for steel. Dangerous and ruthless though such men were, they were no more so than he, and he had always had the wit to learn as he moved through life. But Dan-Tor! Words such as dangerous and ruthless dwindled into insignificance, so inadequate were they, and no knowledge could assail him. And since that Orthlundyn had attacked him! Since his . . . transformation . . . Urssain shuddered inwardly and raised his hand . . .

'Come in, Commander,' Dan-Tor's voice spoke before Urssain had struck the door. He started and almost lost the inner balance he was maintaining so precariously. Then he straightened up and pushed the door open.

A faint, familiar scent pervaded the room. Familiar now because it lingered wherever Dan-Tor had been. It was delicate perfume, underlain by the smell of blood.

The palace servants did sterling and silent work to eradicate all signs of the Ffyrist's slight but relentless bleeding, but traces always remained. Urssain had long stopped asking himself why Dan-Tor would not allow the arrow to be drawn, or why the wound did not either heal or fester. One day, when Dan-Tor appeared, the shaft of the arrow had been mysteriously broken, but there was an aura about the Ffyrist that forbade all questions, and the barbed head still protruded from his back.

What kind of a creature are you? Urssain's mind still screamed at times, when the inhuman reality of Dan-Tor and his affliction touched some still uncalloused part of his nature. How can you live impaled thus? And where in your fragile human flame hides the power to destroy a city? But the answer was always: he is your future, Urssain, your *only* future.

Dan-Tor was standing by the window, staring northwards out over the City. His posture was slightly

stooped as usual and, as he turned to face Urssain, his eyes were still focussed in the far distance. Briefly, Urssain thought he felt a fleeting sense of homesickness, a longing for other places, other times, but it passed almost before he was aware of it as Dan-Tor turned his attention to him.

‘You come to quiz me about my speech, Commander?’ he said, almost good-humouredly.

Urssain hesitated. ‘*Have* come to ask if you could clarify it for me, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘Last night was our most effective rally so far – very exhilarating. I was concerned that in the excitement I might have misunderstood what you were saying.’

Dan-Tor’s eyes narrowed and Urssain felt a ripple pass through his already pervasive terror. That was wrong, he thought, bracing himself for the reproach that must inevitably come.

But no soul-searing glance came to mark his folly. A wave of relief passed over him. The Ffyrst was in a quiet, seemingly straightforward mood. The force of his presence dominated the room as ever, but there was little if any of the terrifying malevolence that the Orthlundyn’s arrow had seemingly released: the malevolence of Oklar. Occasionally, Urssain allowed himself to think of that name when he was in the Ffyrst’s presence, but not often, and not for long. The implications of the name were more than terrifying and he knew he must gradually school himself to them if they were not to overwhelm him. Rumours were all over the City about the true nature of Dan-Tor but, like the King in his death throes, Urssain knew the truth. He had been too close to the unleashing of Oklar for it to be otherwise.

‘Urssain,’ Dan-Tor said coldly. ‘Is palace life addling your wits that you think to flatter me? Don’t do that again if you wish to remain of service to me. I need your obedience, that is all. Ask your question.’

He turned away to recommence his vigil, and Urssain breathed out softly. He knew that to apologize now would be to compound his error, so he gave Dan-Tor what he required: obedience.

‘Is it your intention now to mount a campaign against the Lords in the east, Ffyrst?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Dan-Tor replied simply and without hesitation.

‘But . . .’

‘The logic for a defensive stand against the Lords is sound, is it not, Commander?’ Dan-Tor asked brusquely, still looking out of the window.

Urssain hesitated. Dan-Tor turned slowly and looked at him. ‘*It’s* still valid, is it not?’ he pressed. ‘*Better* *they* weary themselves trekking across the countryside to face an entrenched defensive line than we, surely?’

‘For armies of men, Ffyrst, yes,’ Urssain said awkwardly. ‘But . . .’ He was aware that his eyes were widening in fear as his thoughts began to form into words, but he knew he could do no other than plunge on. It had been discussed by the Mathidrin but it was the first time it had been spoken of before Dan-Tor. ‘But you have . . . weapons far beyond the limits of sword and spear. You could destroy their enclaves with a gesture. I thought . . .’

A glimmer of red shone faintly in Dan-Tor’s eyes and Urssain’s voice tailed off. He quailed.

But the distant storm came no nearer.

‘You would reduce your Ffyrst to a siege piece, Commander?’ Dan-Tor asked flatly. Urssain’s mouth opened, but as Dan-Tor’s tone betrayed neither humour nor reproach, he could find no reply.

Dan-Tor released him. ‘Look to no such aid from me, Commander,’ he said, moving to a nearby chair. ‘The Orthlundyn was a darker force than you can know. What was done was necessary, but men must fight men. The new Fyordyn must prove themselves in battle if they are to be of any value to me. Those who survive will become the heart of the even mightier force that will be needed for our future conquests. Those who do not survive will serve a useful end simply by wearying the enemy.’ Involuntarily, he placed his hand over the broken shaft of the arrow protruding from his side. ‘And we face more enemies than you know, Commander,’ he added enigmatically.

Urssain chose to ignore this last remark. ‘But you spoke of a blow against the Lords, Ffyrst,’ he said.

‘Indeed I did,’ Dan-Tor replied. ‘Indeed I did.’

He fell silent.

His euphoria following the death of the King had gradually faded. He was more whole now, his truer self, but the limitations imposed on his use of the Old Power by his Master and by Hawklan’s embedded arrow weighed on him appallingly.

It gave him little consolation that he knew the restraint was the result of his own weakness, and that a far greater punishment could have been meted out to him. Everything since Rgoric’s madness in suspending the Geadrol and bringing the Mathidrin to Vakloss had betokened too much haste. That, and his own folly in disturbing Hawklan in his lair at Anderras Darion, had obliged him to move with, and manipulate, events, rather than dictate and control them. That was almost inexcusable in His schemes.

Now His icy grip had ensured His favourite Uhriel would not easily commit a similar folly again. Hawklan’s arrow would return upon him much of the consequences of using the Old Power and only He could remove it. Dan-Tor looked down at his hand. A great weal ran across it where he had seized the shaft of the newly fired arrow, but that wound at least had healed eventually, though it was still painful from time to time. Ironically, the arrow itself and its eternally bleeding wound, gave him no pain except when he used the Old Power; rather, it burdened and wearied him, as if it were constantly drawing him to some other purpose.

And he was blind still! One of the birds was bound and his precious, hard-crafted, Vrwystin A Goleg, with its all-seeing eyes, was impotent and useless. He should have torn it free when he had the power, he thought. Then he tightened his hand painfully on the livid scar in atonement for this persistent residue of his too human impatience and impetuosity.

It would have to be sufficient recompense for the loss of his spies that he had learnt that the Cadwanol still watched, for surely no others could have the knowledge and the power to do such a deed? And if the Cadwanol had survived the millennia, how great now was their knowledge and power? Not great enough to prevent the corruption of Fyorlund and the re-awakening of Narsindal, it seemed, but it would have been folly to pit himself against them with Hawklan roaming free to be an accidental beneficiary of the Old Power that would have been levied to such a battle.

And, inexorably, the thought of Hawklan took Dan-Tor along a well-trodden pathway. Who was the man, and what had happened to him? True, Ethriss had not risen, grim and terrible out of the maelstrom to thank his waker by dashing him into oblivion, but neither Hawklan’s body nor that of his oafish companion had been found in the debris, and still Dan-Tor sensed him watching, waiting.

But if he was not Ethriss, who was he? The question was strangely terrifying. Key-bearer to Anderras Darion, holder of Ethriss's sword, and seemingly protected, at least in part, by the Cadwanol . . . ?

Yet, Dan-Tor consoled himself ironically, he might still be Ethriss. Perhaps the Guardian's host had thwarted his master's design by defending himself too well with *that* sword? Perhaps he had deflected the very power that was to waken the greatest of the Guardians?

The questions would not rest. Dan-Tor squeezed his hand tighter, and forced his mind back to the bewildered Urssain and present realities.

To use the Old Power against Eldric's castle would not only wrack his body beyond belief, but with Hawklan's whereabouts unknown, it would still risk awakening the sleeping Ethriss and bringing down His wrath as never before.

'You can be expunged at my whim, and others made in your image.' His Master's words hung cold in his mind.

Your wisdom and mercy are without bounds, Master, he thought.

He must return as soon as possible to the steady patient progress that had ensured Fyorlund would fall so easily when the great tree of state was shaken. Haste could destroy His schemes more effectively than the strength of His enemies.

Yet, some modest haste was perhaps now appropriate. His power, underwritten predominantly by the Mathidrin, held the heartland of Fyorlund: the routes to Narsindalvak, and Vakloss and its environs. But the further-flung estates were maintaining an uncertain neutrality; their Lords avoiding contact with Vakloss as far as was diplomatically possible and, when it wasn't, giving pledges of loyalty that had a distinctly hollow ring.

To aid such unsteady allies in their reflections, Dan-Tor had co-opted various of their relatives into palace service, thus holding them as discreet hostages. It was a hazardous device to use with the Fyordyn, however, and he knew its limitations well enough.

And even the securely held territory was uncertain. For all the ranting success of the rallies, and the support given to the Mathidrin by the rapidly swelling ranks of the Militia and the Youth Corps, Dan-Tor knew that there was an underlying stratum of opposition to him which was impervious to rumour and gossip and which only the destruction of the hope offered by the continuing resistance of the eastern Lords would crush.

His power had always been at risk while these Lords remained to defy it. But was it now increasingly so?

The summer had been good and the Lords' granaries would be well-stocked. Almost certainly, he reasoned, they could survive the winter without difficulty and still have adequate food to carry them across country in the spring without burdening the communities they passed through. In any event, many of these would welcome and aid the Lords' army.

It would be pointless, even dangerous, to risk waiting another year, before facing the inevitable armed conflict. The Lords would be husbanding their resources already and, beyond doubt, the High Guards, with their greater self-discipline, would withstand the debilitating effects of delay better than the ruthlessly

controlled and ambitious Mathidrin, whose main motivation was the promise of the lands and wealth they would come to when the Lords fell.

He faltered. The High Guards of Eldric and Arinndier would be a formidable force . . .

But those fops and dandies of Hreldar and Darek . . .?

He had superior numbers by far. The High Guards would be weary and sick at heart, by the time they had cut their way through rank upon rank of the hapless Militia to reach their real opponents, the Mathidrin. And while they might have superior fighting skills, he doubted they could match his black liveried troops in sheer brutal ferocity.

Dan-Tor frowned. It was not satisfactory. But it would never be so. Too much rode on chance in such encounters. Yet, boldly done, it could be a fitting end to this difficult, turbulent period, and would leave him with his foot on the neck of a quiescent Fyorlund, free to continue silently preparing the way for his return.

On balance, he decided, conclusions could and should be made soon, before the Fyordyn winter arrived to preclude the matter.

It was simply a matter of luring the Lords forth.

He looked up at the now anxious Urssain. 'Listen to me carefully, Commander,' he said.

Chapter 32

Ledvrin was a small village lying about half a day's march to the west of Lord Eldric's estate. There was nothing about it to make it materially different from many other Fyordyn villages in that region. A small stone bridge carried the road, hump-backed, over a narrow river to mark its western end, and a modest trotting would soon bring a rider to the woods that lay along its eastern edge. Traditional steep-pitched roofs topped its cottages, colourful carvings abounded on doors and gates and any other visible woodwork, and gardens and elaborate window-boxes echoed these through the seasons with their own rich displays of flowers and shrubs.

The village was part of the estate of Lord Garieth, an able but young and inexperienced man who had recently, and quite unexpectedly, inherited the title from a cousin. He had arrived to find the estate in a run-down condition and had set about its improvement with considerable enthusiasm, soon earning the respect of his older neighbour, Eldric, to whom he had turned quite openly for all manner of advice.

Though from the west of Fyorlund, on the matter of loyalty Garieth was a traditionalist and strongly favoured the eastern Lords in their opposition to Dan-Tor. However, Eldric's advice here was discreet but unequivocal. 'We can't protect you this far out,' he said. 'And you can't begin to protect yourself with what's left of your cousin's old High Guard. Keep your heart with us but, in so far as you can, do Dan-Tor's bidding; there's a lot you can do for us silently. Disband the few High Guards you still have, as he's decreed, but tell them they can join us if they wish. And tell those who don't wish to that they'll serve us just as well if they return to their ordinary lives and prepare themselves quietly for when the times change in our favour.'

This same advice had percolated down to the village Redes and thence to the villagers. 'Be patient. Stay quiet and polite. Our time will come.'

The advice had been sound. All manner of Mathidrin patrols began to pass regularly through Ledvrin and other villages, on their way to test the vague but currently static boundaries that separated the old and the new orders in Fyorlund. Thus the appearance of a large patrol out of the early morning autumn mist brought only a passing glance from the few villagers who were about at that time.

Unusually, however, though led by a group of Mathidrin, the patrol consisted mainly of brown-liveried Militia and, equally unusually, instead of passing through the village, it halted at the small green in the middle of the village. The morning greyness filled with the misting breaths of the gathering. After a moment conferring with his companions, the leader of the patrol, an ill-favoured, sallow-faced man, stood in his stirrups, looked around, and then beckoned silently to the passers-by.

He remained silent as they gathered round, with varying degrees of patience and curiosity, and waited to hear the reason for this unexpected conduct.

But no explanation came. Instead, the patrol leader casually drew his sword and without warning swung it down on the head of the nearest watcher. It cut through the man's woven cap and wedged in his skull so that the rider was obliged to kick the man about the head and chest to wrench it free. The effort made his horse rear and the dying man jiggled ludicrously until the blade released him. He stood for a moment, his mouth moving but making no sound, then he fell to his knees and rolled over, childlike, in the damp grass, his limbs moving in a vague and disjointed manner and disturbing the brown and gold leaves that littered the little green.

Although unhurried, the incident happened so quickly that the other bystanders stood frozen in disbelief at what they had just seen. Before they could recover, the patrol closed around them and in a brief flurry of thudding blows, muffled curses, and gasps of effort, they too were cut down. Scarcely a cry was uttered.

Abruptly, the patrol began to spread out from the carnage, as if suddenly repelled by it. Only the clattering of their tackle now broke the morning silence.

Then a scream rent a jagged tear through it.

The patrol leader started and looked up to see a woman rushing from one of the cottages. She was moving towards one of the stricken men, her hair and loose gown flying. He frowned irritably, then, without a pause, spurred his horse forward into a sudden gallop.

Riding between the woman and her goal, he filled her vision, but her eyes were in another world and she did not see him even as he crashed straight into her. Her dreadful scream stopped as sharply as it had begun as the fearful impact knocked her to the ground.

Tangled briefly in the horse's flailing hooves she rolled over several times until, her body twisted and broken. Her eyes and mouth still open and silently screaming, she finally came to rest, sprawled across a neat and orderly flower bed.

For a moment, silence rolled back over the village, then from every direction came noises and movement as the villagers, roused by the woman's terrible clarion, came out, puzzled, smiling, concerned, to greet the soft autumn morning.

The patrol leader shouted an order.

On a nearby hill overlooking the village, three riders stood, unnaturally motionless. They were dressed

like ordinary villagers and even the Goraidin who had supervised them would have been hard pressed to identify them as otherwise. Their leader was Jaldaric, son of Lord Eldric, and a Captain in his High Guard. With him were a trooper and a young cadet.

The High Guards, like the Mathidrin, routinely patrolled the fringes of their masters' influence, though more discreetly. This trio had happened on the Militia patrol and were observing it when it entered the village. Now they stood white-faced and helpless as the spectacle below them unfolded.

'We must do something, Captain,' the trooper said, wide-eyed and hoarse. 'We can't just stand here . . . ' Distant screams and cries rose up and mingled with his words.

Jaldaric's face twisted as he fought for control of the emotions that were swirling inside him. 'All we can do is watch, trooper,' he said slowly, as though the words were choking him. 'Watch, so that we can tell what's happened.'

The trooper looked at him, his face a mixture of disbelief and horror. 'We can't just watch,' he said. 'They're killing unarmed men and women down there.'

Jaldaric clenched his teeth, feeling the weight of the Goraidin's burden. 'We've no alternative,' he said grimly.

The trooper's mouth curled up into a snarl. 'You spent too long near Dan-Tor, you cold-hearted . . . '

Jaldaric did not allow him to finish. 'Do *you* want to die this day, trooper?' he said, turning to him, his face savage and his voice taut with restraint. The words were ambivalent and the trooper flinched, but Jaldaric levelled his hand towards the village. 'Is our dying going to save those people?' he said. 'Use your eyes. If we killed ten each, that patrol would still out-number us.' His manner softened as despair replaced anger in the trooper's face. 'Just remember this . . . for the future,' he managed. 'Perhaps one day we'll get the opportunity to . . . ' His voice tailed off.

As if jolted by this sudden additional violence between his normally companionable superiors, the cadet slithered awkwardly from his horse and slumped on to all fours, his legs refusing to support him.

'But . . . ' the trooper began.

'But nothing,' Jaldaric said quietly. 'Look to your cadet, trooper. He's about to be sick.'

The cadet was retching violently. Then he vomited. The trooper dismounted and, crouching down by him, laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

For a long moment neither moved, then the cadet looked up, his eyes damp and his face almost grey. 'I'm sorry, Sir,' he said, to Jaldaric. 'I'm all right now, I think.'

Jaldaric looked at the youth intently. 'No you're not, but there's no need to apologize,' he said.

'I'm all right, Sir,' the cadet repeated, unhearing, as the trooper helped him to his feet. 'But is there nothing we can do?'

Jaldaric looked down at the village again. The patrol was forming up to leave. The road winding through the village was littered with bodies and some of the houses were now on fire, adding their dense smoke to the autumn haze. I wish I had a bow, he thought, and in his mind he sent a hail of lethal arrows through

the misty morning, into the gathering group below.

Then he set the indulgence aside.

‘You know the valley to the north-east of here?’ he asked the cadet.

The youth nodded. ‘Yes sir,’ he replied.

‘Captain Hrostir should be there now with a larger group. Go and find him. Tell him what’s happened and bring him back to help here.’ The cadet nodded again and, scrambling back on to his horse, pulled it round to leave. Jaldaric reached out and took hold of his reins. ‘Tell me the way you’re going to go,’ he said, fixing the youth with a stern look.

The cadet stammered out the route he would take and, satisfied, Jaldaric handed the reins back to him. ‘Ride carefully,’ he said. ‘Some of those people down there might live if Hrostir can get here quickly, and he won’t get here at all if you break your neck riding recklessly.’

‘Yes, Captain,’ the cadet said, anxious to be away. ‘I understand. Are you going down into the village now?’

Jaldaric shook his head. ‘No, I’m going back to my . . . to Lord Eldric’s to report,’ he said. He turned to the trooper. ‘You go on down there now and help where you can until Hrostir arrives. Be careful,’ he added. ‘We’ve no guarantee that patrol won’t come back.’ His discreet hand signal told the trooper to go and search for Hrostir himself if he did not arrive within two hours.

Then, without further farewells, the trio divided.

Once well clear of his two companions, Jaldaric gave his horse its head, and as it carried him rapidly homewards, he cursed and swore and wept – at the savagery he had seen, at the savagery he had felt, and at his own impotence to control or assuage either.

In the village, the only sound was the gossiping crackle of the burning cottages. A light breeze tumbled an occasional fallen leaf along the road, and the birds, gathering for their morning crumbs, began to land amid the carnage and wander about curiously.

* * * *

Eldric put his hands to his head. ‘I can’t believe this,’ he said. ‘It can’t be true.’

Jaldaric, travel-stained and weary, looked down at him, but did not speak.

‘They just rode into the village and hacked people down – for no reason?’ Eldric asked pointlessly, knowing the answer.

Jaldaric nodded.

Eldric slammed his hand on the table, then stood up, kicked his chair back, and walked over to the window.

Jaldaric looked at his father’s back and then at Yatsu, still sitting at the table, eyes fixed, unseeing, on the plans spread before him.

‘I don’t know whether I did the right thing, coming back myself.’ Jaldaric said hesitantly, to break the difficult silence. ‘Perhaps I should have waited for Hrostir myself – sent the trooper back with the news . . .?’

His father waved his hand dismissively without turning.

‘You did right,’ Yatsu said, answering on Eldric’s behalf. His voice was controlled but uneasy, and his face was pale. ‘You’d no alternative but to bring back the news personally; and straight away.’

His eyes met Jaldaric’s. ‘You were also right not to intervene,’ he said. And the look on his face said, I understand your pain. The pain of watching.

Eldric turned to his son and, looking him up and down, nodded in self-reproach. ‘You’re tired, Captain. Go and rest,’ he said. ‘You’ve done well. If anything comes to you that you’ve not mentioned, you can tell us later.’

‘I’d rather go back and help,’ Jaldaric said anxiously.

Yatsu’s reply was unequivocal. ‘No,’ he said flatly. ‘You’re too tired. Go and rest. That’s an order. Hrostir will be looking after things, and we’ll send someone from here as well.’

Reluctantly, Jaldaric saluted and began walking to the door. As he reached it, he turned. ‘I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep,’ he said quietly. ‘When my mind goes quiet it fills up with . . . the sights . . . and the sounds. I don’t think I dare close my eyes.’

Yatsu stood up and walked over to him. ‘Only time is going to help you with that,’ he said softly, but holding his gaze. ‘But go and talk to Hylland. He’ll help you relax if nothing else.’

Jaldaric searched the Goraidin’s face, childlike for a moment. ‘Why would anyone do a thing like that?’ the young man asked. ‘And where could they have found people – Fyordyn people – to do it?’

‘We’ll all think about the why,’ Yatsu answered immediately. ‘It’s important.’ Then, meeting Jaldaric’s eyes with the compassion of a man faced with killing a favourite animal. ‘As for the people.’ He hesitated. ‘Those seeds are rooted in us all. Oklar merely tills the soil.’

Jaldaric’s face wrinkled in pain and doubt.

‘There’s no easy answer, Jal,’ Yatsu said, then, slapping the young man’s arm gently, ‘Go and find Hylland.’

When Jaldaric had left, Eldric and Yatsu looked at one another. Eldric’s face was pained and questioning.

‘He’s coping,’ Yatsu said in reply to the unasked question.

Eldric turned away from him. ‘It’s easier to face things yourself than watch your children face them,’ he said. ‘And so much has happened to him over these last months.’

Yatsu nodded sympathetically. ‘He’s coping,’ he repeated. ‘Just like we all did in our time. And he’s your son. He’ll come through.’ The two men’s eyes met. ‘Just like we all have.’

Reluctantly, Eldric the father set his concerns aside for the moment and turned to face the new reality of the struggle for Fyorlund.

‘Innocent people slaughtered,’ he said. ‘I can hardly believe it. And for no reason!’

‘Not for no reason, Lord,’ Yatsu said, almost irritably, as he sat down at the table again. ‘You know that. Dan-Tor has never done anything for no reason. The patrol was too large and orderly, the deed too foul, and Ledvrin too far from Vakloss for it to have been some piece of . . . random savagery by a few Mathidrin troopers. Besides, we know Dan-Tor keeps the Mathidrin well fettered and, from what we hear, they in their turn control the Militia. This deed was coldly done, and done for some very specific reason.’

‘What, pray?’ Eldric said, bristling a little at the rebuke in Yatsu’s tone.

Yatsu looked at him. ‘I think you know full well, Lord,’ he said.

Eldric sat down heavily and leaned forward. Idly he picked up an ornamental pen intricately carved with an abstract scrolled pattern.

‘It might be a probe,’ he said slowly. ‘To test our response. But a lesser contact would have served that purpose.’

Yatsu watched him.

‘It can only be a lure,’ Eldric went on, his face grim. ‘A lure to draw us out from our estates and towards Vakloss.’ He laid the pen down gently and, leaning back in his chair, let his hand fall unheeded on to his sword hilt. ‘To start the war,’ he concluded softly. ‘Civil war.’

Yatsu made no comment and, for some time, the room was silent except for the subdued hubbub of the castle’s routine daily activity percolating through the stout wooden doors.

‘No overtures for negotiations,’ Eldric mused, half to himself. ‘No formal messengers riding to and fro under flags of truce. Just a simple, “See how I massacre your people, Lords. What will you do now?”’ He scowled angrily.

Yatsu frowned in return, as if Eldric’s talking were disturbing him, but he did not speak. Eldric looked at him. ‘And if it is a lure,’ he said, ‘and we don’t respond? He’ll probably sack more villages, massacre more people. More and more, until we do respond.’

Yatsu nodded. ‘It’s strange that he’s not attempted to treat with us,’ he said quietly, still frowning.

Eldric snorted. ‘The . . . creature . . . realizes we know that any treaty signed with him would be worthless,’ he said.

Yatsu tapped his thumb nail on his teeth. ‘Something’s wrong,’ he said pensively.

‘You’ve an unexpected capacity for understatement, Commander,’ Eldric said acidly. But the Goraidin made no response. For an instant, as his own anger bounced back on him from Yatsu’s stillness, Eldric felt the man drawing about himself all his training and experience, like an impenetrable shield, behind which he was ruthlessly converting his horror at Jaldaric’s news into a spear to drive at the heart of

Dan-Tor's intent.

'Even given what you say about our distrust, he could talk to us,' Yatsu said quietly. 'Make treaties. Break them later and dredge up excuses to blame us. We know he could make very effective use of such a device to persuade more of the Lords and the people of the justice of his action. He could strengthen his position considerably. Yet he hasn't.' He turned to Eldric. 'Instead, he resorts to this . . . barbarity . . . which precludes all debate, and *canonly* draw us forth in battle.'

Eldric flicked his hand out. 'Where he can destroy us,' he said. But even as the words left his mouth, Yatsu was shaking his head.

'He could have destroyed us any time,' he said. 'You yourself pointed that out weeks ago. That's why we sealed our borders tight. So that we'd at least have warning if he approached. But he hasn't made any attempt to come east.'

'He is wounded,' Eldric said tentatively. 'Perhaps the journey would be too difficult.'

Yatsu shook his head again, slowly. 'No,' he said. 'I don't think so. He's no normal creature. According to Dilrap, the arrow's still in his side and the wound's bleeding continuously, yet it seems to cause him neither pain nor discomfort for the most part. And we hear he's been touring his domain, both by carriage and on horseback. He could have moved on us at any time.'

'Perhaps . . . ' Eldric began.

Yatsu motioned his Lord to silence. 'In his place, I'd either undermine us gradually by protracted negotiations, blackening our name in the process, to consolidate my position with any waverers, or I'd walk in and destroy us without any preamble.' He closed his eyes. 'And yet he does neither.'

He was silent for some time. Eldric waited.

'Now, for some reason, he's in a hurry to do battle,' Yatsu began again, pensively. 'He must be, to resort to such an atrocity.'

'He might have done it just to blacken our names, as you put it,' Eldric said, risking interrupting the Goraidin's train of thought, in spite of himself. 'He's a master of calculated rumour.'

Yatsu shook the idea off casually. 'No, it would be too risky. There's still enough truth floating about in Vakloss to prevent something as bad as this being believed wholesale. It's as likely to work against him as for him. No, he's done it to draw us out quickly. He's in a hurry, yet he doesn't use his power.'

His eyes widened slightly. 'He can't use it,' he said slowly, as if carefully placing the centre stone of a delicate arch.

Eldric looked at him narrowly. 'Guesswork, Goraidin,' he said after a moment. 'For all we know he may just be taunting us. Luring us out for some spectacular destruction in front of the City to demonstrate his power, his indisputable authority.'

Yatsu leaned back in his chair and looked at him, more relaxed. 'No,' he said, shaking his head. 'Dan-Tor thinks as we do; the Goraidin. He takes no unnecessary risks. His whole progress through the last twenty years shows that. Painstaking, silent, hidden. No indication of his real nature – his real power. He's an assassin, a poisoner, not a berserker. Look what he did to you at the accounting.'

It was an unexpected blow and it sent Eldric's mind reeling back to that long, bitter and frustrating day. Dan-Tor could have seized him by force with the power he possessed, but he had chosen to wear him down relentlessly and then seize him when he was away from the crowd, by a combination of silent treachery and overwhelming armed force. That was Dan-Tor's way without a doubt.

'He wouldn't choose open battle if he could choose any other way, would he?' Yatsu continued. 'He actively abetted the running down of the High Guards over the years, because he wanted no pool of battle skills waiting to face his Mathidrin when the time came. He even mooted disarming the people at one time, if you remember.'

Eldric started. It was a memory from long ago. Dan-Tor had slipped it into a debate in the Geadrol, but had retracted it hastily and with some ineffective humour in the ensuing icy silence. What kind of a person would even think in such terms and aspire to guide a free people? On reflection, Eldric identified this incident as the beginning of the slow suspicions that were to build against this tall, lank manipulator.

Yatsu concluded. 'With his Mathidrin, this . . . Militia . . .' – he curled his lip as he spoke the word – 'and perhaps even a few High Guards, he has a substantial numerical advantage, but he knows that facing us would still be risky even in conventional fighting; we're better trained than most of his troops, and nearly all our senior officers are battle-trying.' He leaned forward. 'And he must realize that we'd not come forward in conventional battle array, with closed ranks of infantry and cavalry ready to be scythed down like corn at a wave of his hand. He won't know we've been training in small group formations, but he'll know we'll come some other way; some way that's never been done before! How much greater the risk to his troops therefore when that initiative is ours? Yet he chooses it!' Yatsu stabbed out his final words. 'He would not willingly accept such odds, Lord. *Heneeds* to defeat us quickly, and *hecan't* use his power against us.'

Silence hung between the two men.

'It sounds plausible,' Eldric said reluctantly after a little while. 'Even obvious.'

Yatsu shrugged. 'The obvious is invariably the hardest thing to see,' he said.

'And if you're wrong?' Eldric asked.

'Harder decisions have been made on less information,' Yatsu replied simply. 'But we'll all discuss it as usual. Perhaps someone else can arrange the facts differently. Not that it matters if they do. Independent of what we think Dan-Tor's reasons were, he's left us no alternative but to attack him in force, and soon.'

'Not necessarily,' Eldric said, seemingly surprised at this conclusion. 'We could increase our patrols. Change from observation to active response and deal with his patrols one at a time as they appear.'

Yatsu walked over to a map hanging on the wall and, after a brief search, placed his finger on a small dot. 'Ledvrin,' he said, looking at Eldric. Then, sliding his finger to the edge of an area criss-crossed with coloured lines, 'The limit of our effective patrol area.' He shrugged. 'It's too far. And where would we stop?' His finger danced from dot to dot across the map. 'We're stretched to defend our own borders, and he could move against any of these villages. There was nothing special about Ledvrin.'

Eldric sighed and looked down at his hands. 'I know,' he said resignedly. 'I was just clinging to a few last moments of peace.' He slapped his hands on his knees as he stood up to join Yatsu. 'However, that,

as you say, we must all discuss later. For now, you and I must send the news to the others and arrange for help to be sent to Ledvrin.’

* * * *

None of the four Lords or the assembled Goraidin and senior High Guard officers found serious fault with Yatsu’s conclusions. The massacre at Ledvrin could only be a challenge to the Lords to march on Vakloss, but none could hazard why Dan-Tor was suddenly in such haste or why he was unable or at least unwilling to venture forth and use his appalling power against them.

‘We consider him still as a man just because he walked amongst us locked in that same fragile frame that houses us all,’ Darek said. ‘But he isn’t; or is scarcely so. He’s Oklar, the first of Sumeral’s Uhriel, the remains of a man who was corrupted eons ago by the gift of almost absolute power. His powers are beyond our comprehension, and so probably are his thoughts. Let’s keep our minds straightforward and open, and not burden ourselves with what will almost inevitably be futile speculation.’

‘It’ll help if we can understand . . .’ Arinndier began.

Darek held out his hand, fingers extended. ‘I, above all, accept that, Arin,’ he said. ‘But how can we begin to understand how a single hand could contain power enough to destroy a city? For that matter, how can we even understand a . . . man who is unaffected by an arrow permanently embedded in his side; an arrow whose wound bleeds continuously and never heals? He isn’t a man, and we bind ourselves when we think of him as such. He’s a monstrous creation. Every facet of his existence is alien to us.’

‘It’s irrelevant, anyway,’ Eldric intruded brusquely before Arinndier could reply. ‘Human or otherwise, all we can concern ourselves with is his deeds. It seems reasonable to assume he’s constrained in some manner from using this . . . power of his, but if he isn’t, if indeed it’s some ghastly taunt, then at least our small formations may save many of our men.’

‘These small formations may also cost us lives if we meet only conventional battle arrays of infantry and cavalry, and the men can’t re-form quickly enough to face them,’ Arinndier said, expressing the doubts that many of them held about the strange new fighting techniques they were trying to develop to protect themselves from Dan-Tor’s terrible power. ‘Part of me says we should be waiting until we know more, and until we’ve done some larger exercises to test our precious new theories.’

‘And if there’s another Ledvrin while we’re waiting, Arin?’ Darek asked.

‘He couldn’t do that again,’ Arinndier said, his face haunted and doubtful.

Yatsu spoke. ‘My heart says he could, Lord, and that he will. But even if my heart is wrong, we can’t risk such another deed. We’re the protectors of the people – their servants. We can set our own lives into the balance during battle, and those of the men who’ve chosen to follow us, but the whole reason for our existence is the protection of the helpless. Their lives must be kept above such calculations.’

Arinndier’s face darkened. ‘I need no lectures on my duty, Commander,’ he said.

‘Listen,’ Eldric said authoritatively, raising a hand to silence Arinndier and nodding to Yatsu to continue.

‘I’m speaking to clarify my own thoughts, Lord,’ the Goraidin said, directly to Arinndier. ‘I offer no one any reproach. But if we don’t stand where those villagers stood, we see*nothing*.’

Arinndier's eyes narrowed.

Yatsu continued. 'If the people are to be kept from risk, then we must move to protect them immediately,' he said. 'And the only way we can protect them against any such further attack is by a wholesale assault on the perpetrators. Morality, duty, and personal inclination aside, that's a straightforward statement of our logistical position, and it's beyond debate.'

Arinndier glanced down at the various documents that had been hastily prepared for the meeting. Even a casual study showed the impossibility of using extended patrols to defend the myriad villages that adjoined the eastern estates.

'It seems that both circumstances and our duty pinion us, Commander,' he said slowly. 'I was wrong to think of delaying.' He looked straight at Yatsu. 'It occurred to me that to rush headlong into battle, ill-equipped against an enemy of unknown power, would be to risk defeat and thereby jeopardize the people further, but your reminder was timely; I had indeed neglected to stand where the villagers stood.' He shook his head. 'My fear clouded my vision. Fear of ordinary combat is bad enough, but fear of this . . . Uhriel and his terrible power . . . is another. Yet we have some measure of it and we've bent our minds to the problem and trained our men, as best we can. It may prove insufficient, but sadly, I fear that only accepting combat – accepting the risks which are ours to accept – will really teach us further.'

Heads around the table nodded in agreement and Yatsu bowed. He turned to Eldric. 'May I say something further, Lord?' he said.

'Yes, Commander,' Eldric replied.

The Goraidin looked around at the familiar faces of his friends, old and new. He pushed his chair back and stood up. 'I think we have another, perhaps even deeper reason, for bringing this matter to the field now,' he said quietly. 'Judged by any law, this was an appalling crime. It didn't even have that flimsiest of justifications – an evil deed done for the greater good. Whoever did it, every individual involved, must be sought out and held to account, no matter where they hide, no matter how long it takes. And that search must start now.'

Though his voice remained quiet and even, his passion suddenly burst through. 'It does not matter what the cost is. To do less is to betray the people of Ledvrin and who knows how many countless others. It would say to the demented souls who would yield thus to the darker forces in their nature, that the consequences of such conduct could in some way be evaded.' He leaned forward, his eyes scouring his listeners. 'They must be shown otherwise. They must learn that ordinary people pursuing their ordinary lives are never without defenders. They must understand that if they choose to follow such a path, then, from the very instant of the deed, they will be pursued without mercy, and pursued for ever.'

There was a long silence.

Eldric sat motionless, his head bowed. 'You speak my mind, Commander,' he said eventually.

'He speaks my heart,' said Hreldar coldly.

'He speaks the heart and mind of the Law,' Darek said, obviously deeply moved by the Goraidin's uncharacteristic outburst.

Eldric looked round at the meeting. 'Does anyone find fault with the Commander's reasoning?' he

asked.

No one spoke.

He leaned back in his chair. 'We've known for some time that this would be the inevitable outcome of Dan-Tor's scheming, and we've prepared ourselves accordingly – or at least as well as we can.' He paused briefly. 'Most of us here have seen combat. We know that while we can speak and face our fears, they'll not seriously impair either our will or our judgement. Like the Lord Arinndier, I freely admit my fear of this creature and his power. In fact I admit my fear of all the dreadful ways of battle – be they old or new – and the reproach of the people we're even now sentencing to death. I'm afraid too of the greater and worse battles that may yet lie ahead of us even if we succeed in ousting Dan-Tor.' He looked around the table again. 'I'd give much to have this burden taken from me,' he added slowly. 'However, I know that if we do not fight now, others will have to fight far worse battles later and I fear their judgement most of all, even though I may be long dead when they come to make it. Our Commander has shown us both the logic and the passion of our cruel situation. I believe our decision now is not whether we attack Vakloss, but how soon.'

Chapter 33

Urssain was almost jubilant. 'It worked, Ffyrst,' he exclaimed. 'Exactly as you said it would. But even more quickly.'

Dan-Tor turned from the window and examined the unexpectedly enthusiastic Mathidrin.

'They come to break themselves against the spears and shields of our troops,' Urssain continued. 'If they keep up their present pace they'll be exhausted when they arrive. Within the week they'll be finished and there'll be none to oppose you. All the other Lords will fight to kneel at your feet when they see what happens to your enemies.'

Dan-Tor nodded slowly. 'Indeed, Urssain. Commander Aelang is to be commended on the effectiveness with which he provoked the Lords,' he said.

The news was heartening. Soon the residue of this tiresome resistance would be crushed. Yet, when he first heard it, something had stirred somewhere deep within him; a faint tremor of unease. You move too quickly, Lords, it said; even to avenge such a deed. I would have expected you to dither, dawdle and debate a little more before you ventured forth; instead you charge out like so many enraged bulls.

Now, responding to his Commander's confidence, the unease returned to Dan-Tor. To still it, he calculated back from the moment when an exhausted messenger had slithered from his foaming horse with the news of the unexpected appearance of a large army moving rapidly towards Vakloss. The Lords must have started late in the day and marched through the night to cover such a distance. Accepting this, Urssain's estimate of their pace was reasonable and, if they maintained it, the Lords would indeed arrive in well under a week. And yet, at such a pace they must surely be exhausted when they arrived? The Lords' actions seemed to bear the hallmarks of an uncharacteristic impetuosity.

Dan-Tor tried to set this inconsistency aside, but from it a single thought rose to dominate his mind.

Who fires your resolve, Lords?

The name Hawklan floated inexorably in its wake. Had that green-eyed abomination indeed survived and rejoined the Lords? Was he once more hunting him? Using the Lords now as once he had used the

people of Vakloss? Would he be there, at the head of their ranks, spurring on the High Guards, or would he be skulking in the rear, plotting some more devious assault?

Dan-Tor found himself quailing at the thought of Ethriss's sword flashing and singing again in the forefront of battle, cutting swathes through his warriors. It was only with a great effort that he set the vision aside. That image, though it returned vividly, even after the countless millennia of darkness, did not portray the true danger of Hawklan. No single man, however ferocious, could swell the ranks of the Lords' army to the size of the army that would greet and crush them. And there was always a random arrow or a whirling axe to end their riot. The true danger lay in just such assaults on Hawklan's person. If the terrible clamour of battle did not awaken the dormant Ethriss, the impending death of his mortal frame surely would.

Dan-Tor's concern deepened abruptly. The die was cast utterly now. At his instigation, the Lords had launched their army towards Vakloss. Nothing now could prevent a major battle. And if Hawklan were there, in its midst . . .

For a moment, he felt as he had felt at Eldric's accounting: trapped. There he had been faced with the risk of having to use the Old Power to quell the crowd at the revelation of the use of Mandrocs in Orthlund, though, ironically, Eldric's own commanding presence had actually saved him. Now, he could not prevent any lethal physical assault on Hawklan occurring if he were anywhere within the Lords' army. Had he made yet another error? Pedhavin, Eldric's accounting, and now this?

Dan-Tor turned back to the window and looked to the north.

Or had he been manipulated by some subtle hand into ensuring the waking of Ethriss?

The thought chilled even the black heart of his Uhriel's soul.

And yet . . .

It couldn't be. If Ethriss had such awareness, such dormant skill, he would surely have directed it to guiding the Cadwanol, his ancient servants. They could have wakened him. He would not have jeopardized the lives of thousands of men in battle . . .

The thought came like a sudden wind blowing away a stifling mist.

Nor would Ethriss have wantonly provoked the Old Power at Eldric's accounting when so many innocents must inevitably have died.

How could he not have seen it? People had died for Ethriss in their hundreds of thousands, but Ethriss would not sacrifice a single unknowing soul for any end!

Hawklan could not be Ethriss!

Who he was and how he came to possess the key to Anderras Darion and Ethriss's black sword and bow were enigmas, but their solutions could perhaps be untangled at some other time. What mattered now was that he was not Ethriss. He was a mortal man; gifted in some strange way, and indisputably dangerous, but a mere man!

Dan-Tor closed his eyes and felt the burden of Hawklan at last pass from him. If the creature was in this army he would probably be slain with it, leaving Anderras Darion tenantless, and the sword and bow in

His possession. If not, he could be hunted freely, and bound, or slain later. It was no longer of any consequence.

A white smile greeted Urssain as Dan-Tor turned back to him.

‘What action have you taken, Commander?’ he said, knowing the answer. Urssain’s speed in galvanizing the defence of the City was to his credit.

Urssain feared his master’s smiles more than his frowns but this seemed to be devoid of menace. He responded enthusiastically. ‘I’ve sent out messengers to all the companies between here and the Lords, ordering them to pull back to Vakloss as soon as the Lords reach them,’ he replied.

Dan-Tor looked at his protégé. ‘Withdraw?’ he said with wilful uncertainty.

Urssain nodded. ‘Yes, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘The reports we have say that the Lords are coming in full force – Eldric’s High Guards, Arinndier’s, Hreldar’s and Darek’s, plus their civilian reserves, the remains of Evison’s High Guards and quite a lot of deserters from the other Lords . . .’

Dan-Tor raised a hand to stem this flow. ‘Did you manage to ensure that some of your people were with the deserters?’ he asked, again knowing the answer from his own endeavours to obtain information from the east.

Urssain’s enthusiasm faltered. ‘No, Ffyrst,’ he replied. ‘We sent several in with plausible enough tales, but none returned. Nor have we received any messages from them. Not that that’s proved significant. The Lords never disguised their intentions or their activities, and now they’re actually flaunting their strength. We need no secret intelligence to find their measure.’

A fortunate quirk of circumstance, Dan-Tor replied inwardly, a conspicuous foe just when we’re blind. But after the Lords had been defeated he must travel to Derras Ustramel and tell Him of the growing hazards of such blindness, not least the Cadwanol. The birds must be freed if His work is not to be so hampered again; but let Him determine that.

With a flick of his hand, he returned Urssain to the mainstream of his telling. ‘Why are you withdrawing your forces, Commander?’ he asked pointedly. ‘Why aren’t you opposing them at every step.’

Briefly, fear welled up inside Urssain’s stomach but, riding high, he ignored it and plunged on.

‘They’ve committed their *every* resource, Ffyrst,’ he said. ‘To oppose them with individual companies would be to lose men, materials and morale for no useful purpose.’

‘You doubt the courage of your men, Commander?’ Dan-Tor asked.

‘No, Ffyrst,’ Urssain replied, surprised at his own spontaneous faith in the Mathidrin troopers. ‘They’re afraid of nothing. Remember the Mandroc tribes they subdued when we first moved out of your estates and into Narsindal? I doubt the High Guards are expecting such ferocity. But courage is no match for overwhelming odds. If our men stand and fight in small companies they’ll be destroyed, and probably without inflicting any serious harm on the enemy. But if they withdraw, they’ll be here fresh and ready for action alongside all the other companies, and . . .’ He smiled knowingly. ‘. . . they’ll tempt the Lords into maintaining their present pace in anticipation of an equally easy final victory.’

Dan-Tor stood silent for some time. Involuntarily Urssain licked his lips.

‘Good,’ said his tormentor eventually. Urssain breathed out, discreetly.

‘I’ve also recalled some of the companies in the south and west,’ Urssain added. ‘Those from the estates of our friendlier Lords, though I doubt they’ll arrive in time.’

Dan-Tor nodded. ‘And in the City?’ he asked.

‘The City’s sealed, and under curfew,’ Urssain replied briskly. ‘All food supplies have been commandeered, the Militia and all the auxiliaries have been fully mobilized, and the main Mathidrin companies are moving to their defensive stations on the eastern approaches.’

‘Good,’ Dan-Tor said again. ‘And how are the people responding?’

Urssain shrugged. ‘It’s hard to say. We imposed a full curfew immediately we had definite news, so there’s been little chance for any rumours to start. I think a simple public announcement will end what little speculation there is. The Youth Corps can make it, they’re already patrolling the streets to ensure the curfew’s being maintained. I don’t think the people are going to be any problem.’

Dan-Tor stood silent for a moment, then he said, ‘Have two of the reserve Mathidrin companies stationed in the Palace, Commander. We may have no spies in the enemy’s camp, but they’ll have many in ours for sure, and they’ve shown in the past they’re quite capable of reaching into our very midst.’

Urssain hesitated.

‘Just because they’ve turned to face us at last, Commander, doesn’t mean they’re above treachery,’ Dan-Tor said coldly. ‘There are many new faces in the City – in the Palace itself, since my . . . accession. We mustn’t become careless when such a major victory is within our grasp. Attend to it right away.’

When Urssain had left, Dan-Tor returned to the window and resumed his vigil. For some time he stood silently staring towards the hazy northern horizon. Then he turned away and moved through a nearby door.

A long winding stairway took him high up one of the palace towers until eventually he reached a narrow landing. Opening a door, he stepped out onto a broad observation balcony.

In the streets far below the weather was a cool, rather dank autumn. Around the high balcony, however, a wind blew always, and now it was cold and raw. But Dan-Tor was unaffected. Standing motionless, he stared out towards the east.

Now were all his years of silent toil bearing fruit. Not in the manner he had envisaged, admittedly, but far sooner. Briefly the image came to him of a spring flower bursting suddenly into bloom after a long dark winter, but it was distasteful and his head twitched involuntarily to free him of it.

And yet the past months had been a strange, turbulent period, full of change and struggle and mystery: he himself deceived by the aura of that sinkhole Anderras Darion into imagining he had found, and could bind, Ethriss; Rgoric slipping his leash and running amok after almost twenty years of carefully sustained decline; and that horse witch weaning him back to normality and strength. Even getting herself pregnant, if rumour was to be believed. At the thought of Sylvriss, Dan-Tor’s lip curled back to reveal his clenched teeth, white and predatory.

But it had all been salutary: a timely reminder that these creatures were, after all, Ethriss's creation, flawed and dangerous. And, too, the Cadwanol had appeared on the fringes of events. That was of major importance. Perhaps in reality they lay nearer the centre than appearances indicated. They were not a force to be lightly ignored. When this was over, He would doubtless look to have them sought out and crushed before their infection spread.

The cold wind tugged at Dan-Tor's robe. He laid his conjectures aside. Soon, very soon, there would be time for a retrenchment, a quietening of the turmoil and a new beginning. When his army had crushed the Lords he could divide an acquiescent Fyorlund amongst his senior Commanders and turn his mind to the gradual destruction of Orthlund and Riddin; back, if possible, to slow corruption by stealth and smiling deception.

And of course, to lighten these tasks, there would be the hunting of Hawklan.

It was an agreeable prospect, Dan-Tor mused. Violence and war had their uses, but they were too hazardous; too uncontrollable and unpredictable. They represented the very pinnacle of humanity's flawed and inconsistent nature. They were not his favourite tools, though admittedly he wielded them with some relish when need arose.

Even now, there was risk. Small forces had routed larger before now. The thought was haunting and persistent, but he set it aside. Aelang had done his work well; the Lords were moving in anger; an emotion that would have wasted their energies utterly by the time they reached Vakloss to face the vastly superior numbers of the Mathidrin and the Militia.

Granted, the Militia were of uncertain value, but they would burden the Guards in many ways, leaving them the wearier when they finally hacked their way through to the Mathidrin.

He smiled as the thought came to him that the loss of so many Fyordyn men would cause great social upheaval and ease the subsequent governing of the land. It was an advantage he had not considered before.

He brought his mind back to the present. Below him, the City was unnaturally silent; its stillness disturbed only by the Youth Corps' patrols and the occasional rider or runner. In the distance he could see some of the activity as his troops transformed the eastern edge of the City into a defensive enclave.

Slowly he stilled his mind and set forth his power. Out to the north under his own extensive estates to touch the comforting roots of the cold dark mountains that separated Fyorlund from Narsindal. Tentatively to the south where it shied away from the ominous shadow of Orthlund. Then east, out under the bustling preparations of his own army until eventually it felt the purposeful tread of the advancing High Guards.

Ever guarded, Oklar mused. How easily you could be destroyed, in your pathetic strutting arrogance, without the protection of forces you know nothing of. Once it would have been Ethriss or Theowart, or some cadre of potent Cadwanwr, now He Himself guards you from my wrath.

As a reminder of this protection, Hawklan's arrow hung heavy in his side; a terrible, waiting presence. He knew no hurt would return to him while his Power was quiescent and watching, but should he use it

...

Oklar withdrew his Power lest the nearness and vulnerability of his enemies tested his patience too far. To strike them thus would be to shatter his own mortal body.

Let these creatures hack and hew each other, he thought. It is the way it always was and in itself would be a passing amusement for him. It would also be a valuable exercise for the Mathidrin; it was a long time since they'd faced angry, armed opposition. It would thin out their weaker fry and leave him with a battle-hardened nucleus around which could be built His real army.

Briefly he felt a wave of weariness pass over him, but he ignored it. It was just another remnant of his own erstwhile humanity. His eternal solace lay in the knowledge that one day these flawed and erratic creatures would be no more, and he would stand by His side in a world of perfection; shaped by Him and peopled by His creations. It was a heady thought, and he allowed it to soar freely.

* * * *

Eldric was tired after the day's marching and riding, but he had spent the evening walking around the camp: talking to the sentries slowly pacing the perimeter; talking to cadet runners, excited and anxious, homesick yet glad to be there; talking to troopers and officers alike in their tents and shelters, resting after the day's rapid march; talking to grooms and ostlers, tending the cavalry horses and remounts, and the great draught horses that were hauling the supply and baggage wagons in relays to keep pace with the swiftly moving army. Talking . . . and listening. Answering questions. Asking questions. Lifting up the jaded and fearful, calming the over-heated.

Though a soft and hazy mist filled the camp and the surrounding countryside, the stars above shone sharp and clear. He looked up at them.

I envy you your cold clarity, your certainty, he thought. Silver and aloof in your rich purple darkness.

Then he cleared his throat self-consciously as if he had inadvertently spoken this poetic sentiment out loud.

Two passing troopers saluted him.

He returned the salute and wished them goodnight as they faded into the darkness.

Around him was the dwindling hubbub of the quietening camp. Torches and shadowy figures moved hither and thither, though without menace; snatches of conversation, laughter, even some singing, floated to him. Then a dog barked somewhere and, far in the opposite direction, a horse neighed. Standing alone in the darkness he felt as though he were one strand in a huge moving tapestry of sound and quietly bustling life.

He had stood thus many times before, during the Morlider War, and even, occasionally, when on the Watch in Narsindal, though there had always been an indefinable unpleasantness about that place and a different quality of tension had pervaded the Watch camps. Now at least he knew why.

This is a good place to be, he thought. The quiet unity of purpose, the caring companionship of fellows in arms. A good place. Would that it could last. Would that this time it might not end in horror. Other familiar thoughts returned to him unbidden. Armed conflict was an obscenity; a loathsome catharsis, like vomiting, but infinitely worse. Infected, the nation fretted and fumed in discomfort, then in pain, then it retched and heaved until, uncontrollably, in a terrible spasm, it shed the offence, leaving itself exhausted but perhaps renewed amid stench and degradation. The analogy pursued itself. Sometimes it was not an end, but a beginning; even a presager of death.

Eldric let the thoughts pass him unhindered. They held nothing new for him. It grieved him deeply that he and his companions were now the seeming aggressors, but he took solace from the knowledge that if an acceptable alternative presented itself at any time they would take it, and gladly.

He drew in a deep breath of the cool autumn air. It was scented with dampness and browning leaves, dying in preparation for the cold winter and the distant spring.

This is a good place to be, he thought again, then, pulling his cloak about him, he set off for his own tent.

It was indistinguishable from all the other tents except for the standard that hung motionless in the stillness. The Lords and people were never far apart in Fyorlund but both tradition and experience dictated that more than ever they should share both favour and hardship in such difficult times.

Arinndier rose as Eldric entered.

‘I’m sorry, Arin,’ Eldric said. ‘I’m a little late. I’m afraid I was . . .’

‘Talking.’ Arinndier finished his apology for him with a wry smile.

Eldric conceded. ‘Talking,’ he admitted. ‘And thinking.’

Arinndier raised a mocking eyebrow.

Eldric ignored the taunt. ‘The others are ready?’ he asked, affecting a briskness he did not feel.

‘In the command tent,’ Arinndier replied, indicating the entrance through which Eldric had just passed.

Darek and Hreldar were sprawled out in their chairs when Eldric and Arinndier joined them in the command tent. Both confined their welcomes to a cursory nod.

Eldric smiled broadly. ‘A good day’s march, gentlemen,’ he said.

‘No heartiness, please, Eldric,’ Darek replied. ‘Save that for the men. It’s been a good day and night’s march, and you’re as tired as we are.’

Eldric pulled a wry face and sat down by his colleagues. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid we’re none of us as young as we were.’

‘No clichés either,’ Hreldar said.

Eldric eyed him uncertainly for a moment, then, unexpectedly, a smile surfaced on Hreldar’s grim face and he chuckled.

‘It’s as well *we*ll agreed to this forced march,’ he said. ‘Otherwise one of us would be unbearably self-righteous now.’

The fatigue-born unease in the tent faded and, leaning back, Eldric rested his arm on a nearby table. ‘How’s morale among *your* men?’ he asked, looking round at each of his companions.

Excellent, was the consensus. The Lords and their officers had always presumed that apart from Dan-Tor coming personally to use his power against them it was unlikely they would be assailed on their

own territory. With regret, they recognized that if Fyorlund was to be freed from Dan-Tor and restored to its old ways, they would have to take the offensive and move on Vakloss.

The timing of such a venture, however, had proved to be a considerable problem. Their ranks grew daily as High Guards from other Lords joined them; some independently, some with the strong, if covert, blessings of their Lords. Yet with each new individual came the extra burden on food and resources and it soon became apparent that too long a delay might tip the balance inexorably in Dan-Tor's favour; the Mathidrin and this new Militia would presumably be more prepared, and the natural momentum of the daily lives of the people would inevitably make them more amenable to their new leader, while the Lords would be increasingly burdened by a growing, expensive and probably fretful standing army.

Fearing this, and the consequent decline in morale, most of the senior High Guards' officers had argued for a swift and powerful strike against Vakloss. Arguments that had been intensified by the appearance of early snow on the distant mountain peaks indicating perhaps a severe winter. However, despite the unusual fighting tactics they were devising, the fear of Dan-Tor's terrible power, combined with the natural reluctance of the Lords to be seen as open aggressors, had outweighed all other considerations, and a degree of frustration had never been far below the surface.

The slaughter at Ledvrin had, however, materially changed these concerns. An attack by the Lords could now clearly be seen as not only a legitimate, but a necessary, response, and, more importantly, there was the substantial doubt about the ability, or willingness, of Dan-Tor to wield his power. Given these changes and the now raging anger of the men, there was little left to debate.

'Hawklan would have told us to excise the diseased tissue as quickly as possible, before its infection spreads and destroys us all,' Yatsu said at one meeting.

The men were in good fettle and it was debatable whether training through the winter, pending a spring offensive, would materially improve them.

Supplies were good; morale was good. Both were at risk if there was a delay – particularly the latter.

The discussion had not taken long. Nor had its logical consequence. A swift attack meant swift – 'Hit them hard and fast, before they really know what's happening' – and that, in turn, meant forced marching. Each man would carry his own arms and two week's field rations to ensure greater speed by dint of independence from the baggage and supply train, while this in its turn would be smaller and swifter. Normal practice on forced march exercises was for the men to carry a month's field rations, and the reduction to two weeks was greeted at first by mocking applause, though this turned rapidly to laughter and cheering when its implications became clear – within two weeks this business would be over!

Eldric stretched his legs. 'Good,' he said. 'I think we've made the right decision. My men seem to be thriving on it after so long with no clear end in sight.' He pulled himself upright in his chair. 'However, now we're on the point of leaving Garieth's estate, we'll have to face the problem we've avoided so far – the loyalties of the other Lords between here and Vakloss. They're uncertain, to say the least.'

It had been a strange irony that the four Lords knew more of what was happening in Vakloss than they did of the minds of their former friends and colleagues. With the Mathidrin patrolling far and wide, and normal movement between villages and estates being greatly reduced as the country watched and waited, it was easier for the Goraidin to be inconspicuous on the more populous roads in and around Vakloss than on the quieter byways which filigreed the countryside. The seeming ease with which they moved across country belied utterly the considerable difficulty and danger of the journey.

Eldric ignored the unhappy expressions on his friends' faces and ploughed on. 'Correct me if I'm wrong,' he said. 'But between here and Vakloss there's only Irian, Tel-Amreo, Valen and perhaps Shalmson within striking distance of our route, who have – or had – High Guards of any worth.'

No one demurred from this observation.

'We need to find out whose side they're on before we leave them to our rear,' Eldric continued.

'Irian and Tel-Amreo would probably be with us,' Hreldar said after a brief silence. 'But Valen and Shalmson were always in Dan-Tor's pocket. And Valen's Guards were a rough lot at the best of times.'

'They were supposed to disband their High Guards,' Arinndier said tentatively, stifling an unexpected yawn that conveyed both his fatigue and his reluctance to be discussing this topic.

Hreldar looked at him sideways. 'Valen's men could be wearing black liveries by now,' he said bitterly. 'Shalmson's – that's difficult. I don't know – but I wouldn't trust him too far; he was always gullible and greedy.'

Arinndier grimaced at Hreldar's tone. He would have liked to have protested at the idea of Valen's High Guards joining the Mathidrin, but he knew there was a strong possibility that that could well be true. 'Well,' he said, almost impatiently, 'there's no point equivocating now. We can't afford delay and we can't afford to tie down too many men guarding our backs. Send a couple of cavalry squadrons to their castle gates, tell them what Dan-Tor's done, what we're doing, and ask them to join us.'

'Subtle,' Darek said wryly.

Arinndier took the comment at face value. 'Subtlety takes time, Darek,' he said. 'We avoided the issue so far only because we knew the answer. We'll just have to barge in. One of us can go and make a judgement on the spot.'

Eldric nodded. 'It's as good an idea as any,' he said. 'We really don't have the time for sending scouts, messengers and all the niceties. The sudden appearance of a large "friendly" force should provoke a fairly genuine response.'

Darek chuckled. 'Indeed,' he said. 'I can hear Irian now.' Then, more seriously: 'But I agree, Valen and Shalmson could be problematical. That said, I can't see that either Irian or Tel-Amreo would have settled easily for some bland neutrality. Their High Guards will probably still exist in one form or another, and that could be useful; but by the same token, Dan-Tor will have reached the same conclusion and their estates could be infested with Mathidrin. What do we do then?'

Arinndier shook off the remains of his reluctance. 'As agreed at the outset,' he said sternly. 'If we encounter any Mathidrin, we engage without warning.' He drove his fist into his hand with a resounding smack. 'Every one we can deal with in the countryside is one we won't have to deal with at Vakloss. That's why I said send two squadrons. No one – Mathidrin or turncoat Lord – is going to have that many men routinely mobilized.'

Darek raised a placatory hand. 'And Shalmson? Valen? What if they *have* changed sides? I can't see them asking their men to consult their consciences. They'll have had little say in the matter. And rough though they might be they're entitled to a choice. We can't just attack them without warning.'

Eldric and Hreldar looked at Arinndier. He pulled an uncertain face. ‘If that’s the case,’ he said, quietly, ‘then I suppose we’d better offer them an opportunity to remember their Oath of Loyalty before we engage.’

Darek’s comment reminded all of them that soon they would be facing many of their own countrymen in pitched battle, and the atmosphere in the tent became gloomier.

‘Not our choosing,’ Eldric said after a short silence, answering the unspoken doubts that hung in the air. ‘But it’s all we can do. Admittedly this attack is our will, but it’s also the King’s last command. Let’s hope speed and ferocity will lessen the resistance.’

Darek acknowledged the remark, but returned to his concern. ‘And if Valen or Shalmson stay in their castles?’ he said. ‘What then? We’ve no siege train with us.’

‘If we move fast enough, I don’t think that’s likely,’ Arinndier replied. ‘They might know in Vakloss that we’re coming by now, but I doubt anyone’s bothered to detour across country to tell anyone else.’ He shrugged. ‘But if it does happen, then *wewill* have to tie down some of our men in blockade. It’ll take fewer to do that than it will to defend our backs.’

Darek nodded resignedly, and the tent became silent.

Eldric looked round at his friends. ‘Are we all agreed then?’ he asked.

Each of the three Lords signalled his agreement in the manner of the Geadrol; a simple horizontal movement of the right hand. The silent, familiar gesture brought a lump into Eldric’s throat unexpectedly. ‘Good,’ he managed awkwardly. ‘We’ll work out the details the first thing tomorrow. Now let’s get some sleep.’

* * * *

Urssain walked out of his ornate command post and strode past the saluting sentries. A few strides took him towards the edge of a rocky outcrop that overlooked the intended battleground.

The night was still, but there was a cold, wintry sharpness underlying the autumnal calm. Below, spreading far ahead of him and extensively to both the right and the left, were countless scattered lights: globes, campfires, radiant stones, blazing torches – even some of the old-fashioned torches that the Ffyrst’s globes had replaced. It was almost as though the stars of a bright summer night’s sky had fallen to the ground.

Around him rose a sound like waves pounding a distant shoreline. It was the noise of the army; people even more numerous than the myriad lights. Some would be on duty, guarding the perimeters to prevent desertions, checking and moving arms and supplies, pitching tents, tending the horses, attending to newly arrived companies, and the countless other tasks that the serving of an army demanded. Others would simply be waiting; waiting for their next duty, waiting for sleep, for morning, *forthem* .

And all invisible in the darkness that separated these fallen stars, Urssain thought.

Suddenly he felt alone and very small, daunted by the realization that this vast flickering sea of lights was but a fraction of the true energy and power that lay spread out before him; the greater part of it was quite invisible.

A chilling thought came to him. Is it always thus? Do we only ever see just such a shimmering, deceptive, outline of reality, while knives and malign intent lurk in the darkness?

He stood motionless, momentarily disoriented by this unexpected and disconcerting vision, and not knowing how to respond to it. Then the thought and the shadow were gone, like some passing twinge of pain; gone and almost immediately forgotten except for a faint, lingering after-image of uncertainty.

Nerves, he thought reassuringly. He should recognize them by now, he'd been in enough battles, hadn't he? Though admittedly, none had been as big and ordered as this, and he had never held so exalted a position. His certainty returned and his brief unease was replaced by excitement.

Even the news that the Lords' cavalry had suddenly attacked the local garrisons billeted at Irian's and Tel-Amreo's estates did not concern him too much. It had always been assumed that those two Lords would turn on the new regime when an opportunity presented itself and it came as no great surprise when a messenger, having run headlong into the retreating Mathidrin, returned with the news that many of the High Guards of the two Lords had mysteriously 'reappeared' to help with the rout. All that had been allowed for and the Ffyrst's army would still be greatly superior in numbers to that of the attacking Lords.

Although he had been able to gain no direct information about the strength of the Lords' army prior to the attack, Urssain, with Dan-Tor's guidance, had estimated it, including a liberal allowance for volunteers from the High Guards of other Lords. Now, the reports he had received bore out this calculation very closely, including the contribution made by Irian's and Tel-Amreo's Guards.

In a couple of days, the Lords would arrive, exhausted after their protracted forced march, to find themselves facing an army at least twice the size of their own. An army rested and waiting, and which had but to hold its defensive line until the attackers were so debilitated that they could be crushed with ease. It would be both interesting and instructive to stand by Dan-Tor and watch him crush, once and for all, this irritating residue of Rgoric's old regime.

Looking again at the vast camp spread out in front of him, Urssain tried to visualize the scene.

There would be row upon row of infantry, cavalry, archers, as far as the eye could see. And opposite them would be the Lords and their pathetic entourage.

He smiled to himself. It would be a considerable learning indeed.

The only real cause for concern was not the approaching enemy, but his fellow officers. The time before battle was, almost traditionally, a dangerous time in the Mathidrin. The break in normal routines and the pending mayhem provided opportunities for the settling of old scores and the clearing of ambitious pathways which could not be passed by. Various individuals, mainly lone sentries, had already been found murdered and it was unlikely there would be time to inquire into these deaths fully, especially as they involved only troopers.

Urssain wondered briefly if any of the officers were considering attempting to remove him in order to enhance their promotion prospects.

On balance he thought it was less likely than usual. Aelang was his greatest threat, but his pact with the erstwhile Commander of Narsindalvak still held, to their mutual benefit, and between them they offered any usurper a daunting target. In addition they had the indirect but substantial protection of Dan-Tor. He tolerated the internecine feuding that pervaded the Mathidrin, even using it on occasions to fulfil ends of his own, but whenever it reached such a pitch that it might materially impair the efficiency of his troops he

would act swiftly and mercilessly to stamp it out, albeit temporarily.

Urssain knew that after the battle, when Dan-Tor shared out Fyorlund amongst his senior aides, there might possibly be some trouble, but that would have to be dealt with as and when it arose. The immediate danger now lay in some half-witted clown misreading the situation and attempting to avenge some old injustice, real or imagined.

As the thought recurred, he wriggled his shoulders a little as if easing tension. In reality, however, he was feeling the weight of the mail coat underneath his livery; it was so light that he had developed this almost nervous twitch to remind himself he was wearing it.

Ironically, the wearing of the coat contained other tinges of betrayal than a distrust of his own men, as it was not one made recently in Dan-Tor's workshops, but an older one made by one of the Guild Armourers before their craft had gone into such a rapid decline. It was lighter, more flexible and, above all, finer and stronger than those made by the Ffyrst's workmen. It would take the worst of a sword blow and would stop any knife thrust beyond doubt. It had been an expensive purchase but, in matters of personal defence, Urssain was quite clear in his priorities and not given to making petty economies.

* * * *

Out in the darkness, circling wide round the lights that fringed the eastern edge of Vakloss, a small group of men moved silent and unseen across the unguarded fields.

Chapter 34

Eldric's final words to his commanders before they left on their final march were simple.

'Over the past months we've been training for this day. Training intensively. So I'll not burden you with our various alternatives again. However, two things I *will* repeat, for all they're obvious.' He looked at each of the men in turn. 'Firstly, when battle's joined, there'll be confusion and mayhem and precious little chance of sending messages here and there. However, we all know one another. We've discussed tactics endlessly. We all think the same way. Use your judgement as need arises. Have no fear, it'll be the same as mine.' He leaned forward, resting his hand on the table in front of him. 'Secondly, and I can't emphasize this strongly enough: at the first sign of that . . . thing . . . using its appalling power, break formation, as practiced, immediately, whether your unit is being attacked or not, and retreat as fast as you can – preferably without it becoming a rout, but get your men away at all costs. You know your rendezvous points.' He paused. 'Everything we hear tells us that Oklar is bound in some way, but if after all, this is just some ghastly taunt on his part, then all we can do is flee and preserve what we can for another time.'

No one demurred.

* * * *

Urssain had estimated that the Lords' army would reach Vakloss in the late morning. It was an accurate estimate, spoiled only by the fact that the Lords, knowing the terrain, had decided to cover the last part of the journey at night. As a result, their army was within striking distance of the City when dawn began to break.

Hidden by the morning mists, however, they did not become visible to the City's defenders until the autumn sun had turned from a sullen red to a brilliant gold.

‘Commander!’

Instinctively, Urssain lashed out and then reached for his knife as a hand shook him roughly from his slumbers. The offending sentry staggered across the tent, narrowly avoiding knocking over a table strewn with plans and documents.

‘I’m sorry, Commander,’ he gasped, before Urssain could speak. ‘Come quickly.’

Wide awake, his heart racing, and his hand offering his knife menacingly, Urssain took in the man at a single glance: one hand to his injured face, the other empty and extended to show no ill intent, he was unequivocally no assassin. And his whole manner indicated a concern greater than that occasioned by Urssain’s attack.

Urssain went cold. The Lords, he thought, but his face was set. Silently, he swung off the bunk and, snatching his tunic, motioned the sentry towards the entrance.

The sentry scurried out gratefully and Urssain strode after him, throwing his tunic over his shoulders. Without looking round, he was aware that he was the focus of many anxious looks, but he ignored them and went directly to where the sentry was now standing. The man was pointing towards the east.

They’re here, he thought with a jolt, and his throat went tight with fear. Hours early. They’ve caught us unprepared. For an instant, Dan-Tor’s red-eyed wrath rose to dominate his mind, but somehow he still contrived to give no outward sign of this sudden inner turmoil.

However, as he raised his hand to shield his eyes from the dazzling sunlight, the sight he had been anticipating over the past few days did not appear.

Instead of serried ranks of infantry and cavalry moving steadily forward across the distant fields, there was only the mist – bright in the morning sun and at once tenuous and solid. For a moment he could see nothing except this strange silent white ocean, and his fear began to give way to annoyance at this unnecessary awakening. Then gradually, as his eyes adjusted, he began to make out tiny points protruding through the mist. They were like shoots of grass through a late snowfall, except that they came and went as the mist slowly shifted.

Pikes! Dozens of them.

His eyes flicked from side to side. Hundreds of them!

The fear returned, though now it was subservient to a growing excitement. Without turning round he snapped his fingers and beckoned the silent sentries towards him.

‘Battle stations,’ he said quietly, surprised at his own calmness. ‘Go and tell the Ffyrst. And rouse the other Commanders. At the double.’

Still without turning, he took the tunic from his shoulders and put it on as he listened to the retreating footsteps of his messengers. This was the last moment of silence and calm he would know for several hours, and for some reason he was loath to disturb it. Even his breathing became slow and deliberate. With meticulous care he fastened his tunic. Tonight I’ll be able to get out of this – and this damned mail coat – and sleep in comfort, he thought.

Then the silence and stillness were gone utterly as one of the sentries began beating out a frenzied clamour on the nearby alarm bell. The sound filled the air around him, then clattered out over the camp, waking its fellows as it went by.

Faintly, the unholy carillon drifted across the fields to the approaching army. It mingled with the steady tread of the troopers and the soft clinking jangle of the cavalry. The men were silent in the fading greyness, but a horse occasionally shook its head and whinnied softly.

Eldric turned to his companions. He had hoped to make some slight jest at this first contact with the enemy but none came. Instead, he found he was looking to them for a final confirmation of what they were about to do. Each nodded in turn. It was a dark and grim moment.

He looked around at his troops, and then upwards. The sky was visible in places, showing blue as the sun's touch dissolved the mist. The air was full of the scents of autumn, so intense that it seemed as though they had been squeezed from the very earth by the relentless weight of the passing army. It was going to be a beautiful day. It would pursue its restful autumnal course to its golden red sunset as countless such days had done before, oblivious to the horrors that would be done here during its passage.

Jaldaric, riding by his father, looked down at the ground and then to left and right along the widely spaced ranks of troopers vanishing into the mist.

‘We’re destroying someone’s land,’ he said.

Eldric turned to him, and Jaldaric looked at him uncertainly as if perhaps expecting some small rebuke for this almost unintentional remark.

But Eldric simply nodded. ‘We’re destroying the crops, Jal,’ he said quietly. ‘The land’s beyond our hurting.’

‘Fortunately,’ he added after a brief pause.

* * * *

Dan-Tor joined Urssain on the rocky outcrop in front of the Command Post. Some way back from them stood messengers and signallers, restless with anticipation.

Immediately below them, the camp was becoming relatively calm and orderly, following the frenzy of activity that had accompanied the rousing of the various companies and their noisy dispersal to their stations on the battle line.

Dan-Tor gazed out towards the approaching army. It was now more clearly visible as the mist too had dispersed. He raised his hand to shade his eyes and then smiled. ‘I think it will take a little more than the morning sun in our faces to sway this day their way, Commander,’ he said. ‘I fear the Lords will regret their final hasty night’s marching before the sun shines in their faces.’ He chuckled.

Urssain froze.

‘Indeed, Ffyrst,’ he managed. Then, cautiously, as if the movement might offend, he raised his seeing stone to his eyes.

‘What are they doing?’ he asked, after a moment. ‘What kind of a formation is that?’

Dan-Tor did not reply.

Urssain peered through the seeing stone intently, raising a hand in front of it to shield it from the sun.

He could see pikemen and various other infantry; and there were riders; and they were in some semblance of rank and file, but . . . widely spaced? He screwed his eyes up and allowed himself a small inward curse; he had a far better seeing stone back in his quarters, but it was one of the old ones; the one he was using had been made in the Ffyrst’s workshops and was noticeably inferior.

Nevertheless, it confirmed the eccentric disposition of the enemy clearly enough. The Lords’ army was advancing in small groups, about eight in each, he judged, each individual standing well clear of his neighbour, and each group substantially clear of the next.

His brow furrowed. ‘They fear your power, Ffyrst,’ he said, his voice low but excited at seeing into the heart of his enemy’s intent; it was a good omen. ‘They daren’t close ranks because they fear they’ll meet the same fate as the City. It’s making them walk towards us as if they were strolling in the park. We could just . . .’

He lowered the seeing stone and looked at Dan-Tor.

He had been about to say that if they maintained this formation, then a sudden, massed charge would scatter them like leaves in the wind, but it occurred to him briefly that such insolent challenging by the Lords of his master’s awesome power might actually bring that selfsame power down upon their heads. However, following the chilling, ambivalent response to his earlier reference to such a possibility he remained silent and, like a child awaiting a gift at Festival time, merely tried to will the deed from this lean, enigmatic and fearful creature to whom he had bound his fate.

But Dan-Tor gave no response, though his mind was similarly occupied.

Scorn and anger whirled inside him. You would defy me in your arrogance, Ethriss’s creatures? *Me*, the first of the Uhriel! His greatest servant! Who has raised mountains and rent open valleys, turned forests to deserts, drawn forth the terrible inner heat of this world to destroy whole lands and the peoples on them. Who tore the Morlider islands asunder. You would judge me by the petty spleen I vented on your miserable City, and would seek to avoid my wrath by such antics?

Involuntarily, in his anger, Oklar put forth his power, deep underneath the approaching army, until he could feel the earth shaking to their tread.

* * * *

‘There he is,’ Hreldar said, his voice soft and menacing. ‘On that outcrop right above the centre of their line.’

The other Lords raised their seeing stones to follow his gaze. Eldric focussed on the tall figure of the Uhriel. It was still wearing the spartan brown robe of office that it had worn as the King’s physician and adviser. He shuddered. Even though the image was still small and distant, it seemed as though its eyes were staring straight into his soul.

Then abruptly they were rushing nearer and nearer.

Suddenly, a tremor shook the ground. Eldric tore his eyes away from the stone as his horse shied.

* * * *

‘Ffyrst!’ Urssain’s voice was alive with alarm as Dan-Tor suddenly staggered and clasped the arrow in his side. Urssain stepped forward and caught his arm.

‘Are you . . .’ The Uhriel turned towards him and, with a terrified intake of breath, Urssain’s words stopped and he jerked his head away from the vision that was now his master’s face. Unashamedly afraid, he screwed his eyes tight shut as if the darkness might hide him from such terrors.

He felt the Ffyrst leaning heavily on him, then a voice drew him back to the light.

‘I am well, Commander,’ it said, without explanation.

Dan-Tor straightened up. His body was riven with terrible pain and Hawklan’s arrow hung gleefully in his side. End these Lords here, Uhriel, it taunted. Use your vaunted earth-rending power to its full, that I may return it and in turn rend your own miserable frame with it.

Your wisdom and mercy are without bounds, Master, Dan-Tor intoned to himself inwardly, as the agony slowly began to fade.

* * * *

Mindful of Eldric’s orders, the advancing army faltered.

‘He staggered!’ Hreldar cried out, turning to the others, his face alive with a furious triumph. ‘He staggered! He tried to use his power and he couldn’t.’ He stood up in his stirrups. ‘Close ranks, and halt,’ he roared. Eldric, still struggling with his alarmed horse, shot him an angry look, then his own words returned to him, ‘Use your judgement, it will be the same as mine.’ He looked from side to side. Hreldar’s powerful command was echoing along the ranks as successive officers took it up; the brief hesitation passed and purposeful activity was replacing it.

* * * *

Urssain, too, watched as the disparate groups began to merge into clear, identifiable patterns in the distance. As they did so, he recalled Dan-Tor’s words, ‘Men must fight men. The new Fyordyn must prove themselves in battle if they are to be of any value to me.’ He felt an inner hope die and realized that despite his best endeavours, a large part of him had indeed expected to see Oklar revealed again, his awesome power cutting through the Lords and their army as it had cut through the City. Now he knew with frightening clarity what the words meant, and that this salvation was not to be. Something in the Orthlundyn’s arrow prevented it, though Urssain knew that to inquire about this would be to court an immediate and unpleasant destruction, favoured Commander or not.

Unconsciously he rested his left hand on his sword hilt and loosened the weapon in its scabbard.

Bringing his mind back to the present realities, his eyes narrowed. The distant army had completed its manoeuvre. It had taken only minutes. That betokened discipline of a very high order.

The logic of what he had just seen unwound itself. The Lords had known that an appalling destruction

might await them at Dan-Tor's hands, yet they had come prepared to face it. *That* betokened great courage. Now, in some way they too had learned that his power would not be used against them

Discipline and courage, and now freedom from the terror of the unknown! Urssain glanced down at the ranks of the Mathidrin and Militia.

But we have the numbers, he thought. He looked again at the Lords' army. The pikemen were now motionless, standing in orderly rows, presumably waiting for the order to advance. Sixteen rows, he presumed, barely a pace apart, but each man standing a little to one side of the man in front, and each holding his pike vertically; a pike some five, maybe six paces long.

Urssain knew the pattern; it was the traditional High Guards phalanx. The pike had a long metal blade at its tip, and a weighted spike at the other end so that it balanced about one fifth of the way along its length. When the first five ranks brought their pikes horizontal, they would all protrude in front of the first rank to form a long impenetrable row of pointed blades.

By reputation it was a formidable fighting array used to smash into an enemy line like a great hammer, splitting it open for attack by cavalry and lighter, more mobile infantry. But Urssain declined to be impressed. Had not the Mathidrin been trained in its use also? And they were hardened fighters, all with experience in Narsindal, not fops and dandies like Hreldar's and Darek's High Guards. A fleeting memory of Jaldaric's patrol in Orthlund returned to him, but he dismissed it. The men for that had been chosen by the Ffyrst himself for his own protection. It was not typical. Urssain's attention returned to the Lords.

At either end of the phalanx, to protect its otherwise highly vulnerable flanks, were cavalry, and beyond them and behind, further infantry, carrying shorter spears. In front of the whole was another small group on foot. Skirmishers, Urssain thought, archers and javelin-men probably, fast and mobile, to harry and disrupt the opposing front line prior to the advance of the phalanx.

* * * *

Hreldar gazed at Dan-Tor's army. Two long blocks of men. At the rear were black-liveried Mathidrin armed with pikes, thin ranks motionless, while at the front were Militia. They seemed to be armed with a variety of spears and pikes, and though more numerous than the Mathidrin, their line was uneasy. At the front of the whole was a line of archers.

'They've twice our numbers,' he said, his tone matter-of-fact. 'But only a third of them are Mathidrin, and they've less cavalry than we have.'

He turned to Eldric, who nodded. That bore out the information that Lorac and Tel-Odrel had obtained from Dilrap. For some reason, Dan-Tor had not encouraged the development of cavalry. Eldric was reassured. He had been concerned about leaving four squadrons behind to blockade the Lords Valen and Shalmson, but it had been unavoidable. Valen had been unequivocal in his support for Dan-Tor. To Darek's horror, though not totally to his surprise, he had arrived to find Valen's High Guard were indeed sporting Mathidrin livery. His force had succeeded in containing them only by dint of surprise, arriving when they were all in the castle preparing to leave for Vakloss.

Shalmson had been more difficult, pleading this and pleading that, but Arinndier had cut across the debate and simply told him to stay in his castle if he valued his life.

'Even so,' Eldric said. 'They have the higher ground and that long line could fold round on our flanks all

too easily. And I'd like to know what's in those four wagons in the Militia line. They don't look like catapults, but . . . ?'

* * * *

Urssain quickly estimated the now static force. Yes, we have the numbers, he confirmed to himself, and their cavalry was less than he had thought. But the speed and order with which that phalanx had been formed . . . ?

The two armies faced each other.

Two men for every one of theirs. But . . . ?

'With your permission, Ffyrst, I'll ride down and ensure that the Militia fully understand the consequences of failure to hold their line,' Urssain said. Dan-Tor nodded.

* * * *

Eldric wheeled round to face his Commanders. 'The Uhriel is bound,' he said. 'His battle line's conventional. You know what to do. But watch those wagons carefully.' The men saluted and then rode off towards their companies. Eldric looked at his three companions and, without speaking, the four began to move forward.

* * * *

Dan-Tor watched as Urssain rode along the ranks of the Militia. Faintly he could hear his voice. He knew the message he would be delivering; the man had learned a great deal over the past months. It would be a combination of rabble-raising encouragement and implied threat. The Mathidrin archers had orders to shoot any of the Militia who broke ranks, and while this was ostensibly a secret order, it had been sufficiently well rumoured to be effective.

The four Lords rode forward, accompanied by two standard bearers; one carrying a green flag of truce, the other carrying the Fyordyn flag: the Iron Ring set on a red background.

Urssain paused in his harangue of the Militia and turned to watch their approach. A parley? At this stage?

'Look,' he shouted to those around him. 'They've seen our might, and they see their own destruction. They've come to plead for terms.'

But Eldric and the others had not come to debate. They had come to undermine their opponents with the truth.

All four were armed and armoured as Eldric had been for his accounting. With arms glinting and red cloaks brilliant in the bright sunshine, they rode with wilful slowness until they were almost within arrow range of the brown liveried ranks.

Then Eldric rode forward alone until he stood like a commanding officer inspecting his troops.

He pointed to the distant figure of Dan-Tor.

‘Men of Fyorlund,’ he said, his voice carrying powerfully in the autumn stillness. ‘You face me and your own kind armed to do war, but yonder is your true enemy. Yonder is the one who poisoned the mind and body of your King for twenty years and then brutally murdered him when, with your Queen’s aid, he sought to fight free of this bondage. Yonder is the one who has poisoned *our whole country* for twenty years, and would murder it too with this dreadful meeting today because, like its King, its spirit also refuses his yoke. Yonder is Oklar, the Uhriel, come to lay waste Fyorlund to clear the path for his Master, Sumeral. Sumeral, the ancient Enemy of Life, who has risen again in Narsindal while we turned our faces from our duty.’

There was some jeering from the Militia, but it faded under the weight of Eldric’s grim presence. ‘Let him stand forth now who’d prove me liar,’ he said angrily, looking slowly along the watching ranks. He pointed at Dan-Tor again. ‘What mere man could have torn apart our City so, and casually slaughtered so many innocents with a single gesture? You know the truth in your hearts.’ He paused. ‘You arm today for an evil cause, Fyordyn. For most of you thus far, this has been no more than folly. If you lay down your arms and return to your homes and hearths, it will remain just that and there will be no stern accounting. However, if you stay, many of you will surely die.’

The stark simplicity of his statement was chilling. He leaned forward in his saddle and continued, his tone darker yet.

‘There will, however, be a dire accounting for some of you. Those of you who rode into Ledvrin recently. Rode in and cut down men and women as if they were no more than troublesome weeds.’ His horse became restive, sensing his restrained anger. ‘I promise you this, though. You will be allowed more than your victims were. You will be allowed a fair and honest hearing when the courts and the Geadrol are re-established. But I promise you this also.’ His anger seeped through into his voice. ‘No arm is strong enough to shield you, no shade too dark to hide you, no distance too far, nor time too long. You *will be* searched out and found and brought for accounting somewhere, sometime, even if it is at your dying breath.’

He swung his horse round and galloped back to the others, then turning, he called out. ‘Think on what I have said. Lay down your arms while you can.’

In common with all the other listeners, Urssain had been held by Eldric’s tone and manner, and this sudden manoeuvre took him by surprise.

‘Archers, cut them down,’ he shouted, coming to himself.

A few desultory arrows arced after the retreating Lords to land forlornly in the dew-soaked grass.

Urssain swore to himself. He had neither Eldric’s presence nor his eloquence, and he certainly did not have the rightness of a cause to expound.

‘Hold your ground,’ he bellowed angrily as he began riding along the ranks of the Militia again, his tone making his earlier, subtler threats unequivocal.

‘The Militia will break,’ he thought, as he turned finally to return to Dan-Tor.

* * * *

‘The Militia will break,’ Hreldar said to his companions as they rode back to their troops.

At a nod from Eldric, the rider carrying the flag of truce dipped it and, without any further signal, the Army of the Four Lords began to move forward.

* * * *

The four Mathidrin marched purposefully along the broad aisle between two of the largest workshops. Despite the bright autumn sunshine, the buildings looked drab and desolate, showing no outward sign of their function, unlike the large work-halls of the traditional craftsmen which were invariably bedecked with virtuoso demonstrations of their tenants' skills. Indeed, the only outward signs that Dan-Tor's workshops gave were of neglect and decay, or, more correctly, indifference to the space they occupied. An appropriate craft sign for the goods that were produced here, Dan-Tor's enemies declared knowingly; and even his most ardent supporters were obliged to concede that the buildings were eyesores.

'But Lord Dan-Tor has brought work for . . .'

' . . . those whose crafts he's ruined,' had gone the arguments, round and round. But the workshops had been built regardless of opposition; a strange unpleasant scar at the edge of the City. Their appearance now was not improved by the charred remains of those buildings which had been destroyed by fire during the rescue of the Lords. Random sections of jagged, broken walls stood black and solitary amidst tangled masses of twisted metal and charred timber. When the wind blew, it carried an acrid stinging dust into the other workshops and about the neighbouring streets while, when it rained, the dust became an unpleasant clinging slime which stank of retching decay and leached into ditches to poison nearby streams and fields.

The small patrol halted by the largest building and its Sirshiant looked about uncertainly. As he did so, a figure appeared in the shade of the doorway to the building. It hesitated briefly as if debating whether to flee.

'You,' shouted the Sirshiant, forestalling any action. 'Come here.'

The figure stepped out into the sunlight uncertainly. It was a stocky man with a hooked nose and deep-set angry eyes; he was wearing a soiled overall typical of those who worked for Dan-Tor. As he came forward, his hands twitched nervously.

The Sirshiant shot a glance to the three troopers who immediately dashed past the man and, after a brief consultation, rushed through the open doorway. Within seconds, the sound of a violent struggle emerged.

Hearing the noise, the workman produced a large metal bar from under his overall and aimed a mighty swing at the Sirshiant's head.

With apparent slowness, the Mathidrin stepped a little to one side and, almost gently, caught the moving arm, causing his attacker to lose his balance completely. As the man recovered, it was to find his wrist and arm twisted so that he was completely under the control of his captor. He struggled briefly but the increased pressure on his wrist soon stopped him, and he felt his hand opening involuntarily, to release the metal bar. It fell on the hard roadway with an echoing clang.

The troopers emerged from the building similarly restraining a taller, fair-haired man.

The Sirshiant's eyes were cold. 'What are High Guards doing here, disguised as workmen?' he asked his prisoner.

The man twisted round to look at him. ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he said. ‘We’re not High Guards. *Weare* workmen. We’re caretakers here.’

The Sirshiant shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I think not. Caretakers don’t use the hand language to say things like “I’ll deal with this one and draw the others inside.” Do they?’

The Sirshiant released his captive and, at his signal, the troopers released theirs.

Rubbing his wrist, the stocky man looked at the Mathidrin narrowly. ‘And cockroaches don’t know the hand language, do they?’ he echoed cautiously. He looked at his companion and came to a decision.

‘My name is Idrace . . .’ he began.

The Sirshiant’s eyes widened in surprise and he raised his hand and placed a silencing finger on Idrace’s mouth. He looked at the other workman. ‘And that is Fel-Astian. Apart from Jaldaric, the only two Fyordyn from Dan-Tor’s escort to survive the Mandroc attack in Orthlund.’

Idrace gaped.

‘What was the name of the Orthlundyn who rode with you, High Guard?’ the Sirshiant demanded before Idrace could speak.

‘There were two,’ Idrace stammered. ‘Hawklan and Isloman. How . . .?’

‘Later,’ replied the Sirshiant. ‘We’ve no more time.’

He looked up at the building from which the two had emerged.

‘Will this place burn as well as the others?’ he asked.

Idrace gave Fel-Astian a nervous glance, and swallowed. ‘Oh yes,’ he said, very softly. ‘It’ll burn all right.’ His voice contained such strange tensions that the Sirshiant’s eyes narrowed uncertainly.

‘It’s a good job you met us,’ Idrace continued significantly. ‘You’d have killed yourselves for sure.’

* * * *

As the phalanx of the Lords’ army moved nearer to the waiting defenders, the harrying of the Militia begun by Eldric with words was continued by skirmishers. Urssain had been wrong in his earlier assessment of these. They were neither archers nor javelin-men; they were slingers.

The traditional High Guards echoed still the training methods of the huge armies of the Great Alliance that had followed Ethriss, in that each individual was trained in many fighting skills; from the highly disciplined close order drilling required in the phalanx, to marksmanship with bow, sling and javelin and, not least, close-quarter fighting, both unarmed and with sword and spear.

This ensured that the High Guards maintained a high degree of flexibility, with individual units being able to assess each others’ tactical needs in the field and to some extent even replace one other as circumstances dictated.

It also ensured that the particular skills of each trooper were assessed to the full and hence that a high level of expertise was maintained in each discipline. Thus the Militia found themselves facing a lethal hail of heavy lead shot hurled by slingers of no mean ability.

Though more difficult to use, the slings could throw their shot farther than the short bows of the Militia and Mathidrin could fire their arrows, and the defenders found themselves effectively unable to retaliate. Even when the skirmishers ventured forward, it availed the Militia little, as their attackers were lightly armoured and extremely mobile. Slowly, casualties began to occur amongst the Militia, and as tension mounted, the Mathidrin Sirshiants and Captains placed strategically amongst them began to find it increasingly difficult to prevent their charges breaking the line and rushing forward to end this calculated and dangerous taunting.

Dan-Tor watched these preliminaries impassively. Ancient memories returned to him at the sight of the disciplined battle array moving relentlessly towards him and he felt black anger and hatred stirring deep inside him. No parleying, Lords? he thought. No attempt to use your early arrival to swing wide around the City and attempt a flanking action? No hesitation of any kind. Just straight towards the heart of your problem. Straight towards me. Like that accursed Orthlundyn's arrow.

But you're driven by anger still. And your arrogance. You imagine nothing can stand against your vaunted High Guards now you judge my power to be bound. Well, you were opposed and defeated in the past, and you will be now.

Dan-Tor's battle line was almost twice as long as that of the Lords. Very soon, as the phalanx neared his centre, he would order the wings to wheel forward to move against his enemies flanks. True, these were protected by cavalry and light infantry and together these might well break the Militia. But the Mathidrin were behind them and their close-quarter fighting, together with the archers, and, of course, the wagons, would crush this guttering flame of rebellion once and for all.

Then, the phalanx stopped, and the skirmishers withdrew.

The pikemen stood in silence. To talk now would be to miss the orders of the individual phalanx officers, and the consequences of that could be dire. This was no drill. Round shield hung around your neck to protect your left side, both hands free to hold the pike, you kept your station in rank and file at whatever cost, and you watched and listened!

Charge! thought Dan-Tor.

But the phalanx remained motionless.

Dan-Tor frowned.

Abruptly, to no command that the defenders could hear, the front ranks of the phalanx raised their pikes vertically and the whole turned and began marching to the left, leaving their entire flank exposed. They were some distance away, but a determined charge now would scatter them utterly. Involuntarily, Urssain stepped to Dan-Tor's side. 'Ffyrst . . .'

Dan-Tor raised an arm to silence him. Then, with the same silent precision, the pikemen turned back to face the defenders and the first five ranks brought their pikes horizontal again to restore the gleaming serrated edge along which such a charge would have foundered.

Urssain's left hand tightened around his sword hilt. He had not expected this. He had expected a

headlong, brawling clash of arms and a straightforward trial of strength. He glanced cautiously at Dan-Tor. The Ffyrst was impassive.

Worse was to follow for Urssain. The phalanx began marching to and fro as if it were on a parade ground; backwards, forwards, changing formation; a chilling display of discipline.

Periodically during this performance, the skirmishers moved in and renewed their vicious bombardment of the defenders. As the rain of lead shot continued, brown liveried bodies began to litter the field.

Urssain scowled. Despite the sunshine, it was not warm. His men would be suffering from the combined effects of cold and inaction, not to say the same frustration that he himself was feeling. Who could say what effect this tournament exhibition would be having on them? What in thunder were these Lords playing at?

Dan-Tor's eyes narrowed. 'They come a little closer each time,' he said.

The phalanx turned yet again and began marching to its right but on a slightly oblique line that would bring it nearer and nearer to the watching Militia. It continued in this direction for longer than it had previously.

'They're going for our left wing,' Dan-Tor said abruptly. Urssain was startled by the unexpected urgency in his voice.

Turning round rapidly, Dan-Tor snapped his fingers at one of the waiting messengers.

His order was simple. The right wing infantry was to wheel round immediately and attack the cavalry and light infantry that were guarding what was now the rear of the phalanx.

As the messenger galloped off, Dan-Tor looked back at the phalanx, still pressing forward. Soon they would be past the centre of his line.

He nodded. 'Release the wagons,' he said to another messenger.

Urssain smiled. Now things would start to happen, the wagons would soon break up this parade ground display.

There was a strange timeless pause while the messengers galloped through the lines. It seemed to Urssain that his heartbeat filled the world, its rhythm matching that of the relentlessly marching feet of the pikemen. As he had willed Dan-Tor to use his power, so now he willed leaden lethargy into these legs that had trekked so tirelessly across the country to meet their fate.

Then the moment was gone and he was in the present again. The Militia lines in front of him opened and the four heavy wagons were carefully eased forward down the slope. They were very large, and some indication of their weight could be gained from the two lines of men who were straining on ropes to prevent them rolling forward. A Sirshiant by each one reached inside and then stepped back quickly. As he did so, the men released the ropes and the wagons slowly began to move towards the unguarded flank of the marching phalanx.

The slope was gradual, but the wagons gathered speed rapidly. Then, almost simultaneously, each one burst into flames. Not the crackling flames of burning hay and straw fanned by the wind, but flames that roared with a whiteness and intensity that was like the centre of a furnace.

Urssain leaned forward. This was the beginning of the end.

When they struck the phalanx . . .

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the right wing of the army begin to wheel to attack the phalanx's rearguard.

The wagons rolled on, accelerating inexorably. Now they were going faster than horses at full gallop.

A great cry went up.

Not so silent now, Lords' men, Urssain gloated. Not with Dan-Tor's blazing torment about to crush you.

But a hissed intake of breath from Dan-Tor cut across his celebration. He looked up. The cry was not from the doomed pikemen, but from the right wing of the Lords' army. The cavalry, which had been keeping station loosely with the manoeuvring phalanx, had suddenly adopted a solid wedge formation, and with two red-cloaked figures at its head, was charging at full gallop, lances levelled, into the Mathidrin riders who were protecting the left flank of Dan-Tor's army. At the same time the leading section of the phalanx had faced left, lowered their pikes and, still in formation, begun charging up the slope. The rear ranks had partly lowered their pikes to break up the brief flurry of arrows and spears that arced up from the Militia's front line.

Urssain's thoughts whirled. In the instant he saw the Lords' strategy. The cavalry charge must surely overwhelm the few Mathidrin riders, probably driving them into their own men, then both Mathidrin and Militia would flee before such an onslaught. Trapped between the thunderous hooves of the tightly grouped cavalry and the hedged points of the charging phalanx, they could escape only by retreating or panicking through the rest of the line.

Yet even as the fear of this conclusion began to take hold of him, it turned into elation. The left wing might be lost, but in seconds the wagons would destroy the latter half of the long phalanx and Dan-Tor would order the whole centre to join the right wing in wheeling round to envelop the confused survivors. So intense was Urssain's awareness that his thoughts encompassed all this and were turning to the details of the victory parade even as his eyes returned to the careering wagons. The pikemen had turned to face them.

Now! his mind screamed. Die, all of you!

But instead of breaking in panic, the phalanx split open in front of the wagons to leave each a broad unrestricted avenue for its passage. The rearguard infantry did the same, and the four wagons, now virtually solid masses of flame, careened on impotently until, destroyed by their own fire, they tumbled over, spewing great cascades of blazing liquid and debris into the air and across the fresh-trampled autumn fields.

The phalanx closed again in silence.

Urssain watched in disbelief, his throat tight and dry. Desperately he kept his eyes from Dan-Tor.

Then the mounting din from the left wing intruded on him.

Eldric had lost his lance, torn from his grasp as he had impaled some floundering militiaman. Now he was laying about with his sword. Struggling through the panicking mass of Militiamen and Mathidrin, the squadron had lost some of its speed, but a quick glance behind showed Eldric that the formation still held, its widening bulk cutting through the shattered enemy like a scythe through grass. To his left was Arinndier, still in possession of his lance, he noted, and around them was their elite bodyguard.

Both he and Arinndier had protested this, but Yatsu had overridden them. 'You're too old and too important,' he had said unequivocally. When Eldric had leaned forward angrily, the Goraidin's eyes had widened as if he had just been confronted by an insolent cadet. '*There'll be no debate,*' he said. 'You'll have a bodyguard.' As a small concession, he added, 'It'll make the men feel easier.'

Now he was glad of it. He was too old for this kind of butchery. Old faces and old memories rode alongside him, and knowledge of consequences rode at his heels.

A hand clutched at his bridle. It was a pleading hand, he knew, but he slashed at it and both saw and felt it separate from its arm. There was an animal squeal and it was gone, into the bloody mêlée underneath the advancing squadron.

What had you crafted with that hand? he thought. What music had you made, or loved one's hair caressed? A massive rage welled up inside him. A selfish rage, he knew. *I will grind you under the hooves of my horses for bringing me to this again, you abomination!*

A spear struck his cuirass. It was a timely reminder that here only the needs of the moment existed. His left hand reflexively seized its shaft and his right hand brought his sword down savagely across the extended arms that held it; this time there was no regret.

He raised the spear high above his head and turned to his men.

'Oklar!' he roared. 'To Oklar. For Rgoric and Fyorlund. Death to the Uhriel.'

The cry sounded above the screaming and shouting and was taken up by the rest of the squadron.

Dan-Tor heard the distant cry. Darkness welled up inside him as it had in Eldric.

You shall have Oklar before this day is out, he thought savagely. Though it cost me this body.

'The right wing holds, Ffyrst. We'll have them yet.' Urssain's voice cut through Dan-Tor's black intent. Turning away from the mayhem being wrought by Eldric's cavalry he saw that the right wing was indeed holding. Meticulously it had wheeled around to assault the rear of the phalanx and it had maintained both its advance and its formation despite a charge from the defending light cavalry led by Darek and Hreldar.

As they had neared, it had become apparent that the Militia, with Aelang's Mathidrin at their backs, were not going to break, and the two Lords had veered the squadron away from the bristling rows of spears at the last moment, before their horses did it for them.

Now the Militia had closed with the line that the rearguard infantry had hastily formed, and bitter hand to hand fighting had begun in which the Lords' infantry were being pressed relentlessly backward. Hreldar and Darek's cavalry could do little more than skirmish on the well-defended flanks of the advancing enemy.

Dan-Tor's attention moved from left to right. The wedge of heavy cavalry was moving relentlessly

nearer, Eldric at their head, like retribution itself. As he looked at the ordered horsemen, Dan-Tor had a brief vision of Sylvriss laughing.

Yet their progress was being slowed by the panicking masses fighting to escape both them and the advancing pikes of the phalanx, while the rear of the phalanx was showing signs of disarray as their own defending infantry was pushed back into them. The long pike was of little value as an individual weapon and the phalanx depended totally on its close formation for its effectiveness. If this were broken by rear or flank attack then the whole phalanx could be disrupted, and the Lords' army would fall to the superior numbers of their enemy.

The battle hung in the balance.

* * * *

Down the aisles between Dan-Tor's workshops, Idrace and Fel-Astian were running frantically, their faces desperate with fear and effort. The four Mathidrin were running with them, quite willing to accept their judgement in the matter they had just set in motion.

* * * *

Dan-Tor debated, the din of battle washing around his cold heart. The clash of arms, the shouts of fury and terror, the screams of men and horses; ancient sounds. These creatures learn His lessons well, he mused. But the thought was transient; his predominant concern was whether the phalanx would be broken before the panic set in train by Eldric's cavalry spread through the whole army.

He looked again at the two main arenas of the battle.

It was too close a calculation.

He could not risk defeat. To lose so much so easily was unthinkable, and yet . . . it was possible.

Slowly, a dreadful resolve formed. He must use the Old Power. It would not take overmuch to smash the weakening rear of the phalanx and ensure victory for his army.

The decision brought an unexpected clamour of thoughts in its wake. Hawklan? Would the terrible Guardian be awakened? Then, the remembrance that Hawklan could not be Ethriss. And in any event, the green-eyed abomination was not on the field. He would have felt the presence of Ethriss's sword had he been. But the pain? The damage to his body? Such a modest use would be unlikely to kill him, but would it plunge him back into the darkness again?

A tiny spark flickered deep inside him, guttering remnant of a fire he had thought long doused. Your men face pain and death for you, how can you not share their lot? How can you, their leader, offer less than they?

He recoiled inwardly from this untimely reminder of his erstwhile kingly humanity. The pain and the hurt would have to be borne because they would be as naught compared to His wrath if Fyorlund were lost.

Yet, men must face men. His own words returned briefly to mock him in some way that he could not immediately fathom. No, it must be.

Closing his eyes, Oklar reached deep into his ancient skills and gathered his power. This must be finely

judged. He prepared his entire being for the impact that he must both deliver and receive.

* * * *

A thunderous concussion shook the battlefield.

Dan-Tor opened his eyes in shock. For an instant, his shadow spread out in front of him as though the sun were at his back; yet it shone still in his eyes. He felt Urssain turning and heard him gasp.

Imitating the action of his acolyte, Dan-Tor turned and looked upwards. Rising above the City was a brilliant, whirling mass of white incandescence, borne upwards on a column of smoke shot through with roaring flames.

For a moment, his mind refused to function, then: the workshops! His great warehouse! Who could have known the purpose of what was stored there?

Hawklan! It could only be he. The demon had survived! And once more he had reached silently into the heart of his enemy's domain to strike at him. Briefly the horrible rage of Oklar's dark soul transfigured Dan-Tor's face, though none saw it, all eyes being on the prodigy now dominating the sky above the City.

The glowing mass rose higher and higher, and the battle faltered, its terrible hubbub submerged momentarily beneath the awesome roar of the blazing column that seemed to be clawing at the sky as if to retrieve this escaping new sun.

Then . . .

'They're at our back.' The thought welled up from the defending army and was given voice by Urssain.

Dan-Tor spun round, back to the now strangely silent battlefield, still illuminated by the funeral pyre of his years of corruption.

The balance tilted.

Those lines of Militia that were so far undisturbed, broke utterly and the Mathidrin lines wavered ominously. Eldric's cavalry recovered and surged forward again through the now rapidly thinning ranks, and with renewed heart, the rearguard of the phalanx started to move forward.

Then a sudden charge from Hreldar and Darek's cavalry broke the infantry protecting the flank of Aelang's Mathidrin.

The battle was abruptly a rout.

Dan-Tor felt the reins of his power not so much slipping as being torn from him. The Old Power could not now change the outcome of this battle without surely destroying his mortal frame. Men must face men.

The faces of Hawklan and Rgoric and Sylvriss came unbidden into his mind, enigmatic, triumphant and mocking in turn. The cries of 'Death to the Uhriel' floated to him on the terrible screaming tide of his fleeing army.

He turned to Urssain. 'Withdraw the Mathidrin,' he said coldly. 'We retreat to Narsindalvak.'

Chapter 35

Eldric sat alone in the small antechamber. In a few moments he must go the Geadrol and begin the long telling of all that had happened since the King had suspended it.

Under the Law, Eldric could have declared himself Ffyrst and legitimately sustained himself thus by force of arms against any who chose to oppose him, especially in the light of Rgoric's last command and his holding of the King's Iron Ring. Indeed, he had given the thought some consideration after he had begun to get some measure of the harm Dan-Tor had wrought to the many institutions of Fyorlund. It was, however, only a fleeting consideration and following it he had simply convened the Geadrol in the traditional manner.

'I didn't help launch this country into civil war to replace one tyrant with another,' he said, when Dilrap and Darek had explained his rights to him. 'I – we all – have enough guilt to bear as it is. Besides, I know no other way than the Geadrol. It's a way that contains a wisdom that's beyond us all. Look how we fared when it was gone.' It was a difficult argument to refute. 'We must debate and decide our futures together, and in the sight of the people.'

And, in quiet moments such as this, it was guilt that dominated Eldric's thoughts. Even the victory could not truly be celebrated. It was some consolation that by virtue of their discipline, few of the High Guards had fallen in the battle, but many of the Militia had died or been dreadfully wounded, not least when the High Guards had tried to get through their rout to engage the retreating Mathidrin.

'They're Fyordyn, all of them,' Eldric had said, as he had walked through the lines of smashed and broken dead during the awful cleansing of the battlefield. 'Led astray in their weakness, just as we were. They deserved better than this.'

And Dan-Tor had escaped, fleeing at great speed while the Mathidrin had retreated, for the most part, in good order, fighting a ferocious rearguard action. After a few hours of cautious pursuit, Eldric had judged that the cost of attempting to capture Dan-Tor or even break the Mathidrin would be too high and, leaving an extended picket line to warn against an unexpected return by the enemy, he had turned his cavalry back to Vakloss.

Then there had been that brief but appalling spasm of private vengeance-taking, as citizens, hitherto silent, had turned on Militia members and others that they knew, or believed, had supported Dan-Tor's regime. That, Eldrichad crushed with force of arms.

'Any retribution to be meted out will be done in accordance with the Law,' he said with a frighteningly cold menace in his voice when incidents were reported to him. 'That same Law will be brought to bear on anyone who thinks otherwise. Better Dan-Tor than an unfettered mob.'

His hand idly fingered the elaborate carving that decorated the arm of his chair. Many problems vexed him. Some were difficult and painful such as what was to be done with those who had co-operated with Dan-Tor? There were many shades of guilt and mitigation there, from that of Lords such as Valen and Shalmson to that of the ordinary traders and public servants who serviced the regime. And indeed, what of the guilt of inaction to be borne by the majority? Many shades.

Other problems were frightening in their implications, high among these being the strange materials that Dan-Tor had launched against the phalanx and that Yatsu and the Goraidin with the aid of Idrace and

Fel-Astian had fired in the warehouse. Involuntarily Eldric shuddered at the memory of both, and at Yatsu's simple comment. 'If he'd used catapults . . .'

Shaking his head, he stood up and took the sword belt which was hanging from the back of his chair. As he fastened it around himself his mind became quieter. We will discuss all these matters in the Geadrol, he thought. I am not alone, nor ever have been. And we are all the wiser for these dreadful events. Let us have openness and honesty above all things. Only in the truth can we begin to understand, and only in understanding can come the forgiveness that will unify our country again and prepare us to face the real enemy.

Dilrap and the City Rede were working to re-establish the many offices of government and the Law that had been swept aside by Dan-Tor. The army had brought order back to Vakloss and was now searching out pockets of Mathidrin resistance in the more distant estates. The Goraidin were studying the ways of the Militia and the Mathidrin and watching the approaches to Narsindalvak. And Arinndier and Jaldaric were riding to Orthlund, to Anderras Darion, to tell the Orthlundyn of what had befallen, and perhaps to hear news of Hawklan himself.

Unexpectedly, at the thought of Hawklan, Eldric's calm faltered. He did not understand how it had come about, but he knew that it was Hawklan who had bound Oklar. But Hawklan was now strangely ill, while Oklar lived, and, bound or no, had put a powerful army into the field. And if Oklar roamed free, what of the other Uhriel: Creost and Dar Hastuin? And above all, what of Him, Sumeral, brooding in the cold wastes of Narsindal . . .?

Eldric swayed, and put his hand to his head.

I cannot carry . . .

But even as the thoughts formed, others came, like flank riders, to support him. Rgoric, rising anew after twenty years under Dan-Tor's hand; Sylvriss, riding free towards Riddin and carrying Rgoric's heir; Hawklan and Isloman, messengers from Orthlund, stepping out of mist-choked gloom on their way to expose and confront Oklar; the Goraidin, watching and acting where others had failed; Dilrap – funny, dithering Dilrap, perhaps the bravest of all, strewing Oklar's path with confusion while reporting his every deed to Lorac and Tel-Odrel; even Idrace and Fel-Astian, returning from Orthlund to fight their own war alone, wandering the countryside as labourers, watching and learning until finally they came to work at the heart of Dan-Tor's corruption. And what chance had brought them and the Goraidin together to turn what would have been diversionary fires into a monstrous conflagration which had tilted the whole battle?

I am not alone, nor ever have been, Eldric thought again and, straightening his formal tunic, he strode forward and threw open the carved wooden doors of the antechamber.

All eyes in the crowded, but silent, debating hall turned towards him.

* * * *

The story concludes . . .?

in

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