

Green Rider by Kristen Britain

GRAY ONE

The granite was cold and rough against the gray-cloaked man's palms. It was good, solid granite, from the bones of the earth itself. He traced barely perceptible seams between the huge blocks of the wall. It was the seams, he believed, that held the key. The key to the wall's destruction.

The wall towered above him to some unknown height. It was many feet thick, and it followed Sacordia's southern border for hundreds of miles, from the East Sea to Ullem Bay in the west. It protected Sacordia and the rest of the lands from *Kanmorhan Vane*, which in the common means Blackveil Forest .

The wall had endured for a thousand years. It had been built after the Long War at the turn of the First Age. For a thousand years, the denizens of the dark forest had grown restless, had festered, trapped behind the wall.

Now the Gray One must call on them and end their exile. He would bring these nightmares back into the daylight world. He would bring them slowly. Slowly at first.

The wall was bound with such deep magic that it prickled his hands. The magic was ancient and powerful, even for the works of those long-ago humans. Today humans understood none of it. They knew little of what their ancestors had been capable of. Nor did they know what they, the citizens of present-day Sacordia, were still capable of.

A good thing.

He brushed the layers of magic with his mind. Magic had been melded into each block of granite from the moment it was quarried, through its cutting, finishing, and placement. The mortar had been inlaid with strengthening spells not only to ensure that the wall stood for all time, but to prevent magic from breaking it.

Oh, the spell songs the stonecutters must have sung as they hammered drills into the rock and refined the mortar mixture. The wall was magnificent, really. A great accomplishment that had taken generations of humans to complete. A pity it must be destroyed.

The Gray One smiled beneath the shadows of his hood. He would return the

world to a state it hadn't known since before the Long War, far beyond the First Age, a time lost to memory; a time when humans lived in primitive bands that stalked herd beasts and game. There had been no kings back then, no countries, no organized religions. Just superstition and darkness. During the Black Ages, as that long-ago time was now called, they had had a better understanding of magic than they did today.

The Gray One looked up. The pink clouds of dawn were fading, and birds squabbled in the trees. His collaborators would be growing impatient for his return. He supposed they had every right to be impatient: they were mortal.

He closed his eyes and shielded himself. He began to follow songs of quarrymen and stonecutters wrought in a tongue modern Sacoridians would not recognize. The music sprang from the earth's bones; it wove strands of resistance, barriers, and containment.

The echoes of hammers wielded by stonecutters centuries ago clamored in the Gray One's head. The blows jarred him, rang deep in his mind. He gritted his teeth against the pain and probed deeper.

Men and women sang in unison. Their song intensified as his thoughts rippled along the seams. He caught the harmony of their ancient voices, allowed the cadence of the hammers to invade his mind, and he sang with them.

His body swayed to the rhythm, and dripped with perspiration. But his body was a distant thing now, an afterthought, for his mind was deep within the granite. He flowed within the pink feldspar and crystalline quartz, within the pepper flecks of hornblende. He felt powerful enough to withstand the Ages, untouched by the weathering forces of nature. He could endure anything. But he must surpass this power. He must become stronger than even the granite to break the wall.

His voice found its own harmony running counter to the rhythm within the wall. *All great things must fall*, he sang. *Sing with me, follow me.*

Far away, his forefinger tapped the new rhythm on the wall. It wasn't enough yet to disturb the hundreds of hammers, but it helped create discord. But did he detect uncertainty in the song? Did some of the hammers lose the rhythm?

A splintering akin to the spring cracking of lake ice scattered his thoughts. He lost his bearing. The song and rhythm faded, his solidarity with the wall wavered.

His body absorbed his mind like a sponge. The force sent him flailing backward, stunned and unwieldy in his corporeal form. When he remembered how to use his legs and arms, he inspected his handiwork.

Yes, yes, yes! A hairline fracture in the mortar. The wound would grow, and he could come back and break the D'Yer Wall!

Now he must return to the camp where the humans awaited him. Cracking the wall had sapped a great deal of his energy—there was barely enough left to transport him. He would be in bad shape for the rest of the day, but the soldiers would be impatient to hunt down the Green Rider.

Soon he would be done with this intrigue the humans so valued, but for now, it served his purpose.

As he slung the longbow and quiver of black arrows over his shoulder, he felt someone's gaze upon him. He looked wildly about but saw only an owl roosting on a branch above. It blinked, extinguishing its moon eyes, and twisted its head away, as owls do.

The Gray One had nothing to fear from an owl preoccupied with its early morning hunt. He spread his arms wide to begin the summoning. They trembled from the effort of having cracked the wall. "Come to me, O mortal spirits. You are mine to hold, bound to me in this world. Walk with me now and take me where I must go."

He willed them to him, and they couldn't resist his call. A host of spirits, like a watery blur, gathered around him. Some sat mounted on horses, others stood afoot. Among them were soldiers, old men, women, and children. Ordinary citizens stood beside knights. Beggars huddled next to nobility. All were impaled with two black arrows each.

"By the arrows of *Kanmorhan Vane*, I command you to walk with me now. We will walk on the quick time roads of the dead."

DEAD RIDER

Karigan G'ladheon awakened to the chitter of waxwings and chickadees. Mourning doves cooed and jays defended their territories with raucous song and fluttering wings. Above her, the sky opened up like an expansive dusky canopy that winked with stars. The moon hung low in the west.

Karigan groaned. She lay at the edge of a fallow farmer's field, behind a hedgerow, and her back wasn't taking it well.

She pushed damp hair away from her brow. Everything was wet with dew and her clothes stuck to her like a cold and clammy second skin. She remembered aloud

why she was here.

"To get away from Selium."

Her own voice startled her. Aside from the birds, the countryside was wide open and empty and silent. There would be no tolling of Morningtide Bell here, nor the familiar creaking of floorboards as her fellow students moved around in her old dormitory building preparing for a day of classes.

She stood up and shivered in the chill spring air. Indeed, she was "away" from Selium, and would get farther away still before the day was done. She gathered her blanket and things, stuffed them into her pack, stepped over the hedgerow, and started walking. She carried little more than a hunk of bread, some cheese, a change of clothes, and some jewelry that had belonged to her mother—the only objects precious enough to her to carry away. All the rest had been left in the dormitory in her haste to leave Selium.

She walked briskly to stave off the chill, the gravel of the road crunching beneath her boots. The rising sun, with its bands of orange and gold, drew her east.

As she walked, the glistening grasses of farm fields transformed into thick stands of fir and spruce blotting out the newly risen sun and darkening the road.

This was the edge of the Green Cloak she entered, an immense wood that grew thick and wild in the heart of Sacoridia. Its more tame borders marched in snatches and thickets right down to the shores of Ullem Bay and the foothills of the Wingsong Mountains. The bulk of the wood was dense and unbroken, save for villages and towns that made islands of themselves in its interior, and the occasional woods road that, from an eagle's view, she thought, must cut through it like a scar.

Such roads were often in conflict with their surroundings. It didn't take much for saplings to start growing in the middle of woods roads and winter blow downs to topple across them, eventually obscuring the least used. A carpet of rusty pine needles softened Karigan's footfalls and gave this road an abandoned look, though it was the main thoroughfare leading into Selium from points east.

Karigan walked till her stomach growled. She sought out a warm patch of sun surrounded by solid, cold shade, and washed down chunks of bread and cheese with handfuls of water from a gurgling stream next to the road. It wasn't the choicest water, but it would have to do.

Afterward, she splashed cold water on her face. She felt altogether bedraggled after just one night on the road, and she longed for the hot baths and full meals the school served up.

"Don't tell me I miss it..." She glanced over her shoulder as if the entire campus, with its templelike academic buildings looming over the city from atop its hill, might pop into view.

It was curious how a night on the road made yesterday's events seem somehow less significant, less hurtful. Karigan half-turned, gazing back down the road which, within a day's walk, ended at the school. Her hands tightened into balls and she clenched her jaw. She would show the dean.

Kick me out of school, will you? Let's see how you like confronting my father. She grinned, imagining her father, his expression livid, towering over a shrinking Dean Geyer.

Then her shoulders sagged and her grin faltered. It was no good. She had no control over her father. What if he agreed with the dean that her punishment was just?

She kicked the ground and pebbles skittered across the road. Gods, *what a mess.* She hoped to reach Corsa before the dean's letter did, so she could tell her father her side of the story first. Either way, she would be in deep trouble. Maybe she ought to hire herself out on a merchant barge and stay away for good. After all, that's what her father had done when he was a boy.

She jammed her hands into her pockets, and with head bowed, ambled along the rutted road at a reluctant pace.

She startled a baby squirrel sitting on an old lightning-racked stump. It pipped and squealed, its tail a bristle. It stamped in place, then darted from one edge of the stump to the other, as if too frightened to decide which way to go.

"Sorry I scared you, little one," Karigan said.

Chittering, the squirrel dashed into some underbrush and scurried noisily through the leaf litter of the forest floor, sounding like some much larger beast.

Karigan walked on humming an off-key tune. However, when the sounds of the squirrel did not abate but, in fact, grew much louder, she froze.

The racket shattered the woods. Trees and shrubs shook as if some wild creature—many times larger than a squirrel—thrashed in the twined branches and undergrowth. Crazy catamounts and rabid wolves played through her mind. She hadn't a weapon with which to fend off the beast, and she couldn't run either; her feet seemed to have taken root in the ground.

She drew a ragged breath. Whatever the nameless beast was, it charged her way,

and fast.

It burst from the woods in an explosion of branches. Karigan's breath hissed in her throat like a broken whistle.

The creature loomed huge and dark in the tree shadows. It huffed with great wheezings through flared nostrils like some infernal demon. Karigan closed her eyes and stepped back. When she looked again, a horse and rider, not some evil dragon of legend, staggered onto the road. Twigs and leaves fell from them to the ground.

The horse, a long-legged chestnut, was lathered with sweat and huffed as if from a hard run. The rider slumped over the chestnut's neck. He was clad in a green uniform. Branches had lashed trails of blood across his white face. His broad-shouldered frame twitched with fatigue.

He half dismounted, half fell from the horse. Karigan cried out when she saw two black-shafted arrows impaled in his back.

"Please..." He beckoned her with a crimson glove.

She took one hesitant step forward.

The rider was only a few years older than she. Black hair was plastered across his pain-creased brow. Blue eyes blazed bright with fever. With the two arrows buried in his back, he looked as if he had fought off death longer than any mortal should have.

He was of Sacoridia, Karigan was certain, though the green uniforms were far rarer than the black and silver of the regular militia.

"Help..."

Each step she took was shaky as if her legs could no longer support her. She knelt beside him, not sure how she could aid a dying man.

"Are you Sacoridian?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Do you love your country and your king?"

Karigan paused. What a curious question. King Zachary was relatively new to the throne and she knew little of his policies or methods, but it wouldn't do to sound disloyal to a dying servant of Sacoridia.

"Yes."

"I'm a messenger... Green Rider." The young man's body spasmed with pain, and blood dribbled over his lip and down his chin. "The satchel on the saddle... important message for... king. Life or death. If you love Sacor... Sacordia and its king, take it. Take it to him."

"I—I..." One part of her wanted to run screaming from him, and another part felt drawn to his need. Running away to Corsa, instead of waiting for her father to collect her at Selium, had held an irresistible air of adventure that she had anticipated. But real adventure now looked at her with a terrifying visage.

"Please," he whispered. "You are—"

The last words died inaudibly as blood gurgled in his throat and sprayed his lips, but she thought she caught a breathy *the one*. The one what? The only one on the road? The only one to take the message?

"I_ "

"Dangerous." He shuddered.

Everything around fell silent in an expectant hush, as if the world held its breath for her decision.

Before Karigan could stop herself, she said, "I'll do it." She heard the words as if someone else had drawn them from her.

"You's-swear?"

She nodded.

"Sword. Bring it to me."

The horse shied from Karigan, but she caught his reins and drew the saber from the saddle sheath. Its curved blade flickered in a patch of sun as she held it out before her. She knelt beside the messenger again.

"Wrap your hands around the hilt," he said. When she did, he placed his hands over hers. It was then she saw his gloves were not dyed crimson, not originally. He coughed, and more blood flecked the corners of his mouth. "Swear... swear you'll deliver... the message to King Zachary... for love of country."

Karigan could only stare at him wide-eyed.

"Swear!"

It was as if she already looked upon a ghost rather than a living man. He would

not allow himself to die until she swore the oath. "I swear... I'll deliver the message for the love of my country."

Although she had sworn, the Green Rider was not ready to die yet. "Take the brooch... from my chest. It will ident..." He squeezed his eyes shut in pain till the spell passed. "Identify you as messenger... to other Riders." The words were gasped as if he were forcing air in and out of his lungs by sheer will to extend his life. "Fly... Rider, with great speed. Don't read m-message. Then they can't tor-torture... it from you. If captured, shred it and toss it to the winds." Then, because his voice had grown so faint, she had to lean very close to hear his final words. "Beware the shadow man."

A cold tremor ran through Karigan's body. "I'll do my best," she told him.

There was no response from the messenger this time though his eyes still stared at her, bright and otherworldly. She gently pried his fingers from her hand and closed his eyes. She hadn't seen the winged horse brooch before, but now, pinned over his heart, it glowed golden in the sun. Absently she wiped bloody finger marks off her hands onto her trousers and then unclasped the brooch.

A curious sensation, not at all unpleasant, as if all her nerves sang in unison, tingled throughout her body. The gold warmth of the sun embraced her, and drove the shadowy chill away. There was a fluttering like great white wings beating the air, and the sound of silver-shod hooves galloping...

Moments later, the sensation receded, and she realized the sound was her own excited heartbeat, and the sun had risen sufficiently to widen the patch of light she stood in. Nothing more. She pinned the brooch to her shirt.

She then sensed, like a breeze whispering through a hundred aspen trees, invisible lips that seemed to murmur, *Welcome, Rider*.

Karigan shook her head to clear it of such fancies, and turned to practical matters. What to do with the messenger's body? She couldn't just leave it lying there in the middle of the road exposed to carrion birds and passersby, could she? She wouldn't want to stumble across a body in the middle of the road during her travels. It just wasn't right to leave it there.

She grimaced. The body was too heavy for her to drag into the woods by herself, and how would she bury it? She most certainly hadn't packed a shovel. It seemed wrong to leave the body out in the open, but... she had to try. Then, as if a voice said to her, *Don't waste the time*, she backed away from the body and took up the reins of the horse.

And still she hesitated. The least she could do was leave the saber with the

messenger to show how bravely he had died. But what if she met up with the people who had struck him with the arrows? She would need some kind of defense, even if a saber wasn't any good against arrows.

Practicality won out, and she slid the blade back into its sheath.

The messenger had told her to fly, but running the horse to his death would serve no purpose. She would walk him and mount up only when he seemed at least partially recovered.

The horse was a sorry-looking beast. His legs were long but thick; obviously he had been bred to run fast for distances with no thought to aesthetics. His neck reminded Karigan of her father's descriptions of some long-necked wild beasts he had seen on one of his voyages. The horse's coarse chestnut hide was crisscrossed with old scars.

"I wish I knew your name," Karigan told him as they plodded along.

The horse curved his neck to look, not at her, but behind her. She glanced back, too. The messenger's body had already fallen behind a bend in the road, and there was nothing to see besides the pointy shadows of spruce trees shrinking as the morning progressed.

She shuddered. The messenger's twisted, tortured form would stay in her memory for some time to come. She had helped lay out the corpses of old aunts and uncles for funerals, but they had died peacefully in their sleep, not with arrows driven into their backs.

This message business was a huge change of plans. Home was out of the question. Karigan bit her lip. Her father would be aggrieved enough by her suspension from school, and now she was running off on some reckless errand without having considered the consequences.

She could almost hear her aunts enumerating her deficiencies: *Feckless*, Aunt Gretta would say; *Willful*, Aunt Brini would add; *Impulsive*, Aunt Tory would declare. Aunt Stace would sum it all up with, *G'ladheon*, and all the aunts would nod knowingly in mutual agreement.

Karigan thrust a strand of hair behind her ear. She could not help but concur with her aunts' assessment. It seemed she always made the wrong choices—the kind that got her into trouble.

It was too late to turn back now, though. She had made a promise. She had sworn to the Green Rider she would take the message to King Zachary himself.

She had visited Sacor City once as a young child, and at the time, elderly Queen Isen, Zachary's grandmother, reigned over Sacoridia. Zachary's father had ascended the throne only to fall ill and die a short time later. Zachary's ascension to the throne had been challenged by his brother, Prince Amilton, but why, she did not know. She assumed all royals engaged in squabbles whenever power and prestige were at stake.

Now her ignorance annoyed her. What could be happening in the land that meant a life-or-death message for the king? What did the message contain that was so vital someone was willing to kill for it? She longed to look at the contents of the message, but the Green Rider had ordered her not to.

Belatedly, she wondered how much danger she had put herself in. She was all alone amidst the wild forest lands of Sacoridia. She carried a message for which a man had been pursued and killed. She let out a trembling sigh, suddenly yearning for home; to be held in the safety of her father's arms and to hear her aunts gossiping in the kitchen. She missed the big old house in Corsa and the predictable and unimportant concerns of everyday life that pulsed and flowed through it.

The recklessness of her decision to carry the message truly set in. With a sinking feeling, she knew it would be a long time before she saw home again.

Three wooden arms branched from a cedar signpost planted in a grassy island in the middle of the intersection. From the south arm hung a shingle indicating the River Road. More shingles, carved with the names of towns along the way, hung beneath it. If Karigan were going home, she would take this road.

The middle arm pointed to the well-maintained King-way which bore east, the most direct route to Sacor City and King Zachary. Her father had said the Kingway would one day be paved all the way from Sacor City to Selium, increasing commerce and prosperity for all the villages situated along it.

The third arm pointed toward an ill-kept, overgrown track. The one shingle hanging from it bore one ominous word: North.

Estral, Karigan's good friend at school—her only friend at school—had hinted there was more activity up north in recent months and that King Zachary had reinforced the borders with armed patrols. But Estral, who pursued the craft of the minstrels and seemed to come by incalculable amounts of information from unguessable sources, never said exactly where the trouble was emanating from. Mysterious Elt Wood lay due north, but somehow she couldn't fathom anything from that strange place deigning to bother Sacoridia.

The horse had finally cooled down enough for Karigan to mount up. The saddle

was a tiny thing compared to what she was used to. A light saddle made sense if you wanted to travel speedily, which she supposed most messengers did, but it would take some getting used to. It felt like there was nothing between her rump and the horse's bony spine.

The message satchel was strapped to the front of the saddle, and a bedroll, two small packs, and the saddle sheath to the cantle. She would investigate the contents of the saddlebags later when she was well down the Kingway. Maybe there would even be food inside one of them.

She adjusted the stirrup irons to a comfortable length, settled into her seat, and squeezed the horse's sides. He didn't budge. She kicked more insistently, but he stood his ground.

"You're a stubborn, ill-trained horse," she said.

The horse snorted and walked toward the North Road of his own volition.

"Hey!" Karigan pulled back on the reins. "Whoa. Who do you think is in charge here?"

The horse stomped his hoof and shook the reins. Karigan tried guiding him toward the Kingway again, but he refused. When she let up, he gained a few more steps toward the North Road. She dismounted in disgust. She would lead him onto the Kingway by foot if she had to. The horse tossed his head back and jerked the reins out of her hands. He took off down the North Road at a trot.

"Hey, you rotten horse!"

More horrified than angry that the horse was running away with the important message, she chased after him. He looked back at her as if to laugh and kept jogging for nearly a mile. Then he waited patiently, cropping the grass that grew in the road, for an infuriated Karigan to catch up. When she was just within an arm's reach of the reins, he swished his tail and trotted off again, leaving her to shout a number of curses in his wake.

The third time, Karigan made no attempt to grab the reins. She stood huffing and puffing before him with her hands on her hips.

"All right, horse. Maybe you know something I don't. Maybe the Kingway is more dangerous because it's the most direct route to King Zachary. We'll try this road for a while."

At this compromise, the horse allowed her to gather up the reins and mount. He responded to her commands as a well-trained horse should, and Karigan frowned at

his duplicity.

"That's right, you rotten horse," she said. "Pretend nothing happened."

He then adopted an uncomfortable gait that jarred every bone in her body.

"I do believe you're doing this on purpose."

The horse made no indication he had heard her, and continued on in his ambling, bouncing, potato-sack gait. Karigan clucked him into a canter which was equally jarring, but would make better headway. If foes were on their trail, she wanted to keep as far ahead as possible.

Red squirrels raced across the road before them. "Road" was laughable. It served more as a streambed when the ditches were too overgrown or filled with debris to drain properly. When Karigan reached King Zachary, she resolved to inform him what a sorry state the road was in, and demand that taxes be put to good use in repairing it. Well, maybe not demand. One did not demand anything of a king, but she would make a strong recommendation nevertheless.

Later that afternoon, she slowed the horse to a halt and dismounted. She threw her pack to the ground and searched through the saddlebags to see what would prove useful during her journey. To her delight, she found not only dried beef, bread, apples, and a water skin, but a thick green greatcoat, caped at the shoulders. Though it was a little long in the sleeves, it fit fairly well.

"Now I won't go cold." She took the food and water and plopped on the ground for a feast, and groaned. "Am I sore." She glared at the horse who nibbled innocently at some grass.

After her light supper, Karigan wrapped herself in the greatcoat. She dozed off, and in a dream, imagined that a filmy white figure approached the horse and spoke to him. The horse listened gravely to every word. She heard nothing but a low whisper. *Who are you?* she wanted to ask. *Why do you disturb my rest?* But her mouth would not work, and she couldn't shrug off her slumber.

A nudge on the toe of her boot woke her up. The horse gazed down at her and whickered. It was dusk.

"Are you telling me it's time to go?"

The horse waited for her on the road.

"All right. I'm coming, I'm coming."

They trotted along the road again, the flutelike song of thrushes echoing in the twilight. The horse compelled Karigan to ride through the night. It was an uncomfortable ride although his gait lacked its former tooth-rattling agony.

As she rode, the woods and the abandoned road began to take on a new, ominous character. Tree limbs clinked together like old bones, and clouds blanketed the moon and stars. Her breath fogged the air, and she was glad of the warmth the greatcoat provided.

A number of times she glanced over her shoulder thinking someone was following behind. When she saw no one, she pulled her coat tighter about her and tried singing some simple songs, but they died in her throat.

"Can't keep a tune anyway," she muttered. She urged the horse into a canter, but still the unseen eyes seemed to bore into her back.

DISAPPEARING ACT

By the time morning arrived, bleak and gray, Karigan rode hunched in the saddle. She was exhausted, but the sensation of being watched had disappeared with first light and she finally felt safe to stop and rest.

She slid from the horse's back onto wobbly legs and groaned. Riding class had been one of her best, but nothing had prepared her for endurance riding. Too tired to even eat, she loosened the horse's girth so that he might have some comfort, wrapped herself in her stained blanket, and fell into a deep sleep.

She guessed it was late morning when she awakened. Gray clouds foretold showers to come. She leaned against a gnarled ash tree and slipped her chilled hands into the pockets of the greatcoat, and found, to her surprise, a piece of paper. Curiously she unfolded the crisp, white sheet. It was a letter written in bold script, addressed to one Lady Estora.

"A letter from our dead messenger?" she asked the horse. He blinked at her with long lashes.

She hesitated to read it. It wasn't addressed to her, or intended for her, and she feared invading someone's privacy. But the messenger was dead, and reading it wouldn't do him any harm. If she could find out who Lady Estora was, she might be able to deliver it to her one day. With this rationale, she felt better about reading it—until she realized it was a love letter. Her cheeks burned as she read:

My Dearest Lady Estora,

How I miss you these last few months; your ready smile and merry eyes. My heart aches with the knowledge that it will yet be a long month to the day before we see one another again. My brother insists it's not love, but what does he know of it? He has never loved a soul.

Karigan scanned the private, loving sentiments until she reached the final paragraph.

It is dreadfully lonely without you and to keep my spirits light, I think fair thoughts of you planning our spring wedding. Do not worry—dark arrows couldn't possibly keep me from you. With Loving Devotion, F'ryan Coblebay

Karigan clutched the letter to her chest and sighed wistfully, imagining that Lady Estora was the most beautiful woman who lived and how distraught she would be over her beloved F'ryan Coblebay's death.

F'ryan Coblebay. The messenger for whom she swore she would deliver a message to the king. The dead Green Rider. He was no longer nameless. How ironic his last line about dark arrows.

The horse jerked up his head, his ears pricked forward.

Karigan shook herself out of the reverie. "What's wrong? What do you hear?"

He pawed at the road. His uneasiness was enough of an answer for Karigan. She thrust the love letter back into her pocket and cleared up her things. Hooves clipclipped distantly down the road.

She stepped into the stirrup to mount the horse, but the saddle slid beneath his belly. The contents of the saddlebags spilled onto the road. She cursed and pushed the saddle to its rightful place behind the horse's withers, and stuffed the bags with their displaced goods.

A sudden gust took her blanket and it tumbled down the road with a life of its own. Karigan sprang after it, feeling like a clown as the wind took it just out of her grasp. Finally she pounced on it and ran back to the horse with the crumpled mass.

This time, before mounting, she tightened the girth, skinning her knuckles on the metal buckles. She sucked on them, tasting salty blood. Sweat trickled down her sides. The hoofbeats were drawing nearer.

There was no telling exactly how close the riders were, or even if they were the ones who had pursued F'ryan Coblebay. She was determined not to find out.

A fine mist fell and tendrils of fog reached out of the forest as Karigan and the horse galloped along the road. She didn't know what else to do except follow the road. If they cut through the forest, its dense growth would hamper their speed. If the people following behind were hoping to waylay the message she carried, they might have a tracker among them who could find her just as easily off the road as on. If she remained on the road and an archer with black arrows was among the group, surely she was an open target. No easy answer came to her.

They ran hard. She began to wonder how long the horse could endure this pace without rest. The fog, at least, would provide some cover. And where were they? Where did the road lead besides north? The stream of doubts flowed through Karigan's mind. She bent low over the saddle, queasy with uncertainty.

When they came upon an enormous fallen spruce blocking the road, Karigan was prepared to pull the tireless horse aside, but his stride did not flag. As he gathered himself beneath her, she grabbed handfuls of his mane and closed her eyes. He launched over the spruce. Branches slapped his legs and belly. Upon landing, his front hooves dug furrows into the soft road surface. A lesser horse would have refused.

Rain pelted down, the sky darkening as if it were evening rather than late morning. The road turned into a quagmire of mud, and the horse slipped and labored through it. When they reached a stream flowing across the road, instead of under it through a collapsed culvert, she pulled the gasping horse to a halt.

"Running through this mess will only break one of your legs," she said.

She guided him upstream. A tracker wouldn't be able to find hoofprints in rushing water. If they were lucky, the rain would wash away their prints on the road. The Horse, as she decided to call him for lack of any other name, seemed to approve, or at least he did not resist.

Karigan pushed away branches hanging over the stream, receiving an extra drenching from water accumulated on each limb. They picked their way over slick moss-covered rocks and through deep mud.

A granite ledge, mottled with green lichen, large enough to hide behind, loomed out of the mist. The road couldn't be seen through the fog, but it was close enough that anyone passing by could be heard. Karigan concealed herself and the horse behind the ledge, and stood miserably in the downpour awaiting some sign.

Though only moments passed, the waiting was interminable. Karigan dismounted and, tired of the rain pounding on her head, drew up her hood. She leaned against the coarse, wet granite, berating herself for having left Selium at all.

When she left Selium, the possibility of encountering genuine danger had never occurred to her. Sure, she had wanted an adventurous life like her father's. And here it was, nothing at all like she dreamed it would be.

If something happened to her, she would be unable to clear her name in Selium. More distressing still, the people who cared about her would have no clues to her disappearance. She closed her eyes and could see her father scouring the countryside for her, calling her name, grieving... Her throat constricted, and she swallowed hard.

The Horse tensed beside her, his ears pricked forward. Voices could be heard from the road, faint at first, then clearer as they drew closer.

"No sign of any horse here."

"I don't like it. The Greenie's dead and you can't tell me the horse has the smarts to deliver the message by himself."

There was a long silence before the first voice replied. "Sarge, in my estimation, a ghost rides that horse. How do we stop a spirit rider?"

Sarge snorted. "You know I forbid that kind of talk. Don't let the captain hear it either. That's the problem with you rustic fools, you're all superstitious."

"Things was getting uncanny," the "rustic fool" answered. "These woods, the dead Greenie, and the Gray One. Ice cold, he is. It's not reg'lar."

"I don't care if it's regular or not. We follow the captain's orders and right now our orders are to find that horse and destroy the message. Understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

Sarge grunted. "Spirit riders. You rustics have lively imaginations. I've never heard such nonsense. Now look for tracks. Captain doesn't carry that whip as an ornament, you know. You don't want his leather licking your hide, I assure you."

So at least four searched for the message. Where were the other two if they weren't with the sergeant and his companion? Whose soldiers were they? Their accents were Sacoridian to the core, but surely the king's own militia would not be involved in trying to block a vital message from reaching him. Some of the wealthier provinces armed their own small contingents, as did major landowners. Would any of them have something to lose if the message reached King Zachary?

"Sarge! I got something. Looks like a hoofprint in the mud."

"Sharp eyes, Thursgad."

Karigan unconsciously grasped the winged horse brooch pinned to the greatcoat. It warmed at her touch. Trees shifted around her in the gently wafting mist like the shapes of armed soldiers. Branches jabbed at her like swords. Should she make a run for it? Could speed and surprise allow her and The Horse to escape? She remembered all too vividly the black-shafted arrows protruding from F'ryan Coblebay's back.

Trying to outrun the soldiers would be fatal. She would hide behind the granite ledge and flee only if she had to. If the soldiers believed the messenger horse was acting on his own, all the better. She unsheathed the saber and stood by the horse's side, ready to mount, just in case.

"I can't figure out which way the horse went," Thursgad said.

"Think like a horse. Shouldn't be too hard—they've got small brains like yours. They'd take the easiest route."

"You mean... straight down the road?"

"Whadya think I mean? Is your brain even smaller than a horse's? Yes, the road. Straight ahead. This hoofprint confirms it came this way."

"But if a spirit rider guides him—"

"Thursgad, you fool. Didn't I say none of that rustic nonsense?"

Their voices faded down the road. Karigan heaved an enormous sigh of relief and sheathed her saber. She swung herself up into the wet saddle, grimacing as cold rainwater soaked through her trousers.

Then she sat in indecision. Using the road might mean running into those who searched for her. She could cut through the woods and head east, but the woods would slow her down. She frowned. If she hadn't skipped so many geography classes, she might be able to think of some other route than the road.

The Horse whinnied sharply and danced beneath her, his hooves sucking in the mud.

"What now?"

The driving rain had changed to a penetrating drizzle. It fell away in layers like veils to reveal the approach of a mounted figure. The rider was much like one of Thursgad's spirit riders, gauzy and indistinct in the shifting fog, molded of mist,

insubstantial as air. His tall white stallion faded in and out of the opaque fog.

The Horse pawed the mud and snorted, every muscle in his body taut, willing Karigan to give him his head to flee as instinct told him he must. Her arms ached with the effort of holding him in. She sat rooted, fascinated by the stranger. Then she remembered F'ryan Coblebay's final words: *Beware the shadow man...*

As the rider neared, his form solidified and sharpened. No ghost was he, and his demeanor did not suggest he was a man of the shadows. He sat erect in the saddle. He stared at her with one intense green eye, the other covered by a black patch. Rain beaded on his bald head, but he seemed unconcerned. Beneath a plain charcoal cloak he wore a gold embroidered scarlet tunic. It was the uniform of one of the provincial militia.

The man halted the stallion's fluid movements with an imperceptible twitch of the reins. Karigan watched him through her tunnelloke hood. Water plunked rhythmically from the rim onto her arm.

The leather of the man's saddle creaked as he leaned forward. His eye searched her. "My men seem to believe you're some sort of spirit rider," he said in a gravelly voice roughened by a lifetime of shouting commands. "Who is beneath the hood?"

Karigan was too paralyzed by fear to speak. Why hadn't she let The Horse run when she had had the chance? She grasped the brooch again.

The man's green eye flickered. "I see from your hands that you are of the flesh. Though one Greenie is dead, another carries on the mission. If you don't wish to shed your earthly flesh like Coblebay, I suggest you hand over the message satchel you carry. And you will tell me who gave Coblebay the information."

Karigan sat frozen, holding the reins tightly, feeling as if someone clenched her in a steely grip. The Horse's neck was lathered with sweat, his eyes rolling wildly. Only her tight hold prevented him from bolting.

The cold rain soaked through to Karigan's skin and the clamminess of it made her shiver. The sodden greatcoat weighed her down and made movement an effort.

The man raised a brow and Karigan imagined the great gaping socket beneath the eyepatch widening. "My governor is most displeased by this. Someone has abused his trust, and all his plans will go to ruin if he doesn't learn the name of the traitor."

Karigan remained still.

"I see." He pulled what looked like a live snake from beneath his cloak. It was a coiled whip. "Since you do not volunteer the information, I shall have to persuade

you."

Karigan panted, and loosened her hold on the reins. Whatever had held her back now eased its grip on her. The whip unraveled in the man's hands, and he cracked it expertly.

"I will have you know that the hands that wield this tool of persuasion are well-practiced. Perhaps you've heard of me. I am Immerez. Captain Immerez."

Karigan had never heard of him, though a true Green Rider might know him by reputation. Her knuckles turned white around the brooch. She swallowed hard. If only she could snap her fingers and turn invisible! The brooch pulsed with sudden heat beneath her hand.

Captain Immerez stiffened, the whip going limp in his hand and his one eye wide open. "Where...?" He bent close again, his eye darting about. "Where are you?"

Karigan's mouth dropped open. Had he gone suddenly and inexplicably blind? Yet he seemed to see clearly. He just couldn't see her. She looked at... no, looked through her arm. It was there like a faint shadow, but definitely transparent. She jabbed her arm with a finger. It was solid enough...

Whatever rendered her invisible had affected her vision as well. The deep greens of soaked moss and pines became shades of gray. Immerez's scarlet tunic darkened to a shadowy maroon. Shapes grew indistinct as if a thick cloud obscured her sight.

Immerez's eye still searched for her. He unsheathed his sword, undoubtedly attempting to test by touch.

The shackles of indecision and fear fell away. The Horse needed no prompting as she gave him his head. They bounded down the stream, and she let instinct guide him, the grayness in her eyes lacking enough contrast or depth to distinguish rocks from water.

Once they nearly fell headlong, and Karigan was thrown onto The Horse's neck. He almost fell to his knees, then scrambled for his footing, slid through mud, and picked up the pace again. They careened around boulders and between trees in a breakneck dash that would have mortified her riding instructor. All the while, Captain Immerez's high-strung stallion splashed behind them.

An eternity passed before they reached the road. Karigan could only guess how the struggle downstream had taxed The Horse, yet he flew into a flat-out gallop when they reached level ground.

Thursgad and Sarge, at least the two men whom she guessed were Thursgad and

Sarge, appeared ahead, riding their own horses at a slow jog. Should she turn back? The whip whizzed past her ear. Immerez was just strides behind. But she was invisible. How could he... ? She blew past the two men ahead and got an impression of their amazed expressions.

"The horse!" they shouted.

Though she was invisible, The Horse was not. As she rode around a bend, she wished for him to be invisible, too. The Horse vanished from the pursuers' sight, leaving behind only the echo of pounding hooves.

Karigan rode on, feeling as if she were submerged beneath some gray sea, with water pressing in all around. She felt as if she fought the tide; her lungs ached for air. In the gray-ness, a gloom clung to her which she felt she would never be free of, as if she would drown in it. She was so exhausted. Exhausted and wrung out with despair in the never ending gray, gray world.

Then color shimmered like a newly created thing. A path opened up on the side of the road painted with rusty red pine needles and vibrant green hemlock, pine, and spruce trees. Tiny white bunchberry flowers grew in patches along the path. The sun broke through the clouds, and though it appeared just a lighter shade of gray elsewhere in the woods, along the path it showered through the trees in brilliant beams of gold.

Karigan reined The Horse along the path and slumped on his neck. She could see right through his chestnut hide to the forest floor. He halted, and she slid off his back onto a moist patch of sphagnum moss. She was too exhausted to even remove the sodden greatcoat.

As she drifted into sleep, she wished to be whole again—not transparent like some living ghost.

GRAY ONE

The rising sun was hidden behind the height of the great wall. One could look up and up, and even higher, but never really see the top. It was magic, of course. Where the real granite stopped, a magical shield continued in a seamless illusion of a towering wall. The D'Yers had designed the wall to seemingly surpass the sky and reach for the very heavens. There were flying things the Sacoridians and the League had wanted to keep on the other side.

The Gray One's original crack had spread its spidery fracture lines into the

surrounding seams of mortar, weakening a section of wall about the size of a doorway. This went far beyond his expectations—that the cracks would grow more than a few inches. He was closer to breaking through than he could have hoped for.

Time. Time had made the spells brittle and the mortar vulnerable. Without the touch of a mage to maintain the wall, it had weakened. Even now silvery runes shimmered on the granite blocks around the fractures. The runes were ancient Sacoridian and Kmaernian characters. They were runes of alarm; they warned of the fissures, of the weakening of the wall. They revealed unraveling spell songs, and rhythms that had been corrupted.

No one would know about the wall until it was too late. It was already too late. The D'Yers hadn't bothered with patrols for centuries, and even if they became aware of the cracks, they wouldn't know what to do. They would have to seek a scholar to decipher the runes, and a very learned master he would have to be. The language of Kmaern was lost with its people, extinct from the tongues of the living for centuries.

Even if the D'Yers could translate the runes, they would have no understanding of how to rebuild the wall. Like many other things, they had lost the craft. There was no threat to the Gray One's plans.

He splayed his fingers against the cold wall. It prickled, but without the intensity of before. He willed his thoughts down through his shoulders, down his arms, and through his fingertips. His consciousness spread across the wall like cracks, and he felt the resonance of his song still working in the rock and mortar.

The old voices had grown uncertain, and the beat weaker. With any luck, his song would spread along the entire length of the wall of its own volition and decay the spells that bound it together. In time, the wall would crumble to the earth and the power of *Kanmorhan Vanewould* spread unhindered across the lands. Not only would the Gray One win access to those great powers, but the lands would surrender to him under the threat of darkness that lurked in the forest.

He sang the unweaving, steadily corrupting the old spells, chipping away at mortar with his thoughts, convincing the granite it had been subject to thousands of years of freezing and thawing, to wind, rain, and snow.

Finally, he weakened it enough.

The Gray One moved each limb experimentally where he lay on the dewy grass. His body proved a hindrance at times, but it managed to absorb the shock with no damage.

His mind had experienced the worst strain while singing the counterspells, and when body and mind reunited after hours of unweaving, he had collapsed. His head throbbed worse than at any time during his earliest training.

It was midmorning; the soldiers would be anxious to find the messenger horse. Let them wait. They would find their quarry soon enough. First he must examine his work.

The fissures had spread along every seam across a width of about six feet. They had spread upward, too, to wherever the wall peaked. The Gray One placed his palms against the wall, and this time he pushed. The cracked section teetered and swayed, balanced on edge. The wall fell over with a shower of mortar and chipped rock; the ground rumbled like thunder as giant blocks pummeled the earth. Tremors shook beneath his feet.

When the dust had settled, rubble sat in a heap where a once impermeable section of wall had stood. Not only was the physical barrier down, so was the corresponding magical barrier that had shielded above it. The real wall was only ten feet high, whereas the magical shield extended far into the sky. His broken section would now serve as a portal.

Black tree limbs twisted and writhed in a shifting vapor beyond the breach. Much of the forest remained cloaked by fog. Unknown wild creatures screeched within. Soon. Soon some of them would find their way through the wall and into Sacordia.

He wanted to explore the forest, but there was no time. He turned away from *Kanmorhan Vanew* with some regret.

I will enter one day. But now is too soon. I must lay the groundwork.

A fluttering of wings on an old ash tree caught his eye. An owl launched from its perch and flew swiftly away to the east, soon disappearing in the distant sky.

It is sensible to leave, he thought. This will soon be no place for owls or other creatures to live.

He called his ghostly slaves to attend him. They swam in an indistinct mass before him. These had once been individuals with their own paths in life, their loves and hates, their skills and talents and dreams. Some had been good citizens, and some had been criminals. Indiscriminately, the Gray One had cut short all of their lives. All so they could serve him.

One stood off by itself, more rigid and defined than the others.

"Coblebay," the Gray One said. "You couldn't resist my call this time."

The spirit wavered as if drawn by the Gray One's words, then redefined himself. *I still resist.*

"Won't you help me take the quick road?"

I've come to see what you've done.

"Magnificent, isn't it?"

The spirit's face remained impassive.

The Gray One knew what energy it cost the spirit to appear to him, and yet resist. He stretched out a hand. "You will serve, not defy me." The magic of his command vibrated in his throat. The binding song flowed through his mind.

The spirit faded, began to drift toward him.

"Yes," the Gray One said. "You serve me." But even as he said it, he lost strength in his legs and staggered, barely maintaining his feet. The strain was too much. He asked too much of his body after having breached the D'Yer Wall. He would have just enough power and strength to travel. Reluctantly, he let F'ryan Coblebay go, and watched him vanish.

He wondered at the spirit's stubborn nature. It was strong, and it had its own agenda that impelled it to resist him.

SEVEN CHIMNEYS

Someone prodded Karigan's ribs.

"Stop it, Estral. I'll go to class tomorrow." She moaned and rolled over onto her back. The rich scent of loam filled her nostrils and the sun beat on her face. She blinked her eyes open. Clouds smeared the sky like fingerprints. This wasn't her dorm room.

Thump, thump. This time on her shoulder.

Karigan blinked again. Soldiers pursued her. Soldiers who would stop at nothing to possess the message she carried.

She sat bolt upright, and the world spun. She gasped in terror, feeling around herself for a rock, for anything with which to defend herself, expecting at any moment to feel the sting of Captain Immerez's cruel whip. But when the dizziness passed, two elderly ladies, not Captain Immerez at all, stood before her. She rubbed

her eyes to make sure.

"The child is alive," said one.

"I can see that very well for myself," said the other.

Karigan shook her aching head to make sure she wasn't dreaming, but the two still stood there staring at her in fascination, lively eyes animating crinkled elfin faces.

The plump one wore a dress of burnt orange and had a white apron tied around her ample hips. A kindly smile rounded her cheeks into robust humps. Her companion, in contrast, wore a sterner expression on her narrow face. She was dressed in deep velvet green with puffy sleeves, a black shawl draped over her shoulders. She leaned on a cane of twisted hickory, which she had used to prod Karigan awake. They both looked as if they were out for a stroll in one of Selium's manicured parks, not standing in the middle of the wilderness.

"Do you think we ought to take the child in?" the plump one asked.

"She does look harmless and frightfully out of sorts. It would be rude of us not to invite her to tea."

"That would surpass mere rudeness, I fear. It would be uncivilized. But what of the others?"

"They must be invited, too."

Karigan glanced over her shoulder to see who they meant, but only The Horse stood there.

"Letitia will have a thing or two to say about the mud."

The thin one rolled her eyes. "She always has a thing or two to say."

"The child does look like she's in need of a good scrubbing. She is very muddy."

"I agree. It would only be proper for her to be presentable, and Letitia wouldn't have so much to complain about." The woman then turned her sharp eyes on Karigan. "Come, child, and bring your friends. It's nearly time for tea and you mustn't keep us waiting."

The two ladies turned their backs to her and walked down a surprisingly well-groomed trail. A well-groomed trail? The last she remembered was a tangle of underbrush. She watched The Horse follow the strange old ladies, his ears twitching back and forth as if he listened to their nonsensical chatter rising and burbling like

birdsong. The woman in green halted and looked over her shoulder.

"Child, are you coming or not? It would be terribly impolite of you to be late. Look, your companions are joining us."

Karigan looked, but still couldn't see anyone but The Horse. She could only wonder who these eccentric ladies were and what they were doing in the middle of the woods.

They appeared harmless enough, and The Horse seemed to trust them. She snorted at herself: was she to rely on horse instinct this whole strange journey? It was her stomach, though, that decided her. It rumbled in an empty, cavernous way, and the thought of tea and cake was heartening. Legs wobbly and head pounding, she climbed to her feet and trotted to catch up with them.

The woods gradually grew more cultivated. The path broadened into a full-scale road wide enough for two amply outfitted coaches to pass one another. It was well maintained, too, compared to the North Road. Someone had cleared dead wood and the snaggle of underbrush from the bordering woods, lending the area an aura of order and balance unlike the chaos of the untouched wilderness. Neatly trimmed hedges lined the road.

They crossed a stone bridge which spanned a chatty stream. Warblers trilled in the woods about them. The pounding in Karigan's head subsided; weariness lifted from her shoulders.

The road ended in a loop at a stately old manor house built of stone and timbers. Several chimneys puffed balsam smoke into the air, and windows rippled in the sunshine. Vines crept up the sides of the manor house, blending it harmoniously into the woods. Several outbuildings of like character, including a small stable, were spread out behind it. It was an oasis in the middle of the Green Cloak.

The two ladies mounted the steps to the front porch which wrapped around the house. "Welcome to Seven Chimneys," said the woman in green, as if addressing an assembly rather than just Karigan.

Karigan counted the chimneys and came up with nine, not seven.

"It was built by our father long ago," the woman continued. "Come." She extended her hand. A fine tracery of veins like rivers on a map looped around her thin wrist and across the back of her hand. "Our servants will see to your friend, the horse."

No servants appeared, but The Horse walked toward the stable as obediently as if led. The two old ladies certainly were peculiar, but they didn't seem threatening,

and so she followed them into the house.

The floors were a light stained oak, and the walls were papered with intricate, flowery designs. Rich hangings, anonymous portraits of men and women garbed in armor or fancy dress, and hand-braided carpets adorned each room they passed through, all miraculously unfaded by time or sunlight.

Heavy furnishings were intricately carved, not a surface left untouched. One such chair in the corridor had a back carved in the likeness of a tree, its armrests and legs all leaves and sinuous, winding branches and roots. A red velvet cushion covered the seat.

Cheerful fires glowed in each fieldstone hearth they passed, and Karigan's damp chill began to be replaced by warmth.

"Letitia has set a bath for you, child," the plump lady said. "She will be none too happy about the mud you've let in, but don't let her annoy you. If she couldn't complain, she wouldn't enjoy life at all. Isn't that right, Miss Bay-berry?"

"Indeed. Mud season is the bane of her life, poor dear, and sends her into a snit every year. We endure, however. It is impossible to find good help out here." Miss Bayberry paused in front of a door and took a deep breath. "Well, then, child, we shall lend you a nightgown and robe after your bath. Letitia will see to the cleaning of your clothes."

They led her into a stone-flagged room where yet another hearth merrily crackled with fire. A solitary window looked out into the garden. Sunlight filtered through its upper pane, which was stained in the deep hues of wild blueberries and cast liquid splashes of blues and greens on the slate floor.

Plumes of steam rose from a brass hip bath in the center of the room. It wasn't what Karigan was used to, with Selium's porcelain tubs and piped water, but in her present state, the hip bath looked heavenly.

Miss Bayberry pointed her cane at the tub. "Take your time, child. Relax—you look thoroughly done in."

The two left, pulling the door shut behind them. The voice of the plump one drifted back to Karigan from somewhere down the corridor: "I think our etiquette has improved over the years, dear sister."

The other made a muffled agreement.

Karigan disrobed, untidily dropping her clothes on the floor. A bucket of cold water and a dipper stood next to the tub. She ladled enough cold water into the bath

to make it bearable, but it was still shockingly hot as she submerged.

Sprigs of mint floated on the water, the scent soothing and relaxing her. Her body quickly adapted to the heat, and her taut muscles loosened. Before she became too languid, she set about cleaning several days' accumulation of grit from herself. Her long hair wasn't easily managed, but she struggled with it till it was clean and fully rinsed.

She sighed blissfully and eventually dozed off. When she awakened, the bath water was still comfortably warm, and sunshine still glimmered through the window as before. Yet, she couldn't help but think hours had passed.

Her clothes had disappeared, but the promised nightgown and robe hung from pegs on the wall, a comb placed on a side table, and a pair of soft suede slippers were on the floor below.

They do think of everything.

When she was dry, robed, and her long hair was combed out, the pleasant smell of mint lingered on her skin and hair. As if on cue, Miss Bayberry tapped on the door.

"Child, are you prepared for tea?"

Karigan cracked the door open and smiled. "Yes, I'm ready."

"Very good. Bunch awaits us in the parlor."

Bunch?

Miss Bayberry, leaning on her cane, led Karigan to the most elaborate room of all. They sat on a plush sofa which faced yet another hearth. The sofa's armrests were carved with floral patterns and hummingbirds. Sunlight beamed through a broad window casting the room in a warm amber tint.

The plump one, "Bunch," Karigan supposed, carried in a silver tea service on a tray and set it on a table before them.

"We use the silver for special guests only," she said. "Not that we receive guests very often, special or otherwise. Usually a wayward stranger lost in the woods. I trust you found the bath satisfactory."

"Oh, yes—splendid!" It wasn't a word Karigan typically used, but it seemed appropriate in this house of rich furnishings, and in the company of these two ladies.

Bunch poured tea. "Honey and cream? No, not you, my dear Bay. You know what cream does to your digestion."

Miss Bayberry *hrrrumfed* her opinion.

Butter cookies, scones, and pound cake were served with tea, and while the ladies discussed the oddities of weather and gardening, Karigan's mind brimmed and swirled like the cream in her tea, especially when Bunch poured a fourth cup which she placed before an unoccupied chair.

Miss Bayberry noticed Karigan eyeing the teacup. "I am sorry your other companion could not join us, but Letitia would not have him in the house. She was adamant."

Karigan couldn't take it any longer. "Companion? What companion? I've been traveling alone."

"Oh, my dear. You must be terribly unobservant."

"Or dense," Bunch said, not unsympathetically.

"I was referring, of course, to your companion whom you call The Horse. I assure you that though he did not join us for tea, he is being well tended by the stableboy."

"The Horse." Karigan shifted in her seat wondering if the women were mad. "And the other?"

Bunch and Bayberry exchanged surprised glances.

"If you don't know, dear," Miss Bayberry said, "then it may not be our place to tell you."

"Oh, come now, Bay. She will think us daft old fools. My dear child, a spirit accompanies you."

A swallow of tea caught in Karigan's throat and she choked violently.

"Oh!" fretted Bunch. "I told Letitia to leave the nuts out of the scones."

Miss Bayberry struck Karigan soundly on the back.

"*Awhata* accompanies me?" she sputtered.

"My," Bunch said. "She's deaf, too."

"A SPIRIT!" Miss Bayberry hollered through cupped hands.

"Please," Karigan said, her back stinging and her ears ringing, "I can hear fine."

"Ah." Miss Bayberry crooked a skeptical brow. "You are accompanied by a shadow. A specter, a ghost, a shade. You know, dear, a spirit." Her apparent ease with the topic was unnerving. "He follows you. You, or something about you, binds him to the earth."

Karigan paled. She had heard stories, of course, of dead relatives visiting those still alive and loved. There were many tales of spirits haunting buildings in Selium, but she had never given them much credence.

"Now you've gone and done it, Bay. You've upset the child."

"H-how do you see this spirit?" Karigan asked.

"Quite simply, the same way we see you." Bunch twisted her teacup in her hand. "He wears green and has black hair hanging to his shoulders. Two black-shafted arrows protrude from a blood-dampened back that will not dry."

"He calls himself F'ryan Coblebay," Miss Bayberry said.

Karigan's hands trembled. How could they know what he looked like or how he had died unless... unless they really could see him? They could have gotten his name off the love letter which had still been in the pocket of the greatcoat... The greatcoat had disappeared from the bathing room with the rest of her clothes.

Miss Bayberry placed a comforting hand on Karigan's wrist. "Not to worry, dear. Master Coblebay is only trying to watch over you, to see that his mission is carried out. After that, he will pass on. As it is, he tends to fade in and out. His link with that which is earthly is rather limited. One day, you too, may see."

Karigan shook her head in disbelief. Here she was, in this incredible manor house, with two old, eccentric ladies who could communicate with ghosts. Either they were cracked, or they were seers, or some other sort of magic was at work. "Who are you?" she asked. "And what are you doing out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Miss Bayberry rapped the handle of her cane on the little table. Scones and cookies bounced, and teacups clattered. "Bunch! Did we forget introductions? Did we?"

An expression of horror swept across Bunch's plump features, and she covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, Bay. In our haste to please, we forgot. It has been so long since anyone has visited. Can you forgive us, child, for forgetting this one basic

propriety?"

Karigan stared dumbly.

The ladies must have perceived her reaction as forgiveness, for they both released sighs of genuine relief.

"Well, then," Miss Bayberry said, "let us introduce ourselves properly. We are the Berry sisters. I am Bay and this is my sister Bunch."

"Our dear father, the late Professor Berry, gave us names that made us sound like some of the local vegetation," Bunch said with a chuckle. "Terms of endearment, really. They are but nicknames."

"We were born," Miss Bayberry said, "with the names Isabelle—"

"And Penelope," Bunch finished. "Though we rarely use our true names."

"We loved our father a great deal. It was he who built this house in the midst of the Green Cloak's wilds. He said it was the only way to absorb the power of nature and bring to the wilderness an element of civilization. What, with no towns nearby, and the unpredictability of living near the northern border, it was not an easy life, especially for our mother. Child, there wasn't even a road back then."

Miss Bunchberry smoothed a crease out of her linen napkin. "When our father built Seven Chimneys, he sought to provide Mother a respectable estate. He spared no expense for her, and even brought along the entire household staff from our original home in Selium."

"Selium," Karigan said. "That's where I began my journey."

"Are you a scholar?" Miss Bayberry asked.

Karigan frowned. "No." She hadn't been much of anything at Selium.

"Ah, well. Our father was. He was a master of many disciplines—so many that he just wore a white uniform with a master's knot. None of the single disciplines have white uniforms, you know, and Father was the only one to wear it. Soon he studied disciplines that were no longer taught... or approved of."

Miss Bunch leaned forward. "The arcane arts," she whispered.

A tremor ran up Karigan's spine. Magic was a topic to be shunned by most Sacoridians.

"Who is telling the story?" Miss Bayberry demanded.

Miss Bunchberry pouted.

"Don't interrupt again." Miss Bayberry cast her sister a severe expression, then cleared her throat and continued. "Father started to study the arcane arts. He spent years poring over old books and scrolls in the archives, first to learn the history of magic, then to learn its application. The latter made the Guardian of Selium nervous. You see, after those incursions made by Mornhavon the Black, who used such terrible powers during the Long War, people have been phobic of magic, as if using it would restore Mornhavon, or someone like him, to power.

"The Guardian finally demanded that Father either stop trying to awaken magic, or leave the city. As you may have concluded, Father chose to leave the school."

Karigan was incredulous. First ghosts, now magic. These two old ladies must be daft. Her hands shook a little as she set her empty teacup on the table before her.

"Was... was your father successful?" she asked. "At awakening magic, I mean..."

"Yes and no," Miss Bayberry said. "He had no natural talent. Either you are born with innate talent, or you can possess a device which provides or augments powers. Mornhavon the Black had natural powers, but he augmented them with a device called the Black Star. Father did try to create magical devices, but he wasn't very successful because the magic wasn't within him. The arcane arts are elusive. Still, he was able to accomplish some things. I expect you know all about magic."

"Uh, no."

Miss Bayberry raised both brows. "But surely you must know since you carry a magical device."

"I_ "

Karigan looked at Miss Bayberry, then Miss Bunchberry. Their faces were flat, their eyes questioning. The house creaked in the stillness.

"You are a Green Rider, are you not?" Miss Bayberry asked.

"No, not exactly."

The ladies exchanged glances and rounded their mouths into O's.

"Our question to you, then," Miss Bunchberry said, "is who are you?"

Karigan shifted uncomfortably in her seat under their intense gazes. It was as if

the room had suddenly iced over. She realized she would have to do some fast talking or... Or what? What could these two possibly do to her? With all the talk of magic and ghosts, better not to find out.

In acknowledgment of their penchant for propriety, she stood up and bowed the formal bow of the clans: one hand over her heart, and bending deeply at the waist.

"I'm Karigan G'ladheon of Clan G'ladheon," she said. "At your service."

"A merchant greeting," Miss Bunchberry said in hushed tones to her sister.

Miss Bayberry remained unmoved, absently caressing the smooth handle of her cane. "You'd best tell us your story, Karigan G'ladheon."

Karigan cleared her throat uncertainly. She glanced at the fire, finding some comfort in its warmth and cheerful crack and pop. "I, uh, left Selium rather abruptly." She took a deep breath. "I was a student there, and the dean suspended me. Indefinitely."

The sisters maintained their stoic expressions. Somehow it seemed terribly important to be honest with them. If she admitted her doubtful background, they would be more willing to trust her. Still, it didn't make the telling any easier.

"The dean suspended me because I skipped classes and such. He said my, uh, attitude wasn't good." Blood crept up her neck and colored her cheeks, and still the ladies stayed mute, neither condemning her nor offering comfort. "The main reason he suspended me was because there was this fight. And I won."

She could still see it clearly, the throng of students pushing and shoving around the practice ring to see what was happening, Timas Mirwell prone on the ground, spitting dirt, the tip of her wooden practice sword against the back of his neck. *You are dead*, she had told him.

Miss Bunch lifted a brow. "You were suspended for winning a fight?"

"I beat the heir of the lord-governor of Mirwell Province." At the time, she hadn't felt remorseful about challenging him to the fight, then thrashing him. He had humiliated her in a number of other ways since the first day she arrived at school, and she had finally had enough. But now, under the steady scrutiny of the Berry sisters, she had a new perspective. She felt childish.

"All right," Miss Bayberry said with a dismissive gesture. "You've established you were not the most desirable student which, in the end, caused you to leave Selium. Did you not think to face your problem?"

Karigan's cheeks grew warm again. "I was too angry. I ran away. That's when I met F'ryan Coblebay."

"Ah," said Miss Bunchberry. "This is what we were wondering about."

Karigan wiggled in her seat and felt the weight of their gazes on her again. But she had nothing to be ashamed of with this part of the story. She told them of how she encountered F'ryan Coblebay, dying with two arrows in his back, and anxious for her to carry his message to the king. She was careful about what she told them—it wouldn't do to reveal more than necessary. She wished she hadn't let the message satchel out of sight. She finished with her narrow escape from Captain Immerez and his men.

The sisters glanced at one another as if mentally conferring. The room warmed considerably.

"The spirit... that is, F'ryan Coblebay, wasn't able to tell us so much," Miss Bayberry said. "You've explained yourself quite adequately, dear child. Yours is a brave undertaking. Many would have quailed at carrying such a message under such serious circumstances." She must have noticed Karigan's stricken expression for she added, "Rolph the stableboy immediately placed the message satchel in the guestroom where you will be spending the night. No one has broken the seal of the message. Your other things await you there as well... except the device which is in our immediate care."

"The...device?"

"Yes, the arcane device. The one that caused you to fade out when you faced those brigands on the road. The brooch, child."

"Oh!"

"It isn't a particularly powerful thing," Miss Bunchberry said. "It may even be more trouble than it's worth. Letitia brought it to Bay and me when she set about cleaning that muddy coat of yours. Poor soul just can't abide mud. She'd clean it from the ground if she could."

"Ahem, sister," Miss Bayberry said. "Keep with the topic."

Bunch sent Bay an annoyed glance, then continued.

"Father had no one but us to confide his discoveries in, and to teach. Seven Chimneys wasn't a proper school like Selium, but it didn't keep him from his calling. Teaching, I mean. That's why Bay and I are able to recognize arcane magic like the brooch. It is probable you accidentally invoked its one single power: fading out."

Miss Bayberry produced the brooch in her upturned palm, seemingly out of the air. "We would like you to try to invoke the power of the brooch so we can see how potent it is."

Karigan sat up startled. For all the sisters' fetish for propriety, and seeming ingenuous natures, she sensed an underlying intelligence of which she was allowed to touch but a small part. There was an intensity about them, like a bright burning fire within, but hidden behind a facade of proper social deportment, lightly sugared scones, and fine silver. Was their simplicity a deception, so as not to betray their hidden wisdom? Or was it that their father had taught them well? There was little about them, she decided, that was simple.

"I'm not sure I can make the brooch work," Karigan said. "I don't know how I did it the first time."

"Just try for us, dear," Miss Bunch said. "Try to remember what you did just before you went invisible."

Karigan took the brooch with some hesitation. It was cold and heavy in her hand, the winged horse ready for flight as ever. She tried to remember the moments leading to her serendipitous ability to become invisible... Captain Immerez sitting upon his white horse in the rain, his one eye trying to see through her hood; a whip unraveling in his hand. She shivered. She had no idea what had triggered her invisibility except a strong desire to disappear.

"Oh!" Miss Bayberry straightened next to her, her eyes glittering. "The child has positively faded."

"She is one with the upholstery," agreed Miss Bunchberry.

To Karigan, the room had become leaden, all the furnishings, and even the fire, just shades of gray. Except the Berry sisters. Their eyes were as blue as ever—as blue as blueberries—and color and light danced about them, just like the colors of the trail that had led her to Seven Chimneys. Why the variation? The grayness weighed on her, just as before, and she wished herself visible again.

"We have learned much," Miss Bunchberry said.

"Child, your brooch isn't terribly powerful, just as we suspected. It gives you an ability to fade out, or more accurately, to blend in with your surroundings. It wasn't particularly potent here in the parlor because of the amount of sunshine coming through the window. It must have been extremely effective in the dark forest with all the rain and fog."

Karigan nodded, her temple throbbing. Maybe the terrible weather had been an

advantage in her confrontation with Immerez after all.

"I can see also that the device saps energy from the user. That is often the fault with magical devices, and even innate power. There is always some cost to use it, and for the trouble, it's often not worthwhile."

Karigan hooked a tendril of hair behind her ear. The brooch had proved its worth already. She dreaded to think what would have happened if she hadn't used it when she met Immerez. "I still don't understand how this brooch... how magic works."

Miss Bunchberry poured another cup of tea to help "restore" her. The steaming liquid extinguished the throbbing in her head.

"Of course we've just tried to explain magic," Miss Bunch said. "The little we gleaned from our father's teachings, anyway. But one can't explain magic, really."

"It exists," Miss Bayberry said, "as flowers bloom in the spring."

"As the sun rises and sets," Miss Bunchberry said.

"As the ocean rolls..."

"And as stars twinkle in the night."

"You see, child," Miss Bayberry said, "magic is. The world fairly glows with it. Rather, it did before the Long War, and for a while afterward. All we have left now are shards and pieces."

Miss Bunchberry folded her hands decorously in her lap. "Child, we thought from all appearances you were an indoctrinated Green Rider. The magic accepted you, and the messenger service does take young ones, you know. Only Green Riders and magic users could recognize that brooch. To the ordinary person, the brooch would look like something other than its present form. Maybe a cheap piece of costume jewelry, or nothing at all. It is a way of setting apart the false Green Riders from the real Green Riders."

"I don't understand." Karigan had never seen the brooch as anything but a winged horse. She had known it was pure gold—what kind of merchant's daughter would she be if she couldn't recognize true gold?—but she had thought nothing of it.

Miss Bayberry stirred some honey into her tea. "The brooch has accepted you. It wouldn't permit or tolerate you to wear it if it didn't perceive you as a Green Rider."

Karigan was aghast. "But it's just metal." And she was not a Green Rider.

"With some very strange spells designed within it. I'm not sure how the brooch accepted you as a Green Rider, but it may have been the duress of the situation when young Coblebay passed his mission on to you." Miss Bay tapped her spoon on the edge of her teacup. "Fortunately, the brooch found you worthy."

Or unfortunately. Karigan hardly felt worthy of anything at the moment, and such talk made her dizzy. "I have a lot of questions..."

Miss Bayberry reached over and patted her knee. "We understand, child. You left Selium under undesirable conditions only to find your life complicated by a dying messenger with an unfinished mission. I know my sister and I have said some unlikely things, but we are trying to be helpful for we have known some Green Riders in our lifetime—friends of our father's—who shared with him what they knew of magic. They were the best kind of people."

The sisters had said unlikely things, indeed! Ghosts? None that she could see. And magic? Karigan's fingers tightened around the gold brooch. She felt the urge to hurl it into the fire along with F'ryan Coblebay's message. Why had she taken on his mission?*I must have been out of my head... or daft.*

Maybe she could leave the message with the sisters and absolve herself of all responsibility. Suddenly the brooch flared with heat in her hand, and she dropped it onto the floor. She blew on her stinging palm.

"What happened, dear?" Miss Bunchberry asked.

"It burned me! I was thinking about getting rid of it and it burned me!"

"Arcane relics often have a mind of their own, and when they've made up their minds about something, well, there is no changing them."

Karigan groaned. How could an inanimate object have a mind of its own? She tentatively picked up the brooch. It was as cold and immutable as ever, and only her still stinging palm proved the brooch had burned her. Was she losing control of her life to a horse, a ghost, and a brooch?

"Poor child," Miss Bayberry said. "You ought to be settled into a life of ease and courting as with all girls your age. But I can see in you too much fire for such a life. Yours is an open road filled with excitement and, yes, perils."

"Never forget you are a creature of free will. Free will is everything. You may choose to abandon your mission. Choice, my child, is the word. If you carry that message against your will, then the mission has already failed. Do you understand?"

Karigan nodded. She had chosen to carry the message. Even F'ryan Coblebay

had given her the choice. To believe she had been forced against her will to carry it was to admit defeat before the mission had even begun.

PROFESSOR BERRY'S LIBRARY

Miss Bunchberry showed Karigan to her father's library so that she might amuse herself in a restful way before supper. The shelves along each wall were filled from floor to ceiling with books, their spines dyed in bright yellows and reds, deep blues and greens. Older tomes covered in plain, worn leather stood out amidst the color. Embossed titles in gold and silver gleamed on the bindings in the remnant shreds of daylight.

If Karigan were more of a scholar, she'd feel as if she had stumbled upon a veritable wonderland. The collection was greater than even Dean Geyer's.

Thought of the dean made her frown.

A bay window looked out into the formal gardens below where a bronze statue of the fabled Marin the Gardener, in her weathered, elderly visage, watched over the grounds. Sparrows and chickadees darted to and fro, feeding on seed left on the statue's outstretched hand. The popularity of Marin was greatest along the seacoast where it was said she had once inhabited an island in the Northern Sea Archipelago. Some island cultures deified her as the Mother of all Nature, while those inland tended to think of her as more of a sea-witch who brought good luck to the gardener, and kept a limited area in balance with itself. A winter for every summer, the stories went.

Her presence in gardens was supposed to bring a bountiful harvest of foodstuffs, and to promote the growth of colorful and glorious flowers. Lovage, delphinium, comfrey, and others grew beneath her beneficent gaze. Violets and bluets bloomed about her feet. In an adjacent plot, a vegetable garden was laid out in neat rows, tender shoots seeking the sun, and leaves unfurling over tantalizing secrets just beginning to take shape beneath the soil.

A brass telescope mounted on a tripod looked out through the bay window toward the sky. An expensive object to possess, even for someone as wealthy as Karigan's father. The ground glass alone was probably equivalent to two barges of his finest silks.

A fire crackled in a snug hearth, casting a warm glow over the room. The library was a very homey place in all.

A collection of objects displayed on a mahogany table drew her to the center of

the room. A navigator's astrolabe stood next to the pitted skull of some unknown creature. A beautiful harp set with emeralds, sapphires, garnets, rubies, tourmaline, and diamonds glistened in the firelight. There were many things that weren't set in any particular order: a whale's tooth with fine scrimshaw etchings of a sailor and a fair lady, a hunk of melted, glassy rock of unknown origins, a rusted dagger with a polished pearl handle, a gold coin indented with tooth marks... endless things to entertain a curious mind.

A miniature ship encapsulated in a bottle fascinated Karigan. It rocked in a frothy sea, square-rigged sails billowing, seemingly in a breeze. Tiny figures moved about on deck or climbed the rigging. A light fog moved in on the ship, and moved out. The waters calmed some, and the sails slackened.

She was tempted to uncork the bottle to see if the sea would pour out. She suppressed the impulse, but not before another caused her to grab the bottle and shake it. The "sky" darkened; foamy waves lashed the deck, and the ship pitched and careened. Rain fell in sheets. Ant-sized sailors scrambled for handholds, and she imagined she could hear their cries above the crashing of the sea. *Drop the aft riggin', boys, an' watch the top'sle, she blows down!* the bosun cried. Then, *Man overboard!*

The sailors staggered and crawled astern, groping from handhold to handhold, doing all they could to keep from being washed overboard themselves, but by the time they reached the poop deck, their companion had vanished beneath the roiling waters.

Karigan hastily replaced the bottle and stepped back repelled, trying to reassure herself that the ship's lifelike qualities had all been the effect of some illusion or magic, and that the tiny figures on board had never been in peril.

In time, the tempest subsided and the seas calmed. The crew dropped anchor and set about making repairs to sails and rigging. Karigan heaved an unintended sigh of relief.

Next she picked up a clear, round crystal. Dazzling silver rays flickered to life from within, and spread warmth through her aching muscles more effectively than the bath had. She fancied it was a captured moonbeam such as children chased, as she had once chased, on silver moon nights. She never heard of anyone ever capturing one. It was said that only Eletians were quick enough, but no one knew if the fair race that once inhabited the Elt Wood still existed.

Karigan did not believe moonbeams could be captured, but she could not explain how light flowed from the crystal. She held onto it for a time, allowing the heat to soothe her.

The lap harp drew her attention next. It was as old as anything she had seen in the museums in Selium, and ornate enough to satisfy any royal. She strummed the gold strings, and was stunned by its true tones and human voice. Single strings produced perfectly pitched individual voices; combined strings sang in unearthly harmonies. It was like having the Selium Chorale right in the room with her.

I bet Estral would like this.

Karigan wasn't proficient at playing any instrument, but no matter which string she struck, the harp made her sound like a master. The beauty of it kept her playing at great length. Every object in the room resonated around her. The light in the crystal brightened, and the little sailors sat or stood in an attitude of listening, their ship becalmed in a mirrorlike sea. Karigan shivered and detached herself from the instrument. The whole room seemed to dim and sag in disappointment.

The shadows grew long outside, and as dusk fell and darkened into night, pinpoints of starlight dotted the sky. The glow of the fire, which never needed stoking, and the crystal kept the library light and cheery. There were other objects on the table, but Karigan refrained from touching another. Everything was strange.

Instead, she turned her attention to the shelves. Despite the absence of Professor Berry, there wasn't a speck of dust on the books. Obviously they were still treasured and well cared for. She ran her forefinger along the spines of the books; they smelled faintly of leather and ink, but without a hint of mustiness. There were books covering all angles of Sacoridian history from *The Foundation of the Sacor Clan* to *The House of Hillander: A Guide to Practical Monarchy in Our Times*.

A large section was devoted to Rhovanny. One intriguing book was titled *The Architecture of the Royal House of Rhove Illustrated*. Karigan's father had once been to the castle in Randann and had described to her the wonders of the king's house. In the book, she found handpainted illustrations of some of the details he had described, such as the roof of the castle which reflected light like the corona of the sun. In the old days, the effects revealed the sun goddess' favor of the royal family to the common folk. The book disclosed the roof to be tiled by thousands of mirrors.

Some tomes were so old that the words were hand-inked in a script Karigan found agonizing, or impossible, to decipher. Many were in strange languages, or ancient versions of modern languages.

One such book was titled *Translations from Ancient Elish*. Elish was, or had once been, the language of the Eletians. She thumbed through the volume. The lettering, printed in fair Eletian characters, shimmered in the light of the crystal. She pronounced words which had been translated phonetically into the Common, and the harp hummed with each syllable she spoke. She hastily closed the book and

shelved it.

Undaunted, Karigan climbed a ladder which rolled along the stacks on runners. She found books on the arts and sciences. One row was devoted to the arcane arts. When she opened one of the books, she found only blank pages. No wonder magic was arcane!

The rest of the books on the shelves seemed rather dull. Several dealt with etiquette, and she doubted they had belonged to Professor Berry's original collection.

She left the stacks and paced around. She stretched taut muscles as she walked. Too many days in the saddle, and too many nights on the ground. The floor creaked beneath her feet, and she wondered when Miss Bunchberry would return for her.

She paused when the telescope caught her eye again. It gleamed more gold than brass in the flickering firelight, and aroused her curiosity. It was a rare opportunity for her to look at the stars. At school, the star masters hoarded the looking pieces, allowing only a special few to gaze through. She bent over and peered through the eyepiece.

Stars streaked across the lens as she adjusted the scope's position and focus. She located the Sword of Sevelon, a constellation of seven stars in the shape of a cross like a sword, and nearly as easy to find as the Ladle. The scope's range was amazing. Only the scopes in Selium's observatory compared in distance and clarity.

Legend had it that a great hero by the name of Sevelon had once served the god and goddess by attending to their affairs on earth, and dispensed justice as the immortals saw fit. In popular legend, Sevelon often manipulated events so they benefitted her fellow mortals, and kept the immortals humble. After many lifetimes of good work, Aeryc and Aeryon rewarded Sevelon by allowing her to ascend the crystal staircase to the heavens to dwell with the immortals among the stars.

When she reached the final landing, she cast her sword aside for all time, and it could now be seen still tumbling across the night sky. It was dominant in spring, the sword tipped up in the "salute" position, and as the seasons progressed into early winter, the sword spiraled until the tip was planted downward in the "warrior at rest" position. The sword then left the skies, only to emerge large and brilliant again the following spring.

Interestingly, Sacoridian legend depicted Sevelon as female, while Rhovan legend characterized her as male, despite the fact that a female statue of Sevelon stood in the great hall of the king in Randann. Whether male or female, Sevelon's exploits served as stories with morals told to the children of both countries. Sevelon was depicted as knightly, courageous, and good, while the god and goddess were

depicted as capricious, using humanity to suit their own whims. Karigan had often wondered if Sevelon was as pure as the stories made her out to be.

Just as she thought to turn the telescope elsewhere, the stars swam in her eyes. Try as she might, she couldn't focus or blink her eyes clear. A scene began to unfold, and though she tried, she could not pull away from the eyepiece.

Evergreens wheeled, merged, and spun like a kaleidoscope in the eyepiece. Fragments of an image fell into place and created a picture of the all too familiar woods of the Green Cloak and the desolate stretches of the North Road. A red squirrel paused in the road, then scurried across and into the undergrowth and shadows of the woods. A raven alighted at the top of a spruce, the bough bending under its weight. It squawked once and flapped its wings, watchful. All else was still.

Although Karigan couldn't place the section of road, it looked familiar. But then, there wasn't much to distinguish one part of the endless stretch of the Green Cloak and the monotonous miles of curving road from another.

Movement caught the corner of her eye, and the telescope obligingly zoomed in at a dizzying rate only to reveal herself. She watched herself lead The Horse away from F'ryan Coblebay's body. The Horse plodded dispiritedly behind her, his head bowed, while she walked on seemingly deep in thought.

I remember this.

As they rounded a curve in the road, something behind them caught The Horse's attention. The Karigan within the vision looked behind, too, just as she had done that day, but saw nothing. The Karigan who observed through the telescope, however, saw a shadowy figure following behind, bent and in green, with two arrows protruding from his back.

Before she had time to consider it, the vision dissolved as if flushed with water, only to reveal another. Bright sunlight washed the new scene, but she couldn't determine anything else about the setting. The soldiers Sarge and Thursgad had their backs to her and obscured her view. The telescope moved in slowly, allowing her to peer over their shoulders.

Captain Immerez sat on the ground soaked in blood which gushed from his wrist. His severed hand lay on the bloodied ground, stark white, and with the fingers still curled around the handle of his whip.

Revolted, Karigan tried to jerk away from the eyepiece, but she was held fast.

I will kill that Greenie. Immerez's whisper came breathy and close into her ear.

Like the turning of a page, the scene changed. Darkness flooded Karigan's eyes like puddles of black ink. Then Immerez's face appeared, a glowing orb, his features chiseled by shadows and flickering light, as from a candle or fire. He moved his face close to hers, rotating his head sideways to gaze at her with his one eye. The shadows shifted across his features and darkened half his face. He smiled.

A sticky wetness dripped into her eyes and Immerez turned into a luminescent blur. She blinked rapidly and the contours of his face sharpened. He pulled back and was surrounded again by the blackness. He thrust his handless stump in front of her face, the wrist now equipped with a metal hook. He turned it carefully and slowly so she might see it from all angles. It gleamed in the unknown light source.

Immerez then pressed the hook into the flesh just below her eye. She gasped at the sharp, cold pain.

Well met, Greenie, he said.

Pain ripped just below her eye. She made a strangled noise of terror, wanting to scream, but her voice was muffled and it was difficult to breathe. She wanted to paw at her cheek, but as if her hands were bound, she was unable to move them. Her breath rasped raggedly and quickly in her ears. The pain...

Then Immerez's face folded in on itself, and the pain ceased.

The next scene blossomed sky blue, with slow moving clouds trailing along in a chill spring breeze. Karigan stood amidst the green of the practice field at Selium. It was pocked with worn, dirt-floored practice rings. A crowd thronged around her. She held the point of her wooden practice sword at the back of Timas Mirwell's neck as he lay prone on the ground before her.

You are dead, she said.

Timas spat dirt. The roar of the onlookers subsided to painful silence. *G'ladheon,* he said, *that was dirty sword-play—against the rules!* He climbed to his feet wiping dirt and spittle from his mouth. He was a small young man and had to look up at her.

I dunno, Timas, an onlooker said. *Whether it was against the rules or not, she got kill point.* There was a murmur of agreement from the crowd.

Karigan, the watcher, struggled to release herself from the eyepiece, but still she could not move. *Must I relive this?* As if in answer, the scene continued uninterrupted.

It wasn't fair! Timas cried.

You just haven't learned that kind of swordplay yet, said someone else, and many in the crowd laughed. *At the top of your class indeed.*

Timas sputtered in anger. Karigan flashed a grin at her audience and dipped into a low, self-mocking bow. Timas sprang upon her unguarded back and swatted the wooden sword across her shoulders. Stunned, she fell to her hands and knees. Sharp pain flared across her back. The crowd watched in silence, unable to react.

What's happening here?

The crowd gave way to a stocky man with steel gray hair. Arms Master Rendle grabbed Timas around the chest and pressed on his wrist to force him to drop the practice sword. He let go only after Timas stopped struggling and kicking.

Then he clasped Karigan's hand and hauled her to her feet. *You all right?* he asked gruffly.

Karigan watched the rest, how Master Rendle humiliated Timas for his unwarranted attack by assigning him a month of drudge chores; how the arms master remarked on her abilities with a sword and offered to take her on as a private student. Yes, it was all familiar to her, but what she hadn't seen before, what she hadn't noticed, was Timas Mirwell watching from a distance as she and the Arms Master conversed, his expression one of unadulterated hatred.

Karigan shivered. Timas had gotten his revenge by taking his case to his relatives of status who lived in the city who, in turn, took his case to the dean and the trustees. Karigan had initiated the fight. She was the one to blame.

The scene faded out, Rendle talking to her softly, and Timas' glare radiating across the practice field to her like a flare of pure hate.

Karigan fought to pull away from the terrible visions, but the telescope wasn't done with her yet.

The brightness of day darkened to night. Little could be seen except a rider, cloaked and hooded in gray, mounted on a shadowy horse. She felt unexplained attraction, coupled with fear, toward the rider. She was drawn inexorably closer to him. He twisted toward her. Though she couldn't see his features beneath his hood, she felt his cold gaze as if he could see her where she stood in the library. Icy daggers of fear pierced her heart.

Who are you? he demanded. *Who watches?*

She felt unseen eyes search for her, and felt his smile. *The mirror goes bothways,* he said.

Karigan's mind screamed in fear.

The telescope, or maybe it was her own will this time, wrenched her out of that scene. But no sooner was she out than she was plunged into another. A tall man with almond-shaped brown eyes gazed at her sadly. She couldn't make out his surroundings, but she had an impression of a room of stone walls like a keep or a prison.

Kari, the man said, I need you. I need you here. Please don't accept that mission. It's dangerous and I can't bear the thought of losing you.

This man needed her? Who was he that he should speak to her so? She tried to call out to him, to reach for him, but she could not move or speak. *What mission?* she wanted to ask. *What danger?*

His image shimmered, then vanished, and she felt inexplicably bereft and alone. Stars filled the eyepiece once again. Released from the spell of the telescope, Karigan fell to her knees weak and breathless, her whole body shaking and drenched with sweat, her head throbbing.

She cupped the crystal in her hand and staggered over to an overstuffed chair by the unending fire. She curled up and heaved a sigh as the warmth of the crystal wrapped around her.

INTRIGUE

Karigan had not realized she'd fallen asleep in the big chair until she awakened to find Miss Bunchberry gently shaking her wrist. "Supper, dear child. Letitia has outdone herself."

Karigan stretched and yawned, and nearly walked out of the room with the crystal cupped in her hand, before she remembered it and replaced it on Professor Berry's table of oddities. Of all the objects in the library, the crystal seemed to be a source of light and warmth, and possessed no twisted qualities like the telescope. The silver light extinguished as her fingers released it. The room grew dark and uninviting without its radiance.

"I daresay," Miss Bunch said as she led Karigan out of the room, "it's been a long time since I've seen the moonstone aglow. It will not work for Bay or me."

"Moonstone?"

"Oh, yes. It holds a silver moonbeam."

Hairs prickled on the back of Karigan's neck. "You aren't telling me it's really—"

"Of course I am. It was given to Father by an Eletian years ago." Miss Bunchberry smiled, and her eyes became dreamy. "I rather fancy the story of Laurelyn the Moon-dreamer and how she built a castle of silver moonbeams, don't you? Silvermind it was called. My father wanted to go find it, but other projects diverted his attention, and before he knew it, he was too old for adventuring."

Laurelyn the Moondreamer. Karigan had heard the story as a tiny child, and had forgotten it long since. In her memory, she could hear the words as she sat wrapped in her mother's protective arms. "Tell me 'bout Laur'lyn, Momma. Tell me again." Her request was met with a warm chuckle. "Maybe you will build your own castle of moonbeams one day, Kari." And the story would be repeated till she fell asleep.

"Have I made you sad?" A startled expression crossed Miss Bunchberry's face. "Are you in pain?"

Karigan wiped away a tear. *Yes, and yes.* Aloud she said, "I'm fine."

Aromas of roast goose and baked bread drifted through the house, reminding her of Midwinter Festival: loud music, wild dancing, and plenty of imbibing. Her father always invited the cargo master and crew, and all the closest kin of Clan G'ladheon. Her mother used to preside over the affair, an element of calm and dignity amidst the frenzy of merrymaking. Her mother, with her high forehead and rich brown hair, the one parent everyone saw when they looked at Karigan.

The tears brimmed in her eyes again, but her solemn thoughts were dashed when she saw Miss Bayberry sitting primly at the head of a ridiculously long table that rivaled, in length, any in the dining hall at Selium. The silver was in use again, and the table was positively heaped with food. Karigan wondered exactly what clan had been invited to feast with them.

"Please be seated," Miss Bayberry said.

Fortunately, the three settings had been placed at one end of the table, rather than at opposite ends. Otherwise they would have had to shout to one another to carry on a conversation.

Miss Bayberry dropped a cloth napkin on her lap. "F'ryan Coblebay couldn't join us though we did the proper thing and invited him. It seems he expends far too much energy when in contact with that which is earthly, and he wishes to reserve it for times when he's truly needed." She sniffed, indicating how she felt about that. "The Horse couldn't join us either. Letitia was resolute that she would not have him in the house. To help compensate, Rolph has been feeding him premium grain and the sweetest hay."

"As you can see," Miss Bunchberry said, "we've observed proper etiquette. Letitia wouldn't have us dine in the kitchen, though Bay and I normally sup there. What fun it is to see Mother's old table in use once again. From time to time, relatives or my father's old colleagues would descend upon Seven Chimneys. Letitia would cook and bake all day in anticipation. Those were grand times."

Goose and sauce were passed around, along with the last of the winter squash, legumes, mushrooms, and dressing. A slice of warm bread spread with creamy honey butter melted in Karigan's mouth. It was like a traditional Midwinter Feast, except it was spring. Miss Bayberry poured Rhovan red wine in each goblet and Karigan could only guess at the vintage.

It was like spending an evening with a pair of spinster aunts, eccentric as they were, but oozing comfort and a sense of home. The canny intensity Karigan had witnessed before seemed to dissipate as the evening wore on and the wine bottle made its rounds.

When they had eaten all they could, they removed to the parlor where glasses of brandy awaited them, and the fire roared in the hearth as cheerfully as ever. Karigan sank into the sofa with the hummingbirds carved on the armrests, her goblet in one hand, and she told tales of her mostly silly classmates and Selium. Bunch and Bay raised eyebrows upon learning that the hot springs could be pumped directly into a bathtub.

"It was so long ago that we lived in Selium," Miss Bayberry said. "I don't think half the school or museum buildings you described were there when we were. Otherwise, the city hasn't changed much." She swirled her brandy in her goblet and smiled in a self-satisfied way. "Child, you have enlivened this house more in one day than we have been able to in years. My sister and I will remember your visit for some time to come. I can only hope that you have found your stay with us equally interesting."

Karigan nodded emphatically. Interesting was an understatement.

"Miss Bunch tells me you spent the afternoon in the library. What did you think?"

"It was... unusual."

Miss Bayberry cast a severe glance at her sister. "Bunch, did you just leave her there? Did you explain nothing? Give no forewarning?"

"But Father's old things are so harmless—"

"That is not the point. We caused our guest undue surprise. That was not proper."

Miss Bunchberry gazed sulkily at her lap. "The moonstone lit at her touch." Her voice was nearly a whisper.

Miss Bayberry scrutinized Karigan anew, and something of that hidden intensity reignited—and it wasn't just the glow of the wine or brandy. "My dear child, that stone has shone no light for many a year. How you called upon the moonbeam to glow I can only wonder. Do you have any idea?"

Karigan shook her head, wary. "No. I—I was just curious about the objects on the table, and when I picked up the crystal, it lit up." She wondered if she had somehow offended Miss Bay, but the old woman's expression was glad.

"What else did you observe?"

Karigan described her experiences with the bottled ship and the harp. "They were very odd." She shuddered, remembering the tempest she had caused. "I mean, they possessed qualities that were so real. I know it's illusion..." Her statement was met with lingering silence. "It was illusion... wasn't it?"

Miss Bayberry leaned forward and, evading the question, asked, "What else did you observe?"

Karigan licked her lips, a little nervous now. "Well, the harp sounded so human, unlike the lap harps my friend Estral plays, and she has access to the finest instruments in all of Selium."

"My dear child, arcane objects are... unusual. Of course, when you first observed the things on my father's table, they seemed relatively normal. After handling them a bit, you discovered otherwise. The bottle, the moonstone, and the harp are a few among several devices Father collected over the years in order to comprehend magic. He discovered, like you, that arcane objects can take on some very lifelike qualities.

"That harp has a very dark history. It was originally made by the finest craftsmen at the turn of the First Age, for a wealthy aristocrat. It was carved as no other instruments of those times, and inlaid with precious jewels, themselves cut by masters of lost Kmaern for whom rocks and gems were living things.

"The aristocrat was pleased by what he saw, but not with what he heard. When strung, the instrument sounded like any other well-crafted harp. The aristocrat, it seems, could not live with a harp that was not extraordinary. Remember now, this was a dark time. Magic was more accessible and understood back then. Mornhavon the Black was at the height of his power, and dark magic had a profound influence on many people. It was difficult to wield any magic without the taint of the dark, so strong was Mornhavon."

Miss Bayberry paused to take a sip of brandy. She carefully replaced her goblet on the table before her, clasped her hands, and bent toward Karigan to resume her story. "It's not known if the aristocrat had innate powers himself, or if another did the work for him, but he had the finest singers known in the lands, including Eletians who have the fairest voices of all, brought to his keep. Using methods unknown today, he extracted the voices from the singers and melded them into magical strings. Child, what you heard were voices from centuries ago."

Karigan remembered, with clarity, the crystalline voices of the strings... strains of some ancient past forcibly carried into the future... like ghosts. "What happened to the singers?"

Miss Bayberry tilted her head, looking beyond Karigan, a sadness in her eyes. "There is no record, but you can believe that if they survived the process, they lived without that which they loved most—their ability to sing."

The more Karigan learned about magic, the less she liked it. It seemed to bring nothing but evil and grief. "The telescope—"

"Oh..." Miss Bunchberry groaned. "Not the telescope. I do think, my dear Bay, that we should remove the lenses and crush them beneath our heels."

"Nonsense, sister. That telescope was one of Father's most treasured pieces. Tell me, child, did you see far when you looked through the eyepiece?"

Karigan noted there was no question of whether or not she had gazed into it. "I saw very far. Too far." She described the series of images as they had appeared.

"A sprinkling of the past, present, and future," declared Miss Bayberry. "Such a device could erode one's sanity if one had constant access to it. Father possessed a tremendous will to resist using it when he had major decisions to make. Believe me, he felt the lure, but he also felt it was human temptation more than the device itself that called to him. Indeed, no one should see too much of their own history or future."

Miss Bayberry fixed her piercing blue eyes on Karigan. "Remember, child, your future isn't made of stone. What the telescope showed you was what may happen if the present line of events continue."

Put that way, it sounded to Karigan as if the current of her life was out of her control. It wasn't a welcome idea. "Do you look into the telescope?" The sisters seemed to know so much about everything.

"Heavens, no," Miss Bayberry said.

"We've no need," Miss Bunchberry added.

The ladies would say no more about the telescope or anything else in the library. Miss Bunch left the parlor briefly, and returned bearing a wooden game board and multicolored pieces. She set them on the table before them.

"Are you familiar with Intrigue, child?"

Karigan had recognized the game immediately—it was all the rage in Selium. Two kingdoms battled for dominance, each piece possessing a different ability. Arranging the pieces in various patterns created offenses or defenses.

The pieces, in this case, were made of ivory or bone, dyed in the traditional colors of red, green, and blue, and carved in the likenesses of kings, messengers, spies, soldiers, and so on. The game was most difficult when played as a Triad, with a third player who was random—the wild card with no set loyalties one way or the other. The other two players could petition the Triad for allegiance, but the Triad could choose not to take sides and play for its own benefit. It was the never knowing of what the Triad player would do that made Intrigue exciting.

Exciting, if you liked the game. Karigan didn't. She lost every time she played. "I've played Intrigue a few times, but not often with a Triad." Estral had been her only friend at Selium. There was never a third person to play with.

Miss Bunchberry clapped her hands. "Splendid! Bay and I haven't played with a Triad in a long time either. Child, you will be the Triad, and if this first game doesn't last long, we can switch."

Splendid. Karigan remembered to smile, and because propriety was so important to the ladies, she said, "I'm honored."

"That's good. I offered to a guest first as was proper."

Miss Bayberry nodded in solemn agreement.

They played long into the night, each taking a turn as Triad. The gentle sisters transformed into ruthless opponents and Karigan found herself, as usual, on the defensive. Miss Bay took a general and three of her knights. Miss Bunch killed her queen and abducted a spy. She watched their pieces march across the star-shaped board and annihilate her kingdom, and she wondered, with a bemused expression, if she and Estral had been too kind to one another. The sisters did not spare an inch where Estral would have allowed a concession.

Karigan didn't consider herself a ruthless person. Rather, she considered herself wise to the ways of survival. The swordplay "tricks" the cargo master had taught

her, the stories her father had told her of his perils and adventures as a merchant traveling in far-off lands, her experiences far away from home among aristocrats... these were basic learning experiences for life. She had never thought of employing ruthless tactics in a harmless game of Intrigue.

When the third and final round was won by Miss Bunchberry, the older woman sank back into the sofa with an ecstatic giggle. "That was just so fine. I could play endless games, but I know it's late." As if to accent her words, the last embers of the fire crashed in the fireplace, sending a flurry of sparks up the chimney.

Miss Bayberry's lips were set in a taut straight line. She had won two of the three victories, yet she seemed none too happy about it. "I think the child wasn't putting her all into the game. Perhaps she believed she was doing the polite thing by letting us win."

Karigan blushed, as she often did, somehow feeling guilty. "I did try..."

"Tsk. Not hard enough. You've much intelligence for such a youngster. Use it. Many of the situations you come across in Intrigue aren't too far removed from real life. Many of the aristocrats use it as a teaching tool for their children, and it may have been developed for that exact purpose."

Miss Bunchberry looked scandalized by her sister's outburst. "Bay, you really oughtn't criticize our guest."

Miss Bayberry rolled her eyes in annoyance. "Bunch, sometimes one must go beyond the bounds of propriety and speak her mind." She jabbed her cane at Karigan. "Child, use your brain. Think on your feet. Being polite and reserved is how we were raised, but we learned the hard way that the rest of the world isn't that way. I've perceived from conversation that you comprehend such things, like that swordplay with whatsit... that Titmouse, or whatever his name was. In other words, child, propriety has its place, but don't let your guard down. In real life, you never know who the players of Intrigue really are, or what they stand for."

The words echoed in Karigan's mind as she followed Miss Bunchberry and the glow of the oil lamp up the stairs to the second story. Weren't Miss Bayberry's words much like what Arms Master Rendle had told her one evening after sword practice, as she repaired fighting gear at the field house? "Do not make the mistake you made with Timas, lass," he had said, pipe smoke curling above his head and up to the rafters of the field house. "Never assume the enemy is down and then turn your back on him. You will pay for it with your life."

In other words, expect others to play dirty. Miss Bayberry's words, and Arms

Master Rendle's, hung heavy with her, but every time she thought of Timas as "Titmouse," she was reduced to giggles.

"This is the east gable guestroom," Miss Bunchberry said. "You will see the sunrise from here and the morning sun will fill your room with warmth." She lit another lamp for Karigan's use. "Letitia has aired the place out and put fresh water in the pitcher next to the wash basin. She will draw a hot bath for you in the morning, as well."

"If I could see your Letitia, I'd thank her for her delicious cooking and all the details she has seen to." Karigan thought it rather odd she had seen no signs of servants, especially the often talked about Letitia.

"We will pass your praise on to her—if she hasn't heard already. Now—

Karigan put a hand on Miss Bunch's wrist before she could go on. "Why can't I meet Letitia?"

Miss Bunch brushed a gray curl from her face and looked at Karigan in surprise. "You want to know why... why you can't meet Letitia? Isn't knowing that she is here to serve enough?"

"No. In my clan, the servants are practically part of the family. It only seems fair to thank Letitia in person."

Miss Bunch clucked her tongue. "Dear, dear," she muttered. But when she saw Karigan's look of resolve, she said, "We are not fond of relating painful stories, child, especially when one's father is at fault. It was an accident."

"An accident?" Karigan's brows drew together in a perplexed line. "What was an accident?"

Miss Bunch's eyes shifted and she plucked nervously at the hem of her apron. "Letitia's invisibility was an accident. Oh, dear." Miss Bunch drooped into a chair as if overcome.

Karigan's mouth hung open aghast. "Invisible?"

"Very invisible. Far beyond what you are able to attain with your brooch, child. Completely, irreversibly, transparently invisible. She is more akin to an energy, or a ghostly presence, for we cannot hear her either. But we know she's there, for the house is tidied when neither my sister nor I have lifted a hand, our meals are prepared for us, and so on. We know when she is less than happy, for she starts sweeping up a tumult like a great dusty tempest. And it's not just Letitia."

"Not just... Letitia?" Karigan looked all around her, wondering how many invisible servants might be in her room this very minute. It made her skin crawl.

"Well, there's Rolph the stableboy, and Farnham the groundskeeper, too."

"And you said they are invisible by accident?"

Miss Bunch nodded mournfully. "Indeed, child. You see, Letitia was forever nagging Father. He tired of her pointing out the mud he tracked in from the garden, or the coating of magic dust he left in the library which she had to wipe up. He was consumed by his scholarship, and scraping off candle wax from tabletops, or leaving papers in orderly piles were not foremost in his mind.

"One day, as Father was in the library hard at work studying some form of magic or another, Letitia stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. *At it again, eh Professor? she said. A spill of that vile liquid in yon beaker will ruin the finish of your fine table and then where would we be? And after Herschel refinished it for you last month.*"

"Uh, who's Herschel?" Karigan asked.

"Herschel was our handyman. Was with the family for a hundred years, it seems. We believe he has passed on... Things break now and then, and no one fixes them." Miss Bunch emitted a sad sigh. "If he were lying dead somewhere, there was no way for us to see him." She paused for a few moments, then continued her story. "Letitia nagged at Father until he commanded her to silence. *I need quiet, woman*, he said, *not your endless nattering.*"

"Letitia is not one to just sit quietly while the chaos of clutter, dust, and bubbling fluids threaten to overwhelm her sense of domestic orderliness, but she had pressed him too far this time. *Sir*, she said, waving her dust rag in emphasis like a law reader about to present some crucial evidence to an arbiter, *may I remind you that you threaten the sanitary concerns of this household, and you with two little daughters under your roof?* She followed up that reproof with *atsk, tsk, tsk*. And that's when it happened."

"It?" Karigan asked.

Miss Bunch fanned her face with her hand. "Yes, it. *Shetskedone* too many times, and Father lost his patience. Remember now, their run-ins had been going on for a very long time, and the tension between them both had built up over the years. Father shouted, *Servants should not be seen or heard!* Well, that did it! We haven't seen or heard any of the servants ever since. Not one of them. But we know they're there."

"Wait." Karigan held up her hand. "Your father said that servants should not be seen or heard, and Letitia and the others just disappeared?"

"Well, no, child. Dear me, but I don't tell stories as well as Bay. I left out one crucial fact. The 'vile' liquid Letitia feared that would ruin the finish of Father's table was volatile with spells. The spells responded to his command unequivocally. He could not countermand it."

Karigan was aghast. "And the servants stayed with you even after your father... turned them invisible? Weren't they angry?"

"Of course they were upset, child. And terribly so. But they stayed in hopes that Father would find another spell to reverse the curse. He searched to exhaustion and illness to find one, and never stopped until he died. He was terribly remorseful, and I think the servants knew it. And yes, they stay on with us. Where else can they find positions, invisible as they are?"

"And so, that's it?" Karigan said. "Letitia and the rest will be invisible to the end of their days?"

Miss Bunch nodded with a solemn expression on her face. "We try to treat them as well as possible, and continue Father's search for a cure. We have picked up a thing or two about magic along the way, but so far nothing that will help the servants. Alas, there may not be an answer."

Karigan had no response this time, and Miss Bunch pulled herself out of the chair and patted her on the shoulder. "As I said, it is a painful story, one that we will never be free of. In the meantime, we go on as we must, and," she added in a whisper, "we take care about what we say about whom. You never know who is listening in!"

Miss Bunch moved to the doorway. "If you need anything, just call. I sleep down the hall. Bay can't negotiate the stairs very well lately, poor dear, so she has taken a back room downstairs. Sleep well. Breakfast will be served when *you* wake."

Karigan was left alone in the room which, like all the others in the house, was well-appointed. A porcelain pitcher and bowl stood on a wash stand. The heavy bureau, carved intricately with pine boughs and cones, was draped with hand-embroidered linens. A huge cedar chest, full of coarse wool blankets, sat at the foot of the bed. A pieced quilt with a diamond-shaped motif flared like a starburst.

She looked in satisfaction at her clean clothes neatly folded on the edge of the bed. She took the winged horse brooch from her robe pocket and pinned it to the lapel of the now spotless greatcoat.

She checked the greatcoat for the love letter and found it intact and undamaged.

Miraculously, or perhaps meticulously, the vigilant Letitia had removed it during the cleaning process, and replaced it after. The message satchel, too, had been placed on the bed. She hadn't dared to open the leather case before, and though she felt the sisters could be trusted, she did so now. Inside was an envelope sealed with the wax imprint of a winged horse. All items accounted for, she could now sleep in peace.

But then she caught sight of herself in the dresser mirror. Her image was like a ghost flowing by, her long white nightgown billowing behind her gauzy and luminous. She backed a few steps to gaze in the mirror. She found herself mostly unchanged from her travels, if a little thinner in the cheeks.

There was a blemish beneath her left eye. She leaned toward the silver glass for a closer look. It wasn't a blemish exactly, but a reddened crescent-shaped scratch just above the cheekbone, and just below her eye.

She remembered the image of Immerez through the telescope, and the feel of his cold, metal hook against her cheek. She touched trembling fingers to the mark, and turned away from the mirror. It was coincidence and nothing more. She could have gotten the scratch from thrashing through the underbrush, or from her own fingernail. She could have gotten it from anywhere.

Exhaustion was leading her to strange fancies, and she delayed going to bed no more. The bed was like the one her grandmother had used. It was so high that a stool was stashed beneath to help one climb into it. Karigan sank into the down mattress and clutched the blankets about her.

It was hard to believe she had been with the sisters for only a day.

This afternoon, she had been asleep on a patch of moss, not even sure how she had gotten there. Tonight, she lay in true luxury between crisp, cool sheets smelling as fresh as if they'd just been pulled off the line. She blew out the lamp on the nightstand and sighed in satisfaction. It had been a strange day, but there was nothing extraordinary about this gabled room or the comfortable featherbed.

Karigan nestled under the covers. The house was draped in silence, but outside peepers cheeped in their springtime chant. The last sound she heard as she drifted into a heavy slumber, was the *hoo-hoo-hooing* of an owl on a tree below her window.

In the morning, The Horse waited outside for Karigan. She had awakened to the warm glow of the rising sun, as Miss Bunchberry had promised she would, certain that she had slept hours upon hours. Yet, the sun was still low when she finally roused herself. Even when she took her time bathing, and breakfasting on the elusive Letitia's cooking, the morning advanced very little. Time seemed... well, flexible at

Seven Chimneys. She had slept in and taken her time in every endeavor, and yet, she was still getting on with her travels bright and early.

The Horse was tacked, the saddlebags bulging to capacity. His chestnut coat glowed in the sun—someone, probably the invisible Rolph, had given him a bath and thorough brushing, and he looked handsome despite his gangly shape. Karigan gave him a companionable slap on the neck.

"Before you go, child," Miss Bayberry said from the front step, "we've a few things for you."

Karigan glanced at the bulging saddlebags and felt the extra weight in her pack. "You've already given me so much—all the food and a change of clothes..."

"Nonsense, child. Those are just provisions. You have a little growing to do, and Bunch and I are concerned about your proper nourishment. We would like to give you some gifts. Very simple gifts." She held forth a tiny sprig with dark green leaves. "My namesake, bayberry. When you find resolve failing you, when hope is lost, or you miss the deep scents of wild places, take a leaf and rub it between your fingers. The scent will refresh you, and perhaps you will think of me."

Karigan smiled as she took the bayberry. The freshly cut branch was fragrant.

Miss Bunchberry had a shy smile on her face. She held in her palm a flower with four white petals. "Bunchberry is my namesake. There is a small patch in the woods behind the house just pushing up out of the ground with the spring. If you are in need of a friend, pluck a petal from the flower and let it drift in the wind. Perhaps you will also think of me. It won't wither soon, child, as a good friendship should not."

"One more thing, child," Miss Bayberry said. She pressed something cool and smooth into Karigan's hand. Thin slivers of light beamed through her fingers, even in the bright sunshine.

"The moonstone!" Karigan cried in awe. "I can't take this. It was your father's."

"Don't be silly," Miss Bayberry said. "It has taken to you. I daresay it never lights up for Bunch or me. And as for it being Father's... well, I'm sure he would have wanted you to keep it."

Miss Bunchberry nodded in agreement. "Take it. It will light your way and keep you warm. It was the moonstones, they say, that held back the dark forces during the Long War. It should serve you well. May the moon shine brightly on your path."

"Thank you... thank you." Karigan's eyes grew moist. "Is there anything I can do

for you? Take word of you to kin in Sacor City?"

"My, but she's taken to the part of being a messenger, hasn't she, Bay?"

"Definitely, but I'm afraid that we have no kin in Sacor City. Just a cousin down south and you wouldn't want to meet her."

"Miss Poppy is very cranky," Miss Bunchberry said.

"And that doesn't even begin to describe her. Child, you need do nothing for us, for you've done so much by giving us a little company, and as I mentioned before, Green Riders assisted our father in his search for knowledge. We are simply returning the favor. If you are back this way, do visit. Just watch out for brigands and thieves on the road."

Karigan didn't think the sisters had gotten the better end of the deal, but this wasn't one of her father's bargaining sessions. She looked the manor house over, at the windows reflecting the woods, and at the chimneys puffing smoke. "Why," she asked, "do you call this place Seven Chimneys?"

"You mean when there are more than seven chimneys?" Miss Bunch asked. Karigan nodded. "Why, seven is a magical number. Nine is not, and Father wouldn't use a name for his home that wasn't magical."

Karigan chuckled and mounted The Horse. "I don't even know how to get to Sacor City from here."

"East by north, child," Miss Bayberry said. "East by north will get you there."

When it was apparent no further information was forthcoming, Karigan reluctantly turned The Horse down the road. Glancing once over her shoulder, she saw the two sisters standing side by side as they watched her leave. She waved, and they waved back. She wished, with a sigh, she could linger.

All too soon, Seven Chimneys and the sisters disappeared behind a bend in the road, and shortly after, the road turned into a deer trail. She reined The Horse around, but found that the road was really gone, as if it had never existed. She circled around in the underbrush, but could find no evidence of it.

"A road can't just vanish," she muttered. But then again, neither could a girl and a horse.

MIRWELL

Tomastine II, Governor of Mirwell Province, sank wearily into his worn, hide-upholstered armchair, facing a stone hearth large enough to walk into. The fire would do his bones good. It would relieve his joints of aches accumulated over an active lifetime of hunting and warring.

Blast the cold damp, he thought.

The Great Arms of Mirwell, two war hammers crossed over a mountain crazed with cracks and fissures, on a field of scarlet, drew one's eye above the massive mantle. The creation of the Arms, according to the family chronicles, coincided with the formation of the Sacor Clans before the Long War. Clan Mirwell's ancient roots were imbued with crushing opponents, of possessing the strength to strike down the very mountains. The Mirwells had never governed their province with a bejeweled scepter of gold, but with an iron hammer of war.

Even so, over the generations, the province had grown quiet, almost sleepy. Two hundred years ago, however, it had not been that way. The clans had torn at each other's throats for land and the glory of the family. Clan Mirwell had absorbed more land into its borders than it had lost, and acquired a reputation for savage brutality. Ah, the glory, when you knew what a man thought and he expressed it with his blade, instead of today's spineless politicking of court eunuchs who stabbed you from behind with words.

The high king of old was no more than a clan lord himself, sitting in a pretty throne watching all his liege lords—the clans chiefs—gut each other. The clan chiefs had eminent control over their lands and all those who lived within their borders. Once a year, in the rare display of peace, the chiefs swore their fealty to crown and country, paid their taxes to the realm, and that was that. Although the chiefs of Mirwell were often the close confidants of the kings, and served as advisors.

Then King Agates Sealender, the last of his line with no heirs born to him, died of old age, and clan chief Smidhe Hillander, of Clan Hillander, ascended the throne. That's when history went awry. Mirwell combed his fingers through his lank gray hair. Yes, everything changed with Clan Hillander.

King Smidhe tamed the lands with his own forces, created permanent boundaries, and decried bloodshed between clans. He proclaimed the clan chiefs brothers and sisters, and said that the country of Sacordia could never survive if it did not stand as one. There were other ways, he said, than bloodshed, to find glory.

Indeed, the clans had never seen such unity since the Long War. King Smidhe said the founding clans of Sacordia, when they created a high king, had never intended the chaos beset by the Sealender line. Mirwell snorted. King Smidhe pacified the clans. The chief of Clan Mirwell had fought the new way, but the king's soldiers had come to him and Clan Mirwell was pacified, too. Mirwell's soldiery had

been decimated or run into the Teligmar Hills until they surrendered. The honor of the clan had never been clean since.

King Smidhe bestowed the clan chiefs with new titles— they became lord-governors, and new industry was encouraged. Commerce blossomed as timber was harvested and granite quarried. Eventually the paper-making process was discovered and the printing press invented. King Smidhe even encouraged good relations with neighboring Rhovanny and trade developed among lesser clans whose merchant fleets plied coastal waters, elevating Sacoridia's reputation as one of the wealthiest countries on the continent.

The old high king was called the Great Peacemaker, and Province Day was established as a national holiday celebrated throughout the country in the summer to commemorate Sacoridia's unity, and the man whose words were carved into his tomb in Sacor City. They read: *There is greatness with unity. Only if we lift ourselves above our base and bestial natures shall we stand as one.*

The fire hissed and steamed with rain that seeped down the chimney, and Mirwell shook his head. The raging blood of his clan had never been truly gentled. Tournaments and hunting diverted some of the blood lust, but there wasn't the same glory to be had. Oh, there were occasional forays into the Under Kingdoms. Mirwell had been on a few himself. But even now ties had been forged with those savages, and there was nothing. Nothing until now.

The governor was determined to raise his clan to its former glory, to once again attain a place in concert with Sacoridia's kings, to expand forth its boundaries that now felt too crowded. He would control commerce and the distribution of wealth. And he would do it the old way: by force.

Mirwell sighed, glancing at the crumpled letter on his lap sealed with the dean's mark. Before shaking the very foundations of Sacordia, he would first have to deal with his son, his only progeny despite a succession of wives and mistresses. Actually, he would deal with his son second. Someone was here to see him.

"Report."

Captain Immerez stepped into the flickering light. It gleamed off his bald head. He had spent no small amount of time waiting for his lord's notice. Mirwell was perfectly aware of this. Immerez's face remained neutral, however, and his bow was deferential, despite the misery his wet, muddy uniform must have caused him.

Immerez was young yet. He could stand it. The youngsters could traipse through the wilderness in all weather conditions, none the worse for wear. Mirwell had paid his dues in that way. The bear head mounted on the wall attested to his strength in the old days, and he was now content to manage his province by his fireside and let

the young ones do the work, just as his father had before him.

"My lord-governor," the captain said. "We've killed the messenger."

"Good." The captain could always be depended on to carry out his directives. He had been hand picked from hundreds of young soldiers years ago to help in raising Mirwell Province back to glory. "And what did you find out about a spy?"

Immerez shifted uncomfortably. His one eye darted to and fro, and he licked his lips. Rain pattered against the window. "We were unable to extract that information before he died."

"What? I don't find that satisfactory."

Immerez held his chin up. "The only way to stop him was to kill him."

Mirwell drummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair, which was carved in the likeness of a catamount's head, and rubbed smooth by the years. "Meanwhile, someone may be loose within my household, imparting information of my plans to the king. Where's the message?"

Immerez swallowed.

"Well, man, what is it?"

"The message... it—it got away."

"The message got away? What did it do? Sprout legs and run?"

"Yes, my lord. I mean, no, my lord."

Mirwell rubbed his grizzled eyebrows with his thumb and forefinger. "Explain."

"We chased Coblebay for days, and even more after we injured him. The day we thought we finally had him, he eluded us yet again. He rode like a demon, as if his horse had wings. Unnatural, if you take my meaning. He should've died days earlier. He rode off the trail and into the woods. We lost all trace of him, as if he'd disappeared completely."

"How do you know he's dead?"

"We found him eventually, on the Selium Road."

"So where's the message?" The governor's voice was tinged with impatience.

"With the horse." Before the governor could bark another question, Immerez

explained, "Someone took the horse. That fool Thursgad thought Coblebay's ghost still directed it, but we caught up with the rider, cloaked in a Greenie greatcoat, and very much of the flesh. This Rider *did vanish*."

"Greenie tricks, eh? I've heard they have uncanny abilities, but they are close-mouthed about it. Zachary keeps that woman by this throne. You know the one."

"Mapstone?"

"That's the one. Mapstone." He snarled her name. "He keeps her by his side and she looks at me like she can see right into my soul. I heard of Greenie magic when I was a boy and always knew to keep my mind clear around her, and my words honest. No sense in taking a chance, and I'm glad I haven't. Only a Greenie could disappear like that. What do you plan now?"

Immerez released a long breath, as if relieved by the governor's apparent understanding. "My men and the Gray One continue to track this new Greenie. I request additional help. I thought it would prove advantageous if we include a couple of Prince Amilton's people in the chase. After all, it is for him we are treading such a dangerous path."

"A couple of Amilton's folk, eh? Which ones did you have in mind?"

"His Weapons."

Mirwell chortled. "How very shrewd of you, Captain. We'll make our would-be king feel a little vulnerable without them, eh? And how very appropriate. They are already traitors to the realm, so by necessity they will be careful. By all means, broaden the search."

"What if the prince should protest?"

"Does he have any choice? Without our help, he won't be able to claim the crown as his." The fire popped, and the captain blinked. Mirwell ran his fingers through his beard where four white streaks cut through the gray like claw-marks. "You must stop that Greenie, Captain. We must prevent that message from getting through. If it does, our plans could fall to ruin, and the reprisal would be harsh indeed. We mustn't alert Zachary to his impending assassination. Find out also who the spy is, if one exists, by whatever means necessary."

"Yes, my lord." Immerez started to bow, but Mirwell stopped him with a gesture.

"And Immerez, if you fail, I shall carve out your other eye from its socket myself, and display it in a jar on my mantel until it withers away."

Immerez's cheeks blanched. He knew it was no casual threat. He completed the bow and turned smartly on his heel, leaving the library in brisk even steps.

Mirwell chuckled. Immerez was generally a competent man, but a threat wouldn't hurt. It was no secret the governor could have housed a museum of body parts taken from those who had displeased him.

The letter from Dean Geyer crinkled as he unfolded it for another read through. His idiot of a son had lost a sword-fight with some merchant girl and had retaliated by involving the Selium Mirwells. It seemed his cousins had things under control. The girl in question was suspended from school for the fight, causing her to run away. Mirwell, never fond of merchants, grinned. Maybe his boy held some promise after all. But governing a great province, a province that was destined to become even greater once they rid Sacordia of King Zachary, took more than simple retaliation and meanness of spirit.

The girl's name was G'ladheon, a name of the old days, but not an original Sacor Clan, and certainly the name of a lesser clan. A merchant clan... He had heard of it before, he thought, but it was one that did not frequent Mirwell Province.

He rang the bell at his side and presently his aide, Major Beryl Spencer, joined him. Her bow was crisp, but elegant. Ah, if he were only twenty years younger, maybe the two of them could have bred a robust, intelligent son. But he had grown too crusty, and another heir now would not only ruin all his hard work with Timas, but would complicate things inordinately.

"My lord?" Beryl perched on the edge of a chair and held a quill and paper ready to record his command, or to script a letter.

"I've an assignment for you, Spence," he said, using his pet nickname for her. "My son has gotten into trouble with a girl of a lesser clan."

"Shall I offer the clan reparation on your behalf, or shall we acknowledge the child?"

"Child? What? Oh, no, not that kind of trouble." It was an amusing thought that made him chuckle, and almost erupt into a belly laugh. Beryl's perplexed expression prolonged it. "No, I doubt the runt is capable of siring a child. I'd like you to find out about a merchant clan called G'ladheon. Find out who they are and what their home province is. I want to know how powerful they are should they seek retaliation."

"Yes, my lord. Anything else?"

"Send word to Dean Geyer that I need *dates*, not just names. I thought the man to

be intelligent, as scholars are supposed to be."

Beryl's eyes were questioning. "In regard to... ?"

"He'll know what it's about, and tell our messenger he must reply immediately. Dismissed, Major."

"Yes, my lord."

Beryl bowed and left him. An efficient woman, that Beryl. Mirwell liked to surround himself with efficiency. Efficiency meant competence, and competence meant that his goals would be achieved. He had but to command. He glanced at Dean Geyer's letter again. There was a natural history class full of high-blooded children at Selium, some of them the sons and daughters of clan chiefs. Interesting that the G'ladheon girl's name should be on the class list. In an odd way, Timas had saved her life by causing her to run away.

The field trip sanctioned by the dean would insure that none of the aristocratic children would pose a threat to Prince Amilton's ascension to the throne. Oh, there were others out there, thick-blooded aristocrats ready to take the throne, but they would be dealt with individually if necessary. Children were but a small sacrifice for a greater cause.

Mirwell wadded up the letter and tossed it into the fire. He watched the paper ignite and blacken around the edges, seeming to fold into itself until it was no longer there. This plan of his had to be thought through, and he had been thinking about it for decades. Only with the help of the Gray One had it seemed possible for it to become reality.

Beside his chair, a little table held an Intrigue board set with blue, green, and red pieces. Few were moved from their starting positions on the edges of the board, for only one man played this game.

Mirwell removed a green messenger from the perimeter of the red court. The pieces were ancient, at least very old, and made of enameled lead. The features on the pieces had been blurred by the fingers of generations of his family.

He laid the green messenger on its side. "You are dead," he said.

Then he moved another green messenger into the fray. He positioned three red soldiers, two red knights, and a blue assassin behind it.

SPAWN OF KANMORHAN VANE

Several days passed, punctuated only by the occasional spring shower. Karigan and The Horse drifted between the North Road and the cover of the endless forest, backtracking several times in hopes of confusing Immerez and his men should they pick up on her trail again. Every so often, she felt as if she were being watched, and was seized by an unnerving urge to glance repeatedly over her shoulder. But she never saw any evidence of pursuit, and The Horse didn't seem concerned at all. Could it be that the spirit of F'ryan Coblebay still followed?

At midday, she sat on a rock while chewing on a piece of dried meat. The Horse wandered nearby, cropping at grass that grew in the road and swishing his tail at flies. Karigan slapped at her own neck. The biters had emerged in abundance after all the wet weather.

After only a few days on the road since her stay at Seven Chimneys, she missed all the little comforts provided by the Berry sisters—the soft bed, hot tea, fragrant baths, and especially the conversation. It had been all very civilized. She kept the gifts bestowed upon her by the sisters close to her. The moonstone remained in her trouser pocket, and the bayberry sprig and bunchberry flower were tucked in an inner pocket of the greatcoat. Whenever she removed them, they were uncrushed and unwilted, and yet, she wasn't surprised.

The Horse nickered and looked toward the sky, blades of grass sticking out of the corners of his mouth. Karigan followed his gaze, shielding her eyes against the glare of the sun. Far above an enormous eagle circled. His size and dull coloring indicated he was one of the rare gray eagles who lived in the Wingsong Mountains. They were seldom seen so far from their mountain realm, and never at close range. Her natural history instructor, Master lone, would give up his master's knot to see what she now watched.

The eagle rode the currents, rising higher and seeming to float on the air, then swooped lower as though watching something. Karigan could imagine the feathers on his wings rippling, and the wind roaring in his ears. What breathtaking sights he must see from so high up! Could he see beyond the expanse of the Green Cloak to the sea? Could he see the spires of his own mountain peak home?

The eagle's circle widened—he was definitely searching for something—prey most likely. He hovered for a moment, as if frozen in time, before veering southward and out of sight. The Horse snorted and resumed his grazing.

At dusk they followed a deer trail to find a campsite for the night. Karigan winced at the thought of sleeping on the ground again, certain that her back would never be the same after so many nights of rocks and roots. Her precious, albeit bedraggled, blanket from Selium helped, but it was certainly no feather bed.

Biters buzzed in her ears. It was feeding time, and they chewed on any bit of flesh

she left uncovered. The Horse shook his whole body to relieve himself, and almost dislodged Karigan from the saddle in the process.

She scratched at a new row of welts on the back of her neck, wishing for a jar of priddle cream, obtained from the horrible smelling priddle plant, more often called stinky weed. Despite the pungent odor, or because of it, it was by far the best repellent against biters. Wishes were as solid as air, however, and she was no more likely to come across a pot of priddle cream as she was to sleep in a feather bed.

Without warning, The Horse stopped dead in his tracks and laid back his ears. Karigan paused her scratching.

"What's wrong?" she whispered. "I don't see anything."

There were any number of things in the deepening shadows of the woods that could spook a horse, though this horse was not easily spooked. Karigan waited for a moment, and when she didn't hear or see anything, she urged him forward. He resisted and stepped backward instead.

"I still don't see— " Off to their right, the underbrush rustled. "—Anything." The last word crept out in a whisper.

Karigan's eyes darted from shadow to shadow, searching for the source of the noise, but silence hung thick in the woods as if all the creatures within waited with bated breath for something to happen. The reins became slimy in her sweaty hands. The Horse shifted uneasily beneath her.

Just when she decided she must have imagined the noise, a creature larger than a horse exploded from the underbrush, scattering leaves and branches into the air, and hurled itself at them in a silvery streak.

The Horse reared, dumping Karigan out of the saddle.

Karigan groaned. The whole world moved and bumped in her head... her aching, groggy head. The greatcoat and her shirt were bunched up beneath her shoulders, and the ground scraped and dug into her bare back. There was a terrible pain in her ankle. Her arms trailed behind her in the forest litter. Trailing, moving, bumping. No, the movement wasn't in her head at all. Her foot must be caught in a stirrup and The Horse was dragging her.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she had to crane her neck to see. A huge pincerlike claw, not a stirrup, clamped her ankle. The claw was attached to a saucer-shaped body armored by a metallic carapace supported by six jointed legs. A flat tail arched over the creature's body with a stinger the size of a dagger protruding from its end

oozing with venom. Two black orbs glinted in the moonlight, moving on the end of eyestalks. A mandible worked where its mouth was, and two slender antennae felt the path ahead as the creature ambled crablike deeper into the woods. A second claw snapped at The Horse, forcing him to keep his distance.

Karigan almost lost consciousness again, but she fought it off. Oblivion, no matter how inviting, was not going to help her. Instead, she screamed.

Then like a frightened animal snared in a trap, she squirmed and thrashed and snarled, but the claw held her fast, and in fact tightened and cut into her ankle. She moaned with the pain. She sat up even as she was being dragged, and tried to loosen the giant claw with her hands. The shell was as hard as a knight's plate armor, and the claw wouldn't budge. Her toes began to feel numb. She fell back, puffing from the exertion, letting her hands trail in the leaf litter. Her head throbbed so and she felt as though she might vomit. Where was the creature taking her?

Gods... She stifled a helpless sob, her breathing ragged. Her heart thumped against her rib cage. *Calm down, calm down. Think.* She forced herself to take deeper, longer breaths, to relax her muscles as much as possible, just as Arms Master Rendle had trained her. "Caving in to fear will be your death," he once said. "There is no room for it on the battlefield. Being afraid is healthy, but fear is an enemy." She continued with the breaths and thought about how she could help herself.

Her head bounced on a rock and sparks of light burst before her eyes. She groaned and felt the back of her skull.

She winced as she touched one egg-sized bump—from when she fell off The Horse, she guessed—and a small one from the rock. Rocks and roots continued to scrape her back as she was dragged along. Would this nightmare never end? How could she help herself?

Her hand trailed along another rock and she fumbled with it, but she couldn't get it firmly into her grasp. She searched for other rocks, but they were too small to have any effect, or too lodged in the ground, or too big for her to handle. She grappled with another that seemed right, and almost lost it when she ripped a fingernail on it. But she didn't give up till it was firmly in her hands.

It was not easy to aim, being hauled along the ground on her back as she was. Using the strength of both arms, she heaved the rock at the creature, issuing a grunt as she released it. It glanced harmlessly off the creature's carapace and dropped to the ground with a thud. She succeeded only in drawing the creature's attention to her. It swiveled its disk body about to look at her directly. The eyestalks bobbed above her, then the feelers swung over and probed her midsection.

"Stop it!" Karigan cried.

The jabbing was painful, and at times, ticklish. She grabbed one of the feelers and the other whisked away. It was rough and cold in her hand, and as thick as a broom handle. The creature considered her for a moment, then shook her till she was certain her foot would be severed from her ankle. She dropped the antenna, tears of pain slipping down her cheeks.

The Horse took advantage of the diversion and met the creature head on, rearing up and pounding his hooves onto the hard shell. He moved deftly out of the way of the stinger to evade the snap of the claw. When he came too close to the creature's eyes, it was alarmed enough to drop Karigan's foot and pay full attention to the annoying mammal that threatened it. How astonishing, Karigan thought, that The Horse hadn't run off, much less had stuck around to defend her.

A moment passed before she realized she was free, and that her foot was still attached to her body. She tried to stand on it, but fell back to the ground with a cry. Too much feeling flooded into her foot all at once. She stood up again, this time hopping on her left foot, and not daring to put weight on the right.

"Horse!"

The Horse was too preoccupied with fighting for his own life to help. The creature, unburdened of Karigan, moved quickly from side to side, and swiveled to stop him. The Horse's hooves thudded the ground as he turned and swerved, bucking at the creature, then rounding on it and snapping his teeth. His efforts could have killed a man or woman, but proved futile against the armor plating of the creature. He was showing signs of exhaustion, breathing labored, and foamy sweat dripping on the ground, and he stumbled with increasing frequency.

Karigan hopped away in an attempt to keep ahead of the two combatants. If The Horse failed, there was nothing to stop the creature from getting her.

She hopped and loped heedlessly, pushing through underbrush, and checking over her shoulder to see how The Horse fared. As the moon fell behind some clouds, an almost palpable darkness took hold of the forest and she could discern little about her. Maybe the blow to her head contributed in some way, by darkening the edges of her vision.

With her uncertain footing and dim sight, she stumbled into something sticky, like a giant cobweb. She tried to walk out of it, but it clung to her, and snapped her back, entangling both legs and most of her body. She struggled, but the stuff only stuck to her more.

What is this?

The moon began to edge out from behind the cloud and she saw a white, weblike filament stuck to her arm and legs. In fact, it was tautly woven between several trees.

Oh, gods, a giant spiderweb.

Her only hope now was The Horse.

Something quivered down the length of the web. The moon had moved far enough out from behind the cloud to penetrate some of the deep shadows with light, revealing other creatures trapped like Karigan. A doe kicked, trying to free herself. It looked like she had been at it for some time. Her head sagged in exhaustion, and her body heaved in staggered breaths. Birds, squirrels, bats, a raccoon, and even a wolf were ensnared.

The wolf snapped at the air and howled, a rending howl that churned Karigan's insides. His call wasn't answered, and he whimpered. Karigan had heard howls like that on freezing winter nights. They had terrified her. Yet, all she could do now was pity the wolf.

On the ground behind her, almost hidden beneath a bush, was a heap of ivory bones, luminous in the dusky forest, and freshly stripped of flesh. Next to the bush was a pile of round, fist-sized objects, each the same tarnished silver of the creature. Was it her imagination, or did a couple vibrate? She passed her free hand over her eyes, uncertain of the reliability of her vision. It felt like someone was drubbing her head with a hammer, and she was dizzy.

More bones were scattered near the spherical objects, and she began to suspect that, like a fly caught in a spider's web, the creature was not done with her.

Sounds of the battle between The Horse and the creature drew closer—the racket of hooves on carapace, the cracking of tree limbs, The Horse's hard breaths, the snap of claws... The Horse backed through the underbrush, and Karigan could see the rise and fall of the creature's claws as it herded him toward the web.

"Horse!" Karigan shouted. "It's a trap!"

The Horse hesitated and glanced in her direction, as if suddenly understanding his predicament. The creature struck him with its tail, embedding the stinger into his neck. The Horse crashed to his side, and he didn't move.

"*Nooo!*" Karigan wailed.

The creature prodded The Horse's belly with an antenna. When he didn't respond, it emitted a clicking sound, perhaps of approval. From The Horse, it sidled to the webbing, and moved up the line from the doe to the raccoon, then to Karigan.

Eye stalks wavered as it inspected its prey. It poked her ribs with an antenna, and softly whistled to itself.

Karigan jerked away and slapped her free hand at the antenna. "Get away!" But already the creature's attention was on the spherical objects. It nudged one or two with its claw to a more satisfactory position, then trundled away.

Karigan moaned. All was lost without The Horse. She was trapped and there was no escape. She hadn't expected it to end this way. She thought she would reach Sacor City, and hand over the message directly to the king. She'd be a hero! If she was to be stopped, she thought it would have been by Immerez and his men, and they were horrible enough to contemplate. This monster was totally unexpected.

Moments passed and the wolf cried out with his dreadful howls. How long before the creature returned? How long before it would return to feed?

The scent of bayberry drifted to Karigan from her coat pocket. The little sprig of bayberry must have been crushed during her struggle with the creature, and now it did what Miss Bayberry said it would: "When you find resolve failing you, when all hope is lost, take a leaf and rub it between your fingers. The scent will refresh you, and perhaps you will think of me." Hope swelled within her, and with it, courage. While she still lived, there might be a chance.

Miss Bunchberry had given her a bunchberry flower: "If you are in need of a friend, pluck a petal from the flower and let it drift in the wind." She wished fervently that she could now be in the care of the Berry sisters. She needed a friend.

A crack split the air somewhere behind her. At first she couldn't identify its source, then she glanced at the spherical objects. They vibrated and hairline fractures grew and spread across their smooth surfaces. Karigan sagged, but the webbing held her up. The spheres were eggs.

Antennae poked through. Tiny claws tapped on the insides of shells, and slimy silver bodies, miniatures of the parent creature, emerged wet and glistening. They slid over their brethren, one on top of the other, and scurried toward the web, attracted to the heat they sensed from those trapped in it. There was no doubt of what would be doing the feeding.

A creature crawled onto the toe of Karigan's boot and she kicked it. It spun a yard away, but in a flurry of legs, feelers, and claws, it scurried toward her again. The animals struggled, too, but in their panic, only entangled themselves farther into the webbing.

An almost human scream drowned the moans of the animals. Karigan's nerves stretched taut. The raccoon. She closed her eyes as if to silence its anguished cries.

When the cries diminished, she opened her eyes again.

Three hatchlings crawled up her leg. She growled and shook them off, more angry now than fearful. The creatures had no right. *Noright*. The hatchlings closest to her feet made a sickening crunching sound beneath the heel of her boot.

The bunchberry flower was in her hand. She couldn't remember having pulled it out. The fragrance of the bay-berry was intoxicating. *If you are in need of a friend, pluck a petal...* She would need an army of friends. She shook her leg, but this time the hatchlings hung on with their claws, antennae feeling the way up her leg.

She lowered the flower to her other hand which was stuck in the web, and pried off a single petal...*and let it drift in the wind*. As soon as the petal left her fingertips, a breeze swept it up, avoiding the webbing and entwined tree limbs, and carrying it out of sight above the treetops. Karigan sighed. At least she would die remembering her friends.

She shook her leg again. The creatures had climbed up as far as her hips and now employed their stingers. Her legs began to go numb. Yet she vowed she wouldn't die without a fight. She shook and writhed her body, ignoring the stings, and brushed some of the creatures off with her free hand. Each hatchling that fell off was a victory. She ground them into the earth with the heel of her boot.

A screech echoed over the whimpers of her fellow victims, and some great winged thing crashed through the canopy of the trees. Karigan cringed under its shadow. What horror had come to join the feasting of the little creatures? Then she saw the outline of an eagle—a huge gray eagle.

"The web!" she screamed at him. "Watch the web!"

She felt the beat of each powerful backstroke of his wings. The span of his wings had to be as long as she was tall—wonderful for the great heights of the Wingsong Mountains, but not practical in the woods.

I will help you. He settled on a stout branch above her head.

"What?"

In the oldest folklore, the kind children adored and skeptical adolescents scoffed at, there were stories of creatures with an intelligence equal to a human's, who could speak into the minds of others. Karigan herself had pleaded with her mother to tell such tales, but now, a skeptical adolescent, she wasn't sure that she had actually heard the eagle. Master Ione had never said anything about animals or birds using mind speech, so surely, she had heard nothing at all. The eagle was nothing more than an illusion gazing at her. Her pounding, addled mind, and the poisonous stings

were making her see and hear things.

I will help you. The voice was deep and guttural, and very real.

Awed, Karigan could only stare at him, her mouth gaping. If the old stories were true and the eagle really spoke to her, did she direct thoughts of what she wanted to say to him, or did she speak aloud? Could he hear her thoughts?

Direct me. The eagle perched as implacable as a statue, though his "voice" was tinged with irritation.

Karigan opened and closed her mouth, fishlike, unable to utter a word. Even if he could read her thoughts, they'd be an unintelligible jumble.

She did not know what to tell him. If he tried to fight the creatures, he could easily get tangled in the web, or the creatures could sting him, or... She looked hopelessly about for an answer, shaking a couple of hatchlings from her leg almost as an afterthought. She looked at The Horse's still body. He had fallen on the saddle sheath. If the eagle could reach her saber...

"My sword," she said. "It's beneath the horse. If you could pry it out and—"

The eagle, guessing her intent, launched from his branch to The Horse. He stood on the ground, his head cocked as if deciding how best to proceed. Karigan couldn't watch. Tiny silver disk shapes swarmed all over The Horse.

Her right leg was completely numb. At least she couldn't feel the pain in her ankle.

"Ow!" A hatchling bit her beneath her left knee. She shook her leg so violently that the hatchling smashed against the nearest tree trunk. She breathed hard with the exertion, and hung limp in the web like a marionette.

Here is the sword. The eagle hovered just above her, the hilt of the saber grasped in a huge talon.

She extended her free hand as far as possible. The eagle lowered the saber carefully, trying to avoid becoming enmeshed in the web. She couldn't quite reach the hilt, and had to grab the blade instead.

"Ow!" It bit into her fingers and palm, and she almost dropped it. But her fear of the creatures was greater than the pain, and she kept her grip on it. She shifted it with her other hand, so she could grip it by the hilt.

Your horse still lives, the eagle said. *I will do what I can for him.*

The Horse was alive! Joy surged through Karigan and she slashed through the sticky web and released herself. However, her numb right leg failed to support her and she fell face to feelers with a dozen hatchlings. She scrambled to her left foot and hopped back a step. She brushed or cut off any hatchling that still clung to her.

You must kill them all, the eagle said. Using his sharp beak, he plucked a hatchling from The Horse and smashed it against a rock, much the way she had seen gulls crack crabs open along the seashore. *You must do it now while their shells are still soft. They harden as we speak. Kill them all.*

There must have been hundreds of the creatures scattered all over the forest floor. First she attacked those hatchlings affixed to the hapless animals caught in the web. The doe and the raccoon were dead, their flesh efficiently stripped down to the bone. Then she released the birds and bats that were too high up for the creatures to reach.

The wolf still fought, but the weight of the hatchlings attached to his blood-soaked fur weighed him down. He yelped with every movement, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, and yet Karigan paused. Too many people had told her, when she was little, that wolves killed the sheep people depended on, that wolves would eat a man if driven to hunger. Wolves, they said, were evil—products of Mornhavon the Black.

The wolf gazed at her with defiant amber eyes, as if challenging her. As if challenging her to release him. Just as suddenly, his eyes rolled back in a spasm of pain, and his hind legs sagged beneath him.

Without another thought, Karigan brushed the creatures from his fur with her saber. His sides heaved as he panted. Where the creatures clung to him with their mouths or claws, she speared them through the shells. When she had them off the wolf, she hacked them into pieces, their phlegmy yellow blood soaking into the ground. The wolf collapsed, his eyes half closed in exhaustion. Karigan slashed down the web to prevent any other animals from becoming ensnared.

Balanced on one foot, she single-mindedly hacked at the creatures. Without a ready source of meat, many just scurried in circles, their claws clicking at empty air. Some helped her cause by feeding on their brethren.

Agile as Karigan was, it was difficult to chase the creatures down on one foot. Her blade bounced off shells that grew harder with every passing second. Soon, the eagle deemed The Horse safe enough to be left alone, and took up the hunt, tearing the creatures apart with his powerful talons. His keen eyesight assured that not one hatchling escaped.

The Horse's chestnut hide was nicked and streaked with blood where the

hatchlings had bitten him, but as the effects of the sting waned, he could lift his head and move his legs. Karigan wiped her yellowed blade on a clump of moss. The ground was littered with destroyed hatchlings. The wolf had disappeared in the mayhem.

Sensation crept into her right leg like the sting of a hundred hornets. She didn't even want to think about what the parent creature had done to her ankle with its claw.

"What are these creatures?" she asked the eagle.

They've come from Kanmorhan Vane. All things there are corrupt.

"Kanmorhan Vane?"

The Blackveil Forest which your country borders, he said. Kanmorhan Vane is its Eltish name. A friend of mine, an owl, told me there is a breach in the D'Yer Wall through which the creature came. I've been tracking it for two days.

Blackveil Forest figured in more stories about evil than Karigan had heard about wolves. She was inclined to believe those stories in light of her encounter with the creatures; stories of how Mornhavon the Black sickened the once verdant forest with his magic. Everything that dwelled there, it was said, became evil. After the Long War, Aleric D'Yer had begun a wall along the Sacoridian border where Blackveil threatened to spread its roots, even though the evil of Mornhavon the Black had been vanquished.

A block of granite from the wall was on permanent display at the Langory Museum in Selium, though she doubted many paused to consider its significance. The wall had stood for so long that it was taken for granted, and most information about Blackveil was held as superstition. After all, how could a mere wall prevent such a dark force from encroaching across the border? The stories about Blackveil, Karigan thought, could not have been exaggerated if the parent creature had come from there.

When you see your king, the eagle said, you must warn him of the breach. If the one creature made it through, others are bound to follow.

When you see your king... Karigan wasn't at all confident she would succeed after this experience, but she felt more hopeful than just a few minutes ago.

The eagle cocked his head, as if listening. In the moonlight, his gray feathers were not dull, but rippled with subtle blues, greens, and golds.

I hear the parent, he said.

Karigan froze. The hand that held her saber shook.

It must not live, the eagle said. I will help you as well as I can.

"What?"

You must slay the parent, he said, annoyance in his voice. It mustn't be allowed to lay any more eggs.

"How am I supposed to—"

The underbelly is soft. So is the tissue between the joints.

Vegetation rustled as the creature drew nearer. How was Karigan to reach the creature's underside? She would have to be beneath it before she could reach with her saber.

Avoid its blood, the eagle said. It's not diluted like that of the hatchlings. It will burn you, and maybe poison you if you touch it.

They didn't have to wait long. The creature scuttled into the clearing, driving a terrified red fox before it. When the creature saw the carnage of its young, and the destroyed web, it screamed in rage, a high-pitched whistle racking the forest. Karigan dropped her sword and clapped her hands over her ears. The fox kept running, and without a web to stop it, was safely free of the creature.

The whistle faded and Karigan uncovered her ears. The creature charged her. She stumbled backward and landed hard on her buttocks, gaping at the creature looming over her, its antennae whipping the air above.

The eagle dove between the creature's flailing claws, narrowly escaping being snapped shut in one pair. The creature shook tail feathers from its claw and hissed in fury. It swatted at the eagle with its tail.

The eagle dove at the creature's eyes. *Don't just sit, he chided Karigan from mid-flight. It must be killed.*

She curled her fingers about the hilt of her sword. An invisible pair of hands slipped under her arms and helped her up from the ground. There was no time to think about the unseen help as the creature made steady progress toward her, despite the eagle. The weight on her right foot sent the hornets prickling up and down her leg.

A claw whistled within inches of her nose. She ducked and felt the whoosh of air as it clamped shut where her head had just been. A frontal assault, evidently, was not

the most advantageous. She limped away from the creature's line of sight and lethal claws, but it was quick. A claw struck her across the shoulders from behind, knocking her face first into the ground. She gasped for breath, trying to gain her bearings.

Messenger!

Karigan turned at the eagle's warning. An open claw descended on her, but a flurry of fur darted from the vegetation and straight at the creature. The wolf!

The creature paused its attack at this new distraction. The wolf snarled, wove between the creature's legs, and caused it to stumble.

Again, the invisible hands helped Karigan to her feet and handed her the sword. She ran-limped to the creature's rear, but it was too quick and swiveled around to attack her directly. The tail whistled overhead. Sweat slicked her back and every step on her bad foot was agony. She couldn't get close enough to the creature's belly without facing the claws or tail.

The wolf positioned himself before the creature. He glanced at Karigan with his defiant eyes, then leaped up and caught a feeler in his mouth. It broke with a crack. Oily black blood spilled from the severed appendage, and the wolf dropped the broken piece, his mouth foaming. Pain enraged the creature, and it snapped up the distracted wolf in a claw.

"No!"

Karigan moved between the claws, and holding the saber two-handed, chopped into the joint of the pincer that clutched the wolf. The claw and wolf crashed to the earth.

The creature whistled and hissed. Now Karigan dared to approach closer, hacking when legs or the other claw came too close. The eagle continued to harry it from above, constantly at its eyes, even more so now that there was one less claw to worry about.

Karigan dismembered the second claw and ducked beneath the body. Without ceremony, she thrust the saber into the leathery undershell and disemboweled the creature. Foul smelling blood and black ropy innards poured from the wound. The ground sizzled beneath the guts. She jerked the saber free and backed into the open night air. The creature shuddered, tripped over its own legs, and collapsed onto the ground. Karigan waved away the stench that rose up about it.

Her wrists began to burn. "My skin!" Black blood seared her wrists.

The eagle flew over to her. *Water. You need water to bathe in. I saw a stream this way.*

Karigan dropped her sword uncaring. Tears of pain filled her eyes. She limped through the woods behind the airborne eagle, stumbling from exhaustion. Branches snagged at her greatcoat and slapped her face. The dense canopy of the woods blotted out moonlight, and she fell twice. Groaning with the pain, she climbed back to her feet.

Quickly, the eagle said. *It's not far.*

"My water skin would have been closer."

It would not have been enough. And he flew ahead over the trees.

After another fall, Karigan remembered her moonstone. When she removed it from her pocket, it lit the woods around her like brilliant daylight. Her pains diminished as she held it, and travel through the woods became easier.

The promised stream appeared, a glimmering ribbon in the light of the moonstone. She set the stone on a fallen tree trunk and dropped to her knees in the soft mud of the stream. She plunged her wrists, sleeves and all, into the cold, soothing water. Her whole body felt hot, as if she had bathed in the creature's burning blood. She splashed her face with stream water.

I hope for your sake we were not too late.

Karigan looked at the eagle. His feathers showed a veritable rainbow of colors in the light of the moonstone. "What do you mean?"

The blood—its poisonous effects.

It was like listening to someone else's conversation from far away. She cupped water in her hands to slake her sudden thirst.

Creatures such as we fought tonight haven't been seen since the Long War. The eagle preened a little, then watched her impassively as she dunked her whole head into the water.

Her thirst quenched, at least for the moment, she stood up, wobbling with dizziness.

What are you doing? the eagle asked.

"The Horse... he needs me. And the wolf."

Karigan limped back through the woods, stumbling and falling despite the assistance of the moonstone. It seemed to take years to reach the clearing where the carnage of the battle lay. The creature's carapace had darkened in its pall of death. She felt numb all over. Only the eagle's loud protests prevented her from stepping in a puddle of black blood.

The Horse watched her approach. He lay on his side with his legs tucked up against his belly, and though his neck was grotesquely swollen where he had been stung, his eyes were bright. The wolf, on the other hand, did not move. Karigan cried in rage and pulled at the claw that still clenched him, rocking it back and forth. His eyes were empty of defiance and life.

"I won't have this!"

She dropped the claw and found her saber on the ground. The blade was still black with the creature's blood. She carried it over to the creature. The Horse whinnied in alarm, but she ignored him. She swung her sword again and again at the creature, but it bounced off its shell.

The eagle flew at her face, pushing her away. *Foolish human. It's dead.*

"Leave me alone!" She swung the sword erratically, nearly catching the eagle in midair, but gentle hands took it from her. She wasn't sure if she could see the hands or not, but they were cool to the touch. They led her from the clearing and helped her lay down.

She closed her eyes and fell into dreams of thousands of silvery creatures stinging her, making her drink black blood, of fire and burning. When she opened her eyes again, F'ryan Coblebay stood next to the eagle, flickering like a candle in a breeze. She could not hear their words as they conversed, only whispers that may have been the branches of trees rattling together like dry bones. They glanced down at her, talking about her, she was sure, as if she wasn't there.

"Talk to me..." She had meant to yell, but her lips and mouth were so dry the words were no more than a raspy breath.

She saw the wolf. Like F'ryan Coblebay, there was a luminous quality about him, an otherworldliness. He looked right into her face, his amber eyes challenging her once again. Challenging her to what? She could not maintain that gaze, and she closed her eyes. She fell into a dark slumber with tiny silver-shelled creatures feeding on her mind.

SOMIAL OF THE ELT WOOD

The nature of her dreams changed abruptly. She heard fair voices in song and talk around her. The voices weren't intrusive, but soothing, though she could not understand the words. She awakened once, and a myriad of stars brightened the sky like beacons, and silhouetted the tops of evergreens. She lay in a great round clearing softened by deer moss that looked like clumps of snow in the starlight. Stars flickered among the trees... no, not stars, but *moonstones*... dozens of them. She was not alone.

Light followed in the wake of folk tall and slender, who glided across the clearing and disappeared among the trees. She sat up with a start that set her head ringing.

"Easy, youngling," a quiet voice said. A gentle but firm hand on her shoulder eased her back down. "There is nothing to harm you here. You've the good fortune of being found by friends in your time of need. You need not fear the Tree Kindred of the Elt Wood."

As Karigan drifted back into sleep, she heard the eagle say, *My Lord Drannonair of the Mountains calls me. I confess I've no wish to get mixed up in the affairs of earth-bound creatures, and it was time I left.*

The quiet-voiced one laughed, and it was a sound of joy. "But, Softfeather, you are always betraying yourself!"

Someone put a cool hand on Karigan's burning forehead, and she fell into deep slumber. She dreamed of feasting, of fair folk amidst the moonstones singing and laughing, and dancing to music that could not be heard. The women, clad in long and simple dresses, spun and danced with fluid grace as if their movements were some flowing language. If so, what were they saying? The swaying, dipping, leaping figures were strong in her vision, but after a time, they faded into the moonstone light.

The singing continued for a time, and though Karigan didn't know the language, it seemed she understood the words nonetheless:

By bright of light in Laurelyn's step,

By the brilliant light of Moonman's beam,

We leave the shadows of the night,

In the realm of poison dreams.

Our hearts will lift at the hour,

When the light conquers the dark,

And when poison from the heart is driven,

We dance in a glade in Laurelyn's step.

The song faded, and the men entered the clearing and picked up on the rhythm of the unheard music where the women had left off. They danced for a short time, but could have as easily surpassed the Ages.

Karigan dimly perceived a change of light from dusk to dawn. Stars still dangled above as the sky transformed into the blue blush of day. The dance went on and the strains of a song she could not hear carried through her dreams. When the dance stopped and the women reentered the clearing, Karigan moved to join them, but the cool hand on her forehead cast her into a deeper sleep where dreams would not disturb her.

When she awakened again, stars still dotted the sky and moonstones shimmered in the woods as before, and the clearing was not-so far removed from her dreams, except now it was empty of dancers. It was all she could do to open her eyes, so overcome with weakness was she.

"So you are with us again, youngling."

Karigan recognized the voice, but the speaker wasn't within her vision. When she struggled to her elbows, the clearing and stars spun.

"None of that," the voice said. "You are too weak yet."

Hands pressed her shoulders down. When the spinning ceased, a young man such as she had never seen before knelt beside her. At least, he was young in appearance, though the weight of years could be felt through his mild manner. Long hair shimmered silver in the starlight, though she could not be sure that silver was its true color. Wide bright eyes of pale gray set into a fine-boned face gazed down at her merrily. He was slender like a reed, but not bereft of heft and muscle.

"Who—" she croaked. Her mouth and throat were parched.

He lifted a skin of water to her lips and helped her drink. It was cold and clear as if it had been drawn from the root of all waters, from a mountain spring that flowed into a sunny glade where the trees around it grew taller than any she had ever seen.

"I am Somial," the man said. "I am Somial of Eletia, or the Elt Wood as your folk would call it."

Karigan choked on the water. Eletia! "Eletians are legend," she whispered.

"If that is so," he said with a smile, "I must then be a legend."

"Estral always claimed there were still Eletians around, but I never believed her."

"Your Estral, then, is most wise."

"The Horse—" She tried to sit up again, but Somial pressed her firmly to the ground.

"He fares well," he assured her. "We have been caring for him most diligently."

Karigan struggled no more. She hadn't the strength to. "A long night," she murmured.

Somial arched his right brow. "Yes. This night and the last two."

"I've been—?"

"Yes, messenger. Your fight only just began when you slew the creature of *Kanmorhon Vane*. Softfeather told us of your courage. Such courage is not often found among your folk, nor such resilience. The poison of the beast raged hot and thick through your veins."

Karigan couldn't get over the feeling he was secretly laughing at her, but his gaze and tone were sincere enough. "Softfeather? Who—?"

"The gray eagle. He, too, is a messenger of sorts among his folk."

Karigan closed her eyes. The lights around her had begun to dim and flare, and dim again. How was it the Eletians had come to be here at this time? Were they just another fever dream?

"How did you find me?"

Somial said, "We *aretiendan*, hunters, or watchers for the king. We walk the lands, even outside our beloved Eletia. Long it has been since last we traveled Sacoridia's fine northern forest. Our king and his son have sensed a great unease in the world, and the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane* only confirms some unrest of the dark powers. We would that we could have come to your aid sooner, but we only knew of you when we saw the light of *themuna'riel*. Curious that a mortal should possess one. We don't know what to make of it."

"You mean my moonstone?"

"Yes, your moonstone. You have been touched by the light of Laurelyn. It makes you a friend of the Elt Wood, though our king cares little for your kind."

"It was a gift," Karigan said, a little defensively.

"And a worthy one. As is this." He held in his palm, a tiny white petal. With a clear ringing laugh, he tossed it into the air and it might have vanished, but to Karigan, it seemed to become a star. She couldn't hold on any longer, and as she slipped again into slumber, Somial said, "Your wounds were grave, the poison is still within you, but you shall be well soon. Do not fear the night or the creatures within. We shall watch over you, Karigan of Sacoridia, till you have regained the strength to continue your endeavor."

"Can you take my message to Sacor City?" she asked in a groggy whisper.

"Your path lies long and dark," came the quiet reply. He brushed damp hair from her forehead. "But you've the will and strength, and *themuna'riel*. Laurelyn's light can shatter the strength of the dark powers. Yours is not our mission, youngling. We seldom venture where humankind dwells."

"Youngling..." she protested.

"Though I am young among my folk at nigh on two hundred years, you are younger still." He kissed her forehead, a gesture that reminded her of her mother, and as she slipped into oblivion, she thought she heard him say, "May Laurelyn light your way."

Karigan drifted off and did not know how long she slept, and though the sleep was deep and healing, she was always aware of the rhythm of the music. The Eletians watched over her, and thus reassured, her sleep was peaceful.

When she did awaken, the clearing was awash in the glow of late morning sunshine. Experimentally she moved each limb. Her right leg was still sore, and when she inspected her ankle, it was bruised black. There were numerous purple marks on her legs where the hatchlings had stung her, but the swelling was gone and the marks were not very painful.

Her wrists were wrapped in a gauzy material where the creature's blood had burned her. In all, she felt as anyone else coming out of illness: weak but renewed, and grateful to be well.

There was no sign of Somial or any other Eletians in the area. They had tended her wounds well. She lay on her bedroll wrapped in her blanket, her head pillowed on the greatcoat, just as she had slept so many nights during her journey. Maybe Somial and the Eletians had been dreams, but her tended wounds proved otherwise.

Nearby, The Horse's tack and her packs lay on the ground, and beside them, the

unsheathed saber which glared in the sun. Someone had cleaned it of black blood. She shivered as she remembered that night, and wondered how many nights had since passed.

A loud rattling of branches on the outskirts of the clearing made her heart leap. She took up the saber expecting another creature to attack her, but relaxed when The Horse emerged from the trees. She staggered to her feet and limped over to meet him halfway across the clearing. When she saw no evidence of his sting wound, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He nickered softly.

"Never thought I'd be so happy to see you, you stubborn old horse."

Karigan lingered another day and night in the clearing trying to regain the old strength that still eluded her. There was no trace of the Eletians, though when she slept, she could still feel the rhythm of their silent song.

AMBUSHED

The world beyond the clearing was oppressive. Biters swarmed in clouds about Karigan and The Horse, stealing away any pleasure they might have found in the budding of wildflowers, and the trills of warblers recently arrived from the south. Deciduous trees, few and far between the spiky sun-stealing spruces, strained to open their leaves.

The weather alternated from cold damp to summerlike heat and heavy humidity. Karigan opted to wear the greatcoat often despite the heat as her only defense against the biters. The cuffs were all burned through and tattered from her confrontation with the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane*. Still, it offered a sense of security.

They cantered long on the road as much to outpace the biters as to make up ground. The Horse's gait was tireless, his tail whisking behind as they loped along. Whether it was relief from biters or a sense of spring that drove him, it was hard to say. For all their speed, they were no less cautious in covering their tracks, for she knew Immerez and his men still sought her and the message she carried.

If they were cautious on the road, they were equally cautious off. No longer did they blindly follow deer trails to find a campsite. Karigan chided herself over and over for ever having done so in the first place. Following deer trails at dusk was like walking into a predator's trap. Encountering the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane* at what was supper-time for most predators had been no mistake. Who was to say some bear or catamount, equally as dangerous, wasn't waiting at the end of some other deer trail for an easy meal?

Between Immerez and the creature, Karigan felt like prey in more ways than one.

After a week of swift travel, she began to find signs of human habitation. Though the road had in no way improved, it was grooved with wagon wheels and hoofprints, all recent. Every so often, travelers rode or walked down the road, and she and The Horse concealed themselves in the woods and watched those who passed by.

There were grim men with thick beards and broad shoulders dressed in buckskin, their horses or mules burdened with pelts. Merchants in bright garb sat on wagons laden with goods. Though they were not nearly as prosperous looking as the leading merchant clans of Sacoridia, they were heavily armed and guarded, their cargo masters casting stern expressions over the road.

At the sight of merchants, whether they were of a clan or not, Karigan felt pangs of homesickness. All merchants longed for spring after a winter of little or no travel and no haggling or dealing. Spring brought increased commerce and an opportunity to see old friends. Karigan had accompanied her father on many spring journeys which often included fairs. She would sit proudly with her father atop the foremost wagon of a long wagon train on its way from one town to the next. But she was not with her father. She was alone on a dangerous road and fairs were a distant dream.

Other armed travelers passed down the road, but she couldn't decide if they were brigands, mercenaries, or both. They were male and female, some jolly and lighthearted in conversation, others grim and stern like the merchants' guards, and yet others possessed a downright disreputable air. Their clothing was soiled and their bodies reeked, even off the road where she stood.

What conversation she picked up was more often foul than not. She didn't know whether to feel glad to see others on the road, or alarmed. Carrying the life-or-death message, given to her by a murdered Green Rider, made her suspicious of all who passed by.

The message. The all important message. What did it say? She was dying to take a look at its contents. She had already risked her life to carry it—didn't she have a right to read it even though F'ryan Coblebay had told her not to?

Karigan pulled The Horse to a halt, disregarding the cloud of biters that massed around her head. She unfastened the message satchel and drew out the envelope. "King Zachary" had been written on the front in quick, uneven strokes. She frowned. *This isn't for me.*

She turned it over and took a look at the wax seal. It remained uncracked and unblemished despite its hard journey. A bead of sweat glided down her forehead and pattered onto the envelope. She wiped it away carefully with her sleeve.

I could say it broke along the way...

Maybe she could slip the tip of the saber beneath it, then after she read the message, soften the wax and reseal the envelope. But that would distort the perfect imprint of the flying horse and it would be obvious she had tampered with it.

There's only one way, she decided.

She held the wax seal between her thumbs ready to crack it, one eye closed and a grimace on her face as if she didn't want to see it happen. Then The Horse shifted beneath her and flicked his ears back and forth. Voices, barely audible, floated to her from behind. She sighed, actually relieved by the diversion, and dropped the intact message back into the satchel.

She guided The Horse into the woods and tied him up well out of range of the road. She crept back to the road and crouched behind a rock. Two people, a man and a woman, walked into view. They moved as smoothly as cats, their ease of movement belying powerful shoulders and sword arms, and legs rippling with muscles.

They were both dressed in the same plain leather jerkins. Gray cloaks, patched and travel-stained, hung from their shoulders. They wore no devices to identify militia or mercenary company.

Bandits or plainshields, Karigan thought. *Poor bandits if that is what they are.*

Despite the drab and worn look of their gear, the patches had been carefully sewn and the leather was oiled. Long swords bumped against their hips as they walked.

Their poor state probably had little to do with their prowess as fighters. They did not waste movement with superfluous gestures even though they appeared to be in deep discussion... Deep, heated discussion.

"I tell you, Jendara," the man said, "I caught a whiff of a horse."

His partner looked at him askance. Ringlets of russet hair flowed down her back. "You're just hungry," she said. "You are imagining things."

"What about those droppings we saw back there?"

"Look, there've been several travelers up and down this road. Who's to say that last pile of horse manure belonged to the one we're looking for?"

The man's face was grim. It was coated by the beginnings of a spiky yellow beard, and the lines of tension could be seen clearly beneath it. "I'm tired of this

walking. We should be with our lord."

The couple drew abreast of Karigan's hiding spot and walked by.

"I don't like it either," the one called Jendara said. "But we must do as we are told."

"Chasing ghosts and horses. It is not what we swore to do."

"The sooner we're done, the sooner we return to our true duty."

Then the two were gone. Karigan stood up and brushed pine needles from her trousers. Their conversation was enough to convince her she had no desire to encounter them on the road, especially with the reference to chasing ghosts and horses. She would stay here this night, and maybe the next, but she liked having them ahead of her less than behind.

A few days later on a sweltering afternoon, Karigan gave in to the heat. She folded up the greatcoat and fastened it behind the saddle with the bedroll. It was like midsummer in the southlands in the shade, and even the biters seemed to wane in the heat. She rolled up her shirt sleeves and squeezed The Horse on.

All at once, the bushes beside the road shook and The Horse swerved out of the way, nearly unseating Karigan. She held onto his mane, but a man burst out of the bushes and seized The Horse's bridle. The Horse jerked back, but the man's hold was secure.

"Dismount," he said.

Karigan cursed silently. This was the man she had observed on the road the other day, but where was the woman, Jendara? She reached for her saber, but felt the pressure of a sword tip against her spine.

"Were I you," the woman said from behind, "I would obey."

Karigan licked her lips, tasting the salt of perspiration. If she could urge The Horse into a run, maybe the man would release the bridle and the woman wouldn't have time to—

"Dismount!"

The sword tip pressed harder into her back. She dismounted. The Horse made to bolt away, but the man yanked on the bridle.

"I've heard of you, smart steed. If you don't obey, I shall sever the tendons in your legs."

The woman regarded Karigan with eyes as steely as her sword. Today her lush hair was bound by a strip of cloth. "You don't look like a spirit rider to me."

The man snorted in contempt. "Ghosts do not exist, and they certainly do not ride horses. Those Mirwellian fools are over superstitious."

Karigan's eyes widened. Surely they meant Immerez, Sarge, and Thursgad... and they were *Mirwellians*! Nothing good ever came out of Mirwell.

The man, still holding the bridle, reached over to the message satchel. He undid the leather thong, peered in, and nodded. He let the lid drop and secured it back down. "This is it."

"Remove your shoulder pack," the woman said.

Karigan reluctantly slipped it from her shoulder to the road. It was an inglorious end to her mission. She was caught, and the delivery of the message thwarted by mercenaries working for Immerez.

The other mercenary was already looking through the saddlebags, laughing in delight at the food remaining from the Berry sisters. The woman looked in disdain at the soiled blanket and clothes she found in the shoulder pack.

"I told you there would be little spoils," she said. "Greenies aren't known for being rich."

"We've the food, Jendara, and a new horse, and all the gold the Mirwellian will pay us. What's this?" He untied the greatcoat from its fastenings and unfurled it. "Looks warm enough... but, ach! I wouldn't want to be seen in a filthy Greenie coat. This bauble on front, however..." He gazed speculatively at the brooch.

Jendara spotted something shining from the tangle of blanket she had pulled from Karigan's shoulder pack. "What might these be?"

Karigan cried out in alarm. "Don't touch those! They're mine!"

In her hand, Jendara the mercenary held finely wrought rings and bracelets set with gems. She was entranced by the way they glittered in the sun. "They're yours no longer, Greenie."

"Those were my mother's—" Her voice broke off in a sob. They were the only objects of intrinsic worth that she had taken with her when she fled Selium.

The man unclasped the brooch and let the greatcoat fall to the dusty road. His grin revealed a gap between his two front teeth. "A bit gaudy, but it might be worth something. We didn't fare so badly after all, did we Jen? Perhaps our luck has changed."

The Berry sisters had told Karigan the brooch wouldn't tolerate the touch of another, yet it glimmered coldly in the sun, the same as usual, as the mercenary weighed it in his palm. Then again, according to the sisters, Professor Berry had never mastered magic, so who was to say there were no gaps in their knowledge?

Jendara was too busy admiring the jewels on her fingers and wrists to answer.

"And a saber. A Greenie saber, but one should never leave behind a weapon. The king's smiths do a fine enough job on their blades."

Karigan's throat constricted with grief and anger as Jendara drew on her finger the troth ring Stevic G'ladheon had given his bride Kariny twenty-five years ago. It was gold and set with a diamond that flared like a star in the light of day. The clan emblem of a ship at full sail upon the sea was etched into the gold band. The etching had been made three years after the wedding when Clan G'ladheon had been formally recognized by the merchant's guild and a representative of the queen.

The emblem represented Stevic G'ladheon's most profitable ventures, most achieved by sailing far seas, and backed by a hardworking bloodline that once made its life in the islands of Ullem Bay. The jewels Jendara now admired were Karigan's only material link with her former life, and her mother.

"You won't take those," she said.

"I don't think you can stop us." Jendara laughed. "We will take good care of your things, and the Mirwellians will take good care of you."

Karigan clenched her hands into fists, her cheeks blushing hotly. She had not killed that unnatural creature only to be put into the hands of Immerez. The creature had been more dangerous than these two. She leaped at Jendara with an animallike snarl, but even as she did so, the other mercenary's hilt cracked against the back of her skull and she fell into darkness.

Karigan awakened with a throbbing head. Her tender wrists, not yet fully healed from the burning blood of the creature, were bound cruelly tight behind her back, leaving her fingers numb. She lay prone on the dead leaves and moss of the forest floor. She assessed her body for further damage, but found none besides her smarting head and strangled wrists.

She carefully surveyed the scene around her through cracked eyelids. In the lengthening shadows of late afternoon, The Horse stood hobbled and untacked a short distance away. His head hung low in a dispirited way.

Jendara and her partner sat before a cookfire eating from Karigan's rations. They had heaped her things into two piles: the things they could obviously live without, namely her travel-worn clothing, and another pile of things they intended to possess, mainly the sword and jewelry. The man twisted the moonstone in his fingers, but it didn't light up. Evidently, they had been through her pockets, too.

"Curious, this crystal," the man said. "Probably a cheap bauble of glass, but fair enough."

"You're no judge, Tome," Jendara said. "See how it catches the light? A fine crystal, I judge. What I find curious is that a simple Greenie possesses all this excellent stuff. Maybe she's really a thief."

"Now what would a thief be doing delivering messages to the king? You heard what she said about the jewelry being her mother's."

"I guess you're right, but she's a stupid Greenie to be carrying these jewels on a road such as this."

Karigan closed her eyes. The thought of the mercenary fendara wearing her mother's troth ring made the bile rise in her throat. How could she get it back? Even if she did manage to loosen her bonds, how could she ever hope to escape two thoroughly trained mercenaries? Arms Master Rendle had taught her much in the few sessions they had had together, but she possessed neither the practice nor the strength to match Jendara and Torne.

"What are you thinking, Greenie?" Karigan opened her eyes only to find them level with the toes of Tome's boots. "I can tell you aren't asleep."

She spat on his boots.

"I'll say one thing for you," Torne said, "you may not be a spirit rider, but you are spirited!" He laughed at his own joke while Jendara cast him a disgusted look as if she had to endure his humor more than she wanted. "Tomorrow we continue our travels so we can meet up with Captain Immerez. I expect you to be on good behavior, thief. Yes, you will be a thief, girl. Folks on the road will be less likely to take pity on you. One word about Green Riders and I'll put you in the spirit world." He guffawed again, and before Karigan could move to lessen the blow, he kicked her in the ribs.

Pain exploded through her body as Tome's laughter assaulted her ears. Each

breath she took ripped her side. In a haze of pain, she thought she saw F'ryan Coblebay, white and gauzy, standing among the trees. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, he was gone.

Karigan trudged through ankle-deep mud with her head bowed. A storm stirred up the treetops and rain pelted from the dark sky. A crack of lightning shattered the darkness. At first Tome wasn't going to give Karigan any protection from the weather. They had no extra cloaks, and he did not want to give away her "identity" by letting her wear the greatcoat. Surprisingly, Jendara insisted he let Karigan wear it.

"The horse and gear will give her away anyhow," the mercenary woman said. "We can say she stole it all. She's a thief, remember? Besides, there can't be too many idiots on the road on a day like this." She glared at Tome significantly since it had been his idea to travel despite the storm, instead of holing up somewhere dry.

Tome relented, but by the time Karigan was permitted to wear the greatcoat, she was already soaked through. She drew the hood up over her head with her tied hands, and searched the pockets for the bunchberry flower and sprig of bayberry in vain. The mercenaries must have discarded them as worthless. She sighed in despair. There was no hope of help this time—she'd have to find her own way out.

The damp caused her ribs to ache dully, but the sharp pains had subsided and she could breathe easier. Her wrists were swollen red beneath the bandages. Tome had not allowed her to wrap a fresh dressing around the burns.

"How'd you get burned anyway?" he asked. "Clumsy with a campfire?"

The question wasn't even worth the dignity of an answer. A campfire, indeed! She wished another creature would attack—then see if Torne could do as well as she had. She fantasized about huge claws squeezing his mid-section, squeezing him so hard that his eyes popped out.

Lightning struck somewhere nearby with a deafening crack. The Horse snorted and sidestepped nervously. Karigan grimaced as a tingling sensation crept its way up through her feet all the way to the roots of her hair. The thunder rumbled away and Karigan thought, *Idiots. They don't have the sense to find cover in a lightning storm.*

She was mollified by the fact that if any one of them were to be scorched by lightning, it would be Torne or Jendara for the swords they carried at their sides. It was not an unpleasant thought.

Even now, oblivious to the dangers of the storm, they took turns riding The Horse. At first he pulled away, but Torne threatened to sever his tendons again.

Karigan commanded him to be still. He looked at her with wide eyes and snorted defiantly, but tolerated to be mounted. Neither mercenary sat upon him for long, however.

"One must have a bottom of steel to ride this beast," Jendara declared. "I suppose he will serve as a pack animal."

The Horse tossed his mane at the insult. Karigan smiled smugly to herself—his gaits were smooth as butter when desired.

They continued down the road as thunder drummed low and far away, over some distant part of Sacoridia.

The mercenaries were not very generous with *her* food supplies, Karigan thought. They crouched beneath some trees by the road at midday. The rain had dwindled to a steady drizzle and the last bit of storm had rumbled away an hour ago. Already the biters were stirring to a frenzy in the damp.

Karigan's stomach growled as she picked pieces of mold off the crust of hard bread Torne had tossed her. Torne smacked his lips over dried meat as if it was a feast. Jendara was a bit more dainty, but not much. The two must not have eaten in a while. What kind of mercenaries were they if they couldn't hunt up the occasional hare or squirrel? Even she had learned a thing or two about trapping and hunting from the cargo master, though it wasn't a skill she used often.

"What are you glowering at, girl?" Torne demanded.

"You look hungry. Didn't they teach you wilderness survival in mercenary training?"

Torne's eyes blazed. "Jendara and I were soldiers of the highest order. We had no need."

Karigan raised a brow. "What order might that be?"

"We weren't always mercenaries, girl. It's none of your business."

Karigan guessed they had not been mercenaries for very long, and the fact they were no longer a part of this "high order" was a sore point, at least for Torne. She thought hard about what the two could have been before they became swords for hire. Guards, she supposed, but even guards were subject to survival training... unless they never left a specific post, or were of so high an order they were waited upon by servants.

"The Mirwellian fools told us you can disappear," Jendara said. "When are you going to disappear?"

Despite the mercenary's mocking tone, Karigan perceived a hint of uncertainty. It wouldn't hurt to play on it, but it also renewed her concern for the brooch. Torne had taken to wearing it on his cloak. "I'll disappear when I'm good and ready to."

Torne guffawed. "Those idiots lost her in a heavy fog. Disappeared, indeed."

"Immerez is no idiot," Jendara said quietly, "though he thinks it was some Greenie trick, not a spirit rider."

"Is that so, Greenie girl? You know some Greenie tricks?"

"Maybe. You might not take me as a spirit rider, but a spirit rides with me."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Karigan shrugged innocently, a twinge of pain tugging at her ribs.

"I won't have any of this spirit stuff!" Torne was over to Karigan in a bound, and he cuffed her across the face.

She fell to her side and shook her head, tasting blood from a cut lip. What was left of her midday meal was a mess of crumbs on the ground. She forced herself back into a sitting position.

"You're nothing but a ruffian," she told Torne, "and a coward."

Torne only laughed. Karigan had the satisfaction, however, of knowing she had planted a seed of uncertainty in his mind. If only she could get her hands on that brooch. At present, however, it did not seem likely.

They passed through numerous settlements cut out of the woods. They were too small, really, to be called villages. Woods folk in plain dress worked about their cabins. They hung laundry in the sweet spring air, tended gardens where enough sunlight crept through the forest canopy to nourish vegetables, and they split wood.

Torne used some of the coppers he had taken from Kari-an's pockets to purchase meat and bread, boasting all the while to the settlers about the thief he and his partner had snared. More often than not, food was offered the mercenaries for free when they heard this fabrication.

Karigan received nothing except scowls and curses about thieves who preyed on law-abiding Sacoridians who were trying to scrape out a living in the wilderness.

Some looked her up and down, disbelieving one so young and innocent looking could be a notorious thief.

"That's part of her method," Torne explained at one settlement. "She seems innocent, but when you are not looking..." He spread his hands wide, allowing the settlers to come to their own conclusions. "Do you see this horse, and the coat she wears? Murdered a Green Rider, she did."

Disturbed exclamations passed among the settlers. Just about everyone in the tiny community stood around the mercenaries and their captive. Visitors came seldom and they were hungry for news.

Karigan guessed these were all very decent folk, and she couldn't blame them for their accusing, if not fearful, expressions. They had probably been victims of brigands more than once. Seldom did the king's law pass through these isolated spots, except at tax time.

Torne was an adept storyteller, too. Despite the blatant lies, Karigan didn't dare breathe a word. Jendara held her close with a dagger tip digging into her back. It was frustrating having people so close who could help her, but they had been turned against her by Torne's words.

"Bad 'nough with groundmites crossing the borders," one man muttered. He removed his leather cap and smoothed his hair back. "Don't need our own kind killing and thieving."

"Groundmites?" Jendara asked in surprise, echoing Karigan's own thoughts. "Crossing the borders?"

"Aye," the man growled. "Killed a family not five miles from here on the Putnal Trail. And not a sign of king's soldiers anywhere. We sent one of our lads to the city to find help. The rest of us sleep uneasy with what weapons we have close at hand, and keep watch during the night."

"Wise precautions," Jendara said. "Groundmites crossing the borders..."

"Aye, worse still, some of our hunters found the carcass of an unnatural creature and its spawn." Karigan snapped to attention as she listened. "We wouldna believed it were they not our finest woods folk who found it, and honest to the core. Whatever slew the creature must be even more dangerous. Sank its great fangs into the creature's belly, it did. Makes you wanna believe the old minstrel tales of Mornhavon and the Blackveil Forest."

Karigan wanted to laugh out loud. Maybe she ought to name her plain saber "Fang" the way the great warriors named their blades, or carried blades bearing long

lineages and ancient names. If they only knew who had really slain the creature!

The crowd babbled about the old evil, ancient prophecies, and the Long War. Karigan became absorbed in her own thoughts. Estral, ever the fountain of information, had mentioned trouble on the borders. But groundmites? She had scarcely believed groundmites would dare leave their dens in the far north after they had been slain and scattered after the Long War with the fear of the League driven into their hearts.

Now she felt no disbelief that the groundmites, legendary minions of Mornhavon the Black, which were not quite human, but beastlike creatures that were terrible in battle, were roaming across Sacoridia's borders. There was no room for disbelief—not after Immerez. Not after the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane*. Things were happening in the world, and her beloved Sacoridia no longer seemed very secure.

A tug on her coat snapped her out of her reverie. A little boy with tousled sandy hair gaped up at her with solemn brown eyes. He couldn't have been more than six years old.

"You really kill someone?" he asked in awe.

Karigan glanced about. The settlers and the mercenaries were too deep in discussion to notice. She then looked down at the little boy. "No."

"You lying?"

"No."

"Din" think so." He grinned at her brightly, then ran off to join his mother who stood off a ways with a cluster of other women. She put a protective arm about his shoulders and scowled at Karigan.

Jendara and Torne were invited to share dinner with the settlers. Visitors bearing news from abroad were enough cause for celebration. The feast was held outdoors, for no dwelling in the area was large enough to hold more than a small family. Pots of priddle cream were passed around and smoke candles lit to stave off ravenous biters.

However, no one passed Karigan any cream, and she was tied to an ash tree out of range of the smoke candles, her mouth securely gagged with an old rag. As if to augment her misery, the smell of roasting meats drifted all around her. Her stomach roiled. The hard heel of bread Torne had tossed her earlier had done little to ease her hunger pangs.

One of the settlers stood guard a little ways off. He seemed more intent on watching the festivities, his notched and rusted blade loose in his hand. She could hear music, mostly a simple pipe and drum, and laughter and clapping from dancing folk.

She allowed a few tears to trickle down her cheeks. If only she still possessed the winged horse brooch or the bunchberry flower.

How she missed the Berry sisters. And Estral, and her father. Where was he now? What was he doing? Was he searching for her, or did he assume her dead? Would she ever see him again? The tears poured down her cheeks now and she sobbed hard, gasping for air through the gag. She was so alone! How did she ever get into this mess? She would never wish for adventure again—she just wanted to go home.

Under different circumstances she might have found the night quite pleasant. A milky moon rose far above the trees, and stars speckled the sky. The laughter of the settlers had a homey feel, but only made her more lonely. She took a deep, rattling breath and blew it out her nose slowly. A soft breeze dried her tears and whispered of summer yet to come. It would have been easy to feel happy here, comfortable, if she hadn't been tied to a tree and gagged.

I wish I could help you.

The words drifted to her as if upon the breeze. She looked wildly about her and strained to see behind the tree, but no one was there.

I wish—help you.

Karigan sat up alertly.

—you—danger—the rood. We spoke—ger.

Karigan grunted through the gag, unable to respond.

—no strength—help now. Wish—could—elp.

Karigan squirmed, fighting against her bonds. Was it F'ryan Coblebay trying to communicate with her? Was she crazy to think she heard the voice of a ghost?

—not—er—wish—help.

"Mmff fog elp wone ga me anna wheah!" was all she could say through the gag.

There was giggling all around her. Karigan looked up and all the young children

of the settlement gazed at her the way they might at some intriguing beast at the Corsa Zoo. In the forefront was the little boy who had spoken to her earlier that day.

"Are you a muhdrer?" asked a tiny girl with her forefinger hooked in her mouth. "What's a muhdrer?"

"Hush, Tosh," the boy said knowingly. "She's not a murderer. She told me so."

"Maybe she's crazy," another boy said. "My old aunt was crazy and they locked her in the attic."

The rest of the children were duly impressed.

"What's a muhdrer?" the tiny girl asked.

"Means she killed someone," the first boy said.

Karigan cleared her throat, and they all jumped.

The boy looked surreptitiously around, then gazed at Karigan with a very serious expression on his face. "You have to promise not to talk. Not loud, anyway."

Karigan nodded emphatically.

The boy looked around again, then pulled the gag out of her mouth. She took some deep breaths, then said, "I didn't kill anyone."

The children jumped again at her voice, but they seemed willing to believe her.

"What are you all doing here? Won't you get in trouble for talking to me?"

"Dad's too sleepy. Drank too much cider." Then the boy pointed to the guard whose back was still turned to them. "You gotta keep real quiet, 'member? Then we won't get in trouble. We came to look at you."

Now Karigan did feel like a strange beast in the zoo. "Well, then go away. I don't like being stared at. It's not polite." The Berry sisters would approve.

The children giggled, especially when she made an ugly face. They skipped away, chattering excitedly among themselves in hushed voices. They had done the forbidden by speaking to her, and were full of it. Only the sandy-haired boy remained behind, and Karigan now saw he held a dish heaped with scraps of food.

"I couldn't eat it. You can have it."

Karigan was about to compare herself to a beggar dog, but was too hungry to

care. She lowered her face to the dish while he held it, and ate greedily. She licked the plate clean. She wasn't even sure what it was she had eaten, but her stomach felt full for the first time in days.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

"Dusty."

"Thank you, Dusty. Thank you."

He smiled shyly, then without warning, stuffed the gag back in her mouth. He ran off to join his friends. Karigan watched after him with regret. She had been about to ask him to untie her. Except for one trip to the latrine to relieve herself, she had been left tied to the tree in the cramped position.

When morning came and Tome made her stand up, she nearly fell to her knees. He stood by impatiently while she rubbed some feeling back into her legs.

The greatcoat weighed more than before, and the pockets bulged against her thighs. When Tome wasn't looking, she slipped her hands into a pocket and found it stuffed with what felt like dried meat, cheese, hard bread, and an apple. Dusty and his friends must have filled her pockets while she slept. They didn't want to see her go hungry!

When she could finally walk without too much discomfort, Torne secured her wrists in front of her. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "One word from you, and Jendara's knife will slide right into your back. Should I gag you?"

Karigan shook her head. One night of that foul gag in her mouth had been quite enough.

The three of them walked from the settlement with Torne in the lead, Karigan in the middle, and Jendara leading The Horse very close behind. The folk patted Torne and Jendara on the back, or shook hands, wishing them goodspeed. Karigan was wished a good hanging.

The children were there, too, and waved their good-byes emphatically. Karigan winked and smiled at her miniature benefactors in return. An angry father who noted the exchange threw a stone at her, which missed her shoulder by a handsbreadth, but she didn't care. Even with the animosity of the settlers surrounding her and the grim outlook of days of travel with Tome and Jendara, something good had happened here: she had made new friends among the children when all others scorned her, and when she had been at her loneliest.

When they were out of earshot of the settlers, Torne chuckled. "Suckers. Feed

'em a story and you can get anything you want." The Horse's saddlebags were crammed with food. "Maybe we ought to do this sort of thing full time."

Jendara shrugged her shoulders indifferently. "It's annoying dragging a prisoner around." She glanced at Karigan.

Karigan wondered, once again, who the two had been prior to becoming mercenaries.

WEAPONS

Karigan received her answer later that afternoon. The day dragged along until The Horse froze in his tracks, his ears laid flat. He sidestepped nervously and patches of sweat darkened his neck and flanks. Torne hauled on the reins as if he could forcibly drag The Horse down the road. When The Horse stayed anchored to his spot, Torne cursed and threatened him.

"He senses something ahead," Karigan said, weariness weighing her words down. She could have cared less if the mercenaries walked into some sort of trouble, but Tome's hand was on the hilt of his sword and it looked as if he was going to use more than threats to move The Horse this time.

"Go on, Horse," she said.

The Horse flickered an ear at her, but balked no longer. They walked on and soon discovered what had stopped him. Strewn across the road, and alongside it, was a jumble of bodies.

"King's soldiers," Jendara said without emotion.

In a flash, the mercenaries unsheathed their swords. That was when Karigan saw the black bands on their blades which marked the two as swordmasters. As such, they probably were, or had been, either tomb guards, or the king's personal guards, truly an elite order of soldier. They took oaths which bound them for life to the royal family, and even beyond life. Some were bound to protect the dead in the Avenues of Kings and Queens from desecration, and to guard against potential grave robbers lured by the priceless relics of ages long past entombed with royalty. No too few guards were interred near their wards.

They were the finest swordfighters found in all Sacoridia. Arms Master Rendle had told her that such guards, even without their blades, were human weapons. In fact, they were often referred to as Weapons.

Karigan had been too shocked during the ambush to notice the bands on their

blades before. Their status as Weapons explained their ineptitude in the wilderness, but not why they were now scraping around as mercenaries.

Weapons were revered for their skills, and though they did not live in absolute luxury, they lived at least as well as the lower nobility in large houses with servants to attend to their needs.

Even after retirement, they held honored places in the king's court. Many often became counselors to the king, or trained the next generation of guards bound to the royal family. Karigan found it hard to believe Torne and Jendara had left Sacor City and their privileges voluntarily.

Crows flew squawking into the trees as Jendara and Torne picked their way among the bodies. Larger carrion birds hopped, wings extended, only a few paces away. The Weapons checked pockets and packs of the dead for valuable trinkets or coins, but the two were out of luck. Whoever had slain the soldiers had done a thorough search already. The breeze shifted and Karigan gagged on the stench of rotting corpses.

"Looks like they were ambushed by groundmites." Jendara sheathed her sword as if groundmites were no cause for concern.

"The Gray One has been busy," Torne said. He beckoned for Karigan and The Horse to follow.

Karigan covered her nose and mouth with her hands, and tried not to look down, but she had to look where she stepped. Bodies lay twisted and entwined, and it was impossible to tell where one stopped and another started. Crawling beetles created a sense of movement among the dead.

The silver of uniforms glared in the sun as if to mock the pride and honor with which the soldiers had once donned the colors of Sacordia. Grim faces bloated in the sun unseeing. Carrion birds had picked out their eyes.

Among the human dead were a few not-so-human remains. Karigan couldn't tell if it was death that made the skin of these large creatures yellowish brown, or if it was their natural coloring. The skin was covered with patches of mud-colored fur. Open mouths, as if in the midst of howling at the moment of death, were armed with sharp canines. Their ears were pointed and furred like a cat's. Groundmites.

Three human heads were impaled on lances by the roadside. What remained of a captain hung from a tree, his stomach split and gutted. Two black-shafted arrows with red fletching pierced his heart. Karigan vomited.

It took considerable time to coax The Horse across the corpse-strewn road,

much longer than she could bear. She wanted to run, to leave the grisly scene far behind her. But she knew it would return to her in her dreams, no matter how far away she went.

"That horse would never survive a battle," Torne said, watching the miserable Karigan tug on the reins.

"Greenies are worthless in battle." Jendara's voice was full of contempt. "They gallop across the countryside on horses, is all. I'm surprised they even carry swords."

Karigan felt as green as her greatcoat, and kept walking even after she had come to the end of the carnage. The mercenaries trotted to catch up with her. Behind them, the carrion birds flopped back among the corpses to resume their feeding.

Karigan was sick several more times. Blood and gore clung to her boots and no amount of scraping them on the road seemed to rub it off. When a stream appeared alongside the road, she ran to it so fast that even quick Jendara could not route her. Karigan stood there in the stream, her eyes closed, willing the rush of water to cleanse her feet, and her mind.

"Back on the road," Jendara ordered.

When Karigan opened her eyes, she was staring down the black-banded blade. Torne stood in the middle of the road, his head thrown back in laughter. "A murderer who can't stand the sight of blood!"

Karigan ignored him and locked her gaze with Jendara's. "Were you a tomb guard, or a king's guard, Swordmaster?"

Jendara squinted, as if the glare off her own blade blinded her. A frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I do not guard the dead."

"Then why do you betray the king?"

"I do not betray the king, not the rightful king."

Karigan raised her brows. The only sound was the stream flowing around her ankles. Just what had Jendara meant by *that*? "There is only one king. Zachary."

The blow was so fast Karigan didn't see it coming. Jendara slammed the flat of her sword on Karigan's collar bone and sent her nerves ringing with its force. She splashed to her knees, cold water soaking through her trousers.

"I serve the rightful king," Jendara hissed. "Do not forget it." She grabbed

Karigan's collar, hauled her out of the stream, and shoved her down the road.

Torne was laughing again, or perhaps he had never stopped. Karigan staggered after her captors, dizzy and empty from vomiting repeatedly, but relieved her boots, at least, were clean.

Days came and went—Karigan lost count of how many. Hands tied before her, she trudged along with the mercenaries. She was only able to keep on because of the food Dusty had slipped in her pockets. She nibbled at it when the mercenaries weren't looking, or were asleep. Even with the food in her pockets, she dreamed of feasting on goose and fresh baked bread, of sugared apple fritters and sharp cheese.

One night while Torne snored on the opposite side of the campfire and Jendara sat at watch with her back to Karigan, Karigan slipped her hand into her pocket. Her mouth watered in anticipation and her stomach rumbled—Torne had given her nothing to eat all day.

She pulled out a strip of dried meat. She chewed and swallowed hastily, yet savored every bit. So intent on the food was she, that she did not notice Jendara gazing at her until it was too late. The swordmaster's eyes glinted in the firelight.

Karigan tensed, readying herself for another blow, for more pain, for Jendara to rouse Torne. She stuffed the rest of the meat strip into her mouth, not willing to be denied one last morsel. She glared defiantly at Jendara.

The swordmaster, however, did not twitch a muscle. She did not wake Torne, nor did she leap over to Karigan and strike her, or demand that she empty her pockets of the hidden food. She spoke not a word. She simply blinked her eyes and turned her gaze back to the depths of the night woods, her back rigid. Karigan was not about to question her motives.

When Karigan didn't dream of food, she dreamed of retrieving the brooch, and fantasized about what she would do with the saber if she were invisible. She dreamed also of her mother's ring, which Jendara wore. Sometimes she dreamed that her mother chastised her for her carelessness. Other times, her mother held her in a warm embrace, the seal of Clan G'ladheon seeming to come to life behind them—the roar of the ocean, the creak of ship timbers, the cry of gulls... Then she would awaken to a reality much stranger than all her dreams together. How did a simple schoolgirl ever get into such a mess?

Travelers on the road watched the trio curiously. Tome told his story many times, Jendara sticking her knife tip into Karigan's back lest she speak out. Tome's embellishments, Karigan thought, were getting a little wild, and if he wasn't careful,

he would one day betray himself. One afternoon he pulled aside an old trapper riding a mule.

"Down the road you'll come to a terrible sight," Torne warned the man. "King's soldiers slain, every last one."

The trapper rubbed his bristly gray beard, eyes wide. "All dead, you say? How?"

"Groundmites," Torne said. "Surely you've heard of them raiding the borders."

"Aye, but..."

"You will see. But see also, this girl." Torne pointed at Karigan and the trapper followed with his gaze.

"I see her."

"*She* is responsible."

The trapper plucked at the laces of his coarse wool shirt. "Responsible? She is? For what?"

"The massacre."

"I thought you said groundmites—"

"She led them there," Torne said fervently. "She led the massacre, she slew many of the guards herself. And what she did to the captain... Unspeakable." He shook his head.

The trapper raised a skeptical brow and cleared his throat as if to say something, then he eyed Tome's sword and thought better of it.

"We take this girl, this *traitor*," Tome spat the word, "for judgment in Sacor City. She eluded us at first, but we caught her, planning another raid with her groundmite cohorts on an innocent settlement."

"Aye, well, must be goin'. Good day't'ya." The trapper slapped his mule into a hasty trot trailing a plume of road dust behind him.

Tome beamed his gap-toothed grin at Jendara, pleased with his own performance. She groaned and rolled her eyes.

Some folk Tome told the story to were all too ready to believe it, and suggested a roadside hanging for Karigan. Tome protested and declared himself a good citizen willing to let the king's law decide her fate. She wondered *what* king he was talking

about.

Jendara was tiring of his stories as well. "Do you have to blather on to everyone we meet? I never took you for the minstrel type."

"I am not a spineless minstrel. I am being neighborly. Besides, it unsettles folks to see a girl tied up by two warriors like us. Especially when she wears that green coat." Karigan had refused to remove it, no matter how warm the weather, for fear Tome would discover her hidden caches of food and take it away from her.

"Well, I'm getting tired of the story. If you don't watch yourself, you'll overembellish and give us away. Your tongue is not nearly as glib as a true minstrel's."

"My sword work is what's glib."

Jendara looked away from him with a frown of disgust on her face.

Dusk shadowed the road. A mounted figure appeared ahead of them riding at a walk, his movements smooth and fluid. Tome squinted his eyes, then unexpectedly, whooped in recognition. He ran forward to greet the horseman. Karigan's heart sank. Immerez? The Gray One Jendara and Tome murmured about?

In the hands of Immerez, her chances of escape slimmed considerably. But as the rider approached, she saw he wasn't Mirwellian at all. He wore no scarlet, but a leather jerkin emblazoned with an eagle grasping a human skull in its talons. A mercenary.

"Garroty!" Torne cried. "What chance meeting is this?"

The other man grinned and the effect was grotesque. His face was misshapen by dozens of scars and a wad of tobacco stuffed in his left cheek. Gray-brown hair hung in a ponytail down his back. His arms were rosy with muscles and veins. The eagle and skull were tattooed onto his left forearm like an oversized bruise.

"The Talons have given me a fortnight's leave and I'm traveling. Good to see you, Torne." His voice was gravelly and low. "I see you travel still in beautiful company." His eyes drifted first to a smoldering Jendara, then rested on Karigan. "And who is this?"

"A Greenie we're delivering to the Mirwellians. For profit."

"Ah, yes. Profit." He leaned over his horse's withers and spat tobacco. "You are a merc's pride, Torne, seeking profit. But you were not very good at it when I took

you under my wing when you fled the city, were you?"

"We've improved, I assure you."

Garroty snorted. "Profit is of little meaning to you except if it helps sustain you in service to your master. This smells more like politics to me."

"What do you know of politics?" Jendara asked. Her countenance suggested he knew nothing.

"I know who you work for, beautiful."

Jendara bridled. "You will address me by my name."

Garroty shrugged.

"Why don't you camp with us tonight?" Torne asked eagerly. "We could catch up on things."

"Why don't you keep going?" Jendara suggested, an unfriendly smile on her face.

"I accept your invitation," he said to Torne. He turned to Jendara. "Nothing could keep me away from your lovely companion."

Karigan wished he would follow Jendara's advice. The Weapon's animosity toward him made her nervous. Garroty's easy seat on his battle horse, his ugly grin, and all too interested glances, did not reassure her at all.

Torne and Garroty stayed up front, conversing about weapons and war, other mercs they had both known. Garroty remained arrogantly mounted while the others walked. Torne had to crane his neck to look up at his friend. Jendara strode behind with Karigan, leading The Horse in brooding silence. Karigan wondered what caused Jendara to loathe the mercenary so.

They walked until nightfall, and settled beside the road around a little campfire. Karigan leaned against the rough bark of a pine, huddled in her greatcoat. She wanted to stay as far away from Garroty as she could, but his coarse laughter assaulted her ears and echoed down the road. He spoke of profitable campaigns his company had engaged in.

"I tell you, Torne, some of those villages in Rhovanny are ripe to pluck, especially in the wine country. And the wenches there don't carry swords." He grinned at Jendara. She glared back.

"Sacordia is a bit too peaceful for profit," Garroty said. "That's what I think."

There is always something happening down in the Under Kingdoms, though. Petty lords trying to reshape the map. The year has been good for many mere companies."

"Stick around, my friend," Tome said. "There are those in Sacoridia who would change things as well."

"Maybe so, but Zachary is a strong leader. It would take a united front, maybe more, to bring him down. The governors might not like him a lot, but the common folk do, and what the governors don't need is an uprising among the common folk. Nothing would get done. The harvest would rot in the fields. Paper makers would stop their mills. The governors' wealth would dwindle. Simple as that."

"Then what are you and your company doing here in Sacoridia," Jendara said, "if it's so unlikely there will be an uprising?"

"Aah. Now we come to it. Rumors, beautiful. Rumors, no doubt begun by your employer, and designed to create unrest. I've even heard of a woman who has convinced a good many common folk that Sacoridia has no need for any king at all—not enough to start a rebellion, but enough to spread dissent. And her ideas are catching on.

"The Talons are here in case an uprising does occur in Sacoridia. It would prove more profitable than anything that has ever happened in the Under Kingdoms. Imagine, the governors uniting to bring down the king. Talk about profit! If your employer is as good as he claims, the peace Sacoridia has enjoyed for centuries will be shattered. There is nothing better than civil war if you're a merc. Captain Heylar of the Talons has eyes and ears in the courts of most provinces. Wouldn't hurt to encourage a profitable situation now, would it?"

Karigan listened to this with wide eyes. Much more was going on in Sacoridia than she had ever dreamed. Did this sort of speculation always go on, or was there really a threat to Sacoridia's peace? There was always intrigue—the Berry sisters had said as much. Intrigue was as much a game in real life as it was on a board. But surely, threats to the king were not commonplace. Nor the threat of civil war.

"You expect mercenaries can encourage the governors in civil war?" she asked Garroty. His smile was feral in the dancing light of the fire. It made her feel like dinner, and she was sorry she had drawn his attention.

"So, the Greenie speaks." He leaned to the side and spat. "Of course we seek to influence what would be in our best interests. Civil war means work. Work means profit. Men of the Talon Company are wise in the ways of such things. They merely encourage the governors to do what is *right*. And should they do what's right, Talons will be strategically placed to negotiate contracts with the highest bidders. It's more convenient to hire a company of well-trained soldiers than to raise a rabble army of

commoners."

Karigan shook her head. Outsiders were trying to create a civil war in Sacordia for *profit*. As the daughter of a merchant, she understood the nature of profit, but at what cost? The very idea was gruesome.

Quite suddenly, she felt an urgent need to reach the king with the message F'ryan Coblebay had entrusted her to carry, but she was caught up in a hopeless situation, held captive by two swordmasters, and now accompanied by a seasoned mercenary.

MIRWELL

Warm air flowing through an unshuttered window cleared out stale air which had accumulated in the library chamber throughout the lengthy northern winter. What a change mild air was, and for once without that damp, chill wind.

A bee droned along the flowered vine growing just outside the window, and the air smelled of fresh green things and lilacs. The square of sky framed by the window was brilliant and clear. On such days, it was said, you could see Mount Mantahop of the Wingsong Range from the fortress gate towers. Mirwell scoffed at that—in all his years he had never seen it. The range was just an indistinguishable line of nubs and bumps far, far away on the horizon.

He sipped from his goblet of rhubarb wine and stared into the embers of the day fire, allowing the wine to warm him from inside. Despite the influx of summerlike warmth, the old stone fortress was dim, and if you weren't careful, in a perpetual state of damp and mildew. Mold grew in the dark corners which his servants battled constantly with soap and scrub brushes.

The damp made his bones ache. He could never seem to keep warm, not satisfactorily anyway, and he suspected it was unhealthy to reside in the dank fortress. His personal mender advocated he leave his library chamber and soak up the sun outside, but there was too much to do. This was no time for catnapping in the sun.

The efficient Beryl Spencer sat across from him in a straight back chair, her nose buried in half a dozen sheaves of paper. She must be nearsighted. He would have to look into getting her fitted for a pair of specs, but he hated the idea of wrecking her lovely oval face with glass and wire. Besides, the lenses would no doubt cost a pretty fortune.

"The clan is presently headed by Stevic G'ladheon," she said. "It was his only daughter, Karigan, who provoked Lord Timas. She hasn't been seen or heard of

since running away."

"Tell me about the clan," Mirwell said, intrigued by how Beryl's scarlet uniform deepened her rosy, healthy cheeks.

"It's based in Corsa. No surprise there. Corsa is home to many merchant clans due to its outstanding deep water harbors. G'ladheon invests heavily in shipping, but is not a dominant holder in any single ship."

"Wise of him. The more diverse his holdings, the less risk to his fortune. He does have a fortune, doesn't he?"

Beryl looked up at him with those pale green eyes of hers, glistening like the gems that were her namesake. "Stevic G'ladheon is perhaps the single wealthiest person in all the provinces. Last year's Merchant Guild's Year End Reckoning had him the highest grossing member."

"Therefore, not a man to anger if his wealth is any indication of his influence. What does he deal in?"

Beryl scanned her papers. "Textiles and spices mainly. Some lumber and paper. Much of his trading is done inland via river cog and wagon train. He has strong ties with Rhovanny, and has even traded ice in the Cloud Islands. Very clever of him to find such a market in the tropics. According to some of your relations, my lord, he doesn't venture often into Mirwell Province."

"No wonder I've heard little of him. Do any of my relations consider him a threat?"

"No, my lord. Though, just in case, they traced some of his personal history. He is the clan founder—Clan G'ladheon has existed for some twenty years."

Mirwell snorted. "A bought clanship, I've no doubt."

"G'ladheon worked hard for it, starting with small merchant families to learn the trade. He's intelligent to have accumulated such wealth over so short a time." Was that admiration in Beryl's voice? "Here's an interesting bit of information. About thirty-five years ago, he served on the merchant vessel *Gold Hunter*, which used tactics of questionable legality during peacetime to acquire goods for trade."

"Explain."

"The crew practiced piracy, my lord. Mostly around the Under Kingdoms. They wreaked havoc with the sugar and tobacco trades."

Mirwell raised his brows. "More interesting by the moment. Any idea of what capacity he served as on this vessel?"

"No, my lord."

"What became of the ship?"

"It was sold and reregistered as *SMV Avren's Pride*, and became something of a coastal scow transporting granite and lumber. It was lost somewhere in outer Ullem Bay fifteen years ago."

"I see no immediate threat from this G'ladheon fellow." Mirwell sipped his wine. It was just the right amount of dry balanced with sweet. It did not rival the fine vintages produced in the lake country of Rhovanny, but in a pinch it would do. Vintners couldn't seem to grow grapes in Sacoridia's sandy soil, so cider and fruit wines served as staples. Unless Rhovan was to be had, of course.

"Good work, Spence. Keep the information on hand just in case he turns into an overwrought father. Should he cause us trouble, I'm sure our good friend aus-Corien of the Under Kingdoms would be interested in hearing about him. And we may have our own uses for the information."

"Yes, my lord. Anything else?"

Mirwell rubbed a sweaty hand on his thigh. He could think of countless "things" she could do for him. He felt a certain thrill at the idea of what she could do for him tingle all the way down to his loins. Would voicing his desire wreck her fealty and efficiency? Or, would it bind her closer to him?

Phaw, randy old man, he thought, not displeased by the response of his libido. But she was too effective as his aide and he feared ruining her devotion. Should she make the first advance herself, however...

She never would. He was a grizzled old man and she was more intent on making a place for herself in his court hierarchy with pure hard work. She had moved swiftly up the ranks during her term in Sacoridia's regular militia, and had given it all up to serve her governor and home province. The chance she had taken paid off, and here she was working her way up in his own provincial militia. Ambition was a trait Mirwell admired, and honest ambition rare enough.

Ah, well. At least I can enjoy my dirty thoughts.

"My lord?"

"Eh?"

"Anything else?"

Now she must think him a dotty old fool leering at her like that. "Send in Amilton," he said, then amended, "*PrinceAmilton*."

"Very well, my lord."

Mirwell watched after her with longing and regret, and observed how her every movement was graceful, yet held a stillness like a deer in the woods: alert but calm, and not prone to excessive motion. She reminded him of the Weapons, but their movements were always precise and lacking beauty.

Ah, if he were a younger man, then maybe, but now he must set aside his thoughtful maunderings and get on with his great work. The glory of his clan was more important than anything else, and Amilton had been insistent about seeing him today. Mirwell had put him off all morning, and most of the afternoon. By now, the prince would be angry enough to spit venom.

"There are ways," the governor told the bear head mounted on the opposite wall, "of showing who is in control. Subtle ways, mind you."

The bear had once exerted her control on him in a none-too-subtle way. It was she who had maimed his right side. He had been careless during the hunt, had gotten between the mother and the cubs. The bear mauled him, and it was perhaps his injuries which had prevented him from siring another son, though he was always certain to blame his wives. He could not be perceived as weak in any of his ventures. Too bad the wife who bore Timas had been so short and mean. The boy had acquired her temperament and size.

Half-dead and ravaged from bear claws and teeth, Mirwell had hunted down and killed the mother bear with nothing more than his own stubborn will and a dagger, just to prove he was not weak. He skinned her and ate of her raw heart, still warm and pulsating with blood. As he chewed, bear blood gushed in runnels down his beard and neck, and into his gaping wounds, blending with his own streaming blood. This, he thought, made their strength one.

Then, out of pity, he killed the mewling little cubs, too little to survive without their mother. Of the bear pelts, he made a mantle to wear on state occasions as a reminder to others of his strength.

Prince Amilton entered the chamber, glowering. His bodyguards, simple Mirwellian guards, posted themselves outside the doorway. Not that he needed guards in the governor's house, but he had become dependent on his two Weapons who usually never left his side, and now they were somewhere out in the great wide wilderness tracking the Greenie and leaving him, in his mind, vulnerable.

Regular militia made a poor substitute for one used to the fanatical, servile devotion exhibited by Weapons. Mirwell liked the idea of a more vulnerable Amilton. It made the prince more malleable.

Amilton was dressed in elegant silks with a purple scarf tied prettily around his collar—useless clothes more suited to impressing court butterflies than anything else. He did attract his share of female attention, but to what practical end?

The governor preferred a military look himself, and no one in his court, not even the ladies, wore such lavish fabrics or colors. Amilton looked a butterfly in House Mirwell.

Mirwell touched his brow and inclined his head, not deeply, but not insolently either. He was excused from a full formal bow because of his old hunting wounds.

"Wine, my prince?" he inquired.

Amilton waved a contemptuous hand at Mirwell and faced the fire. Mirwell poured him a gobletful anyway, and with great effort, limped over to the hearth to give it to him. Amilton took it wordlessly—and poured the contents on the floor.

Mirwell watched unblinking. "How may I serve you, my prince?"

Amilton turned on him, his expression haughty. His face was narrower, more sharp and severe than his brother's, but he had the brown, almond-shaped eyes that characterized Clan Hillander.

"You shall not serve me the bottled urine you call wine."

"I beg forgiveness, Liege. Rhovan is difficult to come by, and we save it for more... extravagant occasions." It was no wonder the late king had chosen Zachary to rule—Amilton was a spoiled fop.

"You seem reluctant," Amilton said, "to update me in the affairs concerning my brother."

"Missives from Captain Immerez are few. He is hard on the road to ensure our plans go forward without mishap. You know as much about his progress as I do."

"It seems I could have sent my own assassins months ago and have had done with it."

"Of course we've tried that avenue to no avail—it lacked finesse. The assassins were promptly thwarted."

"Yes, because you've permitted spies into your house who learned your plans. And my brother knows where I am."

"If your brother knew the source of those assassins, don't you think his Weapons would be upon us now? And why should he care where you are, so long as it is far away from Sacor City? My liege, we only suspect there is a spy in House Mirwell."

"I believe my brother was suspicious enough of those last attempts to put a spy here. How do you know our next attempt won't fail?"

"Every precaution is being taken, Liege. You must trust me in this."

"I sincerely hope you don't fail this time, Tomas." Amilton left his goblet on the mantel and moved restlessly about the chamber. He paused by the open window which looked over the training fields of the provincial militia, and allowed the implied threat to hang in the air before he spoke again. "And you trust this Gray One?"

"Explicitly. He is of the old powers, and his alliance will bring such influence and glory to us that we can't even begin to imagine it."

Amilton leaned against the windowsill, arms crossed, his trim, angular figure silhouetted against blue sky. "I don't particularly care for his ways. The groundmites, you know. But the Gray One's forces ought to convince the other governors and nobles to ally with me."

"His forces are great enough to take a province at a time, if necessary," Mirwell said. "And he has offered you powers?"

"Not precisely. I fear he may betray us and offer them to my brother first."

"It would be easiest for the Gray One, in his own self-interest to do so."

"I agree."

"Let us not fret," Mirwell said. "He'll have trouble convincing your brother that the D'Yer Wall should be crushed. Zachary is far too scrupulous."

"And I'm not?" Not even a trace of a smile could be found on Amilton's lips.

Wisely, Mirwell didn't respond. He was growing used to Amilton's little tirades.

"My father took what was mine by right of succession, and gave it to my brother. Do you know the humiliation I experienced when *he* was pronounced heir? I wanted to gut him right there in the throne room; right there in front of my father and his

counselors, and those smirking lord-governors and clan chiefs. He was always favored in Father's eyes. He always exceeded me in his studies, he excelled in hunting and riding. He revived the old Hillander terrier breed, and his kennel is the envy of the country."

"He sounds very impressive," Mirwell said. "But a man cannot be judged by his kennels."

Now Amilton did smile, but it was fleeting. "If I'd the sense, I'd have seen to my father's death before he had a chance to announce an heir. I'd be king now, and I would have the control over my brother's life, instead of he over mine. Then we would see who the exiled one was!"

Mirwell gazed down at his Intrigue board. Little had changed on it since Immerez last reported. He picked up the red king, its enamel paint chipped and scratched, and rotated it in his fingers.

"Hindsight, my prince, will not change the future. There is no use dwelling in it. Your brother does lack certain qualities which are in your favor."

"Such as?"

"Such as ambition. You and I share that particular quality, and it is always the downfall of one who is as scrupulous as your brother. We will make Sacoridia great, you and I." He set the red king on the fringes of the green king's realm.

Ambition was a healthy attribute for a man in his waning years. It kept him thinking young, and prepared his clan for the ages to come. Once Amilton ascended the throne, Adolind and L'Petrie Provinces—the poorest and richest provinces in Sacoridia—would be incorporated into his own. Adolind because it bordered him to the north, and it contained millions of acres of virgin timber—enough to feed paper mills and shipyards for the next few centuries; and L'Petrie for its harbors, fishing fleet, and prosperous trade city—Corsa. It was also on the southeast corner of his border.

There would be little resistance, if any. Both provinces had militia that were laughable at best. And if there was a problem? The Gray One and King Amilton would back him up with their forces.

"You will prevail, my prince," Mirwell said. "You will prevail."

That is, he thought, if Immerez stops that Greenie in time.

STEVIC G'LADHEON

Stevic G'ladheon caught wind of a bad omen as he rode his sorrel stallion through the gates of Selium. An undertaker's cart stood pulled to the side of the street. The ancient nag harnessed to it dozed in the sun oblivious to the flies that swarmed around her tearing eyes, and that which lay beneath the blanket in the cart.

The undertaker, an old man with a stubble beard, leaned against the cart on his forearms. His worn clothing, hole-ridden trousers, and a frayed waistcoat held together by patches, were smeared with mud and dirt as if he had just returned from grave digging. Stevic G'ladheon, whose own clothing was of the richest fabrics and finest make, wrinkled his nose.

A woman in green joined the old man. Her hair, like new copper, was bound in a single braid down her back. A winged horse was embroidered in gold on the left sleeve of her shortcoat, and a saber girded at her side.

"I can smell what's in that cart from here."

Stevic smiled grimly at his cargo master, Sevano, who rode next to him on a gray mare. "It's not what I think of when I think of Selium," Stevic said. "I'm surprised they let that undertaker through the gates."

As they rode past the cart, the woman lifted the blanket. She clapped her hand over her mouth and nose. Whether she was shocked to see the corpse of someone she knew, or was reacting to the stench of decay, he couldn't tell.

"Found 'im on the side of the road," the undertaker said in a gruff voice. "Had to have been there a while, I reckon. Woulda left 'im there, but I'm not that way. Some fellas would let a corpse rot in the open if someone weren't there to pay for a proper burial. I can give you a real decent deal on a pine box if you're inclined."

"Was there any sign of a horse nearby?" was the surprising response.

"Nothin' but my old cob here within miles, Cap'n. Now how 'bout that box?"

The woman dropped the blanket and grabbed him by his lapels. His eyes bulged and his arms dangled helplessly at his sides as she shook him. "Did you see anything lying near the body?" she demanded. "A satchel of any kind? Tack?"

"N-no! Nothing..."

Stevic and the cargo master hurried past the unpleasant scene at a trot. After a while, Stevic pulled on the reins and looked back. The undertaker had disappeared, and the woman held two arrows at eye level. A frown tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Sevano followed Stevic's gaze. "Green Rider," he muttered. "Always like a raven before the storm, bearing ill news wherever one turns up."

It sometimes seemed true that the king's messengers bore only bad news: from strife, illness, and death to new taxes. Some likened crossing the path of a Green Rider to meeting disaster. Stevic knew otherwise. Years ago, a Green Rider had brought news of Queen Isen's approval for the chartering of Clan G'ladheon. The Rider had stayed on to witness the confirmation ceremony, and turned out to be a jolly entertainer during the reception that followed.

Stevic and Sevano rode through the late afternoon bustle of Selium. Grafters hawked their wares in stalls, and tourists milled around street musicians who played ballads for coppers. Steam rose from vents in the roofs of bathhouses. Despite the outrageous rates chalked outside on slates, long lines formed outside, and business was thriving. If not for the hot springs, commerce in the city would be considerably slower.

Students, in their indigo, green, maroon, gold, and brown uniforms, created a motley scene as they wove in and out of the crowds, or sat on the front steps of the art museum. Some shared notes and gossip while others sketched. Some played involved games of Intrigue as pigeons cooed and stalked the steps in search of handouts.

The old longing swelled within Stevic's chest as he took in the scene—a wistful longing to be a student here, himself. He hadn't the wealth when a youth to study at Selium. Indeed, his family had dragged what meager living they could out of the sea. At a young age he could master a sloop and haul weighted nets alongside his brother and sisters. As he spent a portion of each day gutting or scaling fish to be dried, he dreamed—oh, how he dreamed—of the Golden Guardian searching in his poor village for hidden talent, and finding it within him.

Alas, it remained a dream, for the Golden Guardian had never come to his obscure village. Stevic saw the life of a fisherman as the bleakest possible future, and no longer able to endure the stink of dead fish and their scales clinging to his skin, he ran away.

Instead of a refined education immersed in the arts and history, he was educated through life experience in the employ of various merchants. He learned to read and tally figures—his first employer had seen to that—and traveled to places he could never have imagined, but he missed a classical education.

In the midst of the conviviality of Selium's main thoroughfare, and absorbed by his own regrets, he almost forgot the unpleasant summons that had brought him here. The charges against Karigan were preposterous, of course, and he planned to straighten it all out with Dean Geyer. If nothing else, currency would convince the

dean of his mistake.

Pink apple blossoms drifted into the street, filling the air with a far sweeter fragrance than the corpse down by the gates. Stevic had traveled lightly, though tempted to bring along a caravan of goods now that the spring trading season had opened and people were in the mood to buy. However, his daughter's plight was more important, and he made what speed he could, bringing along Sevano, who was talented with a sword despite his age, and welcome company. Up the Grandgent River they had sailed from Corsa, on one of Stevic's own cargo barges. They had left it unburdened of goods for speed. From the river, it was a two-day ride to Selium.

Stevic sent Sevano to arrange for rooms at the Harp and Drum, where he stayed whenever he was in town. The inn was clean and tapped into the city's famous hot springs. Each evening, students performed in the common room. The inn provided an opportunity for aspiring minstrels to practice their craft in a real situation, and to earn coppers and silvers for tuition at the same time.

Stevic had hoped Karigan would take a liking to music making, but it appeared she hadn't the aptitude for it. Exactly what she had an aptitude for remained a mystery, though Dean Geyer hinted in his letter that it was for nothing but trouble. Stevic had crushed the letter in his fist and thrown it into the fire. His daughter was headstrong, but she was also intelligent. One just had to know how to direct her energies.

The closer Stevic got to campus, the quieter the street became, as the mercantiles, inns, bathhouses, craft booths, and tourists fell behind. Grand houses now huddled close together on both sides of the street. They were old and similar in style to the academic buildings with pretentious columns supporting overhanging roofs of red clay tile. Sharp angles and corners cast stark shadows against pale walls. Scenes carved in relief ornamented entryways. Over one door, the god and goddess glowed in the sunlight. Narrow, tall windows remained darkened by shadows like empty eye sockets.

Though the houses were similar in style to the academic buildings, the academic buildings were even older. The city had grown up around the school, and the name Selium was interchangeable between the two.

Stevic rode beneath the P'ehdrosian Arch which marked the entrance to campus. He admired the scroll work and detail carved into its marble facade. On the keystone was a half-man, half-moose creature blowing on a horn. His features were scrubbed away by hundreds of years of harsh winters, and his body, like the rest of the arch, was spotted with lichens.

Was the p'ehdrose a mythological species, or a lost race? It was like asking if the

god Aeryc rode the crescent moon in the evening. He couldn't see it happen, therefore he could not know in truth. Once he had thought Selium contained the answers to all such questions, but time and maturity had taught him the answers were all open to interpretation. If he believed the p'ehdrose existed, did it make it so?

His fingers dragged along the inscription inside the arch as he rode beneath. He couldn't read the ancient Sacoridian script, but he remembered that the words roughly meant that knowledge brought peace. In fact, the school had risen from the ashes and death of the Long War with the optimistic goal of ending all war with knowledge. A lofty ideal? Not really, considering Sacordia had been a relatively peaceful nation for hundreds of years. Other countries, once members of the League that had crushed down the dark forces of Mornhavon the Black, were less peaceful than Sacordia, but still sent children to be educated here. A sign of hope for future generations not to be discounted.

At the school's stables, Stevic handed the reins over to a boy and tossed him a copper.

"Thank you, my lord," the boy said in astonishment. Evidently tips were uncommon.

"I am no lord, boy. Remember that."

"Y-yes, my... Yes, sir!"

Stevic strode toward the administration building, with its golden dome and marble colonnade, his royal blue cloak flowing behind him. Well over six feet tall, he was an imposing man with a set chin and wide shoulders. Brown hair, flecked with silver, hung long and loose.

Despite his rich silks and the presumed leisure which accompanied wealth, he wasn't in any way soft. His body, for all its height, was hard and compact from years of hoisting cargo. Most merchants of his status sat in their offices counting their currency, but Stevic was different. He would not make his men and women do what he himself could not do. It wasn't uncommon to see him on the docks, sleeves rolled up, throwing heavy kegs up to a cog's crew.

It also wasn't uncommon for him to be called a lord, for his bearing and composure, his self-confidence and commanding presence, was that of a nobleman. He would have none of it. He was proud of his simple roots, proud of the hard work that had attained the success he now enjoyed. He scorned royalty on the most part, and he was heard to mutter, more than once, that royals didn't have the sense of a horse's ass.

A gold ring flashed on Stevic's finger as he entered the dim administration

building. It bore the clan emblem, the twin of the one his beloved Kariny had once worn. Upon her death it had been passed on to Karigan. Whenever he looked at his daughter, he saw Kariny. Her high forehead and bright eyes... Karigan had not inherited her quiet ways, however, but her father's own temper.

Stevic's footfalls echoed loudly in the lobby. It was a domed rotunda with a veined marble floor. Bronze statues and busts of past administrators, stern and staid scholars, and severe looking craft masters, frowned at him from their alcoves. Offices branched off in either direction in rows of oak doors.

A bald-pated clerk sat at a desk, crouched over a sheaf of papers. Stevic stood before him some moments before the clerk acknowledged his presence with a sniff and nasal, "Yes?"

"I'm here to see Dean Geyer."

"Dean Geyer is in a meeting." The man stuck his nose back into his papers and proceeded to ignore Stevic.

Bureaucrats, Stevic knew, could be worse than aristocrats. As a merchant, he had dealt with his share of tax collectors and trade officials. "I will see the dean now."

"Have you an appointment?"

"Of sorts."

"There are no appointments scheduled on the roster at this time." The clerk didn't even glance at the appointment book on his desk.

"I received a letter from Dean Geyer instructing me to visit when I arrived."

"Do you have it with you?"

Stevic frowned. "I—it was destroyed."

"I see." Though Stevic towered above, the clerk still managed to look down his nose at him. "Dean Geyer is busy. Either you have an appointment or you do not."

Stevic wondered if the clerk gave the royals the same runaround, or if they received special treatment. He placed his hands on the clerk's neat desk and leaned down so he could look the man in the eye. "You will create an appointment for me *now*, or by Breyan's gold, I'll inform the dean that his clerk is reading poetry rather than attending to his duty."

The clerk licked his lips and gulped nervously. "Very well, but the dean will be

annoyed."

"I pay this school handsomely so my daughter can attend. I expect some of that tuition goes toward your salary, and that of the dean. I do not think it unreasonable that the dean see me.*Now.*"

"Of course, my lord."

So, the clerk *did* treat royals the same way. Perhaps he wasn't so bad after all. "I am no lord. I am Stevic G'ladheon, chieftain of Clan G'ladheon. At your service." He put his hand to his heart and bowed slightly, as was customary.

The clerk sniffed as he took in the fine clothing. "Oh. A merchant, I suppose. Very well. Follow me." He hoisted his robes of office and strode across the lobby, his sandals whispering on the marble floor.

They mounted two sets of spiraling stairs carpeted with rich red pile, and zigzagged through numerous branching corridors before halting before enormous double doors of oak. The clerk hesitated and glanced over his shoulder at Stevic. Noting the merchant's expression of resolve, he licked his lips and knocked.

"Who is it?" barked a voice from within.

"Dean Geyer, I—"

"Oh, Matteredly. Come in."

The clerk shrugged and pushed the doors open. Dean Geyer, a distinguished looking man with snowy hair and bright blue eyes, sat at his vast desk, just about to insert a mast into the upper deck of a large model ship.

"I see how busy he is," Stevic whispered to the clerk. Matteredly reddened.

The dean cleared his throat when he noticed Stevic, and pushed the model aside. He stared at the clerk, awaiting an explanation.

"Chief Stevic G'ladheon to see you, Dean," Matteredly said. He backed out of the office without another word, pulling the doors shut as he went.

Stevic ignored the impressive collection of books on the dean's shelves, and the rare hand-drawn maps framed on the wall that would have ordinarily intrigued him. He stepped right up to the desk and focused his attention on the ship model, examining it carefully. "I've sailed a few of these square riggers myself," he said.

"I, uh..." Geyer ran his fingers through his white hair and chuckled nervously,

like a child caught with his finger dipped in the honey pot. "I tried sailing once or twice, but uh... the sea sickness, you know."

Stevic scrunched his brows together. "You've glued the bowsprit to the stern." He clucked in dismay. "And see here—" he pointed to the rear of the model, "—you've put the jib where the spanker belongs."

He stood straight, feet spread and hands on hips, and turned his attention on the dean. He surveyed the dean as critically as he had the model, as if something was out of place. Geyer swallowed and twisted a length of twine around his little finger. He tried to speak, but under Stevic's stern appraisal, no words came out.

"I beg your pardon for this intrusion, Dean," Stevic said finally, "but your letter demanded immediate attention. I haven't even been to see my daughter yet."

The dean paled and seemed to quiver. Then he mastered himself and pointed at a chair on the other side of his desk. "Of... of course. Please sit. You must be weary after such a long journey. From Corsica if I'm not mistaken."

"You are not mistaken." Stevic pulled up a leather upholstered chair. "And I will sit, though I'm not tired. What I really want, Dean, is answers. Why is my daughter being expelled from school?"

Dean Geyer changed the arrangement of his glue pot and carving knives on his desktop, and picked up an unattached model mast which he rolled between his fingers. He seemed unwilling to look Stevic in the eye.

"Not expelled, not exactly. Suspended. You see her grades were dwindling, and she'd been picking fights with other students."

"Those are no reasons for a... suspension."

"I'm afraid they are. We do not abide schoolyard brawls. Fighting is not in keeping with the principles of the school."

"Brawl?" Stevic said. "My daughter does not participate in *brawls*."

The dean pushed his fingers together in a triangle. A smile fluttered on his lips. "A fight, then. A fight which she initiated. Fortunately, the other student involved was not hurt."

"I don't believe it."

"Perhaps you do not, but the student's family complained to the trustees. You must also know she was not doing well academically." The dean relaxed as he

explained Karigan's shortcomings. "She hardly attended her classes, and even when she did, her grades were still mediocre, not in keeping with our standards. That alone would be enough for dismissal. With this as her background, and a fight she provoked as cause, the trustees determined Karigan should spend some time at home and reconsider her reasons for being here."

Stevic's face flushed an angry red. "My daughter is not mediocre. Nor is she a bully who goes about provoking fights."

Geyer spread his hands wide to indicate the matter was beyond his control. "As a parent, you are entitled to feel that way about your child. Needless to say, the trustees have formed another opinion about her. It is hoped that upon reconsidering her behavior of the past, she will change her ways and return to Selium... in time."

Stevic gripped the arms of his chair, feeling as if he would explode. "I would talk with your trustees. If I don't receive satisfaction, my donations to this institution will cease. I will talk to the Golden Guardian himself if I must, but first I wish to see my daughter. I have yet to hear her side of the tale."

Geyer blanched again. "She isn't home? You... you haven't... seen her?"

"Of course not. I told you... What's going on here? Where is my daughter?"

The dean mumbled to himself and looked around his office as if seeing it for the first time. Stevic felt he would strangle the dean with a strand of the model ship's rigging for all he could not seem to say anything. Geyer gathered his courage, but couldn't bring himself to look in Stevic G'ladheon's eyes. "She ran away. I was the last to see her."

Stevic struck the flat of his hand on Geyer's desk. Papers flew off and the ship model shuddered. A freshly glued mast toppled over and clattered onto the desktop.

"My daughter is *missing*?" Stevic lowered his voice to a hoarse growl. "I thought more of Selium than this." He pointed a shaking finger at the dean. "I hold you responsible for her being missing. I demand to see Guardian Fiori at once."

Geyer cringed in his chair. "The Guardian isn't—"

Stevic didn't wait to hear the rest. He threw the double doors open, stormed out of Dean Geyer's office, and searched up and down corridors for the Golden Guardian's office. He flung doors open, startling administrators and disrupting classes. He pushed clerks out of his way when they blocked passageways. Exclamations and curses followed in his wake.

When he thought he had searched every office, he found another corridor

branching off from one of the main ones. He struck off down the poorly lit corridor not slackening his stride. Candles ensconced on the wall sputtered at his passing. The rich red pile disappeared, revealing scuffed and scarred floorboards. Finally, he came upon a door adorned simply with the symbol of the golden harp. He opened it and entered.

The office was a disarray of musical instruments. They hung on the walls, lay on shelves, and leaned in corners. Some were in pieces, or had broken strings curling crazily from tuning pegs. Countless books were stacked on the floor—there was no space on the shelves for them. A thick layer of dust coated everything, and the scent of resin hung thick in the air.

"This is the Golden Guardian's office?" Stevic said with incredulity.

"As a matter of fact, it is."

Beyond the plain pinewood desk in the center of the room, a girl in a uniform of indigo with a white apprentice knot at the shoulder, looked up with sea-green eyes from the book she had been reading.

"I beg your pardon," Stevic said, "but I need to see Guardian Fiori."

The girl's book thumped closed, and she sighed. "I'd like to see him myself, but he's the only one who knows where he is."

Stevic waited for an explanation, but the girl seemed to have sunk into her own thoughts and didn't go on.

"Ahem," he prompted. "What do you mean?"

"He's doing what a minstrel does best. He's journeying. He could be in the northlands, Ullem Bay, or Rhovanny for all I know. He never knows where he'll be until he's there.

He has been gone up to a year, and longer than that before I came to live with him."

Stevic reckoned himself open-minded, but this girl was no older than his Karigan. It was rumored the Golden Guardian was well into his sixties, and though it was not unusual for older men to wed younger women prime to bear children, this age discrepancy was criminal.

He stalked over to a dusty window that overlooked the campus. A bell chimed four times, resonating through the floorboards, as if it must be very close. Students poured out of buildings and onto the square below, changing classes. Karigan

should be among them, but she wasn't. Where was she? On the road home, he hoped. A pigeon perched on the windowsill.

"Some governor Fiori is if he isn't here to watch over his interests."

"Pardon?" the girl asked. "I don't hear well. It's best if you face me."

Stevic turned in surprise. This wasn't Fiori's wife at all, but his daughter! He reddened in embarrassment. "You're Karigan's friend, aren't you? Young Estral?" Karigan had spoken of Estral, saying that she was deaf in one ear from an accident, but still a fabulous musician.

The girl nodded with a smile. "And you're her father." Then her face grew serious. "You haven't seen Karigan, have you?"

"No. I expected to find her here. Either a message she had run away didn't reach me before I left Corsa, or the dean didn't bother to send me one." The anger began to build within him again, like a fire scorching his belly. "I hold Dean Geyer responsible for this. If anything has happened to Karigan—"

"It's terrible." Estral's shoulders sagged and she rested her chin on her hands. "I wish... I wish she'd come back. I miss her. It hasn't been the same here without her. I've no one to talk to, and the other students pester me worse than usual. She used to sort of protect me. I don't know why she ran away. Did you know her grades were improving, and that Arms Master Rendle had taken her on as a student just before she was suspended?"

"Your story differs from the dean's," Stevic said. "You say Karigan left no clue as to where she went?"

"No. And I wouldn't blame the dean too much. He's a little out of touch, and perhaps too much at the sway of the trustees. After all, it was an aristocrat Karigan fought."

"An aristocrat?"

"Lord-Governor Mirwell's heir. He was humiliated after she beat him at swordplay."

"Never heard of anything good coming out of Mirwell." Stevic's caravans rarely traveled there. The common folk were, on the most part, too poor to purchase his goods, and the wealthy were more interested in arms, which he didn't sell.

Estral continued, "It created a sensation all over town."

Stevic grinned mirthlessly. "Sounds like something she would do."

Estral shook her head. "She never knew it, but she had more friends than she ever realized because she stood up to bullies like Timas. A lot of the students here are not of noble blood or wealth, but are full of talent. Father makes a point of searching for such children and bringing them to Selium. They are often at the mercy of those such as Timas."

"And instead of playing along, she stood against the ruffians." Stevic rubbed his chin. "Yes, that is like her."

The office door creaked open. Stevic started in surprise as the Green Rider he had seen earlier with the undertaker walked in. She still clutched the arrows, black-shafted, he saw, her brow furrowed with anger.

"I wish to see Guardian Fiori," she said. The corners of her eyes were creased from too many years in the sun, and her cheeks were sprinkled with faded freckles. Her hair, which had looked so intense outside, now appeared a burnished auburn with a streak of gray sweeping from her temple. Hazel eyes sparkled alertly, no doubt taking in every detail of the Golden Guardian's disheveled office. Her nose was disjointed as if it had been broken once, and a badly healed scar ran raggedly down her chin and neck in a brown line until it disappeared beneath her collar.

"I'm sorry, but he's away," Estral said.

The lines across the Rider's brow deepened. "You are being honest with me? I can sense falsehoods if I so choose." She fingered a brooch on her shortcoat. Stevic hadn't noticed it before, and even now couldn't seem to make out its shape or design.

"I've no reason to lie to you," Estral said. "My father is traveling."

"Your father! You're not one of those idiot clerks—please forgive me." Her voice was chagrined, and it was difficult to imagine her as the same woman who had shaken the undertaker by his lapels. Stevic wondered if she had given the clerk Matterly similar treatment. "I was hoping he could help me identify this talisman." She held the arrows aloft. The steel-barbed tips were encrusted with dry blood. "There are words carved on them in a language I can't quite make out, but I have my own thoughts. They've the feel of magic. Very old magic."

Estral gazed at them with some interest but didn't ask to hold them. "I'm sorry Father isn't here. Maybe Master Galwin could help. He's a historian and the school curator. He studies the lore of old magic. Where did you find them?"

"In the back of one of my finest Riders." She sighed. "We believe he was

bringing us a message of some significance." Then, as an afterthought, she introduced herself. "I am Laren Mapstone, captain of His Majesty's Messenger Service. Your father has been very helpful to me in the past. That is, dealing with objects of antiquity and magic."

"Ach," Stevic said. "Magic is evil." He made the sign of the half moon with his fingers to ward off any magic that might be conjured up just by mentioning it.

Captain Mapstone gave him a long, measuring look. Her head did not even reach his shoulders, but her bearing made her seem equally tall. "And who are you?"

"Chief Stevic G'ladheon, at your service." He bowed deeper for her than he had for the clerk.

"Oh. A merchant. Obviously with backward views. Magic is magic. It's the user who makes it evil or good."

"I still wouldn't touch it."

The Green Rider's lips drew back into what could have been a smile. "There are those who still touch magic and use it, despite the denial this country has been immersed in for the last several centuries."

Before Stevic could retort, the door creaked open again. This time, a man of wiry and well-muscled build walked in. His hair was steel gray, but his mustache and eyes were as black as night. A pipe protruded from his shirt pocket.

"Pardon my intrusion, Estral," he said, "but I hear that Karigan's father is here."

Estral nodded toward Stevic. "That's him, Master Rendle."

"Arms Master Rendle?" Stevic stepped past Captain Mapstone to greet the man. He forgot to bow.

"Pleased to meet. We've a few things to discuss."

Estral's chair scraped the floor as she stood up. "Guess I'm not going to get anything done here. Nobody ever bothers to come back here except when I have to study."

"If you could direct me to Master Galwin..." the Green Rider requested, and followed Estral out.

The arms master watched after them. "A dangerous job that Rider has."

"How's that?"

Rendle shook himself as if he hadn't realized he'd spoken aloud. "Can you imagine riding all hours of the day at the mercy of weather during all seasons? Can you imagine bearing a message through dangerous territories, or taking bad news to a short-tempered lord who wouldn't think twice about killing you? Can you imagine carrying a message someone doesn't want delivered? The lifespan of a Green Rider is very short. That captain is about as old as I see them get."

"That's all very well, but it's their job. Why, sometimes it's no better for a merchant traveling with a load of goods. Unless you've a full complement of guards. I know plenty of merchants who have been killed for—"

"Aye, it's their job, and Green Riders are the closest to insane as I've ever seen."

Unsettled by the arms master's words, Stevic watched out the dusty window as Captain Mapstone and Estral crossed the courtyard down below. "Tell me about my daughter."

Arms Master Rendle leaned against the Golden Guardian's desk, his arms folded across his broad chest.

"By the end of the fight," he was saying, "I saw enough to recognize she had some natural talent with the sword. It was the way she moved. It was raw and instinctual, but I saw promise. You must understand that most of the students who come to me are there mostly because it is part of their coursework, or a clan tradition to receive weapons training. They hone traditional skills it is unlikely they will ever use. Minstrel students are more musician than warrior, but weapons training is required for them. The Guardian believes they should be prepared for the world they wander in, and I quite agree. But it is rare to find a student with actual interest and talent."

Stevic stared out the window. The courtyard had fallen into shadow and silence, empty of students. Even the pigeons seemed to have fled the grounds, giving it a gloomy and abandoned feel. "I had hoped Karigan would find a talent for something, but I never expected the sword."

"Ah, but the sword is just a beginning. I had heard about her from her other instructors. Complaints, mind you, except from her riding instructor, Master Deleon. Del said she excelled at riding. When I saw Karigan put Timas Mirwell on the ground, I thought maybe I could get her to work for something else and the sword would be just a beginning, that it would inspire her to seek out whatever it was she wanted to do with her life."

Stevic turned his gaze to the arms master. "I am fortunate my daughter had such

an instructor."

Rendle grinned. "She was fortunate to have such a father."

Stevic raised a brow.

"I once asked her what she wanted to do with her life," Rendle said. "She told me, something adventurous. She wanted to be a merchant like her father. It is not many children who choose to follow their parents' footsteps."

Stevic stilled, letting it sink in. Then he slowly shook his head and turned back to the window and the shadows. He felt buffeted by a variety of emotions: elation, fear, sadness, desperation. *Where was she?* "She never told me." His voice was taut.

Rendle said nothing until he was certain Stevic had mastered himself. "We continued training every day. It seems someone had worked with her before, the cargo master—?"

Stevic nodded. "Sevano."

"Her skills were less than basic, but she was an eager student, always at the practice field early. She worked harder than any student I've had the privilege to teach in a very long time. Her skills improved quickly though she seemed discouraged by what she saw as a lack of progress. Unfortunately, her training was cut short."

"The suspension you mean."

"Aye." Rendle removed his pipe from his pocket and patted his side as if in search of something, and frowned. "My tobacco pouch. Hmmm..." When he couldn't find it, he stuck the pipe back in his pocket. "Despite the fact Timas Mirwell attacked her after their swordplay, and despite Del... er, Master Deleon and myself speaking on her behalf before the trustees, Karigan was suspended."

Stevic left the window to stand before Rendle. "I've heard the dean's explanation, but why do you think she was suspended?"

"I am Rhovan born," Rendle said. "My mother was of Rhovanny, my father of Adolind Province. I spent a goodly part of my life on the Wanda Plains growing more weeds than crops, and fighting off groundmites and other raiders. We were too concerned with day to day life to worry about what the clans were doing in Sacordia. Politics..." Rendle leaned forward and in a low voice he said, "At least one trustee is of Clan Mirwell. Mirwellians don't take kindly to dishonor. Karigan dishonored the governor's son, thus the entire clan, and they will remember such an insult for a century if need be."

If need be. Stevic took a deep swallow of his ale and set the tankard down on the knotty pine table with *aclunk*. It was late afternoon at the Harp and Drum, and no one had begun to entertain yet. The music would start during the supper hour. He didn't think he would have the heart to listen to it anyway.

Only a few other patrons sat quietly at tables, sipping wine or ale, as drowsy sunlight filtered through the windows. Stevic twisted the gold ring on his finger, ignoring the steaming fresh bread and cheese plate the innkeeper set on their table.

"You think about Kari," Sevano said.

Stevic nodded. "She's my daughter... just a baby."

"Oh, no—no baby is she! Young, yes, but no baby. You know she's got herself into plenty of scrapes before. It's just like her to go home on her own. No waiting around for you to arrive, not with the humiliation this suspension must have caused her. I know G'ladheon pride, I do." He chuckled. "If you were her, you'd do the same."

Stevic smiled. "I did do something similar when I was her age. I joined a merchant barge, but—"

"But she is still your baby," Sevano shook his head. "She has jumped from her nest, her wings spread. You would prevent this?"

"No, of course not. I... Well, you heard all the whisperings of strange things happening as we traveled here. By Breyan's gold, Sevano, strange things were happening all winter. The tree folk have been seen outside of the Elt Wood for the first time in at least a hundred years, and you heard about groundmites crossing the borders just as I did. Are you saying I shouldn't be worried about my daughter?"

"No." The older man stared into his tankard and listlessly picked up a piece of yellow cheese which he tossed back onto the plate. "I worry, too. But remember, I taught her many things about survival, and that Rendle sounds like a good man. I'm sure she learned much from him."

"You both taught her swordplay. I don't expect she has a sword of her own."

"I taught her much more than the sword, I did. She could use her bare hands to defend herself. Like a niece she is to me, too, though no blood do we share."

The two sat in silence for many minutes. The very air pressed on their shoulders. They were awakened from their individual reveries as the door creaked open and blinding sunlight poured into the common room. A young man stepped across the

threshold, hesitating a moment until his eyes adjusted to the dim interior. He was dressed in a waistcoat of green over a white linen shirt. His breeches and the coat he carried draped over his forearm were green as well. A saber sheathed in a plain black scabbard was strapped to his waist.

Stevic watched as the Green Rider searched the depths of the common room. The messenger's eyes registered in sudden recognition and he strode toward them, the soles of his boots making no sound on the wooden floor. Stevic wondered what the Rider would want with them, but he didn't stop at their table. Rather, he continued on to the booth behind them. Stevic couldn't see who the young man sat with because of the high backing of the booth, but he instantly recognized the voice.

"Connly," said Captain Mapstone. "Good to see you. How was the road?"

The Rider murmured something imperceptible, and Stevic strained to hear.

"I need you to contact Joy about F'ryan and his missing message. We need every available Rider scouring all roads and towns. Those who are on a run must keep their eyes open. There's no telling where that message is, or if it even still exists. Maybe someone took it from him, or maybe his horse is running loose with the message still snug in its satchel. We must find out. Also, be sure to warn Joy of the manner of his death."

Connly murmured some more, but Stevic couldn't make out a word of it.

"I don't know," Captain Mapstone replied. "Though I think it very odd that his brooch was missing. It could—"

Whatever she was about to say was cut short by a clamor outside. Stevic looked out his window, but could only see people rushing into the street. "What do you suppose that's all about?" he asked Sevano.

"Dunno." Sevano took a final swig of ale and wiped his sleeve across his mouth. "Let's have a look."

Stevic was reluctant to leave the conversation he had been eavesdropping on, but the booth had become silent anyway. Undoubtedly, the two Green Riders were distracted by the shouting from outside as well. Stevic pushed his tankard aside and followed Sevano out into the glare of sunshine. He pushed through onlookers to see what was causing such excitement, and stopped in shock.

A fallen horse and rider lay in the middle of the street. Blood foamed from the heaving horse's mouth. A youth of dark complexion lay dazed beside it, one leg pinned beneath the horse. Some of the onlookers attempted to free him. The boy seemed oblivious to what was happening around him.

"They killed them," the boy cried. "They killed the master... Master Ione... everyone. They killed everyone but me! Monsters... like men, but not..." The boy's sobs rang out over the stunned crowd.

"I believe that's Urath of the Under Kingdoms," a woman said behind Stevic's right shoulder. "Son of aus-Corien, pack leader of T-katnya. He was on a field trip with his class."

"Someone ought to inform the dean," a man said.

Stevic turned away. The boy's whimpering carried over the chatter of the crowd. The boy's face was clear of tattoos, making him an adolescent who hadn't yet made the great hunt, the traditional rite to become a man of the pack. "He's Karigan's age," he said to Sevano.

"Aye. Well do I know it."

Captain Mapstone watched the commotion from the steps of the inn. Her expression was thoughtful. Stevic walked over to her purposefully, and she shook out of some uncomfortable reverie as he approached.

"Groundmites," she said. "Those monsters he saw were groundmites."

Stevic felt his stomach lurch. Where was his daughter? "Captain, I would ask a favor."

She raised a copper brow. "A merchant always seeks favors at no cost to himself, which he rarely repays."

Stevic's cheeks burned in anger. "Perhaps it's true with some merchants, just as it's true with some minstrels, soldiers, craftmasters, farmers, and ferrymen, but I am not of that nature."

Captain Mapstone's expression remained unaltered and she did not apologize. "What favor do you ask?"

"It would... It would mean much to me if your Riders could watch for a young girl, the same age as this youth here who now lies in the street. She has disappeared and— and she's my daughter. I believe she is traveling toward Corsa, but who can say if something ill has befallen her?"

The captain blinked, but it was her only change of expression. "Green Riders aren't in the habit of searching for runaways, Chief, and at the moment we're involved in—

"I implore you, Captain." Stevic's voice cracked as he spoke. "My daughter has been missing for weeks. She is all I have left since... since my wife died..."

"Surely taking the girl's description and passing it on to your Riders won't distract them from their duty." Stevic had forgotten Sevano behind him, and was suddenly grateful for his presence. "It is but a small thing to ask. She is young and alone. What if she meets up with groundmites like that lad yonder?"

"I will more than repay you if your people can find Karigan." Stevic looked hopefully at her. They were now eye level, the steps she stood on helping her to meet his gaze.

He saw her expression soften just the least bit. "I will make donations to your unit. I'll—I'll re-outfit your Riders."

Now there was a perceptible hint of a smile on her face.

She turned toward the interior of the inn. "Connly! I need you to take a description. Come listen, and listen well." As the young man trotted to the doorway, she turned back to Stevic and said, "I intend to keep you to your end of the bargain."

SWORDMASTERS

Karigan and her captors walked in the same formation as they had the previous day. Garroty sat upon his horse, talking down at Tome who strode beside him. Jendara, leading The Horse, walked next to Karigan. Karigan had spent an unpleasant night listening to Torne and Garroty swap tales and make suggestive, if not entirely vulgar, comments about her. She hadn't slept all night, and now her eyelids sagged as she stumbled down the road.

Her wrists itched. Either they were healing from the burns, or they were getting worse. The rope that bound her wrists made it impossible to check beneath the old, dirty dressings that covered the wounds.

Jendara had kept silent all day. Torne and Garroty directed some comments her way, too. She merely scowled at their backs, as if to burn holes through them with her eyes.

"I'd castrate those two."

Karigan tripped over a rock. Jendara's speaking aloud was unexpected enough. Her words, even more so. "Why don't you?"

Jendara chuckled. "Two of them against me, and one a swordmaster at that? The odds are a bit precarious, don't you think?"

"I'd help."

"Very helpful you would be. I doubt you can even lift that sword fastened to your saddle. All they need Greenies to do is ride."

Karigan, of course, had little idea of what Green Riders were capable of, but was certain she could surprise even Jendara with a few of the skills she had learned, whether Jendara was a swordmaster or not.

"This road goes on forever," Karigan said.

"It was built long ago to breach the northern wilderness." Jendara's reply was again unexpected. "Where do you think all the pulp that makes paper comes from? There isn't nearly the expanse of woods to the south."

Ribbons of sun dropped through the trees, leaving puddles of light on the road and in the woods. Karigan caught movement in the woods out of the corner of her eye. She looked closely, but at first she couldn't focus on the shape. She blinked, and the shape slowly defined itself into a man, another traveler walking abreast of them in the woods, fading in and out of the shadows, weaving between the trees, striding swiftly and unhindered through the underbrush, as if he were on a smooth road.

His passage was silent, not a snap of a twig to be heard, not a single bird flushed from cover. Tall ferns and tree limbs swayed in a breeze—not from the touch of the man who seemed to pass right through without brushing a thing. The Horse whickered and watched the traveler, his ears pricked forward.

"What does he see?" Jendara asked. She looked right at the traveler and... through him. Torne and Garroty chattered, oblivious to the newcomer.

Karigan narrowed her eyes and saw the traveler's pale face, and two arrows sticking from his back. F'ryan Coblebay. He turned to her, still keeping pace with them. His mouth worked as if he were trying to tell her something, but she couldn't hear words. He kept speaking until he passed through the shadow of a tall hemlock and disappeared.

The Horse champed the bit and sidestepped in a skittish way. Maybe he could hear the voice of the ghost.

Watch as she might throughout the day, Karigan saw no further signs of F'ryan Coblebay. What message had he been trying to convey? Jendara had asked, at one

point, what it was she saw, or expected to see, in the woods.

"Just ghosts," she said matter-of-factly. "A spirit follows me."

Jendara frowned. The two men overheard, and while Garroty guffawed loudly, Torne growled. "I ought to cut your tongue out. Your superstitious talk won't work with me."

"You actually sound worried, Torne." Tobacco juice slapped the road. Garroty wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Are you superstitious? You, a swordmaster and grown man?"

Torne glowered. "Of course not. Those Mirwellian fools brought it up first, and this Greenie is trying to make us nervous. Won't work, Greenie, won't work."

Karigan shrugged. She had spoken plain truth which she believed Torne and Jendara must have sensed despite their protests, for they began searching the woods with their eyes, and their pace had picked up.

Garroty chuckled. "All of this plain living has gotten to you. Why, if you had stayed with the Talons a little longer, we could've taught you a few things."

"We are comfortable where we are." Now Garroty had managed to prickle even Torne. "As comfortable as we ever were in Sacor City. Why were we sent on this mission, we don't know and will not question. What my lord wills, my lord receives, and time spent with the Talons has nothing to do with it."

"You are infants lost in the woods," Garroty said. "I bet your horses were stolen right from under you." At Torne's glower, he let out a great "Hah!" and, "I guessed right. And if you took that leather jerkin off, I bet I could count your ribs. Weapons and swordmasters indeed. You may survive in the court, but out here is where it counts."

Karigan could nearly see the smoke pouring out of Torne's ears. With a yawn, she listened closely as Garroty and Torne continued their debate.

"The problem with you Weapons," Garroty said, scraping bristly hairs on his cheek, "is that you're all honor and ceremony. Honor and ceremony may work in court and in battle, but it won't do much good out here. Even the Blood Guard of Rhovanny leave the court once in a while to see what the world looks like."

"Ceremony is deeply traditional among Weapons of the Order of Black Shields," Torne said. "Ceremony instills discipline. Besides, who needs to know of the real world when the court is the real world? Jendara and I... well, our circumstances are special."

"Ah, and if any of Zachary's soldiers see you and recognize you, you'll be hanged as traitors—at the least."

"We aren't traitors, Garroty."

"I suppose that depends on who you work for, then. Zachary or his brother. But hear this, Swordmaster, Zachary is the one in power. He was the one named heir by his father, not Amilton, no matter the usual order of succession. What you've done is high treason, and if you get caught and strung up, you will be let off easy, I assure you. If I recall history, there was a traitorous Weapon named Saverill who was slowly tortured for weeks, and then chained to the prison tower for the vultures to feed on. He was still alive."

"We know the consequences of our loyalties," Torne said. "Tales of Saverill the Traitor were drilled into our memories when we were mere pledges at the academy. You don't have to remind us."

Garroty shrugged. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm all for fighting on behalf of the highest bidder, even if the stakes are a little high. What I am simply trying to say is that you, a Weapon whose honor and ideals go beyond payment, should make very sure the stakes are worth the price you may have to pay, and that you will succeed."

"The stakes are worth it," Torne said barely above a whisper, "and we will succeed."

Another blob of tobacco juice hit the road in reply. The debate ended there.

The shadows of evening deepened, and the air became heavy with dew. Fireflies blinked, falling like flurries of light between the trees. Thrushes sang their evening songs, and as night descended, milky moonlight spilled into the woods. Torne led them off the road and into the clearing where they set up camp.

Karigan was thrown her usual hard chunk of bread, and was thankful as ever for the cache of food in her pockets given to her by little Dusty. The cache wouldn't last much longer, and soon she'd go hungry again, unless she escaped. Her stomach grumbled as the scent of meat drifted from the mercenaries' cookfire. Torne tossed pieces of dried meat into the stew pot.

Garroty stared at Karigan during the whole meal, stew dribbling out the corner of his mouth, which he roughly wiped away with the back of his hand. Repulsed, Karigan looked elsewhere, trying to focus on more pleasant thoughts. Maybe her father was looking for her by now. Surely Dean Geyer had sent him a message about her running away. Well, that wasn't exactly a pleasant thought either. Her father was going to be irate when he found her. After all, it was the beginning of the spring trading season; any delay in sending out the caravans or barges could prove costly.

Tome stood up and stretched. "I'm going to scout for Immerez," he announced. "That fool should have caught up with us days ago." He buckled on his sword belt, wrapped his worn cloak about his shoulders, and strode out of camp.

"Watch out for ghosties!" Garroty taunted, chuckling heartily. Tome's step faltered as he disappeared into the night.

Silence filled the clearing. Garroty pinched a wad of tobacco from his belt pouch and stuffed it into his cheek. His gaze drifted from Karigan to Jendara, and back again. He leaned back onto his elbows, chewing at his ease. Jendara's expression was stony as she drew her sword from its sheath. From a pouch she removed a soft cloth, oil, and two whetting stones. The hiss of blade against stone filled the clearing.

"I love women who carry weapons," Garroty said. "The danger of it excites me."

The hissing ceased. "You're a foul man, Garroty. Be silent before you lose something very precious to you."

Garroty laughed. "It sounds like a challenge to me."

"I've been wanting to unman you since I first laid eyes on you."

"Then go at it, woman. I'll have fun stopping you."

Karigan tensed as Jendara gripped the hilt of her sword and leaped lightly to her feet. Garroty did nothing, and Jendara hesitated.

"Well, woman, come on. I'm waiting."

Jendara snarled. "Stand up. If you're a warrior, you will fight like one."

Garroty chuckled and slowly pushed himself up from the ground. He stood with his arms spread out wide. "I'm standing, woman. Come for me, and I'll show you *my* blade."

A howling pierced the forest, almost human in its cry, followed by the trampling of foliage. The horses whickered nervously.

"What was that?" Jendara asked.

Garroty shrugged, unconcerned. "Probably some wolf looking for dinner." Then with a wicked grin he added, "Maybe it's found Tome."

Jendara muttered under her breath, looking from the mercenary to Karigan. "I'm going to check it out," she said. Glaring at Garroty, she added, "Leave the prisoner alone." She held her sword before her, and stepped uncertainly into the darkness in

the direction of the disturbance. Karigan looked pleadingly after her retreating back.

When Jendara was out of sight, Garroty shook his head. "Foolish woman. Just a coyote chasing a hare, I'll reckon. The horses are quiet now, like nothing happened. No matter." He turned his eyes back on Karigan. "It will give us a little time alone."

"Don't come near me." Karigan's voice quavered as she spoke.

Garroty was across the clearing in three strides. He seized her arm, and lest she cry out loud enough for Jendara to hear, he clamped a sweaty hand over her mouth. He yanked her to her feet, and before she could squirm away, he wrapped his arm around her chest and held her securely. If only her hands weren't tied!

"I've been waiting for this." His hot breath filled her ear damply as he spoke, and smelled of stale tobacco. Garroty dragged her beyond the clearing into the dark of the forest. She kicked and writhed, but the man must have a hide like boiled leather. She raked his shin with the sole of her boot—a trick taught her by the cargo master—but it didn't phase him one iota. Most people would have screamed with pain.

Minutes passed like hours as Garroty dragged her, and then threw her to the ground. The barest shred of moonlight fell across his face, revealing a sickening grin. "I've been waiting for this," he whispered. With a childlike giggle, he unbuckled his sword belt and dropped it to the ground. Karigan rolled over and started to crawl away, but Garroty caught her in the small of her back with his foot, and ground her into the dirt. She gasped for air.

"If you fight," he warned her, "I can easily break your spine." He let his foot rest there for a moment, pressing down when she moved the slightest bit. Then he pulled it away, caught her under the ribs with his toe, and rolled her onto her back again. Karigan gasped for breath, her side throbbing with pain.

Garroty fell to his knees and straddled her. The stench of his unclean body was overpowering, his very sweat reeked of tobacco. Tobacco drooled from his mouth and stained her shirt. Karigan shook uncontrollably.

Fight, fool!

It was a voice Karigan remembered. The voice she had heard that night in the settlement. Garroty's hands now pinned her shoulders to the ground. His expression was rabid.

Fight! the voice commanded.

Yes, fight. The cargo master had taught her several tricks should she ever be in a

situation such as this. She lunged and sank her teeth into Garroty's wrist. He screamed and yanked his hand away, almost snapping her head off her neck with the force.

He growled and struck her across the face.

The blow sent reverberations ringing through her body, and she blinked dazedly. Garroty examined his wrist. This distraction might be her only chance—he was vulnerable with his legs spread above her as they were. She locked both hands into a single fist and punched upward. Garroty's jaw fell slack as if uttering a silent cry. His eyes bulged like a fish's, and he clutched his crotch.

Karigan poised to punch his ugly face in, when she heard Jendara's laughter. The swordmaster sheathed her blade and crouched beside them. "Seems I underestimated you, girl. You don't need a sword to unman this idiot." She chuckled mirthfully at Garroty. "You like dangerous women, do you? It seems to me it would be of service to all women if we permanently crippled you." She reached for her dagger.

Garroty's face swelled with such blood that Karigan thought it might explode. Instead, his fist slammed into Jendara's face. The impact sent her flailing backward, her head striking the ground hard. She didn't move.

Garroty grunted in satisfaction and leered down at Karigan. "This is going to be more interesting than I thought. When I'm through with you, I'll finish off with her whether she wakes up or not."

Not willing to leave himself unprotected a second time, he grabbed both of Karigan's wrists, and knelt across her legs.

Karigan thought desperately. She thought back to summer evenings in an empty warehouse on her father's estate where the cargo master practiced swordplay with her. For one lesson, he left the wooden practice swords leaning against the wall and devoted the session to what she could do with her bare hands.

"Now, Kari," Sevano had said, as she sat cross-legged on the dirt floor. "There may be a time when no weapon you've got. I'm gonna show you how to use your hands and feet to maim, and if need be, kill some thug who tries to harm you. But first, let me tell you where it's gonna hurt him most..."

She had tried Garroty's shins and groin already. What was left? She couldn't pinch the nerves in his hands, and she couldn't kick—she was too immobilized by him to do anything. Sevano would disagree, though. She thought frantically.

Once she decided, she breathed a short prayer and gathered herself up. Propelled

by her elbows and shoulders, she slammed her head into Garroty's face. Not a precision move, but it would have to do. There was a muffled cry and he fell back clutching his nose. Blood was splattered across his face. He curled into a fetal position on the ground, writhing in pain.

Karigan dared not breathe, fearing she had not damaged him sufficiently, and that he would be back on her to finish what he had begun. But he didn't get up, and after several minutes, he stopped moving altogether.

She crawled to him on knees and elbows, and saw that his chest did not rise or fall. The cargo master had said that if the nose was bashed into an assailant's head, the bone would shatter and pierce the brain, killing him. Karigan had killed a man.

She had killed Garroty and was appalled because it did not bother her.

Jendara still lay unmoving, rivulets of blood trickling down her cheeks from her nose. She wasn't dead, for she breathed, but she didn't look likely to wake up in the next few moments. This was Karigan's chance for escape.

She espied Garroty's discarded sword and drew it. She rubbed the rope that bound her hands against the blade, carefully so she wouldn't slice herself. With relief bordering on joy, she watched the rope fall away—her hands were free!

She hastened to her feet to run to The Horse, but paused. The ring of Kariny G'ladheon gleamed in the moonlight on Jendara's hand. Karigan slid it off the swordmaster's callused finger and onto her own. It had always been a little loose on her, but now it fit perfectly.

A twig crunched behind her. Karigan whirled around.

"This is quite a scene." Tome's face was more grim than she had ever seen. "Somehow—I'm not sure how—you've killed my friend and hurt my partner." His sword *shooshed* out of its sheath.

Defend yourself, the voice thundered in Karigan's head. Jendara's sword, still sheathed at her side, was closest. She grabbed the hilt and drew it. The black band seemed to disconnect the blade from the hilt. The sword was of the best balance she had ever held—of course, it belonged to a swordmaster.

"Foolish girl," Torne said. "You are no swordmaster. You dirty her blade by touching it, but you will die on mine."

Torne thrust without preamble and Karigan barely deflected it. She tried to remember the exercises Arms Master Rendle had drilled into her head, and the hints and tricks Sevano had taught her, but Torne was relentless and all she could manage

was to duck and block the onslaught of blows. Each strike from Torne jarred her body and numbed her arms from her fingers to her elbows. If there was any time she was going to die, it was now.

Tome's speed and rhythm was a dance. Karigan had never seen anything like it, and was enthralled by his deadly skill. His feet barely shifted, he never swung the blade more than required. His economy of movement was grace itself.

After just moments of swordplay, Torne raised his sword for the death blow, but time stilled. Cold filled Karigan's body—not a chill really. It was like being a glass filled with cold water. Then there was something else... an awareness of another.

Her arms were buoyed by another's strength, and her reflexes guided by another thought process. Her own awareness grew dim, and she became a bystander in her own body. Or was it her own body? Two points of severe pain in her back twisted her insides.

The action resumed, and the would-be death blow miraculously blocked. *Raven's sweep to the side.* The voice echoed from far away in her head. The same voice that had told her to fight and defend herself. The same voice that had tried to speak to her at the settlement.

One and two and three and upthrust, five. The voice and her body matched and countered the rhythm of Tome's attack. She recognized some of the techniques named, but many more were new to her. All of the various moves, the balance and steps, the angle of the cutting edge, fell into place within her in a way they hadn't when taught by Sevano or Master Rendle.

Was that shock registering on Tome's face as she blocked a particularly difficult thrust? Was that sweat that dampened his brow?

Oversweep, Crayman's Circle, three and four and swipe!

She watched in amazement as the tip of her sword slashed across Tome's leather jerkin. Although it only made a long cut in the leather, his face blanched as if it had been his own flesh.

"Who are you?" Tome panted, his eyes wide in... fear.

...two and three and Raven's Sweep redoubled!

The move threw Tome against a tree, his arms and sword tangling in the evergreen boughs.

Butcher's Block, one-two-three.

Tome barely avoided being chopped in three. Each swing of the sword caused the pain of arrows in her back to twinge, and the bleeding to start anew...

"Who are you?" Torne demanded again.

Burn, brooch, burn! By the flying horse, burn!

Torne screamed. He groped with his free hand for the brooch on his cloak. He grasped it, but jerked his fingers away with a cry. The distraction was enough.

Ice Slide now!

The blade ran through Tome's jerkin and out through his back, impaling him to the trunk of the tree. His limbs jerked and flailed. Karigan's nostrils flared with the metallic scent of fresh blood.

"Who are you?" This time it came as a whisper, barely heard over his raspy breaths.

A voice that was Karigan's spoke words that were not her own. "I am a Green Rider and swordmaster initiate. You are spared Saverill's fate, traitor." The hand that held the hilt twisted the sword, and Tome's eyes rolled into the back of his head. The presence within her turned to Jendara and reached for her dagger.

Stop! Karigan struggled to expel the presence from her, but it was like trying to disgorge her own guts.*Leave me.*

The presence drained from her, and she sighed as warmth flooded through her body again. F'ryan Coblebay stood before her.

I saved your life, he said.*She is a traitor and must die.*

"It is for me to decide," Karigan said, "if she should die." She gazed at Jendara lying on her back, neck naked to any blade she might draw across it. The blood was drying on the Weapon's face, but she breathed normally and looked to be asleep. Karigan remembered when Jendara made Torne let her wear her greatcoat against the cold rain. Jendara had let her keep her hidden cache of food and had never told Torne about it. She knew Jendara would have killed Garroty to keep him from hurting her.

F'ryan Coblebay's form flickered once.*You must kill her.*

"You kill her."

I cannot unless I enter—

"I won't allow that." Karigan clenched and unclenched her hands at her sides. "I will not be used."

I saved your life.

The night's events started to catch up with her. Her body trembled, and she felt cold all over again. The idea of someone else controlling her affairs infuriated... and terrified her. "It seems to me you set me on this course in the first place. You and that brooch."

F'ryan Coblebay dimmed and flickered. No, *not I. You were called.* He looked up at the sky, then walked away, vanishing completely in the dark, but his voice lingered like an echo... *you were called...*

Karigan sighed, feeling light headed from the whole experience. She wanted to get away from the carnage as soon as she could—Garroty's crushed face and Tome's impaled body—but she needed the brooch back, too. Jendara murmured incomprehensibly and twitched on the ground. She would have to be quick.

Torne was pinned to the tree like a cadaverous scarecrow, his arms snagged at odd angles among the evergreen branches. The brooch clung by a thread to his cloak. With a shudder, she plucked it away. It had burned a hole right through his cloak and jerkin, and had branded a red shadow of the winged horse on his flesh.

The Berry sisters had been right in a sense—the brooch would tolerate no others to handle it, except Green Riders. It had merely waited for the most advantageous moment to inflict its wrath, when commanded. She shuddered again and pinned it to her shirt.

She fled the carnage, pausing only to collect the belongings that had been taken from her. She and The Horse galloped away, disappearing as they went. If Immerez was to have met them days ago, he may be nearby. It wouldn't do to be snared again, just as she was escaping.

Jendara crawled to the edge of the clearing. Something like thunder and lightning crackled through her hurting head, but she was determined to stop the Greenie. It wasn't revenge. She applauded the end of the miserable Garroty's life. And though there had once been friendship with Torne, he had gone sour long ago, and tolerance was all that remained. It was the directive of her lord to waylay the message, which meant waylaying the messenger.

Who was this girl who could overpower men so much stronger than she? Torne, pegged to the tree with her own sword, was nothing worse than she had seen in battle, but the expression frozen on his face, an expression of utter amazement,

would haunt her for some time to come.

Jen was amazed herself. Who would have thought the girl capable? And the brand on Tome's skin... Exactly who were they dealing with?

Jendara's dagger shone dully in the moonlight as she reached the edge of the road. With the throbbing in her head, standing was impossible. Her stomach knotted in nausea.

She caught a flurry of movement on the road, and the pounding of hooves. She watched the girl and horse leave at a gallop, then fade out into nothingness. Jendara curled up on the ground, resting her head on her arm.

What were they dealing with?

WAYSTATION

They galloped through the night, The Horse's hooves echoing dully on the road. The gray world passed as a blur, and Karigan relied on The Horse to find the way. Holding onto his mane and keeping her seat was all she could manage under the weight of invisibility. When the night changed to a lighter shade of gray, The Horse slowed to a walk and halted.

"What?" Karigan was unable to lift her head from his warm neck.

The Horse glanced both ways up and down the road, then with a swish of his tail, he stepped into the woods. No path existed here, not even a deer trail, yet as they passed through the woods, no underbrush or low hanging branches snagged them, and the ground was clear and level.

The Horse skirted a granite outcropping, and something snapped within Karigan. The world repainted itself in the colors of early dawn, and the weight of invisibility lifted from her and raised her spirits.

Snug against a granite ledge, a tiny log cabin, with a fenced paddock and attached lean-to shelter, came into view. She was nearly on top of it before she saw it. There was no sign of life anywhere near the cabin except the morning song of birds.

"What is this place?" Karigan asked The Horse. She dismounted, falling to her knees in fatigue. He nuzzled her shoulder reassuringly. The brooch had sapped Karigan's energy painfully, and it was some time before she could stand again, and even then, she had to lean against The Horse for support as they walked to the cabin. A winged horse was carved on the door.

"Is this a Green Rider... shelter?" she asked.

The Horse whickered and nudged her back. She unlatched the door and stumbled inside. The one room cabin was musty from lack of use, and dust swirled about her boots with each step she took. Green Riders probably didn't travel this way often.

The interior was cloaked in darkness with the shutters fastened closed, but she had reclaimed her moonstone along with her other belongings, and now used it to light the building. Silver light stretched to all corners of the cabin, and lifted some of her fatigue and heartened her as if to remind her that she was truly alive.

A straw mattress lay on a simple bed frame against the far wall, a shelf above held some candies, a lamp, and even a few books. Wood was stacked next to a stone fireplace with snowshoes propped on the mantel. More shelves held jars sealed with wax and cork.

A cedar-lined closet contained blankets, pillows, and some clothing. Karigan tore off her own shirt, stained with Garroty's tobacco juice and, now she saw in the light, flecks of blood. Throwing it to the floor, she grabbed a white linen shirt from the closet and pulled it over her head. Then she pinned the brooch on. She felt less dirty now, having broken one more thread that had bound her to the mercenaries.

She took some bedclothes from the closet and heaped them on the table. Using what little strength she possessed, she beat on the mattress, raising all manner of dust. She staggered out of the cabin sneezing.

The Horse watched her expectantly, his ears at point. When the fit passed, Karigan untacked him. "Sorry I made you wait, Horse," she said. Her father and her riding master had both insisted that the horse that bore you must be seen to before yourself. She should have taken care of him before investigating the cabin. After all, he had carried her through the night for who knew how many miles, while she had clung to him witless under the spell of the brooch. He deserved her consideration at the very least.

Once untacked, The Horse walked into the paddock and under the roof of the shelter. Again, he watched her expectantly. Karigan followed and gazed about. A large bin containing a stash of grain and two buckets was attached to one of the walls. The grain appeared, if not fresh, unspoiled; no beetles or worms crawled in it.

She scooped some of the sweet-smelling grain into one bucket, then took the other in search of water. She did not have to go very far. A spring bubbled behind the shelter, trickling into a stream that ran down an embankment. She drank of the clear cold water, unclogging her throat of road and cabin dust, then filled the bucket and took it to The Horse. With those tasks accomplished, she returned to the cabin,

wrapped a blanket around herself, and fell to the bed. She was asleep in an instant.

Karigan awoke with a shiver. Her breath fogged in the cool, damp air—not at all unusual in a northern spring, but not altogether pleasant. At first she thought it was the same morning as that of her arrival, but this morning was drizzly, whereas yesterday had promised warmth and sun. With the blanket still wrapped around her, she found a tinder box on the fireplace mantel, opened the flue of the chimney, and stacked wood on the hearth for a cheerful blaze. It wasn't long before the cabin filled with warmth.

She traded the blanket for her greatcoat and stepped outside to see to The Horse. She refilled his grain and water buckets, the pure ordinariness of the activity creating a sense of security that she hadn't felt for ages. Maybe she could stay hidden in this place and let the world continue without her.

The scent of wood smoke lured her back into the cabin. She had filled a kettle with spring water and now set it over the fire. It had been days since Jendara had let her bathe in a muddy stream, and her fastidious nature insisted upon bathing as a priority that morning. As she waited for the water to heat up, she searched the shelves again. The jars contained tea, spices, soap, and ointment, as well as an assortment of mismatched crockery. Karigan gleefully sprinkled tea leaves into a crude mug, and anticipated the boiling of the water.

She espied her old, stained shirt out of the corner of her eye where she had dropped it on the floor the previous morning. With a grim smile, she pinched a corner of the fabric between her fingers and tossed it into the fire. The rest of her clothes, except a pair of blue trousers, had been left by the roadside miles ago, deemed worthless by Jendara and Torne.

On impulse, she inspected the closet again, the scent of cedar hanging heavy and cloying in the little cabin. Within, she found more linen shirts, but only one fit reasonably well. Each shirt bore a winged horse embroidered in gold on the sleeve. Karigan glanced at her own sleeve, and sure enough, found a winged horse.

Soft hide trousers dyed in green, fur-lined greatcoats and cloaks, tall black boots, and mittens and gloves filled the closet, but only one pair of trousers fit her. She pulled out a pair of leather gloves with flaring cuffs over her hands, and liked the effect. The cuffs would hide the burns on her wrists.

"Well," she said, "everyone thinks I'm a Green Rider, so I may as well dress like one."

Everything in the closet was new and unused, and a notice tacked to the closet

door requested that all items removed be reported to the quartermaster for restocking purposes. It was one more thing she would have to take care of when she reached Sacor City. If she made it.

When the water boiled, Karigan brewed some tea and set about washing herself with a cloth and honey soap. Gritting her teeth, she pried the dirt-caked dressings from her wrists. They stuck stubbornly to her skin, and the scabs broke as she pulled. Her wrists were chafed, tender, sore, and oozing, but not festering. The care of the Eletians had surpassed anything the menders in Selium could have done. She cleaned the burns, applied ointment, and dressed them with fresh bandage strips she had found in the cabinet.

A look in a dusty mirror revealed yellowing bruises on her face. She averted her gaze, Garroty's assault all too fresh in her mind.

Her stomach rumbled, and only now did she think about food. Though Tome, Jendara, and Garroty had dented her food stores, there was still some hard bread, cheese and dried meat left in the saddlebags. Further digging revealed two wrinkly apples. Karigan sat down for a feast by the crackling fire, as the warmth of the tea spread throughout her body.

It was late afternoon by the time Karigan realized she had dozed off. She stretched muscles cramped by the wooden chair, and threw a new log on the fading embers of the fire. Then she looked over the cabin's supply of books which included the fictional story, *The Journeys of Gilan Wylloland*. Karigan had read and reread it long ago, though fiction books were hard to come by. Her mother had spotted it at a fair and added it to the tiny G'ladheon library.

As a child, Karigan had pretended she was Gilan's sidekick, Elaine, traveling lands that existed in only the author's imagination. She had trooped around her father's estate brandishing a stick as her sword, and tormented the house cat as if he were the murderous dragon Viliflavo. The offended tom was named Dragon as a result.

Now Karigan was experiencing her own adventure, but it wasn't anything like *The Journeys of Gilan Wylloland*. The danger was far too real and unpleasant. Gilan and Elaine had ridden through adventure after adventure nearly unscathed. Karigan could not say the same.

Another book, titled *The Natural History of the Northern Wilderness*, had also been on the shelf of Master Ione's classroom. What possible use Green Riders would have for it, she couldn't imagine. It did not occur to her that at least one among them was interested in the wildflowers, birds, or mammals of the region.

Surely Green Riders were far too busy to worry about nature.

The third and last book was bound in plain leather. It was some sort of journal. Inside, a variety of handwriting styles were scrawled across the pages, some legible, some not. She sat by the fire, absorbed by the entries.

Arrived at North waystation by dusk, wrote Pary Mantobe. Snowshoes a must—blizzard dropping inches more of snow as I write. Am not sure I will even be able to reach the horse.

Karigan gazed sideways at the snowshoes on the mantel. The entry was over ten years old.

Some nameless Rider wrote in another entry: *Sawa pileated woodpecker by the stream. Bear tracks in the mud of the spring. Several songbirds I couldn't identify greeted me this morning.* Karigan held the book to her chest. Bears! She hadn't even thought about them. After all her adventures thus far, they didn't seem like much of a threat by comparison.

An entry by T. Bankside read: *...chased by brigands all the way from North—Lt. Mapstone's knife wound festering badly. She's burning with fever—don't know if she'll live the night.* Karigan flipped the page, but the chronicler failed to mention whether or not the lieutenant had survived.

She read until dusk. Many of the entries were no more than accounts of the weather and local fauna. Some entries were set in poetry, while others were accompanied by illustrations. By the time she finished the book, she was under the impression that Green Riders were a colorful group.

Karigan left the warmth of the cabin to check on The Horse. He trotted up to the gate of the enclosure and whickered in greeting. Despite the damp weather, he seemed in good spirits.

"You deserve a break, don't you," she said. After she fed and watered him, she turned to walk back to the cabin, and walked right into a big man. She screamed and fell back, wishing herself invisible.

The man was massive, even taller than her father, with enough heft to make him appear as broad as he was tall. His face was a tangle of curly gray whiskers that hung from his face like lichen draped over spruce branches. Black eyes pierced beneath bushy brows. He was dressed in drab brown and gray, and a huge ax hung from his belt. He was a troll come to life.

He rotated slowly around, as if trying to see where she went. "Green Rider?" The voice was surprisingly gentle. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Please come back. I

smelled the wood smoke and wanted to make sure all was well."

The Horse gave the giant little more than a cursory glance before sticking his nose into the grain bucket.

The weight of invisibility wore on Karigan, chafing against her like an old wound. "Who are you?" she asked, not willing just yet, to reveal herself.

The man turned in the direction of her voice, but looked through her. "I am Abram Rust, King's Forester." He moved aside his damp cloak and revealed the emblem of an evergreen embroidered on his leather vest. "I mean no harm."

Karigan dropped the invisibility and staggered against a fence post.

"You really shouldn't use your magic here," the man said, his tone matter-of-fact.

Karigan's eyes widened. Was she the last person in all of Sacoridia to know that people still used magic?

"Those who built this waystation wanted to ensure it remained hidden. They set spells around the area. Strong, old spells, I'll wager. When you use your own magic, it conflicts."

Karigan raised a brow. "How do you know all this?"

"I've known a great many Green Riders, and they've told me things. You look pale. Won't you let me help you back inside?"

Karigan clung fiercely to the fence post as he stretched out a bear paw of a hand. "Let me tell you, Forester, I've killed an evil creature from *Kanmorhan Vane*, a mercenary, and a swordmaster." The latter claim was somewhat dubious, it had been F'ryan Coblebay, using her body, who had defeated Tome, but it would serve to impress the giant.

He nodded solemnly. "I'm sure you've done a great many things, even as young as you are. Perhaps you can tell me of your adventures. It's been a while since a Green Rider has passed this way. Please let me help you in. I promise I won't harm you."

Abram's quiet voice was sincere. "Fine," Karigan said, "but I won't put up with anything. You make a wrong move, and I can't promise you'll live through the night." She wasn't sure, but Abram might have been smiling. It was hard to tell with all his whiskers, but crinkles deepened beneath his eyes. She took his hand and allowed herself to be led into the cabin.

Assured that Karigan was comfortably propped on the bed, Abram Rust sat in the chair by the fire. The chair creaked as if it might fall to pieces under his weight, but it held. Abram's bulk crowded the cabin. Silence reigned as he gazed about speculatively, every movement deliberate, as if he thought it out before he did it, even the blinking of his eyes.

"This cabin does not change, but the Riders do." His bass voice startled Karigan. "Rarely do I see the same two Riders pass through here." His whiskers drooped.

"Why is that?"

"They move on to other routes or other jobs. Many die. I visit the cabin when a Rider is present to seek news. Often they tell me that a previous occupant has died in the line of duty."

Karigan could believe it. "How long have you been coming here?"

He chuckled—it was a low throaty sound. "Years beyond count, young one. I've been roaming these woods long before the Riders decided to put a waystation here. I've roamed these woods before Zachary became king, even before his grandmother ruled. I've seen seedlings grow into mighty trees, then burn to the ground only to start the cycle anew. Through all the changes I am still Forester. I protect my domain as well as I can, though ever more it is threatened."

"Threatened?" Karigan looked around the cabin as if brigands would break through the rough-hewn log walls.

"The mills. The need to clear land to farm and settle. The need to build fleets of ships to sail the seas; and the need to warm homes during our savage winters." Abram leaned toward her, his features earnest. "There is even a growing need for paper these days. Acres of forest around here have been toppled. So far, this has been outside my domain, but they do not replant and carve ever deeper into the forest."

"But surely your job is to cut trees." Karigan looked at his ax meaningfully.

"You are correct, but this is king's land. I'm the guardian of Zachary's forests here, as I have been for three generations of his family. I am selective in my cutting. A few white pines here for ship masts, a few cedars there for shingles, and I always replant. As other forest is laid waste, my ax is used more to defend the boundaries of my domain. The folk of North are ever pressuring King Zachary to open his lands to lumbering. Some attempt it without seeking permission."

"This North is a lumber town?"

"Mostly." Abram pulled out a pipe and tobacco pouch from his cloak. He stuffed the pipe with tobacco and drew a flame on some kindling from the fire and lit it. "It began as a small settlement about a hundred years back. But with all the demands for timber nowadays, the population swelled."

Abram blew smoke rings toward the ceiling, an amused twinkle in his eyes. When the rings dissipated, the twinkle faded. "North is a lawless town now. Most of the folk descended from the original settlers left, sold their claims. Some stayed to see what wealth they could make themselves. Others opened mercantiles and inns. The fur trade is growing, too, and now I must protect the creatures within my domain, as well as the trees."

"I've never heard of North." Or had she? Something the Berry sisters had said nagged at the back of her mind.

"This must be a new route for you," Abram said. "Or maybe you are just new."

Karigan grimaced. "I'm not really a Green Rider."

Abram stood up, his head brushing the rafters. His hand went to the haft of his ax. "How can this be?" His eyes glinted dangerously. He was like a rearing bear: bristling, wrathful, and immense. His presence overpowered the room.

Frightened by this sudden transformation, Karigan tried to fade out again, but pain lanced through her head. The effort was too much.

"Who are you?" Abram demanded. "You dress like a Green Rider and use Green Rider magic. Who are you?"

"I am Karigan G'ladheon. I'm finishing a mission for a dead Green Rider."

Abram looked at her askance, then let his hand drop from the ax to his side. "It sounds an interesting story. Tell me, and I will decide." He sat again, but rigidly, his eyes still suspicious.

Karigan started with her flight from Selium and finished with her arrival to the waystation. "I am not a Green Rider," she said, "but I'm helping one."

Abram's eyes softened considerably, and he relaxed in his chair. "A long journey you've had, a brave one. I met F'ryan Coblebay once. About two years ago he passed through my domain. A lively lad, very cheerful. I'm sorry to hear of his demise. I understand now, how I mistook you for a Rider. I did think you young, though I know they will accept young people."

"I must reach Sacor City before the Mirwellians find me again."

Abram muttered something under his breath—it sounded more like a growl—and tapped his fingers on the flat of the ax head. Smoke rings drifted to the rafters one after the other. "Strange things certainly have been happening. King's men have been in the region of late, hunting out groundmites, so I understand. But a breach in the D'Yer Wall? That bodes evil. Mornhavon the Black perverted the trees of Blackveil, and they've never recovered."

"So the Eletian told me."

Abram's eyes brightened. "I'd hand over my ax to meet an Eletian. I knew in my heart they weren't legend. A sylvan folk they are, dwellers of the Elt Wood, just as I'm a dweller of this forest. And to think they were wandering through Sacorida's Green Cloak! It's an honor."

Karigan pulled the moonstone from her pocket, certain that Abram would like to see it. The shadows of evening vanished in silver light, bringing to mind dancers in a forest clearing and moonstones glimmering on evergreen boughs.

Abram's eyes opened wide. "What is it?"

"A moonstone. A real moonstone."

"Now that I thought a legend. The Eletians gave it to you?"

"Uh, no. The Berry sisters I told you about. They gave it to me." She explained the professor's predilection for magical artifacts.

"A most unusual hobby," Abram said.

Karigan didn't hear him. Whatever it was the sisters had said about North, it was nagging her again. And then, like a bright flash of sunlight, it came to her. *East by north*, they had said. *East by north*. Karigan sat up straight.

"What is it?" Abram asked.

"I told them I didn't know how to get to Sacor City, and they said to go east by North." She had a sudden urge to giggle. When they had first told her to go east by North, she had thought it pure nonsense.

"That would make sense." Abram puffed on his pipe as if she had said nothing unusual. "The road ends in North. To reach Sacor City, you must travel east, and then south. If you were traveling from Selium, you certainly went out of your way."

"The Horse refused to put one hoof on the Kingway."

"Yes, messenger horses are a strange breed. A trifle uncanny. They've more common sense than most."

"I need to get to Sacor City. I suppose that means going through North."

"Yes, but you best do so with utmost caution," Abram said. "As I said, North is lawless and wild, and these are strange times with strange folk traveling. Why, you've already met up with brigands. I avoid North, myself."

"What kind of strange folk?" Karigan wanted to know. "You can find brigands anywhere, even in Selium."

"There is a woman from Rhovanny, an exile, stirring up trouble. Wants to rid all the lands of monarchs and let the people rule." Abram stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Anarchy, I call it. Yet there are many who follow her and believe the rumors of new taxes on lumbering. Supposedly the taxes will go toward fortifying Sacor City and the royal house. Folks tied up in the paper and ship building trades are infuriated.

"Other rumors circulate. The king turned down a proposal to marry a princess of the Cloud Islands which would have fostered a profitable alliance. Now the queen of the Islands is insulted and may refuse to trade with Sacoridia altogether. The Cloud Islands bring fruit, spices, and whale oil.

"It is said that King Zachary still believes the old magic should be put into use again. Most folk believe that using magic will summon the evil of Mornhavon the Black. When you go to North, you must be quiet about the abilities of your brooch. The least magic will provoke suspicion."

"One can only hope these rumors are isolated—" Karigan knew they would not be, however. Her own father was suspicious of anything remotely related to magic.

"If rumors are to be believed, there have already been assassination attempts on King Zachary. Others are calling for his brother to take the throne."

Jendara's "rightful king" was Zachary's brother, she was sure, and would explain the swordmaster's devotion as a Weapon. But what did Mirwell have to do with it?

"North is not friendly to representatives of the king, or would-be representatives." Abram thrust the poker at the logs on the fire. A flurry of sparks shot up the chimney. "As I said, I won't go there myself. Already I've been accused of being a forestry regulator."

"Is there any way to go around North?"

Abram shook his head. "If you travel east or south from here, the River Terrygood lies in your path. At this time of the year, its current runs strong and deadly. Should you attempt to ford it, even your big horse would be swept away like a leaf in a whirlpool. At midsummer or later you might ford it, but not now. The only bridge is in North."

Karigan sagged against her pillow. "Is there any good news?"

"There is. I will lead you through the woods to a point on the North Road, not far from town. In the woods, I can ensure your safety."

Karigan nodded. "That sounds encouraging. What about town itself?"

Abram grimaced, or at least his whiskers drooped. "I will not go upon the road which is beyond my boundaries. You must travel the rest of the way yourself. You should reach town by evening, and will probably wish to stay the night. Not the best of circumstances, but I know of a respectable inn that caters to the few merchants who travel this way. It is called the Eallen Tree. It is costly, but worth it. Avoid all others. When you leave North, you will find on the other end of town there is a horse track leading east and then south. It will take you partway to Sacor City. The rest will be through open countryside."

Karigan tucked her knees up to her body and wrapped her arms around them. It was beginning to sound like she was nearing the end of her journey and she grinned. "Thank you, Abram. It won't be long now before I give King Zachary his message."

"Do not let your guard down, no matter how near the king's castle you are," Abram cautioned. "It would be easy to do so, with this as the last leg of your journey. Be watchful."

"I promise."

"Good..." Abram tapped his pipe against the fireplace. "Then on to more pleasant topics. You told me of your adventures, so now I will tell you some of my tales."

Abram spoke long into the night. His stories took shape slowly and deliberately, his voice low and melodious. He told stories of other Green Riders who had passed through his domain:

"Disaster seemed to follow young Mayer like a crow. The shelf would fall down when he placed a book on it, or he'd trip out the door. One night he accidentally kicked a bucket of ashes on the floor and nearly set the cabin on fire." Abram pointed to a charred spot on the floor near the fireplace. "Disaster helped him on one ride, however. He was in Afton Village, which is in Coutre Province, during market.

He fell right off his horse onto a fruit stand. The woman tending it, the daughter of a wealthy farmer, married him. Mayer no longer carries messages on dangerous rides, but tends blueberry barrens on his own acreage."

Abram chuckled with the memory. "There was Leon, a fierce gambler by all accounts, who came from a questionable background before he joined the messenger service. He reformed many of his ways, but never the gaming spirit, and he used to sit with me before this very fire trying to swindle the last copper from me. More often than not he succeeded. Until the very last game.

"And there was Evony, Evony with her beautiful voice who should have been at Selium for music instead of wearing the colors of the Green Riders." He shook his head sadly. "She was killed by a noble angered by the message she bore."

Abram's stories spanned more than fifty years, slowly unfolding the heritage of the Green Riders. He remembered the name of every Rider he met, along with some small detail.

"Will you remember me?" Karigan asked.

"Indeed I will. In you I see the spirit of the First Rider, she who carried the messages when Sacorida was newly created. Even your name speaks of ancient times. *Galadeonit* would've been pronounced in the old days, not much different than today. Its meaning, however is beyond my knowledge. I expect to hear more about you in the years to come, young Karigan. This mission of yours is just a beginning."

"I just want it to be over with."

Abram shook his head. "Green Riders are always in haste. Do you know there is a legend that, during the Long War, the messenger horses of the Sacor Clans could fly? Your big red doesn't look likely to sprout wings, so I don't take the legend literally. Perhaps the horses were extraordinarily swift. Who's to say? The old days were odd and rife with magic. I imagine the legend is what inspired the winged horse insignia of the Green Riders."

Abram told tales in his melodious voice until Karigan couldn't keep her eyes open. Vaguely, she was aware of him pulling a blanket up to her shoulders and leaving as if in a cloud of smoke, the scent of tobacco lingering behind.

Green Riders trampled through Karigan's dreams. They galloped along wooded trails, horse hooves thundered over wooden bridges. A horse and Rider surged up a mountain slope, slipping and staggering on loose gravel and sand. A toothy range of snow-capped purple mountains loomed behind them.

A messenger cantered her horse along the shore, and hooves splashed through ocean waves and sent up cascades of salty spray. The Rider laughed in pure joy. Another Green Rider rode down a cobbled city street, face grim and saber bare. The throb of hooves grew like a heartbeat.

Karigan sat astride The Horse, kicking up snow as they galloped through some winter scene. The sound of hoof-beats merged into great wingbeats as The Horse sprouted white feathered wings and flew up above the snow, above the woods and mountains, through the blue of the sky, and higher yet among the stars. Here they flew among the immortals of the heavens, past the Sword of Sevelon, past the Hunter's Belt, past the Throne of Candor the Great, and Aeryc and Aeryon smiled on them.

In time, they descended from the stars and glided through the dark of night, through the canopy of the forest to the floor. The greens and browns of the woods were intensely deep as if damp.

The beat still carried the dream, but this time it was not hooves or wings, but Abram Rust swinging his ax against the trunk of a great white pine. When he stopped, an echo continued the pulsing rhythm. He mopped his brow of sweat and turned to her. *This tree will make the mast of a ship that will carry you through the Ages.*

A winged horse was carved into the trunk. Abram Rust laughed, and with one more mighty blow, the tree crashed to its side leaving a gaping hole in the canopy to the sky. The night was coated with stars like a sprinkling of sugar.

Then the dreams dissipated, like pipe smoke.

GRAY ONE

"I've seen nothing like that," the blacksmith snapped. "You had best move on. Folks here don't take kindly to your type." Joy Overway watched in resignation as the blacksmith disappeared into the hazy dark of his shop. His was the same response she had received all day. She wondered if the good citizens of North would honestly tell her if they had seen F'ryan's horse, or the girl. Not without a hefty bribe, no doubt. She carried just enough currency to get her to Selium, then back to Sacor City, with none left over for bribes. Alas, she didn't possess Captain Mapstone's talent for seeing the truth in a person's words.

The most forthcoming citizen had been a fortune-teller in one of the inns. Joy frowned. The woman had predicted ominous and mysterious things, and had placed on the table a fortune card of a messenger fleeing arrows. "What's this?" she had

asked. The fortune-teller leaned forward, her eyes wide. "You will not find what you seek if you stay on your present course," she whispered. "If you do continue down this path, your footsteps will lead you to disaster."

Joy had left in disgust. More time wasted. The fortuneteller hadn't even bothered to concoct a prediction as to where F'ryan's horse was, or where she might locate the girl. Just these vague, titillating warnings that were the common practice for the fortune-telling trade, used to draw the unsuspecting in to spend more currency for more fabricated prognostications. Strange part was, the fortune-teller hadn't even hinted at a fee for the information she did provide.

Joy mounted her horse and guided him down the muddy "main street" which flowed between ramshackle mercantiles and a seeming overabundance of pubs, and no too few brothels among them. At this peak hour in the afternoon, these places were quiet. Much of the populace was out in the woods felling trees. Soon enough however, after the sun set, the town would erupt with noise, light, and life.

When the river could be forded later in the season, most Green Riders preferred bushwhacking across the countryside in a circuitous route rather than riding directly through North. If time was of the essence, then they might gallop through town so fast that no one was the wiser. Unfortunately, Joy's mission entailed that she make inquiries in the village itself. And she had made enough of those as far as she was concerned. The people here were incredibly hostile.

She patted Red Wing's neck. "We'll spend a peaceful night at the waystation, then get as far away from this place as possible."

Red Wing bobbed his head as if in agreement. They headed south through town at a walk. Joy didn't want to give the locals the satisfaction of seeing her run.

In all, it was a strange assignment she had been sent on. Perhaps it wasn't so strange for her to look for F'ryan's horse if he still carried the message. But the girl? Someone had pull with Captain Mapstone, and that particular someone had to have a *lot* of pull. It was not in the captain's nature to involve her messengers in non-Rider affairs.

Connly had sent her a very good image of the girl. Whoever sought her must have been describing her as he sent. The girl was in her late teen years, a young woman actually, and had a well-structured face, was tall, and dressed well. An aristocrat? Connly didn't elaborate.

Joy smiled. Every contact with Connly was like a gentle caress on her mind. Every night they united this intimate way, their minds touching, sending words and pictures back and forth. It helped make their separation more bearable, though it was no substitute for being together.

She reined Red Wing around a group of people, the King-Haters, as she had taken to calling them. The Anti-Monarchy Society was just so much hoof glop. They were spreading ill rumors about King Zachary, and the people of North fell into their cause with relish.

"You are a slave, sister!" one of the people told her. "A kingless land is a free land. Monarchy is tyranny."

Joy urged Red Wing into a canter before the King-Haters could start chanting more slogans. "I wouldn't be doing this job if I didn't believe in my king," she told her horse. "I'm no slave."

Once Joy was out of town, she exhaled with relief, and pulled Red Wing to a walk. She could feel her muscles loosen as the tension lifted from her. The road was quiet except for the chorusing of peepers in the lengthening shadows. Only one other rider headed in-town. He was cloaked entirely in gray and rode at a leisurely walk. Red Wing pressed his ears back against his neck.

"What is it?" she asked him.

Red Wing snorted and sidestepped as the rider drew abreast of them. The man was cloaked and hooded, and she couldn't tell anything about him, except for a tendril of gold hair that escaped his hood. He drew his horse to a halt.

Joy nodded to him and rode on by. He did not speak to her, or even acknowledge her, and she was glad. Something about him made the back of her neck twinge. She glanced over her shoulder to see if he had ridden on. He hadn't. He was following her.

He drew a black arrow from his quiver and nocked it to his bow.

"Oh, gods," she whispered. Connly had told her how F'ryan died. Two black arrows in his back.

She had only to touch Red Wing to send him flying into a gallop. She veered off the road, crouching low in the saddle. There was nowhere to hide, though. The woods were clear cut.

Red Wing stretched his legs downslope where a boggy pond was rimmed with a thicket of trees. In the trees, bow and arrow would be next to useless. The gray rider's horse pounded after her, his hoofbeats like an echo of Red Wing's. The gray rider drew abreast of her even over the uncertain ground, plunging over snags of wood, and across slippery granite.

The gray rider dropped his reins, guiding his horse with the touch of his legs and

knees. He drew his bowstring and an arrow sang.

Red Wing stumbled beneath Joy, fell away like her own footing lost. She rolled clear as he tumbled haunches over head, the air thick with his screams, his hooves flailing up toward the sky. Then he stilled. Dust drifted and settled about him where he lay dead, an arrow in his throat.

Joy hauled herself behind him, face wet with tears, and grief jammed like a fist in her throat. Her leg was twisted at the wrong angle, her thigh bone protruding through ragged muscle and skin like an ivory bull's horn. She could not feel it, but darkness hovered at the edges of her mind. She drew her saber though it would be no defense against arrows.

The gray rider sat still and silent on his steed. He nocked another arrow and aimed it at her. She heard whispers issue from his hood as if he spoke invocations over the arrow. Or maybe it was the gods calling her.

Pain exploded in Joy's chest. "Connly," she croaked. The world became gauzy around her, and she could feel life leaking away and a darkness spreading in her chest like a disease.

The gray rider sat silhouetted on his horse. He drew out yet another arrow and nocked it to the bow.

She clutched her wound and blood gouted out as if to fill her hands like cups. "Why?" She mouthed the word more than spoke it.

The gray rider drew the bow string. "You shall serve me."

His voice, she thought, was melodic.

He loosed the arrow.

Joy seemed to be looking at the night sky filled with bright pinpoints of stars where the gods awaited her. She drifted; was drawn upward. Somewhere above her, vast wings fluttered—it was Westrion come to take her soul to the heavens. Cares fell away from her as she floated light and incorporeal.

Then, as if a hand reached into her chest and clenched her heart, she felt pain all over again, and cold. She was wrenched earthward, against the forces of the heavens.

No! she cried. *Westrion!*

She was echoed by an angry screech. The flutter of wings grew more distant and

soon vanished.

"You shall serve me," the melodic voice said.

Joy's feet were planted on the ground. She looked skyward, but the starry night was gone, and the air was hazy gray and dull, lifeless. The arrows projected from her chest like porcupine quills and she tried to pull them out, but only enveloped herself with pain.

"They mark you as mine. Think of them as your collar, slave." The gray rider still sat upon his horse, but he was no longer gray. His cloak and hood shimmered with the colors of the rainbow, and he almost looked as if he sat upon the air, for his horse blended in with the gray and lifeless world.

Her corpse, and Red Wing's, lay insubstantial, ghostly. Her body was splayed and broken, her blood had saturated her shirt and coat with darkness. It was not red in her vision. Only the winged horse brooch had any color. It blossomed with a cold, golden gleam. She reached for it, but her hand passed through her body.

She looked at her hands. They were flesh colored, they flexed open and closed into fists. They seemed alive. Was this what it was like to be a ghost? The living world became dead?

Joy.

Joy looked behind her, and there stood F'ryan Coblebay, more real than anything in the midst of the gray world. His green uniform was almost vibrant. *Take my hand*, he said. He stretched his gloved hand toward her.

Behind him stood a host of Green Riders dressed in uniforms from centuries gone by. They whispered and shifted like shadows. *Take his hand*, they whispered to her. Red Wing stood there with him, his mane and tail flowing in no natural wind.

Joy reached for him, the pain constricted around her chest, the darkness spread.

Come, F'ryan said. *You are one of us.*

What has happened? She gasped.

This is a between place, F'ryan said. *The Shadow Man keeps us from going beyond. His arrows, they are anchors. Take my hand.*

Take his hand, the others whispered.

"Do not listen," the gray rider said. "Or you will be tormented forever by pain. It

would be worse than any hell wrought by your mythologies."

Take my hand, F'ryan said.

Joy fought the pain, her fingers touching his. They were warm, felt like real flesh. He grasped her hand and held it. The arrows seared her chest. If she went to the gray rider, she would be relieved of the pain. But it was not right for her to join him.

NORTH

Karigan awoke with the echo of hoofbeats fading with her dreams, and all but forgotten as she attacked her morning tasks. The Horse was promptly fed, watered, and rubbed down. Breakfast was prepared and eaten with dispatch. She took up a broom which had stood hidden in a dark corner and swept the cabin thoroughly.

She checked her packs to make sure all was in order. She found F'ryan Coblebay's love letter to Lady Estora in the message satchel. Maybe Torne and Jendara had thought any document was valuable and so saved it. Certainly they weren't being sentimental. Karigan herself had forgotten all about it. The important thing was that the message to King Zachary was still intact, the seal unbroken.

As she folded and returned the bedclothes to the cedar closet, she espied a tongue of leather sticking out between some blankets. It was a swordbelt and scabbard. A sword-belt would make it more difficult to separate her from the saber. It was a loose fit even when buckled on the last hole, but it would do. She tucked the excess leather beneath the belt, and sheathed the saber into the plain black scabbard.

In an effort not to look so much like a Green Rider in a town that would not welcome one, she dressed in her own blue trousers, and rolled up the sleeves of her new linen shirt to hide the insignia. It was warm enough anyway. She tied the greatcoat around the bedroll, but the brooch remained pinned to her shirt. It wasn't supposed to identify one as a Green Rider anyway, except to another Green Rider. It stood to reason that the tack might give her away, but she hoped nobody would look close enough to notice.

She took one last glance around the cabin and sighed. The stories it could tell... *I suppose I heard most of them last night from Abram.*

Gathering up the tack and packs, Karigan stepped outside into sunshine. Reluctantly she latched the door behind her and walked to the paddock, the saber slapping awkwardly against her thigh.

The path was still moist from the previous day's rain, and the air was heavy with

the smells of evergreen and bayberry drying in the sun. Bayberry? She stopped in her tracks. There hadn't been a bayberry bush next to the path yesterday, had there? But there it was, next to a patch of bunchberry flowers.

"I don't believe it."

Each bunchberry flower was perfect except for one missing a petal. She plucked it and twirled it in front of her eyes. Could it be? She slipped it into her pocket and snapped off a bayberry branch just in case.

Abram awaited her in the paddock, patting The Horse on his neck. "Good morning," he said. "Your guide awaits you."

Karigan returned his greeting with a grin. She set the saddle on the paddock fence and slipped the bridle over The Horse's head. "I appreciate this. The Mirwellians won't find me in the forest."

Abram returned her smile, then helped her place the saddle on The Horse's back. "That is correct."

Abram insisted that she ride The Horse though he would be on foot—he claimed his long legs could keep up with any steed. Karigan pulled the girth tight, hoisted up her sagging swordbelt, and mounted. Abram led them out of the paddock, The Horse's hooves sinking into the mud.

Karigan ducked beneath tree limbs laden with water from the previous day's rain, but still managed to get drenched. Biters clouded in the shade, their numbers beginning to wane as the season progressed.

Sun filtered through the trees and turned droplets clinging to spiderwebs into lacy jewels. Fiddleheads unfurled into broad cinnamon ferns, and the leaves of aspen, birch, and maple trees fully budded, blotting out the sky more than ever.

Abram guided her along no visible trail. He skirted granite ledges and winter blow-downs, stepped across gurgling streams that would dry out by summer's end, and wove his way through patches of brush. Whatever path he followed, it was easy to travel. He hummed the entire way, his beard bristling as if he were smiling. Karigan wondered at his content and was surprised he did not smoke. When she remarked upon this, he replied, "I need no smoke here. Into the cities and villages, by the side of a fire, that is where I need it."

They spoke little as they traveled, though they stopped periodically so Abram could show Karigan delicate lady's slippers, bluets, and trillium, his huge hands dwarfing the blossoms. The sun changed the shapes of shadows in the woods and lifted a moist vapor from the damp ground. Fine needles scattered on the forest floor

dried in the sun, and left a strong tang of balsam in the air. Somewhere a woodpecker could be heard tapping on a tree.

Abram stopped and looked up. Karigan followed his gaze and beheld the tallest white pine she had ever seen. Its girth was so wide that even Abram couldn't wrap his arms all the way around it.

"This tree is hundreds of years old," he said. "I never fail to be awed by it. See up the trunk, the scar that looks like the shape of a gull in flight?"

She squinted, barely able to discern crude wings and a body cut into the bark. The scar was dark, an old carving. "Who would bother to do such a thing?" She was familiar with the carvings made by lovers, but who would carve a gull into the trunk of a tree in the middle of the wilderness?

"One who was a forester long before me."

"But why do it in the first place?" Carving initials into a tree was a silly way to express love. Love was a bit silly, anyway. But it was also cruel if the love ended.

Abram slapped the tree trunk with his palm as if meeting an old friend. "This was a king's tree, young one. Marked to one day be the mast of some great sailing vessel. The mark is that of Clan Sealender."

"Sealender?" Karigan furrowed her brow. It was a new clan name to her.

"The bloodline that ruled Sacorida before Hillander. When Sealender died out, Hillander battled for and won the right of succession. Both are descended from the original Sacor Clans."

"Oh." Once again, Karigan had been stumped by what was probably common knowledge. Next time, if there was a next time, she wouldn't be so neglectful of her history lessons.

"I would not cut this tree down if the king himself commanded me to do so." Abram looked up the tree trunk again, the crinkles beneath his eyes deepening with a smile.

They left the pine behind, circling around tiny spruces waiting in the shade for their chance to grow tall. The afternoon sun waned, forest shadows shifted as they walked. Abram stopped, his head stooped, listening. Blows could be heard, not the *crisprat-a-tat* of a woodpecker, rather the chopping of an ax against wood.

"We are near the boundary," Abram said, "but that still sounds too close."

Without further comment, he bounded away, agile as any deer despite his bulk. Karigan watched after him for a shocked moment before urging The Horse to follow behind at a trot. Abram hadn't been boasting when he said his long legs could match the pace of any horse.

Two men hammered at a tree with broad axes. They had already felled one tree. Two oxen stood by chewing cud, a sledge chained to their harness to drag away timber. The two men didn't hear Abram and Karigan approach, so engrossed by their chore were they.

"Stop!" Abram bellowed.

Karigan would not have been surprised if the whole of Sacordia stilled at his command. The very trees shivered. The two men paused in mid-strike, terror flashing across their faces when they took in Abram.

"You are on king's land." Abram fisted his hands on his hips. Sun glinted off the blade of his ax.

The two glanced at each other and raised their axes defensively. "King never cuts here," one said, and he spat. "He can't protect this forest forever."

The second man spoke more uncertainly. "Soon the demand for paper—"

"You are breaking king's law," Abram broke in without hesitation, his voice strong and sure. "Poaching the king's trees or wild beasts is punishable by death. I am commissioned to mete out the king's justice where this forest is concerned."

The first man glowered, but the second quailed. Karigan glanced at Abram in horror. His face was unreadable. Surely he wouldn't—

Abram stepped forward and the first man raised his ax, this time offensively. Abram rushed him and grabbed the handle before the ax could cut him, breaking the haft over his knee. The second man dropped his ax voluntarily.

"Karigan," Abram said heavily, "this is where we must part. North isn't far."

"What are you going to—"

"Farewell, Green Rider." He nodded his head in dismissal. "It was a good meeting."

"I— " Abram's look told her that she had better move on. "Good-bye," she said. "Thank you." But he had already turned back to the two men and did not hear.

Karigan caught the first man watching her with a dark scowl as she rode away. Surely Abram wouldn't carry out the death penalty. It wasn't in his nature to do so. But the two tree poachers didn't know it.

The trees simply ended. Karigan and The Horse were swathed in full sunlight for the first time since their strange journey together had begun. The Horse snorted and sidestepped, and Karigan covered her eyes until they adjusted to the light. She let out a low whistle. As far as the eye could stretch, the land was a desert of tree stumps. Only on the most distant hills, and behind her, could she find trees.

They skirted the edge of the woods until they met the road. Karigan cast a cautious eye before stepping onto it. The road was a muddy gutter of cloven hoofprints, and was rutted with gullies full of water where timber sledges had grooved the surface. They cantered as much to escape the devastation of the forest as to reach the town of North by sunset. The absence of trees exposed them to watching eyes, and left Karigan feeling very vulnerable.

As dusk deepened, a horseman approached at a quick trot. Karigan slowed The Horse to a jog, and patted the hilt of her saber to ensure it still hung at her side.

It wasn't easy to distinguish the horseman from the shadows. He was garbed in a long gray cloak with the hood thrown over his face. A quiver of arrows was strapped to his back, and a longbow crossed his shoulder. His stallion was a tall gray, at least as tall as The Horse, but more finely proportioned. The silver of his tack jingled as he trotted.

The Horse clung to the right side of the road and laid his ears back.

"What is it?" Karigan asked, tightening her grip on the hilt of her sword. The Horse shook his head, his ears flickered back and forth.

Karigan licked her lips nervously as the gray-cloaked figure drew closer. It would not do to look frightened. The more confident she appeared, the less likely she would be attacked if the horseman was a brigand. She released the hilt of her sword, fingers trembling, and turned to the horseman.

"Good evening," she said.

The rider turned his hood toward her, its depths vacant of all but shadows. An inexplicable dread weighed her down as the hidden gaze raked across her, holding her for some interminable time, perhaps seconds. She sensed something fair that had been tainted, something of age, but young. Something terrible.

The horseman nodded, and the gray stallion trotted on by. Karigan sagged in

relief, releasing the breath she had held during the momentary exchange.

The jingle of tack and plod of hooves paused as if the rider had stopped to gaze after her. She glanced over her shoulder, but no one was there. Karigan wilted in her saddle. There was no place for the horseman to hide, yet he was gone.

"Don't tell me I'm beginning to see other ghosts," she murmured, but the cold dread returned when she remembered F'ryan Coblebay's last words: *Beware the shadow man*.

Sunset blooded the sky behind them as she clucked The Horse into a canter, more eager than ever to reach civilization. They did not slow until they entered town, and her initial relief turned into misgiving as she took in the shamble of clapboard wooden structures with garish hand-painted signs advertising mercantiles, a smithy, inns, and pubs.

The pubs and inns were already brightly lit from within, and bodies were pressed up against the windows. Bawdy music and loud laughter drifted into the sultry dark. She passed The Prancing Lady, The Broken Tree, and The Twisted Mule, and at The Full Moon, a man staggered into the street with a woman riding piggyback. Her face was gaudily painted, she wore a corset and little else, and was covering the man's eyes with her hands.

"Ha, ha, Wilmy," he said, wobbling this way and that down the street. "You let me see now, y'hear? Y'let me, an' we'll have good fun." They disappeared down an alley. The woman's giggles echoed back out to the street, was followed by silence, then delighted squeals.

After a time, Karigan caught up to, and followed behind, a horse cart. Something large and heavy bumped on its wooden bottom as the wheels jolted over ruts in the street.

"Hey, Garl," said a man who leaned against a hitching post. "Watcha find?"

The cart driver hauled on the reins and *whoa*ed his horse to a halt. "Remember that Greenie that come by the other day, asking all those questions 'bout some girl? I found her over by Millet's Pond, two arrows in 'er."

"Just as well," the hitching post man said. "We've no need for those types 'round here."

Karigan went cold. Another dead Green Rider? With two arrows in her? She rode by the cart, The Horse's head lowered as if he knew a dead Green Rider lay in it. Karigan didn't want to look, but could not avoid the glint of light from a nearby inn on the Rider's gold hair. She lay half on her side, one gauntleted hand stretched out,

the fingers slightly curled. The other hand lay across her stomach. She looked as if she might be asleep, except for the two black arrows protruding from her chest. The drinking song issuing from the inn made a grotesque dirge.

Karigan urged The Horse on, and the Rider's gold-winged horse brooch shimmered in the corner of her eye. Shaken, she stared straight ahead, the conversation and laughter of the two men fading behind her. Didn't they care that a woman lay dead next to them? Didn't they know that Green Riders were brave and deserved more than being thrown into the back of some dirty horse cart?

A somber mood took Karigan. She dismounted in front of The Fallen Tree, the inn Abram had recommended. The carved sign above the door showed an ax embedded in a tree stump. No mistake about what this town was known for.

A stableboy came to claim The Horse. "Is there room for the night?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Then I'll see to my horse myself."

The boy shrugged. It wasn't what guests usually requested, but she didn't want to chance anyone seeing her gear close up. She led The Horse through an alley to the rear of the inn where a stable and small paddock stood lighted by lanterns. Karigan hitched The Horse to a railing and untacked him there. Once free, he trotted to the center of the paddock for an enthusiastic roll in the mud. Karigan chuckled despite herself.

The stableboy watched The Horse grunt and rub his neck and side into the ground. "Where'd you find the horse?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I saw his scars. A Green Rider was asking after such a horse the other day."

Karigan had to bite her tongue to regain her composure. The Green Rider had been looking for The Horse? "Are you implying I stole a horse, boy?"

"Why—" The boy looked at her with big eyes.

"I bought that horse from a mercenary, at a fair price, too." Karigan used as stern a voice as possible, and it was working. She blessed her fast thinking. A mercenary's horse would be prone to scars, too.

"Sorry, ma'am," the boy said.

Karigan smiled. Now the boy addressed her with the proper tone of respect, and eyed the saber girded at her side with trepidation.

He thought I was some runaway, she thought. Then remembered that she was. "I don't want any slack on his grain. Give him a good rubdown, and make sure there isn't a fleck of dust on him come morning."

She fished for a coin in her pocket. Her father always insisted on tipping stableboys. He claimed they were always underpaid. It hurt to part with a copper—a night at the inn would drain her resources as it was—but she needed to put the stableboy's mind on something other than scarred horses and Green Riders. The boy received the coin enthusiastically, and reassured her that her horse would be well cared for.

Karigan caught up her gear, the bridle slung over her shoulder and the saddle over an arm, and entered the inn from a side door. She was struck by the aroma of broiled meat and fresh baked bread. Her mouth watered over a table of cooling pies and a cauldron of stew with chunks of beef, potatoes, and parsnips simmering over a hearthfire. She hadn't eaten a true meal since Seven Chimneys. Servants dashed in and out of the kitchen through a swinging door, balancing platters heaped with, or depleted of, food.

"*Out-out-out!*" Animposing, rotund woman brandished her ladle at Karigan. "I won't put up with horse leather in my kitchen."

Karigan rushed through the door, narrowly dodging a servant with a tray of empty tankards. She stepped away from the doorway to avoid further collisions.

The common room was clean and quiet—a good sign. Only a handful of tables was occupied. A woman sat by the stone fireplace reading fortune cards for a burly man, and an equally burly woman. They guffawed at whatever predictions the fortune-teller had told them. A single musician tuned his lute in a corner. It was hardly what she expected to find in North after what she had seen already.

"Do you have a request, lady?"

The musician gazed at her intently. She had seen the same expression on Estral's face often enough, and knew that minstrels missed very little.

"Uh, no. Not right now."

The man, perhaps middle-aged, bowed his head gracefully and turned his attention back to his lute. For a warm-up, he plucked a quiet song.

A skinny man with thinning red hair approached her. His fine vest and coat

suggested he was either a merchant or an innkeeper. For some reason, Karigan always expected innkeepers to be a bit more rotund.

"You wish a room?" he asked.

"Yes. A single."

He raised his brow appraisingly at her trying to ascertain, she was sure, her ability to pay for a single room. His expression was doubtful, but he turned on his heel. "This way," he said. He led her up a narrow stairway to the second floor.

The room he showed her was only slightly larger than the closet she had lived in at Selium, but it looked clean and comfortable. The mattress was feather rather than straw, and was covered with a thick quilt. An oil lamp, not lard or a candle, stood on a table next to the bed. She began to wonder what the expense of a night's stay was going to add up to, and if she was going to end up in the scullery washing dishes, or in the stable mucking stalls. Better that than spending the night in one of those other raffish inns.

"The price," the innkeeper said, "is four silvers." He held his palm out expectantly.

Karigan's mouth dropped open. *Outrageous!* Ordinarily, such an establishment would charge two silvers, and even that was considered somewhat steep. The innkeeper still stood there, hand outstretched, his expression growing more suspicious. Karigan pursed her lips and dug into her pocket. She dropped the precious silvers into the man's hand. He bowed.

"This is robbery." She hooked a lank strand of hair behind her ear. "Even the finest inns in Corsa don't charge this much."

"This is North," the innkeeper said. "The extra expense covers security. You may have dinner when you are ready." He glanced down his nose at her saber, and sniffed. "Arms are generally left in the guestrooms." Karigan selfconsciously hitched the slipping swordbelt into its proper place. The innkeeper removed a key from a ring on his belt. "If you are concerned about your... valuables, you may use this." It was obvious he thought she didn't possess much in the way of valuables.

You'd treat me just fine if you knew I was the heir of the wealthy Clan G'ladheon, wouldn't you. "Thank you." She wanted the key, took it, and shut the door in the innkeeper's face.

She would go down to the common room for dinner in a moment, but first she was due for a cleaning in the washbowl. She splashed water on her face and contemplated the day's events. First the "tree poachers" in Abram's woods, then the

strange horseman, followed by another dead Rider in a cart. Garl, the cart driver, had said she was asking about some girl. The stableboy mentioned that a Green Rider had asked after a horse. Why did the Rider search for a girl instead of F'ryan Coblebay?

Karigan's head jolted up. Water dripped from her face and splashed into the washbowl. *She couldn't have been looking for me, could she?* How would anyone know to look for her in connection to The Horse? That is, if she was the "girl" the Rider had been referring to... Karigan blotted her face dry with the linen towel lying next to the bowl. No matter what the answer, she still had a message to deliver, and with the death of another Green Rider, it appeared she must be more cautious than ever.

She unwound the bandages from her wrists. The burns were healing surprisingly well, though there would be some scarring. It seemed ages since her encounter with the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane*. Would anyone believe her when she told that story? The burns could have come from anywhere, even a campfire as Torne had once suggested.

She gazed in a mirror to assess her appearance. The bruises on her face had faded some, but were still visible. There wasn't anything she could do about that. The winged horse insignia was still hidden on her rolled sleeve. She unbuckled her swordbelt and left it with the rest of her gear. There was nothing about her that suggested she was connected to the Green Riders. Satisfied with her appearance, she locked the room behind her and trotted down the stairs to put some food into her empty stomach.

A few more patrons occupied the common room. Some were dressed well enough to be merchants. Others were in either dusty traveling clothes, or the plain garb of the locals. The minstrel strummed a cheerful tune about how a chicken changed the fortune of a farmer. It was a simple tune, perfectly suited for an inn. Karigan felt the minstrel's eyes follow her as she walked across the room to a small empty table.

She dropped into a chair, only to discover that the table was an enormous tree stump coated with varnish. The number of growth rings convinced her that this tree was older than the tall white pine Abram had shown her.

"You wanting some food, missy?"

Startled, Karigan looked up at an aproned servant. "Yes. Anything that's hot."

"Thought so. You look like you haven't seen real food in a while. Drink?"

"Wine, if you have it."

"Old Ram Canoro makes blueberry wine which we sell. It's a bit rough at first, but good enough when you get used to it."

"That's fine."

The servant disappeared and Karigan settled into her chair to listen to the minstrel. Her eyes roamed the room. Most patrons were in deep discussion, a few played board games. The fortune-teller was alone now, and stared back at her unabashed. She was dressed garishly in red and blue, with colored glass beads dangling from her neck. Rings flashed on her fingers as she absently shuffled fortune cards. Without preamble, she left her table and walked over to Karigan's. She sat without greeting or permission, and adjusted her skirts about her legs, the beads of her necklaces clinking together.

Karigan shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Something I can do for you?"

"I am Clatheas, Seer." The woman spoke with an intensity that suggested many held contempt for her title. "Perhaps I can do something for you."

"Sorry, I don't want my fortune told." Ordinarily, she wouldn't have minded, but she didn't possess the coin for something so frivolous.

"I won't read your fortune. These cards merely mirror one's thoughts." Clatheas spread them across the table. Colorful pictures of kings, queens, knights, merchants, seafarers, and courtiers gazed back up at Karigan. Clatheas swept them back into a deck, nimbly shuffling them as she spoke. "The cards can read nothing. They simply reflect." Her eyes, deep brown, focused on Karigan's. "I'm more interested in the ghost that shadows you."

Karigan half-stood, her chair scraping the floor. When she noticed other patrons watching, she reddened and slid back into her seat. The patrons turned their attention back to their games and conversations.

"You see—?"

"I see a young man in green. Too young to die, yet two arrows pierce his back. You know of him?"

"I—"

"He struggles to speak to you, and to me. He is speaking now, but we cannot hear. He hasn't the power now."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Why should I not? You are more than you seem, though you try to conceal it. The ghost is warning you of something. If you know what it is, perhaps you can avoid it. If not..." Clatheas shrugged.

"Here you go, missy." The servant slid a bowl full of steaming stew, a platter of sliced beef and mushrooms, bread, and a goblet of wine in front of Karigan. "Now don't distract the girl from her vittles, Clatheas." The servant left humming to herself. Clatheas scowled after her.

Karigan broke off a piece of warm, moist bread and offered it to the seer. She waved it off, her necklaces jangling. Without another word, Karigan shoveled succulent stew into her mouth, sucking in air when it burned her tongue. Her stomach growled voraciously, and the seer watched her take every bite. More tables filled up, and the noise level of the common room elevated as the minstrel played foot-stomping, hand-clapping, jig-dancing, boisterous music.

When Karigan had eaten her fill, she sank in her chair with a hand on her gorged belly. More than half the food still remained on the table, but her stomach, which had grown accustomed to so little food, would accept no more.

She sipped lazily at the wine. At first it was a bit sour, but after a while, she was convinced of its fruity flavor.

Clatheas shuffled her cards and leaned toward Karigan so she couldn't be overheard by others. "I find it interesting that a Green Rider should be searching for one who matches your description."

Karigan sat up, all attention now. "My description?"

"There are some who know seers can be helpful. They will listen to seers and believe." Clatheas frowned. "I saw only that Rider's disaster when I looked at the cards."

"She's dead."

"I warned her something terrible was going to happen. You know of her, then?"

"I saw her body."

Clatheas clucked. "I didn't learn her name, but she sought a girl and a horse. You wouldn't know what it means, would you?"

"You're the seer," Karigan said.

"You don't know either. Curious. A ghost follows you, you conceal who you are,

and a Green Rider searching for someone of your description dies." She cut the deck in half and turned over a card. The picture was a rider in green, on a red steed, fleeing arrows.

Karigan's eyes widened. She had seen fortune cards before, but never this one. "How—?"

Clatheas' brown eyes were fervent. "Were I you, Green Rider who-is-not, I wouldn't linger in North. Heed the warning of the card, for it is the same one I saw when I read for that dead Rider."

KING-HATERS

Karigan sat immobilized, and it was some moments before she realized Clatheas had left her to wander among other tables to offer the telling of fortunes. More people trickled into the inn. A group sat in a tight cluster at an adjacent table. Among them was a petite, titian-haired woman. When she spoke, her eyes afire, all others leaned in closer to listen. Karigan strained to hear, too.

"Tomorrow," the woman said with a clipped Rhovan accent, "we shall hold the rally. The people will hear us and support us. It is the people who shall rule, not a man who thinks himself one among the gods."

There was a murmur of agreement. "From North to Sacor City," one man said above the others.

The woman smiled, dimples deepening on either side of her mouth, and Karigan saw how people could be magnetically drawn to her. She hushed the group. "And then the Lone Forest. We will go to the Lone Forest and answer to none but ourselves."

A babble of approval circulated among the group.

"Pie, missy?"

Karigan jumped, startled out of her observations, and wrenched her attention away from the group to the servant. "I don't think so." She smiled with regret, for the pies had looked mouth-watering. "But maybe you could tell me who that woman at the next table is."

"You thinking about joining their group?"

"I don't know what their group is."

The servant pushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. "Why, they're the Anti-Monarchy Society." She glanced over at them, then said in a whisper, "There's some that call them the King-Haters. Their ideas are a trifle far-fetched, but they say things folks want to hear. That's Lorilie, their leader. Rumor has it that she was Rhovan aristocracy until King Thergood cast her out of the country for her beliefs. Ever since, she's been a thorn in Zachary's side. Surprises me that the Greenie wasn't looking for her the other day. Lorilie Dorrان's considered an outlaw in Sacordia, but seeing as most everyone else in North is an outlaw, it doesn't much matter. I'm surprised you haven't heard of her."

"I haven't heard the news of late. It's been a long while since I've traveled through a town of any size."

"I guessed. Your ribs must be bare bones beneath that shirt. Ah, well. Most aren't sure what to make of Lorilie, but they can't dispute her ideas." She collected the remains of Karigan's dinner and ambled away toward the kitchen.

Karigan glanced over at the Anti-Monarchy Society. They talked among themselves in excited voices while Lori-lie Dorrان watched on, somehow separate and above her companions. Then she turned as if feeling Karigan's gaze on her and smiled. With a word or two to her companions, she sauntered over.

"Are you interested in our group, sister?" she asked.

"Uh... I don't know what you're about, except that you don't like kings."

Lorilie pointed to the chair Clatheas had occupied earlier. "You mind?" Karigan shook her head and Lorilie sat down. "We are more than what some call us—King-Haters." She made a wry face. "Our desire is to uplift the common folk who presently slave beneath the oppressive forces of the aristocracy."

"I'm all for showing the aristocracy a thing or two," Karigan said, "but I don't understand the slave part. Slavery was banned in Sacordia during the Second Age."

"Oh, they won't call it slavery, but that's what it is. Landless folk breaking their backs to fill the pockets of their overlords."

"Overlords?"

"The landowners—the aristocracy. And of course it's the common folk who pay the bulk of the taxes, while the aristocrats and merchants get fatter."

"Wait a minute." Karigan sat up a little straighter. "Merchants pay taxes."

"Yes, they do, but it's not proportionate with their wealth. They should be taxed

more heavily, but they are favored by the king." Lorilie leaned forward conspiratorially and put her hand on Karigan's wrist. "Look, sister, we're all in this together. Only by ousting the king and the aristocracy will we be able to raise the people to their proper level."

"Hey, Lorilie!" called one of her friends. "Skeller wants to go over tomorrow's speech."

Lorilie nodded. "One moment." Then again her intense eyes were on Karigan. "Sister, a revolution has begun, and a new order will arise." She smiled grimly, then joined her followers. She spoke softly to them, and they huddled close to her. Then, after a bout of loud laughter, they left the inn.

Karigan swallowed the last of her wine. A revolution? A new order? It was too mind-boggling for one who had been on the road so long. Although the dig about merchants annoyed her, and understandably so... Everyone had the opportunity to do as her father had—to gain wealth and status through backbreaking work. And would Lorilie Dorrان punish her father for all his good work, and for supporting commerce in Sacordia?

I don't even want to think about it. I've got enough problems to last nine lives of a cat.

Karigan stretched and yawned. The wine and food had made her somnolent, and the sooner to bed, the sooner to rise and leave North behind. As she strode across the common room, the minstrel's eyes followed her without his missing a note of the song he sang. She scowled at him, then realized that several of the men in the common room, many lumberjacks by the look of their wool shirts and broad shoulders, followed her with their eyes, too.

The servant met her at the bottom of the stairs. "Don't concern yourself with these lugs, missy. Innkeeper Wiles keeps order here, though he can't keep the men from looking." She rolled her eyes knowingly. "This is a respectable inn. If they want the company of a... woman, there are plenty of other inns in town where they can find it."

"Thanks," Karigan said. She wondered how the innkeeper enforced order in such a rough town, but was glad to hear that he did so one way or the other.

Once in her room, she changed into the oversized Green Rider shirt to wear to bed. She sank into the comfortable feather mattress anticipating a restful night, but discovered she could only toss and turn. Voices and the clatter of dishware disturbed her some, but it was the events of the day that jostled around in her mind and kept her awake.

In the small hours, when the music and chatter in the common room died down, sleep began to take her, but she suddenly jolted awake, quivering. The hairs on her arms stood on end, and her heart beat wildly, but she didn't know what had roused her. Then there it was, faint, barely perceived footfalls in the corridor outside her room. A worn floorboard creaked.

A shadow darkened the crack between the door and floor, then passed over the keyhole. The doorknob twisted one way, then the other. Karigan held her breath, stiffened, listening, afraid to move. Her sword was on the other side of the room with the brooch.

A sharp light pierced through the keyhole, searching, probing.

Karigan sat up and threw the covers aside. The cold night spread goosepimples across her body as she swung her legs over the side of the bed. She tiptoed across the icy floor, took up her saber, and waited by the door.

Strangely, the door seemed to flex and swim in her eyes. She blinked, but the door still distorted and warped in fluid motions, and she felt with a creeping certainty that it wasn't her own groggy vision that warped the door, but magic. She reached for her brooch unconsciously, and discovered it was warm to her touch. The door would give in moments, and with growing apprehension, she knew it was the Shadow Man, the rider in gray, who intended to enter her room.

The shaft of light probing through the keyhole suddenly withdrew, but before Karigan could breathe a sigh of relief, something else came through. At first it was so dark and tiny, as tiny as a fly, she could not see it, but it was even darker than the night, a small black orb that floated on the air, and her eyes fixed on it. The orb bobbed and drifted toward her, expanding as it did so.

It was oily black and radiated a halo of darkness that pushed away even the possibility of light. The orb continued to grow. Tendrils of energy flared and arched across its surface, searing and scorching. Karigan backed away, but the thing, now the size of her head, moved with her. Karigan backed until she was pressed up against the wall and could go no farther, and still it moved toward her.

Then heavy footsteps clumped outside. "Who's there?" a man asked.

The door hardened into ordinary, solid pine wood again. The orb halted, wavered uncertainly, then shrank in the blink of an eye and whisked out through the keyhole. Feet padded lightly away and Karigan closed her eyes in relief. Moments later someone tapped on her door. Holding the saber level before her, she opened the door carefully. To her surprise, the minstrel stood there, his lute in one hand and a glowing oil lamp in the other.

"May I come in?" he whispered. His face looked gaunt in the flickering light. "If the innkeeper or his guard Tarone find me here, I shall be skinned where I stand."

"Why should I allow you in my room?" Karigan demanded none too quietly.

The minstrel peered about nervously. "You are wise in your caution considering someone was trying to break into your room just now. I think I frightened him off, a stealthy fellow. You've nothing to fear from me. I am but a minstrel and carry nothing in the way of arms... my lute would be a clumsy weapon against your blade."

"Some minstrels are trained in the fighting arts."

"True. Especially if they were trained in Selium as I was. But I never took up a sword."

"Selium?"

"Yes. I believe that is where you've come from, too."

Karigan's mouth gaped open. She stepped aside for the minstrel to enter. She shut the door behind him, but didn't sheathe her sword.

The minstrel glanced around the room as if something might leap out of the shadows at any moment. "I am Gowen, a master of my craft. I would have sought you out sooner, but if I didn't perform as usual, someone might have gotten suspicious." What a master minstrel might be doing in a wilderness town like North, he didn't say. Without hesitation he sat on her bed. It was the only place to sit.

"What do you want?" Karigan asked. "How do you know I've traveled from Selium?"

"A Green Rider was looking for you the other day. At least, you answer her description. When she saw I was Sel-ium trained—" he pointed to the gold master's knot on his shoulder, "—she knew she could trust me, and she knew that a master minstrel wouldn't have been placed here by mistake."

Karigan would have liked to have known what he meant by that. "I know a Green Rider was looking for me, or somebody who looked like me."

"You missed her by about a day."

"She's dead. I saw her body in a horse cart."

Gowen shook his head, bewildered. "I never thought the townsfolk would go so

far as to actually kill someone from the king. Joy hadn't been a Rider long."

Karigan sat cross-legged on the floor, and rested her chin on her hands. "I'm not sure it was the townsfolk who killed her."

Gowen cocked his head, his eyes searching hers. Minstrels certainly possessed penetrating eyes. "What is it you know?"

"All I know is that others, including another Green Rider, were murdered in the same manner. Two black arrows with red fletching."

"Strange. Strange things are brewing. Poor Joy was searching for you, or your twin, but you weren't her primary concern. A messenger horse was."

"She didn't say why on either count, did she?" It was too much of a coincidence.

"No. But, young lady, of greater concern are the others who were looking for one who also matched your description. Their description wasn't as detailed as Joy's, but good enough to make a match."

Karigan bit her bottom lip. She didn't want to ask, but she did anyway. "Were they Mirwellian?"

"I see you know you're being pursued. They were here a few days ago. I'm not sure where they went after North, but they were in a hurry. I thought nothing of it till Joy described you. She didn't tell me, though, that you were a Green Rider."

"I'm not."

The minstrel blinked, his only hint of surprise. "You wear Rider insignia."

Karigan had forgotten about the winged horse embroidered on her sleeve. "I'm delivering a message for a dead Green Rider," she said.

"Killed by two black arrows."

She nodded.

"My dear young woman, you should not linger in this town. These black arrows sound like an omen to me. An omen of the dark past. No doubt it has something to do with Mornhavon the Black."

Karigan shuddered. Whether it was the cold of the evening or the name that caused her to do so, she wasn't sure. Mornhavon the Black's name had come up a lot since she had started this strange journey, even though he had been vanquished centuries ago.

"That person outside your door may not have been an ordinary brigand, either," Gowen said.

"How so?" Karigan's voice held little surprise.

"Most don't dare tamper with the guests of this inn. Keeper Wiles' man, Tarone, hasn't stopped short of killing to retain order here. Whoever wished to gain entry does not fear him."

Goosepimples broke out all over again. "Did you get a look at him?"

Gowen shook his head. "He was light of foot and disappeared into the shadows the moment he detected me. The corner of his cloak caught in my lamplight. It was gray."

A knock on the door startled them both.

"Oh, no. The innkeeper and his guard." Gowen rolled his eyes.

Karigan climbed to her feet, carefully draping a blanket over her shoulders to conceal the Rider insignia before she opened the door. The innkeeper stood in the corridor flanked by a hulking giant who was, if not as tall as Abram, at least as wide. He held an enormous club in his hand, and nothing about him suggested Abram's mild and careful nature. Now she knew how the innkeeper enforced order.

"Is everything well here?" the innkeeper asked, the corners of his mouth turned down as if to imply he didn't really care, but he had a reputation to maintain.

"Everything is fine," Karigan said. "Gowen and I were just having a conversation."

The innkeeper sniffed and cast Gowen a severe glance. "You know the rules, minstrel. No... associations with the guests." The guard thumped his club into his hand in emphasis. "You do your job well, but if you can't abide by the rules, I shall have to release you."

Karigan watched in fascination as Gowen affected a convincing facade of humility bordering on fear. "It's really nothing, Keeper Wiles. Really." His eyes were downcast and he bowed. "The lady and I were just making conversation. We hail from the same town. It won't happen again, I assure you, sir."

"It's truly all right," Karigan said. "He's done no harm."

Wiles grunted in disdain. "You may keep your job for now." He turned down the corridor, his guard following behind with heavy footsteps.

Gowen dropped all facade. "That man is a pompous... Well, you saw him. Mind what I told you, young lady. And mind whatever Clatheas told you, too. She's an accurate seer. Farewell and good luck to you!"

Karigan stood alone in her dark room. The door creaked as she closed it. She turned the key in the lock and fell back into bed. Sleep would be impossible now, and she gave some thought to leaving that very moment, but it wouldn't do to arouse any more suspicion than she needed to. Besides, the starless night was less inviting than the warm inn, and she would rather stay put than encounter the Shadow Man again in the dark.

MIRWELL

The Green Rider passed the envelope to Beryl. Beryl glanced at it front and back, then handed it to the governor.

"It bears the king's seal, my lord."

Mirwell looked the envelope over. It was addressed to *Honorable Tomastine II, Lord-Governor of Mirwell Province, Faithful Servant of Sacordia*. The seal on the back was Zachary's, but featured his clan emblem, that of a Hillander terrier pressed into heather-colored wax, rather than the royal emblem of the firebrand and the half moon.

He slit the message open with his dagger and read the contents. Afterward, he handed it back to Beryl to read. The Greenie waited, standing statue-still with her hands clasped behind her back.

Mirwell glanced at her, then his aide. "Rider—"

"Ereal M'farthon, my lord," Beryl provided.

"Rider M'farthon, would you tell us what else you carry in your message satchel?"

The messenger's eyes grew wide, and she glanced questioningly at Beryl before her eyes fell back on the governor. "With all due respect, my lord—"

Mirwell stayed her words with his hand. "Please humor me, Rider. I ask for reasons of personal security."

Beryl nodded to her reassuringly.

Good! Sometimes it took another woman to lend support. *I am an old bear ugly*

enough to make anyone nervous.

The Rider cleared her throat. "With all due respect, my lord, while messages from His Excellency the King are matters of his own business, it's no secret that I carry another invitation to deliver to the lord-governor of Adolind."

Mirwell nodded gravely. "Thank you, Rider M'farthon. D'rang will escort you to the kitchen for provisions to make the rest of your long journey comfortable. In the meantime, I shall craft my reply."

"Thank you, my lord." The Rider bowed out of the library, followed by a soldier in scarlet.

When she was out of earshot and the doors closed, Mirwell turned to his aide. "What do you make of it, Spence? Another Greenie trying to reach Zachary's spy?"

Beryl pulled thoughtfully at her lower lip. After a few moments she shook her head. "No, my lord."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I believe her intentions are as she says—to deliver invitations for the king's banquet and ball. It's certainly something she did not fabricate. Besides, we haven't found any spy in your household yet, and we've been very thorough."

Mirwell knew how thorough. Everyone who inhabited his keep, from the lowest servant to the highest courtier, including Prince Amilton and Beryl, had been interviewed extensively. Some to the point of torture. He had delighted in the screams of some of the courtiers he particularly disliked, and admired some of the techniques Beryl had employed to get them to "talk." The results, however, indicated that no spy existed within House Mirwell. One positive byproduct of the investigation was a reminder to his subjects of his authority. All the better if they trembled a little when he walked by.

"My feeling," Beryl said, "is that Coblebay was working on his own."

Mirwell tapped the catamount head of his armrest.

"Nevertheless, I'm not willing to take chances. Bring me Taggern."

The guardsman was summoned, and clicked his boot heels to attention before his lord-governor.

"Taggern, see that Rider M'farthon doesn't come in private contact with anyone while she is being provisioned. Get a look in her message satchel if you can, then get

her underway as soon as my reply to the king is prepared. Escort her out of the village. I expect a report. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord."

When the guardsman left, Beryl said, "I could keep an eye on the Rider myself, my lord."

"I need you to respond to Zachary for me. Your hand is fairer than mine."

She stepped over to his massive desk, a behemoth of carved cherrywood inlaid with blond oak, which sat upon legs fashioned as the talons of some enormous raptor. He never used the desk himself, and rarely even cracked a book in his library collection. These had all been acquired over the generations, mostly by a Mirwell of a more scholarly tendency. Tomastine II suspected that the province had begun to fail during that particular ancestor's reign. Still he liked the ambiance of the room with its large fireplace and hide-covered armchairs. Beryl seemed to feel right at home behind the desk. She dipped her quill into the inkwell.

"Your message, my lord?"

"Write to our esteemed king that we will accept his invitation."

"We, my lord?"

Mirwell smiled broadly. "Yes, *we*. Did you notice the date of the ball? Not long before the king's annual hunt."

"That's what concerns me."

"What better way to conquer than to be there to see it happen, eh?"

Beryl brought the message over for him to sign. He took the paper, and the hand that held it. He caressed her hand. The palm was well callused from using a sword, but the other side was soft and smooth, not riddled by the brown spots and tangle of green veins women his age were cursed with. She looked at him, stricken.

"As I said, you've a fair hand, my dear." He released it and looked the letter over, ignoring her as she stepped away and clasped her hands behind her back. She stared straight ahead at nothing. "We shall have a fine time in Sacor City."

"Yes, my lord." Her voice was flat.

She took the message, slipped it into an envelope, and sealed it with red wax and the imprint of the two war hammers. She left the library, a bit hastily, Mirwell

thought. *We'll see what comes of a visit to Sacor City.*

He stood over his Intrigue board. He'd have to find its traveling case. Maybe he would have D'rang look for it. He picked up a red governor and a red soldier, and placed them in the court of the green king.

"I look forward to the hunt."

RALLY

Karigan stepped out into the overcast morning, leading The Horse down the alley to the main street. The stableboy watched after them wistfully, probably hoping for another copper. He deserved it, Karigan reflected. The Horse gleamed despite the dullness of the day. She just could not afford to dip into her reserves for more coins, but she had made a point of praising the boy for his fine care.

The main street was still muddy. Townsfolk walked on wooden boards lined in front of nearly every building and storefront, but the boards didn't help if one had to cross the street or veer off course. Women held their long skirts high, their faces in perpetual frowns as they trudged through the slop. Karigan grimaced herself as her foot sucked in the mud. The shine on The Horse's coat would not last long.

She mounted to let The Horse deal with the mud, and they went in search of a food vendor. Shopkeepers were just opening their doors and throwing back shutters. A blacksmith fired up his forge and the roar of flame could be heard all the way out into the street. North could have been any town awakening, but this one was without refinement. She missed the cobbled streets of Selium.

She found a shop with cluttered shelves of baked and dried goods, coarse cloth, axes, knives, rope, handsaws, blankets, lamps, flour, sugar, lard... everything a town of this sort could use. She dismounted and hitched The Horse to a post in front of the shop. She scraped mud off her boots on an iron rung placed outside the doorway just for that purpose.

As she stepped inside, she heard a shout on the street. She peered through a window and watched a man, encumbered by two sacks, running through the mud, making little progress. He was pursued by another man whose white shopkeeper's smock was splattered with mud.

"Come back with that, you thief!"

The shopkeeper, unencumbered, caught up with the other man, and jumped on him. The two fell into the muck, each grappling with the other. Passersby paused to

watch the scene. A dagger flashed in the thief's hand, and he struck down at the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper loosed a hollow wail that Karigan felt every inch up her spine. The thief had stabbed the shopkeeper, and no one had attempted to stop him.

The thief climbed to his feet, threw the two sacks over his shoulder, and walked away. Pedestrians ignored the thief and simply walked around the shopkeeper's body as if it were no more than a rock obstructing their path.

Someone clucked his tongue behind Karigan. A burly, bald-pated man in a white smock shook his head, his jowls wobbling. "Old Mael didn't take any precautions." He patted a short sword sheathed at his side. Anywhere else, a shopkeeper wearing a sword was an unusual sight.

"Isn't anyone going to do anything?" Karigan demanded.

"Old Garl will be along to pick up his body," the shopkeeper said.

"But the thief—"

"Who's gonna run after him? You?"

Karigan blushed with shame.

"No one wants to risk their hide. I see you are sensible and carry a sword. Not common on a girl, but sensible. What can I do for you this morning?"

It took a moment for Karigan to shake off her sense of disgust at how easily the shopkeeper slid from murder to commerce. She couldn't think about it. She had to carry out her own mission, and there was no time to dwell on North's problems. She suspected that if she didn't get to Sacor City soon, more people would die.

She chose dried meat and fruit, tea, bread, and cheese from shelves, and some grain for The Horse from a hogshead. She set them on the counter in front of the shopkeeper.

"Two silvers," he said.

"Why, that's—"*Robbery* she wanted to say. She held her tongue, the price raising bile in the back of her throat. But she was, after all, a merchant's daughter, and not without bargaining skills. "Haifa silver," she said.

The shopkeeper smiled in appreciation. He was a bargainer, too, and looked so smug that few probably got the better of him. "Two silvers is how it stands."

Karigan furrowed her brows together. "Haifa silver is all those goods are worth,

but I'll raise it to a silver. I can see it is difficult to earn a living in a town such as this."

The shopkeeper nodded. "A fine offer, but a man needs more to make a living. A silver and a half, plus a copper."

Karigan shifted her stance. The man didn't give in easily. She wondered how many people were taken by bargainers such as him. When she lowered the price to one silver, the shopkeeper scratched his bald head as if not sure how it had happened.

"One silver is still ridiculous for these goods, but I'll accept the price." She passed the precious coin across the counter. As she did so, something gold glittered in a basket of trinkets on display on the far end of the counter. "How much for the brooch?" she asked.

The shopkeeper brightened. "Why, one silver. Not so much for such a fine piece." He placed the winged horse brooch in the palm of his hand for her to look at.

"A deplorable price," Karigan said. "A cheap trinket. One copper is generous." She knew full well that the brooch was just as much pure gold as her own, but chances were that the shopkeeper saw it as a gaudy piece of costume jewelry, as had Tome and Jendara seen hers.

The shopkeeper raised his brows. "That ring you're wearing... A clan ring?"

Karigan had forgotten about her mother's troth ring. It probably wasn't something she should wear openly, with its gold and diamond, in a town such as North. She sensed, however, that the shopkeeper was suddenly intimidated. Rarely did she ever use the traditional clan bow, but she did so now. She placed her hand on her heart and dipped low. "Clan G'ladheon at your service."

"Merchant clan?"

"Yes."

"I should have known. I wondered how you managed to outbargain me." He chuckled good-naturedly. "A copper it is, for the brooch."

Karigan couldn't believe her good fortune. She thought she would end up having to pay at least half a silver. She pushed the copper across the counter and took the brooch. It was heavy and cold in her hand. All of the blood hadn't been polished off. The folk here were no better than Torne and Jendara, picking valuables off the dead. She dropped the brooch into her pocket, collected her goods, and left just as

a bewhiskered man dressed in buckskin strode in, beaver, fox, and mink pelts swaying over his shoulder.

The body of the shopkeeper had been removed. Farther down the street, a crowd assembled. Most folk were garbed in the colorless textiles or buckskin of the town. A few merchant types added a splash of color. Karigan loaded the saddlebags with her newly purchased goods, and mounted The Horse. The sooner they left town, the better.

They plodded carefully toward the assembly. Members of the Anti-Monarchy Society formed a barrier around Lorilie Dorran who stood atop an overturned apple crate addressing the crowd. *Not everyone likes Lorilie's ideas*, Karigan thought idly. *Or they just don't like Lorilie.*

"You say the king protects you?" Lorilie demanded.

A man shifted uncomfortably in the crowd. "That's right."

The crowd jeered him. He was well dressed, perhaps a merchant, and definitely not local.

Lorilie held her hands up to quiet the crowd. "I suppose the king does protect and favor the *wealthy*. The *wealthy* can afford it. Your merchant's guild is as bad as the governors' council, trying to control entire villages with your trade, and your rules.

"But what of the folk here in North?" Lorilie's eyes seared those of her audience. "A man was killed this morning in the street. No one was here to prevent the crime. The king didn't protect him. The king won't fund a constable to keep order in this town. He will fund constables to guard the warehouses of rich merchants in Corsa." Her hands flew as she spoke. "The only time we see a representative of the king is at tax time."

A low grumble circulated among the gathered. Karigan tried to guide The Horse around the fringes of the crowd without drawing attention to herself, but people blocked the entire street, and were too transfixed by Lorilie to move out of the way.

Lorilie drew herself to her full height, which was not considerable, but seemed impressive nonetheless. "Will raising taxes on lumber products protect the folk of North, or other small villages like it? No! It will cast more beggars into the street. More families will go hungry. Despair, my sisters and brothers, will consume them."

"The king uses the taxes to fortify the country," the merchant shouted. "I call that protection, what with all the groundmites lurking about the borders these days."

The crowd cast questioning eyes on Lorilie, but she didn't hesitate with her response. "Yes, King Zachary is putting the taxes to good use. He is refortifying the wall around Sacor City. He is strengthening the defenses of the castle. This will surely protect the people in the rest of Sacordia from groundmites."

This had to be only half the story, Karigan thought, but what if it wasn't? Maybe the Mirwellians were right. Maybe Sacordia did need a new king. But Lorilie Dorran did not want a king at all. What would she put in his stead? Herself? Karigan shifted in the saddle, guiding The Horse toward a sudden opening between some clumps of people. She wasn't ready to side with the Mirwellians or Lorilie Dorran.

"King's folk will protect Sacordians!" shouted another man.

Lorilie met his outburst with laughter. "Like they protected the families on the borders? A whole unit of soldiers was slain down the North Road. Is that protection?"

The arguments went back and forth for some time, and Lorilie churned the emotions of the audience. She pounded her fist into her hand to add emphasis. She used facial expressions to affect sadness or anger, her voice alternately beseeching and persuasive. She derided all forms of kingdomship, including those who served the king, such as Green Riders, and accused the wealthy class of supporting the tyranny of the king. The merchants walked away amidst jeers. Lorilie was a master performer, and soon she had the crowd waving their fists above their heads and chanting, "A kingless land is a free land! Monarchy is tyranny!"

Karigan tried to work the horse through the log jam of people and was cursed at for getting in the way. "Well, if you let me through," she said, "I'll get out of your way." In the distance she espied the wooden bridge that spanned the River Terrygood, which upon crossing, would free her from the main portion of the town of North.

Then, above the chanting, one voice rang out, "*She's a Green Rider!*"

Karigan froze. Two men pushed through the crowd and pointed in her direction. Abram's tree poachers. An angry murmur swelled through the crowd though they couldn't quite figure out who the lumberjacks were pointing at. There was no one dressed in green.

Karigan had to act fast before the anger of the mob, for mob it was now, turned on her. If they realized who the lumberjacks were pointing at, they would tear her apart. She glanced ahead and saw a woman wearing a light green tunic. It was the burly woman she had seen Clatheas giving a card reading to the previous night at The Fallen Tree. Karigan pointed at her and yelled, "There she is! There's the Greenie!"

An expression of bewilderment, then fear, took over the woman's face. As the crowd surged toward her, Karigan meandered through the angry people until someone grabbed her boot and tried to pull her from the saddle. It was the two lumberjacks.

"You're the Greenie," one yelled at her. Fortunately, no one else could hear over the roar of the crowd. "I heard that troll call you a Green Rider."

Karigan clung desperately to The Horse's mane, and gasped as she was pulled inch by inch out of the saddle. A well-placed kick from The Horse, however, quickly ended the struggle, and one of the lumberjacks fell with a howl beneath the feet of the crowd.

Karigan urged The Horse on toward the bridge, heedless of people who got in her way. The Horse did not trample them, but rather pushed them aside like the prow of a boat on the water. When she was clear of the mob, she galloped the horse over the bridge, his hooves clattering on the wooden deck, the river churning frothy and turbulent below and sending up mist and spray that dampened her face. When finally she was across, and thus free of the town except for a few ramshackle shops and a tavern on this bank, she reined the horse in and looked back.

It was impossible to discern exactly what was happening—the mob had become a single moving mass. She wondered what had become of the woman she had "accused" of being a Green Rider. She had done it not out of mischief, but to save herself.

A mounted figure stood amidst the mob, a gray figure fixed like a statue in the middle of a swift-running, roiling stream, unable to move forward or backward. Karigan felt cold, knowing with some certainty that he watched her from beneath his gray hood.

WILD RIDE

Karigan rode for two days, snatching moments of rest when she could no longer keep her eyes open. The landscape varied little—tree stumps interspersed with staghorn sumac and tiny birches and maples growing up where a vast spruce forest once stood. Many of the useless trees had been toppled to allow easier access to the more profitable ones. Their skeletons lay on the ground, bleached gray and dry by the sun.

Karigan's skin burned, and she felt bleached and dry herself in the intense sunlight without sheltering trees to offer shade. The scolding of squirrels and the spring songs of birds were eerily absent.

She spent much of her time scanning the land. The horse track offered no concealment and anyone could be seen from a long way off. She tried to think of this as an advantage. Without concealment, a trap could not be set for her. She would be able to see her foes from far away.

There was no telling how far it was to Sacor City. They came upon an ancient stone marker so weathered and splotched by lichen that it was impossible to read the inscription.

They passed several teams of oxen hauling sledges piled high with logs, leaving plumes of dust in their wake, which could be seen miles away. Karigan coughed and gasped behind them, wishing she had a scarf to tie around her nose and mouth. The cargo masters paid her no heed, intent on the track ahead.

She spent sleepless nights, huddled beneath the greatcoat, the saber drawn and ready. There was no sign of pursuit, and this was somehow more disquieting. Did other Green Riders spend sleepless nights, too? Or were they used to the dangers of the road?

On the third morning out of North, logged forests gave way to farmland. Fields checkered in spring green and deep brown loam rolled away in each direction. The air freshened and was less arid. Here, birds sang in hedgerows and the occasional trees, but the land still offered no cover. Farmers plowed on distant hills with their teams in plain view. Karigan continued her rigid pace, pausing long enough only for The Horse to recover for another run.

They found an abandoned barn netted by clinging grapevine and thorns to spend the night in. The barn leaned to one side in an attitude of collapse, but the grapevine, Karigan thought, ought to hold it up for at least one more night.

Under cover and out of sight, she slept soundly, not even flinching when bats left their roosts above where she lay curled up in her bedroll. She didn't awaken when they returned from their hunt, or to the yips of coyotes ranging the countryside. The night world moved about her, but did not disturb her.

In the morning, sunlight thrust between boards and broken windows like bright spears. Motes of dust drifted upwards in the light as she slipped tack and packs on The Horse. Both messenger and messenger horse were better for their night of rest.

Karigan peered through the old barn windows before stepping outside. If it had occurred to her that the barn was the only place that offered concealment in the area, and she had been in a less exhausted state, she would have abandoned it as too obvious. What was done was done, and no harm had come of it. No one was in sight except crows which launched into flight as she led The Horse from the barn. She mounted, and the race went on.

That afternoon, a wood came into view. It wasn't the deep forest of the Green Cloak, but a young forest of slender birches, oaks, and maples. They had grown up in what had once been a farmer's field—a wall of fieldstones skirted the horse track and disappeared into the wood.

Karigan approached it with both relief and apprehension. The wood offered cover, but also offered concealment for foes, the opposite of her previous problem. A breeze rustled leaves which whispered secrets among themselves.

A figure in green appeared ahead, and she stiffened. He merged with the vegetation, and disappeared. F'ryan Coble-bay? When he appeared, dire things tended to happen. Karigan licked her dry, cracked lips.

The sun was high and bright, glistening on leaves, turning them into emerald jewels. The shade within the wood beckoned her out of the hot sun, would soothe the sunburn that had afflicted her since leaving North. She could think of no place less sinister than the wood. She took a deep breath and plunged in.

The shade cooled her down. It was like stepping into her father's wine cellar on the hottest of summer afternoons. A bee droned past her ear, and she inhaled the woody scents of decayed leaf litter and earth, much different than the evergreen scent of the northern forest she had left behind.

Leaves thrashed like the sound of a bear charging through the woods. Karigan grabbed the hilt of her sword and looked wildly about. When she saw the source of the disturbance, she laughed nervously. A red squirrel! A squirrel stirring up the leaf litter!

Her imagination was getting the better of her, but what was upsetting The Horse? He sidestepped, his ears flopping back and forth.

"What's wrong?" She had long since learned to trust his signals.

"Hello, Greenie."

Karigan twisted around. Sitting motionless on their horses were Immerez and the gray cloaked rider. She screamed inside.

Immerez uncoiled his whip. Karigan reined The Horse around to flee, but two mounted figures rode from the woods and blocked her path. Sarge and Thursgad! Where had they come from? Immerez leaned toward the gray-cloaked rider, the Shadow Man, listening as something was whispered to him. His one eye was anchored on Karigan, and his hands worked the whip as he listened. Karigan's hand went to her saber, but not soon enough.

"Drive her into the sunlight, boys!" Immerez shouted.

The soldiers charged her in a flurry of Mirwellian scarlet, their swords drawn. Their steeds rammed into The Horse, biting and pushing. Karigan fought to stay mounted as he half-reared and bucked, but the mere force of two against one was too much, and she found herself squinting in the sun. She reached for her brooch and wished for invisibility. The bright world became dull and heavy, and the Shadow Man faded from sight.

Immerez laughed. "I see the Greenie magic doesn't work so well in the bright light of day."

Karigan gasped as she looked down at herself and The Horse. They were too solid. And somehow Immerez and the Shadow Man had known this would happen. She dropped the invisibility—maintaining it would only exhaust her. The Shadow Man reappeared. What did it mean?

She veered The Horse around, but Immerez and his men crowded her. The Shadow Man stayed aloof, watching from the depths of his hood.

Bunchberry flower. Someone would come in need— Before she could even complete the thought, Immerez's thong snarled past her face and lashed around her chest and shoulders, gashing her left arm. She cried out. The leather thong tightened, and Immerez dug his spurs into the sides of his stallion. It leaped backward, and Karigan was hauled from her saddle. When she hit the ground, all the air whooshed from her lungs. She struggled dazedly against the binding thong, fighting waves of pain from the jarring impact of her fall. The whip held her fast.

"Get the message satchel, boys."

Sarge and Thursgad hurried to obey their captain's command, but The Horse wouldn't let them near. He kicked Thursgad's steed squarely in the chest. The unfortunate horse grunted and shied away. The Horse backed from Sarge as if to flee, then swerved around and lunged at him in a rear.

"Damn the beast!" Sarge pulled away unsuccessfully as the hooves of The Horse collided with the shoulder of his bay, leaving behind shiny streaks of blood.

"Hamstring him, or cut his throat," the captain said. "I don't care. Just get that message satchel."

"I'll help ya, Sarge." Thursgad kicked his horse, but it would only step backward. Sarge's horse now shied from The Horse who, with teeth bared, snorted aggressively.

"Proud cut, I'll warrant," Sarge grumbled.

Karigan shook her head to clear her thoughts—not an easy task with hooves flying just inches from her. The hilt of her sword was lodged beneath her hip. She wasn't disarmed yet. The Horse would occupy Sarge and Thursgad, but she would have to deal with Immerez and the Shadow Man by herself. The Horse lunged at Sarge again, and she was showered by clods of dirt and pebbles.

The Shadow Man made a sweeping gesture with his hand. It was a white hand, perfectly proportioned, not the skeletal hand she had somehow imagined. *Someone* living and breathing was concealed beneath that hood.

Immerez nodded in response to the gesture, and clucked his horse backward. Karigan grit her teeth as the whip tightened around her, strangled her, cut into her flesh. He dragged her several yards across rocks and tall grasses away from sharp horse hooves. He dismounted, and keeping the whip taut, stood above her. The sun glared behind him, and Karigan had to squint to see him.

"I don't know what kind of training you give your Greenie horses, but my men will have him down shortly. No doubt about it." His green eye flicked over at the action, then planted on Karigan again. "What do you know about a spy in House Mirwell?"

Karigan struggled to sit up, but he drove his boot heel into her shoulder and slammed her back into the ground. Her shoulder flashed with pain.

"Mirwellians," she gasped. "Nothing but cutthroats."

There was no reply for a moment. "I asked you a question."

Karigan craned her neck upward. "I don't even know what the message is about. I don't know anything about anything. You understand?" She was surprised by her own vehemence. Her voice did not sound high-pitched and frightened.

Immerez squatted down out of the glare, which shifted the shadows on his face. Sweat gleamed on his bald head. "I don't know how it is F'ryan Coblebay passed his mission to you, but he did. You do know the information."

"I do not."

Immerez peered over his shoulder, and to the Shadow Man he said, "I don't wish to play this game anymore." There was no response. Only Sarge's curses could be heard down the track. When Immerez gazed back at Karigan, his features were tight. "You could tell me about the spy now and spare yourself some trouble."

"Does your statue friend make you do all his work?"

Immerez grinned humorlessly. "He is no friend of mine."

"Then why? What's so important?" Karigan wriggled her hand pinned beneath her body, reaching for the hilt of her sword. No one was here to help her. No eagle, no Abram, no Berry sisters, no Eletian, no ghost. Curious that F'ryan Coblebay wasn't here to help, or at least to communicate. Perhaps his time walking the earth had expired.

Immerez seemed perplexed by Karigan's questions. "What do you mean *why*? I'll wager you're trying to throw us off the track."

Sand and grit abraded Karigan's hand as she burrowed it beneath her body. She fixed her gaze on Immerez, so not to give away her intent. "I'm not really a Green Rider. I don't care what's important to you, or what's important to King Zachary. I found the messenger dead and took his horse. I'm just trying to get home, nothing more. You can have the message if you want."

Immerez laughed and slapped his thigh. He looked over his shoulder at the Shadow Man. "Did you hear that? She says we can have the message if we want!" The laughter stopped cold and he gazed down at her. "If that is so, call off the horse."

Karigan shrugged as best she could in the confines of the whip. Her fingertips touched cold metal—the pommel! "He doesn't listen to me."

"I thought so. If you're no Green Rider, you certainly look like one."

Karigan had slipped on the green trousers that morning. "The clothes... they were in the messenger's pack." Her fingers worked down the hilt, slowly tugging the sword from the sheath. A drop of sweat glided down to the tip of her nose and hung there.

Immerez seized her by the jaw, and lifted her from the ground to look her in the eye. "No more lies," he hissed.

"Admit that you know of the Mirwellian involvement. Tell us about the spy."

He released her jaw, and she fell to the ground with a solid thud, her grip on the saber lost. "I know nothing about F'ryan Coblebay or what he did. *I'm not a Green Rider*. Mirwell is a province of idiots anyway!" It sounded childish, and as the fury grew on Immerez's face, she was sure he would kill her.

"I don't care how young you look, Greenie," he said calmly. There was no

explosion, but somehow this was worse. "You shall be bound to a tree and my whip will extract the information from you."

Alone. I'm alone.

The Horse was tiring, and even now Sarge reached for his reins.

Immerez towered over Karigan. "Stand up, Greenie."

Now. Now, *or I won't have another chance.*

She climbed to her feet, gripping the hilt of her sword as she did so. Immerez gasped in surprise, tightening the whip too late. The leather thong unraveled from her shoulders and she jumped to the attack.

She was too close for Immerez to draw his own sword, but he ducked as she swung the saber at him, and double fisted his hands into her stomach. She crouched over, holding her stomach and retching.

"Foolish. Very foolish." Immerez lashed his whip as slowly and deliberately as a cat would its tail. "Drop the sword."

Karigan's lungs ached for air. Blood thrummed through her ears. It was rhythmic, like the galloping of hooves.

"You won't drop the sword, then?" Immerez flung the whip at her. It coiled around her ankle, and he jerked her foot out from under her. She crashed back to the ground.

Karigan cried out. It was the same ankle the creature of *Kanmorhan Vane* had clenched in its claw. The sense of complete helplessness rushed back to her, and the memory of how she had overcome it to defeat the creature and its offspring. She chopped at the leather thong, but it was too thick to be severed completely through. Immerez threw back his head and laughed at her futile attempts. He loosened the whip, drew it away, and gathered it for another lash.

I killed the creature of Kanmorhan Vane, Karigan thought. But I had help... Yet she would not allow Immerez to use the whip again. The crescendo of hoofbeats... Heartbeats thundered in her ears. She sprang to her feet with a growl, and this time she didn't hack at the whip, but at the hand that held the whip.

She stopped, staring stupidly at the saber dripping blood, at Immerez groveling on the ground. His hand was several feet away just like in the vision she had through Professor Berry's telescope. The hoofbeats in her head drowned out his screams.

"Horse!" she cried, but he was already beside her, quivering with energy she did not understand. Sarge's and Thursgad's horses spooked at the air. Even the Shadow Man's mount pawed the ground, his neck foamy with sweat. Immerez's stallion had run away.

Mount. The voice pierced through the hoofbeats drumming in her ears. She obeyed, and the world reeled out of balance.

Thursgad and Sarge and their horses turned slowly, each movement prolonged and exaggerated, removed from real time. Everything blurred in Karigan's vision except herself and The Horse... and the Shadow Man.

The Shadow Man sat serenely on his stallion. A bow appeared in his hands where there had been none before. He removed two arrows from his quiver, each black-shafted with red fletching. He nocked one to the bow string.

Ride! the voice commanded.

Karigan dared not disobey. She squeezed The Horse's sides just as the first arrow was loosed. The Horse leaped into a gallop. Blue of sky, green and brown of wood, rushed by in streaks. The buildings of a village were a smear they left behind. Two arrows, she knew, sang behind her and would not stop till they found their mark.

Wind buffeted her, loosened the braid in her hair. The rhythm of The Horse's hooves pounded through her body, but for all she knew, they flew.

There were other pounding hooves, other riders abreast of her, filmy white and transparent. Trees and buildings did not hinder them, they traveled right through. They called to her with far off voices in what was like a battle cry: *Ride, Greenie, Ride! It's the Wild Ride!*

Cold arms slipped around her waist from behind. *Ride*, F'ryan Coblebay whispered. *It's the Wild Ride.*

The more the landscape grew indistinct, the more the riders clarified. Men and women in greatcoats or tunics striding alongside, some in light armor of war astride battle steeds, and some in uniforms of archaic vintage riding lean messenger horses. All traveled at the same unnatural speed as she and The Horse. All of them were Green Riders from times past, all of them dead. What stake did ghosts have in her survival?

Ride, Greenie, Ride!

Their chant spun the world faster, and still The Horse surged blindly ahead. Their

pale faces were young, few were old. Some Riders thrust their sabers above their heads, others shook their fists, their shouts echoed to her from someplace far away. A cold sweat blanketed her body as she charged along with the ghostly cavalry.

The arrows still followed behind with the same momentum, she knew. She could hear them whining through the air. How long could this Wild Ride last?

Ride, Greenie, Ride! It's the Wild Ride!

The chant kept time with the rhythm of pounding hooves, of her heartbeat, of the blood pumping through her ears.

They burn.

At first Karigan didn't know what F'ryan meant. Did the spirits burn?

The arrows burn.

Karigan glanced over her shoulder, disconcerted at looking through F'ryan's gauzy form. Indeed the arrows were aflame and falling behind. A shout of victory, like a rush of wind, arose from the spirit riders. They pulled their horses to a halt, The Horse slackening his gait without direction. Though all were stopped, the world still hastened by, as if they were being swept away on some spectral current.

"Why?" Karigan asked.

F'ryan Coblebay slipped off The Horse and backed away, melting into the others. *I cannot rest till you complete the mission.* His voice faded. *It was a good Ride.*

"Why?" Karigan demanded, the reins bunched in her fist. "Why did you intervene?"

A lone Rider broke away from the group, her long hair drifting in an unearthly breeze. Two arrows protruded from her chest. The Rider Karigan had seen dead in North. Joy.

If this did not go beyond earthly matters, we would not have intervened. There is much you might accomplish to thwart the plans of an old evil. May we Ride together again some day, Green Rider.

Joy turned her horse back among the other ghosts. The mass merged into itself, then lifted and dissipated like a fog carried off on a breeze to the heavens. Still, the rhythm of the Wild Ride pulsed in Karigan's ears.

RIDE'S END

The world slowed down, though colors still smeared like water on paint. A massive stone structure of towers and parapets and crenelated walls loomed ahead with colorful pennants streaming from its loftiest heights. An arched entryway flanked by rounded turrets gaped before her.

Behind her stood the guardhouses, the portcullis suspended between them, ready to cut off an invasion should an army attempt to swarm across the narrow drawbridge spanning the moat and assault the castle. A wall encircled the castle and its grounds. Somehow, the ghosts had carried her miles in just moments to the courtyard where she now stood before the castle of King Zachary.

The Horse's hooves crunched on gravel. She dismounted and, hands shaking, unbuckled the message satchel from the saddle. She left The Horse standing there, no worse from his strange run.

Time lagged again, and Karigan swayed as if the ground moved beneath her feet. The pennants, each representing the provinces, snapped into definition. Though their lines were no longer blurred, their motion was jerky and slow.

When her footing grew solid again, she proceeded to walk the distance across the courtyard to the castle entrance. Guards in black and silver stepped forward with halting movements to intercept her. They had not managed two steps by the time she was far beyond their reach.

As she walked beneath the arched entryway, more soldiers attempted unsuccessfully to stop her in jerk-and-stagger movements. They were too slow, she was too fast. Their voices were muffled, the words drawn out in a moronic drone.

She strode through a great corridor past guards and courtiers stalled in time. Most did not note her passage. Lamps lit along the walls flickered absurdly slow, casting a wash of strange tones of bronze and gold along the corridor. The corridor, she hoped, led to King Zachary's throne.

Coats of arms and weavings adorned the walls, and these remained static and clearly defined. She focused on these things rather than the unnatural, disorienting motions of the people around her.

Two doors appeared ahead of her, open. Some huge oak tree had been felled to create them. The firebrand was carved into one, and the crescent moon in the other. Two guards clad entirely in black were posted beside the doors. They were Weapons, but even they weren't immune to the time anomaly.

She swept past them and through the doors into a vast chamber. Sunlight lanced through tall and narrow windows at cross slants. Voices echoed off the vaulted

ceiling in a weird and long drawn out babble. Black-clad guards stood like pillars in shadowy recesses.

A tapestry of Zachary's family crest, a white Hillander terrier against a field of heather, occupied the space behind the throne. It was said that the brave little dogs had rooted groundmites out of their earthen burrows during the Long War.

Below the tapestry stood two men and a woman attending a man who sat in an ornate chair. A white terrier sat up from where it had been lying at the seated man's feet. Before it was on its feet, Karigan had crossed the cavernous room. The three people and the king were just beginning to look up at her.

Slam!

Like walking into a wall, like the ground being pulled out from beneath her feet, the force rocked through her body and she fell away piece by piece, like feathers from a burst pillow cascading in a soft flurry.

She lay in a field immersed in sunlight. Sunlight leaked through her closed eyes. Asters and goldenrod droned with bees lighting from one blossom to another. A swallow chirped somewhere above her. She felt warm and drowsy. The light, the light... Something cool and wet ran along her cheek...

Time and motion snicked into place, like the latching of a door. Karigan shook her head, willing the stinging drone of bees and shock of light to leave her. She sighed, closed her eyes, and settled down to continue her nap, but the cool, wet something now licked her hand. She cracked open an eye. A pair of brown eyes gazed back at her from beneath a clump of white fur. The terrier panted and looked at her with a grin.

Karigan widened her eyes. *Dog! Castle! Zachary!* She sat up too fast, and spiraled back down to the woolen runner in front of the king's dais. The buzz filled her head again, but it might have been the voices of people around her. This time when she looked up, four blades wielded by black-clad Weapons were pointed at her chest.

"This is no Green Rider I've ever seen before." A man's voice with a hard edge to it.

"Could it be another assassin?" the woman asked.

"Her coming here smells of magic," said a second man with a sniff.

Karigan had fallen on the message satchel. She rolled to her side to unwedge it, and the Weapons pressed the tips of their blades against her chest.

"Message." Karigan's mouth felt too full of tongue. "Message for the king."

"Let us see it," said the first man.

Karigan took the paper from the satchel and handed it to a Weapon who in turn passed it to someone she could not see. Indistinct murmurings echoed off the walls of the cavernous room, which seemed, rather, like whispers issuing from the fresco-painted figures on the ceiling. The age-cracked figures of kings, queens, knights, and the god, Aeryc, riding the sickle moon, and the goddess, Aeryon, haloed by the sun and peering from behind a cloud, all looked down on her. Among them, and at the center, was a great black horse whose arched neck and flanks rippled with motion.

"—spy," a queen seemed to say from above.

"This message is from F'ryan Coblebay, but this is—" said a king.

"—unimportant and irrelevant. It's the magic I'm—"

"Too young to be—"

"Should be confined and interrogated—"

"—unimportant."

Karigan drifted away again in search of the sunlit field, but she was not able to find it. The Weapons seized her roughly under her arms and hauled her to her feet. Someone took away the saber. She protested weakly, but no one heard.

"Lock her up until we decide."

"Not in a prison cell," said a gentler voice Karigan hadn't heard before. The Weapons blocked her view with their broad shoulders and she could not see who spoke. "Choose a guest room and guard it."

"But, Majesty," said the harsh voice, "you may be endangering yourself. This one uses magic like we've never seen before."

"And all the prison cells in the world would not hold her if she did anyway. A guest room. Does she look threatening to you in her present condition, Crowe?"

"Majesty, begging your pardon, but she may just want it to look that way."

"Of all the idiotic ideas I've ever heard, that is the worst," said a new voice from the direction of the entryway. It belonged to a woman accustomed to authority. The Weapons still blocked Karigan's view, but she heard the purposeful click of boots

on the flagstone floor as the woman approached. She passed by, and the clicking ceased. "Your Majesty."

"Captain, your intrusion speaks of—"

"Disrespect, Castellan Crowe? Is that what you wish to say?"

"I will not have this bickering," said the king. "Captain Mapstone, do you have anything you wish to say? Do you know this girl? She dresses as a Green Rider."

"I've never laid eyes on her before, but I think I can tell you who she is."

The woman stood on tiptoes and peered over the shoulders of the Weapons. Karigan received a fleeting impression of hazel eyes and reddish hair.

"I can also tell you that she is a Green Rider."

"No," Karigan whispered, but no one was listening.

"I can't say I understand, Captain," Crowe said.

"Your Majesty, have her taken to Rider barracks. She will do you no harm, and if I'm not mistaken, the message you hold in your hands is of great import."

"We have our doubts about that," the king said.

"Then what of this?"

The captain held aloft two black arrows. Karigan groaned and lurched to her side, and would have fallen if not for the support of the Weapons.

The two Weapons led her away from the throne, each stony-faced and silent. They passed through alternating shafts of dazzling sunlight and shadow as they walked to the far end of the throne room. Had Torne and Jendara once been this way? Stern and silent? Courtiers, servants, and soldiers who walked the corridors spared her a glance not at all.

They left the castle by a different entrance than she had come in, and passed through a courtyard, skirting the castle. The Weapons gripped her elbows, practically lifting her from the ground, as they escorted her past curious onlookers. They brought her to a whitewashed wooden building, the unmistakable odor of horse manure permeating from a not-too-distant source. The people here were all dressed in green and they were very curious. They stared at her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Rider barracks," the Weapon to her left said, and that was all.

They entered the building, floorboards creaking beneath their feet, and a hint of leather in the air. It was far more appealing than the stone castle. Abruptly they stopped and the Weapon to her right threw open a door. They shuffled her into a room sparsely furnished with a bed, table, washstand, stove, and chair. Sunlight poured through a window, warming the place.

"You will empty your pockets," said the Weapon who had been at her right. The other stepped out of the room and posted himself by the door.

"I will *what*?"

"Empty your pockets." The man lacked any hint of emotion.

Karigan tossed the message satchel on the table— somehow she had managed to hold onto it—and dug into her pockets. She produced the moonstone, some coppers and one silver, the bunchberry flower with its missing petal, the sprig of bayberry, and Joy's winged horse brooch. The Weapon gathered her things up into one large hand.

"The ring," he said.

"The— No. You can't have it." She covered it protectively.

The Weapon stepped forward. "The ring. Until your identity and purpose is ascertained, we will hold these things."

"No. Not the ring. All of these things, all except the brooch, were gifts. This ring was my mother's. I won't give it to you."

The Weapon took another step toward her, his face implacable.

Karigan stooped into a defensive crouch. "The gods help you if you take a step closer. I've about had it. All I've done is deliver a message to the king, yet all I get in thanks is trouble. Well I'll tell you, granite face, I've killed one of your kind, and if you take another step, I'll do my utmost to damage you."

That stopped him, though the threat didn't seriously concern him. He didn't even bother to draw his blade. "I doubt you could hurt any of us. If so, who was it?"

In a measured breath, she said, "His name was Torne."

The Weapon's brows knit together and his eyes flashed angrily. "Torne! A traitor of Saverill's ilk. A deserter. Keep your ring, then. These other objects will be

returned to you if it is found you are not lying." With that, he turned crisply on his heel and glided out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Karigan supported herself against the table, her knees ready to buckle. What possessed her to challenge a Weapon? When she had killed Torne, F'ryan was in control of her body. She staggered across the small room to the bed and collapsed. Straw poked through the mattress ticking, but it felt, for all the world, like a feather bed to her overtaxed body.

A noise awakened Karigan. Someone was in the room bending over her bed, and it was too dark to see who. She reached out into the gloom and grabbed a handful of hair. Her assailant squeaked.

Karigan tugged harder.

"Ow! Stop it!" a girl cried out. "I'd like to keep my hair if you don't mind."

Karigan shook her head. The room was dimly lit by an oil lamp at lowest glow. Orange flickered around the edges of the stove door, and the room, she noticed, was quite cozy. She had slept well into the night. Her "assailant" was a girl of about twelve years old, dressed in messenger green. Her hands were on her hips, and her feet were spread apart, and to Karigan, it was like facing one of her own strong-willed aunts. *You won't finish dinner, eh?* she remembered. Aunt Stace wouldn't let her eat dinner for the next two nights.

"Uh, sorry," Karigan said. She let a handful of brown hair drift to the floor.

The girls' stance relaxed. "I'll accept your apology. Most Riders are jumpy anyway."

The girl's name, Karigan found out, was Melry Exiter, and she had been in the midst of checking on Karigan's condition.

"The nitwits around here don't have the head to take care of anything." Melry cleaned and bandaged the whip wound Immerez had inflicted on Karigan's shoulder. "*Look in on her*, says the captain. Well, what a mess I did find. You look like Condor dragged you all the way from Selium. Are you sure you were in the saddle?"

"Condor?"

"Yeah, F'ryan's horse."

Karigan had grown so used to calling him The Horse that she had forgotten he might answer to another name. Condor fit, though. Condors were not the most

beautiful of birds, but they had the capacity for elegant flight. Karigan looked up at Melry's face and was surprised to see tears trickling down her cheeks. "What's wrong?"

"F'ryan's dead, isn't he? That's why you came on Condor, right?"

Karigan nodded. "Yes, he asked me to carry on his mission."

Melry wiped her nose with the back of her sleeve and sat in the chair. "They told me, but I couldn't believe it till I saw Condor. F'ryan's the closest thing I ever had to a brother. He played games with me, kept an eye on me, let me tag after him around the castle."

"I'm sorry," Karigan said. She knew it was inadequate, but it was what everyone had said when her mother died.

"Yeah. I knew it might happen sometime. I try not to get real close to the people 'round here 'cause they die. It hurts. Captain and F'ryan are the only ones I got close to."

They sat in silence for some time. "Aren't you a little young to be a Green Rider?" Karigan asked. Everyone seemed to think she was too young, and this girl was even younger.

Melry laughed, the tears miraculously drying. "I'm too young? You're too young! I was raised here."

"Here?" Karigan crooked a brow, disbelieving.

"Yeah, here. Captain found me in the stable. I was newborn, all wrapped in a blanket. Someone, my real mother, left me in the stable." Melry shrugged at the illogic of such an act. "They think my father was a Rider who got killed months before. He had a reputation with women... Captain took me in, named me after her grandmother, and she and the other Riders raised me. I'm not a proper Green Rider, I just help out at the stable, and sometimes I run messages for the Green Foot."

"The Green Foot?"

"Yeah. We run messages around the castle. Gives me a few coppers for fair days and Master Gruntler's Sugary. But I imagine I'll be a Green Rider when I get older."

What would it be like to know one's destiny? Karigan had always thought she would be a merchant like her father, but was now certain that she had never really known. "I'm sure you know what it's like to be a Green Rider."

Melry gave her a sideways look. "I'm sure you do, too."

"What?"

"Are you hungry? You're kinda pale."

"What do you mean I'd know what it's like to be a Green Rider?"

"You have a brooch, don't you? I can't see it proper because I'm not a Rider yet, but you have a brooch. That makes you a Green Rider."

"A brooch doesn't make me anything."

"Whatever you say. You want some food? After that, it's off to the baths for you."

Karigan perked up. "Bath?"

Melry chuckled and slipped out of the room. Shortly she returned, bearing a platter of steaming meat and potatoes, cheese, and bread. In her other hand she carried a mug of fresh milk. She watched in amazement as Karigan all but licked the platter.

"Your color's coming back," she said.

Karigan swallowed the last of the milk and wiped the milk mustache off with her sleeve. "Today drained me."

Melry leaned forward with an expression of deadly seriousness that only near-teenagers can achieve. "There have been rumors flying around all day about you, like you did something today that no one's done in a million years. Or was it a thousand?" Melry screwed up her face. "I'm not real good with numbers. Frustrates the captain a lot. Is it true?"

"I've no idea," Karigan said. "But I did have a strange day."

"What happened?"

How could she tell this girl that she had ridden with the ghost of her friend, F'ryan Coblebay, not to mention ghosts who were among the first to be Green Riders? "I—I don't feel up to discussing it."

Melry's face crumbled in disappointment. "Well, they said you traveled fast, whatever that means. Condor is fast, but not the fastest. That would be Ereal's Crane. Anyway, it's off to the baths for you."

Karigan followed Melry out of the room. A Weapon whom she hadn't seen before fell in step behind them. Melry rolled her eyes. The few Riders they encountered in the corridor goggled at Karigan as if she were some unknown creature from another land, but said nothing. One young man, with sandy hair, actually smiled at her and said, "Welcome, Rider."

"That was Alton," Melry said after he passed by. "He's always full of himself—aristocratic blood, y'know, but not a bad sort."

A steaming hip bath awaited Karigan in the bathing room. Several other baths were partitioned off by curtains, but the room was empty of other people. She stepped toward the bath, then hesitated, glancing at the Weapon.

Melry followed her eyes, and put her hands on her hips. "You mind watching things from outside, Fastion? Give Karigan a little privacy, will you? If you want to see a naked woman, go downtown."

Karigan's eyes widened that Melry would speak to a Weapon so, but Fastion's expression did not alter as he stepped outside of the room.

"I haven't decided whether or not Weapons are a natural phenomenon," Melry said, pronouncing the last word with special care. "The captain says that a lot."

Karigan smiled, something her facial muscles were no longer used to. "Thanks, Melry."

"Only the captain calls me Melry. You can call me Mel, if you like." She left the bathing chamber, whistling.

Karigan sank into the tub, her battered and bruised body easing in the heat. She nodded off, and woke up with a snort to discover she had dozed long enough for the water to become tepid. With a shiver, she stepped out of the bath, toweled herself dry and dressed. Tentatively she opened the door and found Fastion waiting patiently for her outside.

"I'm done."

He nodded, and they headed down the corridor. They arrived at the room simultaneously with Mel who could hardly see over an armload of green clothes.

"Thought you might need a change of clothes," she said, "so I stopped at the quartermaster's. He wasn't happy about being woke up so late, nor about giving up good uniforms."

Fastion took up his post outside, and Melry dumped the load on Karigan's bed.

"Hope it fits, and I hope you don't mind green."

Karigan sighed, lamenting her wardrobe left in Selium so long ago. "I'm getting used to it." She held a familiar linen shirt to her shoulders for size. "I think this will work. I borrowed some things from the waystation near North."

Mel's eyes grew large. "You were there? That's wild territory."

Karigan nodded. "I read a notice that the quartermaster was to be informed when things are taken."

Mel listened attentively while Karigan listed the uniform pieces she had removed from the waystation. When Karigan finished, Mel yawned. "I'll take care of it in the morning. Quartermaster'll skin me if I wake him up again. I'm about done in myself, anyway. Have to get up early to feed the horses."

Karigan's eyes fell on the message satchel still lying on her table. "One more thing," she said. "F'ryan Coblebay wrote a letter to a Lady Estora. Would you mind delivering it to her?"

Mel's eyes nearly bugged out of her head. "Oh, no! Estora—she doesn't know about F'ryan yet."

"Then best she hears it from you and not a total stranger like me." Karigan took the letter from the satchel and passed it to Mel, feeling a great deal of self-satisfaction: she had achieved her mission, had delivered the king his message, and even the love letter. And she was still alive.

"I'll take it." Tears threatened to spill down Mel's cheeks again. "You're right. Best she hears it from me."

Mel left, and Karigan sagged in exhaustion to the bed. She kicked off her boots and wrapped a blanket around herself, and fell asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow.

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