

# The Roundrell

a fable of history  
in three parts

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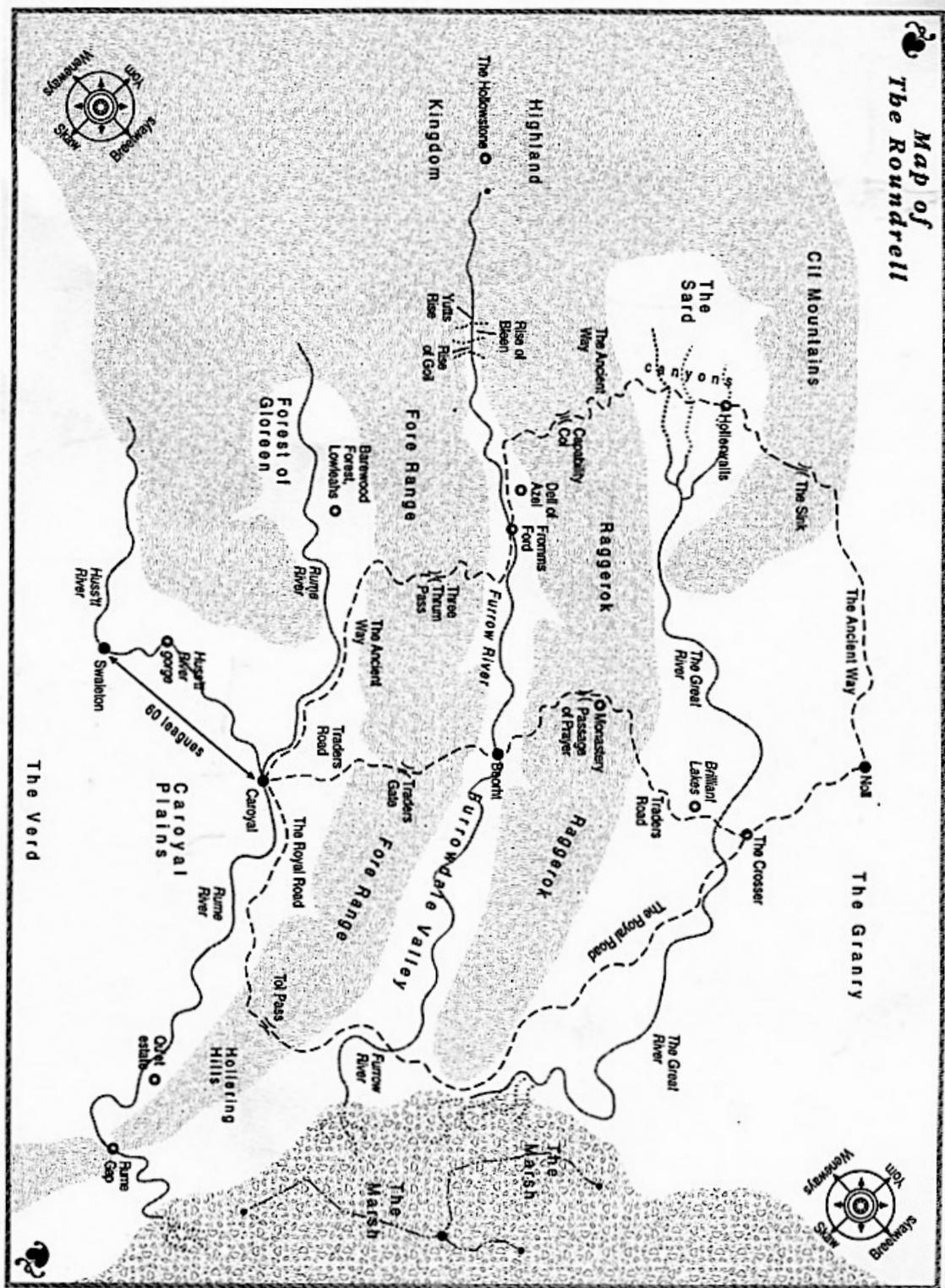
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# Map of The Roundrell





# Book I

*A historian likes to digress, an unfortunate, but ingrained habit. To coin a useful metaphor, the back alleyways behind the grand palaces of history can reveal instructive pieces of rubbish that its owners would prefer not to see under any sort of light.*

*The other besetting sin of a historian is to evaluate. I admit it, is it a crime? Random events need to be threaded together, and sometimes unpicked, for that is sometimes also the thankless task of an historian, to make what appeared sensible, and coherent, meaningless. Not that the events I shall tell in this document are random, on the contrary I will be attempting to make an entire whole, susceptible to analysis and satisfaction – for today I'm in a weaving type of mood.*

*Onto business. The reader must excuse the author for the first five chapters, which are a necessary indulgence to set the scene, skip them at your peril. Dull perhaps, though I endeavoured to liven them up, for these times were lively, but the historical information is difficult to come to hand and much supposition has been required to fill gaps.*

*It will be useful to refer to these chapters from time to time as you read the chronology ahead, but if you must needs rush harum skarum onto to the bowels of the matter then you may as well avoid these chapters. The first chapters should be read with insight, if at all, for I did not intend to write for dull readers and if they are of the temperament to pass over the setting of the table it is unlikely they will enjoy the meal, or at the least suffer from an inconvenient form of digestion, called choking.*

## Chapter 1

# The Powerful Nature of Things

*We recount the ascent of Weal (sometimes called the Worthy) and his son, and his grandson, Swivven (often called the Strong), as the horse-warriors displaced the Past Peoples. Swivvens death precipitates a cruel time in history called The Dark Period, which engulfed the kingdom in the usual aftermath of a bitter war – ignorance, suspicion, fear.*

*The First Kingdom, 1-75 King Weal 1, Weal 2, Swivven*

*The War of Succession, 76-84*

*The Dark Period, 85-116 University of Swaleton revived*

*War of the Lords, 144-147*

It was a time when usurpers were themselves usurped, a time then (as now) that people had wilfully not learnt the lessons of history. A time of greatness, and also of meanness of spirit. A time of lush debauchery and rivalry for the rich, and sad debasement and humiliation for the poor. Stars moved through the heavens and men followed the pattern of seasons in the self-same anguish of hope that we may still feel pertinent today. That there is some point to this life? That our worth is not an accident, and we in each of us feel the unique pulse of intelligence that gives us ample reason to believe — in what exactly?

It was a time then, just as our time.

When King Weal the Second was pricked by the point of his sons sword, and asked, politely, the prison he would prefer, the king replied ‘a nunnery!’, little thinking that in an untypical flash of humour, his son Swivven would oblige him.

So the king spent his last twenty years in a convent on the pass called the Passage of Prayer, attending to his vegetable garden and to the occasional nun that strayed too close to his still vigorous body. Indeed, the story is later told, that the king was so virulent in the latter pursuit that on the second embarrassing pregnancy the Mother Superior summoned the king to her room, and made the mistake of being alone with the old man, who undaunted by her rank (or age), proceeded to mate with her.

Swivven the Strong had forcibly taken over an extensive kingdom from his father and grandfather. The first king had arrived to the Furrowdale Valley as a child in the baggage of a small migrant band of warrior horsemen. They had come from the skaw, from the Verd, forced along the land corridor by the swampy line of the great marsh to the breeways and hemmed in by the Hollering Hills weneways. Since their horses were neither suited to swamp nor hill, they continued, pausing only at the Rume Gap, but seeing those stupendous walls and deep currents, they moved on till they entered the thin, elongated valley of the Furrowdale Valley. Their appearance was unhealthy, with tattered clothes and sickly horses, their womenfolk dumb and tired, and the strange bald cropped heads of the male warriors. Perhaps they were fleeing persecution, or escaping the collapse of a great empire? Perhaps they were nomads, tired of wandering the empty vastness of the Verd, indeed some said they had started from the edge of the world itself, where there was nothing.

With the horse-warriors came their Gods, the bloody war songs of Strom, the dark poems of Wyrð, the lamentations of Wene, and the incantations, prayers and spells that were gathered under the one name The Articles of Faith. These were written by the legendary author 'Doao', a name that originated from one of the early Songs of Wyrð which held the sentence 'dar omu asam oht', or literally, 'the man behind the words'. The horse-warriors could not read, so a small caste of priests interpreted these texts for them — the Righteous. They gained a sinister reputation, for their secretiveness, their exclusion of others and their insistence on an absolute right alone to interpret The Articles. They believed in fate, and seemed to have access to the powerful nature of things that was denied other men.

The Furrowdale Valley suited the horse-warriors tastes, and the child grew into a strong leader, and forged the disparate warriors into a cohesive force, cementing his authority by founding a capital, Beorht, on the ruined site of an older city. The horse-warriors overpowered the various peoples that occupied the land and transformed them into a convenient subject race. These harmless dwellers were known collectively as the Past People, and they existed as mostly farmers on the lowlands, but there were also tribes in the mountains and in the forests, and it was said, though no horse warrior ever saw one, the legendary inhabitants of the mire, the mythical Marshmen.

The Past Peoples were scraped off their land, their customs altered, their rituals mocked, and their gods debunked by the apparent ease with which the horse warriors had settled on them. They became virtual slaves, and two brief rebellions were brutally crushed and several villages scoured to the smoking earth, the men killed, the women bedded. In little less than a generation the horse-warriors had become lords of the land, with their own estates, and had so effectively eliminated an entire culture that it was hard to remember it had existed at all. Only in the nooks and crannies of their land, up in the mountains, or in the deep forests, did the silent tribes of the Past Peoples manage to escape the horse-warriors well-managed wrath — and remain hiding still.

'A story of brutality' remarked Thomas au Morad loftily 'but one so familiar and consistent with human ambition that it is hard to feel compassion for the displaced peoples, and their oppressors. Men after all, are such and such, cruel, indifferent,

vain, could we expect better? Or are we better ourselves?’

Ironically, though destroying much of the Past Peoples culture, the horse-warriors adapted some of it for themselves. The notion of the roundrell, that encompassing pattern of change that men are part of but do not acknowledge, and resist, rather than yield, crept into the warriors great god Strom. Strom was thunder, just rage, dispassionate energy, a male god symbolised with the sword gripped by bloody hands. Such a deity was uncomfortable in the agrarian Furrowdale Valley, and the submissive qualities of the roundrell took secret possession of Strom. He retained his bloodied sword, thick armour, studded shield, and his voice of thunder but it was moved from the battlefields to the high mountains, where his beard was crusted in ice and snow and wild winds shook his locks. He became the weather god. Stuess, his wife, attended to the rainbows, flowers and full ears of wheat.

None of this was quickly done, but fifty years after the Past People had been conquered and driven out of their identity, something of their spirit crept back and conquered the conquerers god.

## II

After founding Beorht, Weal the Worthy (as the child now grandly styled himself) went on to dominate the entire Furrowdale Valley, pushing aside the Past People and subduing them with an even-handed policy of force and bribes. King Weal II usurped his father, but continued his fathers work, by extending the dynasty onto the Granry Plains, settling members of his family on lucrative tracts of land, founding the local capital Noll, and establishing trade routes across the mountains, guarded by a line of imperial forts. These were prosperous times indeed.

The horse-warriors had brought better seeds with them, tougher strains of wheat and hardier horses to plough the fields. They also brought the metals of their warfare, which, stronger than the traditional metals, were quickly turned into agricultural implements. They also brought an energy, a bloody energy no doubt, but one which had its own perverse kind of stability, so that in time the land was calmed. When King Weal II was usurped by his son Swivven, this stability remained unimpaired.

Swivven had neither his fathers rapaciousness or humour. In the last few years of his life it was said that he never smiled, an unnecessary austerity for such a triumphant king. He was a quick, precise man, somewhat of a dwarf (which may have affected his humour, and certainly encouraged the inevitable jokes, though not to his face of course) and his father had time to lament the precision by which his son overthrew him, and the cold matter of fact way Swivven disposed of his rivals. Swivven consolidated his military reputation by his brilliant capture of Caroyal in the gloom of Wast Time.

Caroyal had been taken over by a group of horse-warriors who had not liked Weal the Worthy's rule, and had crossed Tol Pass and stricken the Rume Plains with

their vigorous activities. The Past Peoples were quickly overcome, driven out, and Caroyal prospered. Within twenty years it was a city the equal of Beorht, a tempting prize. But being informed by his generals that a Mid-Wast crossing of the Fore Range was unthinkable, Swivven took their advice literally and decided to go around the mountains. This entailed a trek down the Furrowdale Valley and travelling beside the great marsh. It meant struggling with three thousand men on a bad road with poor fodder, blasted by bitter skaw winds and suffocated by the thick damp marsh fog. And then there was the Rume Gap. Few had ever been through it, let alone try to take an army up its stupendous gorge. Swivven lost three hundred men before the Gap, and four hundred in it, plus half his horses. The bickering of his generals only added to the nagging hunger, cold and death of the expedition, but he held on, installing confidence in himself by executing the generals that disagreed with him. Finally, through the Rume Gap, Swivven left half of his men to wait over at Lake Dia, and force-marched the thousand or so hungry and depleted army to the gates of the city of Caroyal.

Surprise was all.

This tired army would have been no resistance to a stiff opposition, but the city elders startled from their dinner (one member choking on it and unable to join the hasty deputation) hurried through the open gates and met the king with obeisances and gifts. Only later, did one elder remark, when the full weakness of Swivvens position became clear to him, that they could have closed their gates and continued with their claret. He paid for this remark with his life, but the expression ‘closed doors and claret’ was subsequently always used to refer to a position of strength.

The Rume March became legendary and, as with all good stories, gained in the telling, Swivvens force swelled from three to ten and then thirty thousand, and throughout the Dark Period the march was regarded as a triumph of energy and perseverance of the sort exemplified by the First Kingdom. Mothers hushed their children with threats of Swivven the Strong, and fathers compared their sons to the great king. In this way the past, particularly of the First Kingdom, became golden, suffused with glory and honour.

‘The bodies were not remembered, only the deeds’ as Morad remarked.

### III

Swivven experienced few other challenges during his reign. His hard early actions had installed a period of ruthless peace, and only the horse-warrior priests, the Righteous, dared to question Swivvens authority, quoting their own texts as legitimisation and suggesting that they should exercise final power. They might have scared a lesser man, but Swivven damned them as ‘diseased by dogma’ and rounded them up, and exiled all of them and their families to the dry waterless plain of the Sard. Some of the Righteous recanted, and were sent as monks to the convent on the Passage of Prayer, to serve out King Weals dying days, and nurture what ambition they

could in that cold, aloof, retreat.

Morad commented, in his fussy all-knowing way ‘how could Swivven rid himself of the Righteous vanities when he was raised by them?’

Swivven the Strong finally found middle age settling him down, and he produced a son. He was called Locii (‘the lucky one’) an unfortunate name, and was doomed never to have a brother. Though Swivven was energetic and the queen obliging, they only managed to produce a succession of daughters. No less than eight, of which four died as infants. So strange was this phenomenon that the court began rumouring it as the curse of the king. Swivven would have preferred another son, but recalling his own quick dispatch of his brothers, reasoned that it was not worth grieving for a son who would be unlikely to survive his brothers coronation. Indeed, as he married off his daughters to the various high Ducs on the estates, and thus securing their loyalty, he supposed his ‘run’ of daughters was mere a matter of good fortune than anything else. His indifference to the thin thread of heirship that hung over his son was to have catastrophic consequences — as he was to discover when it snapped.

It seemed nothing less than the play of fate. Locii, a young, physically active and gracious lad, could not be denied his pleasure of the hunt and horse. And to amuse himself he collected a group of high-born young men as his companions on the chase. In the year 75 one of young men, a nephew of the Duc du Matan, challenged Locii to a straight horse race through a flat section of farmland. An illogical challenge, for Locii was riding the fleetest sprint stallion in the Kumin–Jael and the challenger could have no hope of success, unless, unless, as the broken king suspected, the nephew knew that Locii's horse was no jumper and deliberately steered the race to a fence that straddled the paddock. The horse shied, Locii was brought abruptly to the ground, his spine broken. He gargled some incoherent words for a moment, then died. The young men took his body home. It was done.

Only a season later the king too died, heartbroken it was said, leaving no male succession. So in this fashion, the First Kingdom collapsed.

#### IV

The calendar of later times was based on the origins of the First Kingdom. So ‘1’ was the first year of the First Kingdom and every year after was organised on that simple relationship. As some later scholars have noted, this acted as a curious form of censorship, neatly eliminating the history of the Past People. For our purposes we can observe that the First Kingdom survived exactly 75 years, through the combined reign of the kings of the Weal dynasty, if such a short period can be so dignified. The time immediately and long after the First Kingdom, became generally known as the Dark Period.

It was a desperate time.

Swivven the Strong's death without a heir, precipitated a bitter fratricidal dispute

between the four Ducs who had married the kings daughters, the Ducs of Proven, Qu'et, Matan, and Glando became embroiled in a sharp battle for the succession. Central authority disintegrated as peasants were formed into armies and sent into furious clashes with other peasants, each with bright coloured tunics to distinguish to whom their allegiance was given. Rapidly the war spread over the entire kingdom, as other Ducs found it politic to join sides. The land began to stink, with unburied corpses, fouled creeks, and burning crops and houses, and the sense of what people were fighting for became lost in the slaughter of brother and kin. No one was exempted from this harvest of folly. The whole kingdom was sucked into a madness that could not be quenched as long as there were men to kill and be killed, as the great passing armies of the Ducs followed their ambitions across the land.

Only ten years past the death of Swivven the Strong, by the year 85, the population of the kingdom was depleted by half, and then half again. Starvation, war, pestilence and simple exhaustion had emptied the land. The wars did not so much stop, as peter out, and a kind of unnatural stillness fell on the kingdom and remained for nearly fifty years. The economy of the kingdom was shattered, and after so many wasted harvests, it was barely possible for villages to feed themselves, in fact, often, they could not. People withdrew into themselves. Villages saw no further than their neighbour. Cities rebuilt their walls, and kept their populace firmly behind them, and the great Ducs (those that remained) stayed within the boundaries of their shrunken properties. Trade was entirely local, and knowledge of other places became rare. Strangers were nearly always treated suspiciously, and only a few people regularly travelled across the land, gleemen, the occasional tinker and the lone wayfarer. The single biggest threat a community could hold over its citizens was expulsion. There was literally nowhere to go.

Some places survived the Dark Period better than others. Noll, the city on the Granry Plain, founded by Weal II, was relatively prosperous, owning land up to 20 leagues beyond its protecting walls, and its market place jingled with barter and coin. This happier fortune was not due to any especial qualities of its leaders, but rather that as the most yorn city of the First Kingdom, it dodged a good deal of the troubles that enveloped and destroyed its neighbours. At the other extreme of the kingdom was Swaleton.

This old city, with its university founded by Swivven, had more or less survived, but had turned inward in itself, shuttering out the rest of the world. By the middle of the Dark Period, half of its population had never been further than five leagues from the city, and were not tempted to do so. Beyond lay petty villages, and beyond that the wastelands of the Verd, turning into empty wilderness. Brigands were supposed to infest the Verd, and monsters, and if that was not enough, it was well rumoured that somewhere out there was the edge of the world, where, Morad remarked sagely 'you would certainly fall off the known map, if you were not careful'. By the year 86 the university of Swaleton was now barely more than an old nameplate on a door that was kept permanently locked, and the collective knowledge was reduced to a rare collection of books, and the wisdom of the old prefectors who once taught there.

It was a thin, tenuous candle of knowledge, and the angry winds blowing out from the Dark Period, threatened to snuff it out.

## Chapter 2

# 'Tuppence for a Countryman!'

*A divergence, the first of many, to study the genealogical line of the Qu'et family and what education was considered necessary for a young man at the end of the Dark Period. A remarkable and notorious figure arrives in Caroyal, since being evil and remarkable are not necessarily contradictory matters. We also give a mention of that influential historian, Thomas au Morad, whose great cultural history it has been my enjoyment (and employment) to study. Even if Morads ancestry is unreliable, there is a great deal of charm in him I think, but I am biased of course.*

The Qu'ets were an ancient family and it is stated by Morad that their odd name simply meant 'always were' in the old texts of the Past Peoples, which had a verse line 'the ways of the Qu'et are once past and prophetic'. In any case the word was pronounced as 'quet' and little notice was taken of the apostrophe. They lived in a tract of land between Lake Dia, itself fed by the great Rume River, and the Hollering Hills, and it was often said about that du Qu'et estate had two great riches. One, the great green jewel called the Charmstone, and the even greater yearly gift of silt from the Rume River, that inflamed their land with fertility.

The Qu'ets were involved in the Wars of Succession because of the attractive, and Strom-give-a-damn attitude of one noble son, who taking upon himself the idea to get a fine wife, heard that Swivven had numerous superfluous daughters, and commenced on a ride to gain one. His father tried to stop the lad but he fled anyway, and took the route over Tol Pass into the Furrowdale Valley. Once there, he boldly rode into Beorht and announced himself to Swivven the Strong as a man in search of a wife, and he heard the king had some spare daughters?

Swivven admired his cheek, and knowing something of the Qu'et family let him take his choice. The son chose, they were married and took on a triumphal procession back over Tol to where his father fumed in despair over his sons actions 'we will be cursed for this connection' he swore, but after a while became reconciled.

The truth of his words came to effect when the other Ducs, also all married off to Swivvens daughters, commenced war on each other.

The Qu'ets escaped a good deal of the warfare, stickily shrewdly to defence, and rescued in part by their isolation from the Furrowdale Valley. After the turmoil of civil war they ended up in the unusual position of having the only sole remaining male heir to Swivvens throne. All of Swivvens original daughters were destroyed by the conflict, except the one that married the Qu'et. So now the Qu'ets were empowered with the only pure line of succession to the throne of the now defunct First Kingdom, which worried the old Duc for many long seasons, but however it was to prove neither an advantage nor hindrance to them for half a century.

The Dark Period was uneventful for the Qu'ets.

For twenty-five years they bore children, mourned their dead, kept up the local customs and maintained the traditional way of life that would seemingly never end, and some thought had always been. For twenty-five years the seasons passed, good and bad, fulsome and rotten, and sometimes there was hunger in the Qu'et family during the Dark Period. For twenty-five years the Qu'ets pre-occupied themselves with just existing, and through generations their horizons shrunk to the point where the family was only dimly aware of events, even along the Rume River. The Granry seemed utterly remote, and its existence seriously doubted. The Qu'ets, like all folk on the land, maintained their estate and borders as if they were little kingdoms on their own, and so they were. Central authority had collapsed, and beyond the immediate estate boundaries was merely brigandage, hunger and death. For twenty-five years, they were content to be left alone, and would have been content to keep the world at a decent arms length for ever, if it had not been for the third Duc du Qu'et, who despite opposition from all the rest of the family, took it into his head to send his son to school.

His wife almost fainted when she heard the dire news!

Such a proposition would have seemed ludicrous even five years before. There were no schools! And a young mans education did not need to stray far from his family and his farm. He only needed to master enough knowledge so as to be able to manage the estate, whenever it should pass to him. Any further knowledge would be superfluous to requirements and probably damage his young head. But the lord had sensed a quickening in the pattern of life around him. Wayfarers were now not so unusual these days at the Qu'et property, and when he questioned them, sharply and with intent eyes, he learnt of new things, of markets increasing, of old waste land being brought to yield, and of 'new' stone houses being constructed in Caroyal. It was as if hope were slipping through the landscape.

In 119, impatient to learn more of the new world that was sluggishly stirring, he set out with ten armoured soldiers and fifteen servants for Caroyal and Swaleton, the first Duc to leave the property in almost forty years. When he returned, he summoned his nineteen year old eldest son and announced that he was sending him to university, to Swaleton. The sons stunned mother protested all sorts of dangers, brigands, five-headed monsters, bad influences, evil eyes and even rheumatism in order to rescind the fatal order, but nothing altered the old Ducs mind. So in the year

120 the son swept out of the castle with a bevy of servants and guards behind — he thought it was a huge lark.

The school of Swaleton had been revived by a group of city elders in 116, and started to style itself, grandly, a university. The old prefectors were dusted off and set to teach what they could, from what they managed to remember, and from what books had survived. Their fees came from the elders, obviously, since they could hardly have come from the students: there were only four. By 120 the roll had increased to 15, and the son of the Duc du Qu'et was one of those few who received an adequate if dated education. The prefectors taught as if the last forty years had not occurred.

The real education took place simply in being there. Listening to other opinions, hearing other views, and learning that the Qu'et property was not the kingdoms centre. One prefector had never even heard of the Duc du Qu'et until his son materialised for instruction. This was heady stuff, and when three years later the son returned to mourn his fathers death and inherit the property, it was as a young and worldly-wise adult. Though he never told his mother that the land was considered curved, that really was too shocking.

The Duc had two brothers. Talmon died in his eleventh year of a fever, whilst Ogen, the youngest, on attaining his manhood was persuaded into adventure. He was effectively disenfranchised from the estate and could do nothing worse than to seek out his fortune elsewhere. The Duc however, watched with some misgiving his young brothers departure. Twenty years later they were to be in the same building, but were never to meet, but there, there, the story is running away again.

The Duc married and produced two daughters and a son. The first daughter was wed to a small-propertied lord on his yorn boundary, and the second to another further up the Rume River. Both daughters were given away on their sixteenth birthday, the question of love never entering the matches. It should not be thought that the Duc was being especially cynical in disposing of his offspring in such a manner, it was usual, and would have looked foolish to do otherwise. They were politic exchanges of 'property' aimed at securing the friendship necessary for survival. The son, Tiven, was already spoken for to a high-born family of merchants in Caroyal and in this the Duc was only moving with the times. The merchants were wealthy and important figures in that city, and the Duc foresaw a time when their influence would be influence everywhere.

The surprise birth of his last child in year 137, a daughter, allowed the Duc the luxury of foolishness. This child he decided he would keep by him, and she would be allowed to marry for love, not dispensation. He called her Juud, which meant 'in the company of' or 'close to' in the Past Peoples tongue. The mother had died shortly after Juuds birth and with his first two children off his hands, and his son capably managing the estate, the Duc felt free to lavish his attention on his two loves, Juud, and his collection of rare and ancient books. Just occasionally he glanced towards Caroyal, and it was a pity he did not look there more carefully, or more often, for he would have found much that would made him uneasy.

## II

In the Croppen season of the year 132 a young man of seventeen looked upon the broad city walls of Caroyal with awe, and once through the breeways gateway he was immersed in the racket and bustle of shop-sellers and vendors, screaming the bargains of their stalls above the voices of their competitors. Carts rudely squeezed his horse to the side of the narrow road and impudent street kids pulled at his stirrups and asked for money. In vain did he try to pull away, as they jogged behind shouting and nudging each other at this out of town oddity. The confusion of the place! Even on its great yearly Harvess Feast, Beorht never matched the uproar in these lanes. Wooden and stone buildings two (sometimes three!) stories high, leaned over the streets, with a glimpse of a brocaded curtain at a window, or a maids head watching the bustle below in an idle moment from her employers work. Occasionally he saw one of the four tall keeps that stood at each corner of the city, linking the walls in a circular bastion that kept a benevolent eye on the squabble of people and buildings below. He saw gold coins in the hands of shoppers, a profusion of costly cloths on their backs and a fat healthy roundness to their faces. Even the urchins looked plump and boisterous.

‘What’s your name?’

‘What’s your’s countryman?’ and the other kids reeled in delight at the sharp retort.

The young man tried again.

‘I’ll give you this penny if you lead me to the house of Yussaf’.

‘Yussafs? They’ve no time for countrymen like you with measly pennies!’

‘Alright, twopence’ said the man desperately.

The urchin agreed and led the young man on a merry route across and around the city twice before he realised he was being made a fool of and knocked the kid down with the stock of his whip. The boy sprang up and with the others danced around the young man screaming ‘tuppence for a countryman! tuppence for a countryman!’ before running off.

A pert maid took an interest in him and showed him to the back door of the merchant Yussafs house explaining ‘they’d never let you into the front with those trousers’.

The door was opened by a sharp-eyed footman who glanced at the young man up and down, taking in the worn leather breeches and dusty tunic, and kept him waiting on the step whilst he fetched the head servant. This gentlemen came hurrying out and at last gave the young man the respect he felt he deserved.

‘Lutens Wenner? Come in, come in sir, but where are your servants?’

Wenner lied on the spot.

‘We were overtaken by brigands and they were killed. I had to fight my way free.’

In this impromptu tale-telling Wenner spared no thought for the far more accurate story of his solo journey with a wayfarer over the mountain range, which would have made a courageous tale if he had the wish to tell it. But the young Lutens Wenner was showing some of the qualities of the older man, secrecy, a clear memory for deceit, quickness of thought and a quality of command that bid the servant (and many others to follow) to enquire no further.

His dusty, inauspicious arrival in Caroyal was brushed over in the next few days. It would not do for a bridegroom of a daughter of Yussafs to be reminded of it and Yussaf was unimpressed by his future son-in-laws appearance and took pains to improve it. Wenner was fed, dressed and instructed in the manners of a proper gentleman of town. He was given a horse instead of a nag, gold in place of copper and orders to make himself agreeable to others of the merchant class to which he was sent on a continuous circle of social engagements. And the young Lutens acquitted himself passably well in a task that would have seemed deadly to any ordinary spirited lad of seventeen. He was a fresh face in the familiar round, and had a certain countrified charm which suited the dowagers and considerable aunts with whom Yussaf was abundantly related to.

The younger daughters thought him dull and slow, and called him ‘Loopy Lutens’ behind his back, but it is doubtful if that ever bothered Wenner. He knew who it was wise to cultivate and who he could safely ignore. His position was not secure since he had to wait almost a year for his bride to be of age to marry (she was still only fourteen), and his prompt arrival had embarrassed the Yussaf household, who, after all, were only marrying off the lad as a favour to his mother.

‘Karee doesn’t mind making a fool of us when she wants’, ‘Karee should be told what we think’, ‘a jumped-up Duchess from Beorht! Where did she steal that title from I should like to know?’, or even suggesting they send the boy home as a reproof to his mother.

Yussaf waved the complaints aside. He’d taken a liking to the lad. He was obedient, more than could be said of his eldest son, who persisted in leading a feckless, braggarts life, and if Wenners early arrival caused some awkwardness this would pass as the time for the marriage moved closer. The wedding took place in the fine stone-worked church that Yussaf had largely funded himself. Most of society attended and it was a splendid occasion to mark Wenners ascendancy into the aristocracy of the city. Only one matter needed to be attended to, that of his career.

Shortly after the wedding the leading merchants in the city gathered to elect a replacement Governor for one who had just died. The appointment was an important and expensive one, so naturally only the wealthiest of the merchants could consider himself available. Yussaf was elected and made as his secretary young Wenner, an appointment that suited both. Yussaf, because his son-in-law shouldered most of the tedious administration of the position, and Wenner because he was to get to know every detail of the cities inner workings, and a great deal about its inhabitants. Their weaknesses, strengths, follies and financial positions all became lodged in the silent, cumulative mind of the youthful secretary, information that had its use and its price. It is probable that from about this time people began to fear Lutens Wenner.

Perhaps it was his mother who forced upon him the skills of winning and con-

trolling people. She married a weak man and dominated him for life, but had the misfortune to be born in a place where the possibilities for power were restricted. The Furrowdale Valley had never recovered from the War of Succession, and had fallen, like the rest of the kingdom into a dark sloth of ignorance and superstition. There was no trade to speak of, and the constant demands of brigands had kept the city poor. She concentrated her ambition in her sons. Driac Slorty, the oldest, she manipulated into the household of the leading family in Beorht, from where she hoped he would launch himself on a career of profit. She made sure he was schooled in the arts of war and he became a formidable warrior. He gained control of that rich household and slowly set about enlarging its estates to the considerable pleasure of his mother. But what to do about her other and weakest son?

He was no fighting man and suffered a sickly childhood. By attaching strings (by dint of a distant relation) to the Yussaf household, Karee pulled them, gently, gently, so that Yussaf felt it would be nice to oblige the old girl by marrying her son to his youngest daughter. The correspondence was erratic and uncertain, and Karee had her eventual success, though perhaps she did not pull the strings gently enough for later Yussaf was heard to exclaim against 'that damned interfering bitch', but then he was wiser to his secretarys skill, and he too, was becoming afraid.

The appointment to governor was for life, and Yussaf was to hold it for six years. On his death Lutens Wenner became the new Governor.

How could this have happened? A penniless youth arrives in an unfriendly city, with slim connections and doubtful ability, yet in only seven years he obtains the leading position in the, capital? These questions were only asked by later historians, the populace and the merchants already knew far too well. As secretary to Yussaf, Wenner gained the information to people which is power. He could make favours, threats, accumulate wealth and insinuate himself into every aspect of the citys economy. If Yussaf had been a stronger man he might have resisted this manipulation of the citys, and his affairs, but Wenner always made sure that Yussaf gained in the backstairs bargainings, and Yussaf had the stomach of a merchant, a clinking, gold-lined hunger of profit.

Later rumour had it that Wenner had been slowly poisoning the old man, but it may have been simpler, that Yussaf's frailness, and fondness for drink, did him in in the end. Secretary Wenner had luck undoubtedly, in his ascendancy, but better still he had a political sense that was unmatched within the city, and was able to take advantage of the whiffs of economic prosperity that was loosening up the conventions of the Dark Period. Perhaps the elders could have refused Wenner as Governor, but the secretarys sharper talents had already divided their purpose and they were incapable of acting together. By the year 140 Wenner was established at the remarkable early age of 26 as the citys leading personage. He had power and influence within and without the walls, wealth, success, honour. It might be thought that he had reached the pinnacle, though in fact, in his opinion, he had only just begun to climb it.

The next few years pushed events along at a dazzling speed, and communication was so slow on the plain that few were to be aware of these events until overtaken by them. Wenner enlarged the citys army, and formed an elite body of warriors and bor-

rowing the idea of Swivven's, named them the 'baldymen' after the baldybird that was famous in its ferocity in defending its young. The bird had a bald crown, which the baldymen imitated by shaving their heads. The effect was distinctive, and quite intentional by Wenner. The baldymen not only acted as a bodyguard to Wenner, but also as his messengers and, through other intermediaries, not infrequently, as his spies. They began to garner a sinister reputation for themselves.

Lutens Wenner was systematic. He craftily annexed the immediate lands around the city. When the lords protested he sent the baldymen. In a startlingly short time he doubled, then quadrupled the city's boundaries. The small armies of the lords were incorporated into his own, and the process continued. The first sticking-point was the Duc du Glando, whose property bounded the swollen Caroyal territory on two sides. The Duc had an army of much the same size as Wenner's, and a reputation for using it. Wenner could not yet risk a war against the Duc so it was politic to reassure the old warrior that Caroyal posed no threat to him. Wenner's cleverness was not in offering any cooperative treaty with the Duc, but going towards him as a mere tyro in affairs of state.

The ploy worked. The Duc would have been insulted by any upstart suggesting that he and the Duc were equals, but was flattered by Wenner's assertion of ignorance in these matters. The Duc, assured by this attractive young man that he was the stronger and wiser, came to believe it and did not ascertain its truth. Later, in the valuable space granted by the Duc's gullability, Wenner briskly invaded the Duc's land whilst entertaining the Duc with a banquet in his honour in the city. The Duc was imprisoned, executed, his army leaderless, and unprepared, herded as prisoners in their own castle.

The other lords and Ducs began to panic, some, those on the borders of Caroyal, sought treaties, and were roundly damned for it by their fellow lords. Others, amongst them the Duc du Qu'et, realised that Wenner was no idle local threat and formed themselves into a defensive League. But their response was usually too little and too late. Wenner seeing the panic caused by the fall of the Duc of Glando ordered his troops to march.

### III

This War of the Lords, as it came to be known, occupied a total of four years, but in reality ended in the third year, with the sacking of the Qu'ets property.

In the year 146 one half of Wenner's army was sent down the Rume to meet the collected army of the Ducs Promill, Qu'et and Thalme, on paper at least a formidable force. Wenner needed the other half of his army to guard Caroyal from the threat of a small gathering of lords from the skaw, but he considered these to be not such a serious problem, and the best of his army and most of his baldymen went to meet the Qu'et force.

Luck is an unfair ally in war. The strength was on the Qu'et side, and arguably the right, but by chance the Rume River was at an abnormally low flow, so the one secure

defence for the Qu'et force did not exist. Possibly this should not have been of serious concern to the Leagues army but Mial Hest, the very able general in command of Wenners force, turned it to his advantage by crossing the Rume behind the Leagues army and threatening their properties. The League panicked, reversed its march to deal with the threat and arrived on the battlefield exhausted by two days forced march and scattered over three leagues of farmland. Wenners army cut the League up piece by piece. Only Tiven du Qu'et put up any sort of resistance, but his energetic defence was overwhelmed and his body lost in the smoking carnage.

With such a victory under their belts, Wenners army, spearheaded by the baldymen, descended on the properties of the decimated League, pillaging the forts and burning the estates. Something like a madness fell on them and they swept along the banks of the Rume in an orgy of destruction and greed. The two older daughters of the Duc du Qu'et were taken, and killed by the baldymen in a frantic hunt for the mythical jewel known as the Charmstone. So ignorant of the actual size of this thing, that they even split open the daughters stomachs, thinking that they might have swallowed the jewel.

The Qu'ets property was the last to be reached and something of the victors fury had worn off. The Duc was waiting for them in the library and handed the Charmstone to an officer of the baldymen without a murmur when asked. He only begged one favour, that they would leave the rare books untouched. They put him on a horse and sent him to Caroyal, setting the Qu'ets castle alight with copies of the ancient vellum and leather volumes that the Duc had spent the best part of forty years collecting. The aged paper burnt excellently.

A victory so complete should have made Lutens Wenner a happy man, but in fact the bloodiness of his armys rampage alarmed him (he censured his general for it), as it also alarmed the remainder of the League which put up a stiffer if hopeless fight for fear of the consequences if they lost. Wenner was also embarrassed by the arrival of the Duc. It had been his intention to rid the land of Qu'ets and their relations, so as to eliminate the nuisance of their lineage from Swivven. But since the Ducs dead son was engaged to one of the citys leading merchant daughters, a merchant who had supported Wenner generously with money, it would hardly be tactful to organise an execution immediately. After toying with various schemes of elimination Wenner decided that the Duc alive might have some use for him and sent his distinguished prisoner to exile in the city of Swaleton.

The least part of Wenners happiness was the loss of the Charmstone, and this caused by the same wretched officer who allowed the Duc to live.

Determined to earn the governors good pleasure, he had rode urgently back up the Rume with the gemstone. The dry spell had broken and heavy rain was swelling the river so the he rode hard to make the ford before the river flooded. At the crossing, he urged his horse into the muddied water against the boatmans shouted advice. He almost made his way across, when his terrified mare, straining at the current, lost her footing and unbalanced. Rider and horse plunged uselessly in the water and were carried away. Wenner grimly learnt of this news a day later, and cursed the unfortunate in language so vile that the Court blanched in embarrassment. Wenner had gained an unwanted prisoner and lost the jewel. It seemed a pretty poor bargain.

Still he made the best of it and marched at the head of his army into the flag-waving Caroyal. The war dribbled on for another year, partly because Wenner had not the energy to prosecute it, but it came (from his point of view) to a satisfactory conclusion with the remaining lords and Ducs swearing allegiance to him. After observing this grovelling subservience, they all had to return a year later to repeat the performance, to the great hall that Wenner had constructed and to hear this man proclaim himself the first king of the Second Kingdom.

The year was 148 and it was precisely the new kings thirty-third birthday.

#### IV

Whilst the celebrations continued in the various cities and villages on the plain, the Duc du Qu'et continued his uninterrupted routine of prayers, washing, reading in the meagre library and strolling about the small courtyard that passed for a garden by dint of a few bushes planted in the hard-baked soil. This daily pattern he was to maintain for another nine years. Plenty of time to think about the past, his childrens deaths, the wanton destruction of his library and dwell on an uncertain future. This man who had lost everything to Wenner's gain, yet could barely feel an interest in the monarch as he stretched the regulations of his power across the plain and into every aspect of an individuals life. Indeed as the Second Kingdom grew in stature the Duc seemed to turn more away, and immersed himself in the ancient historical lands that had long passed. In particular he read from Thomas au Morads famous book *The Culture and Customs of the Past Peoples* and gained much pleasure from the prose style of the author.

Some would call it old-fashioned when it was merely unhurried. Perhaps fashions had speeded up, at any rate it suited the Duc well enough in his circumstances, time he had aplenty. It also succoured him to know that Morad had written this great volume on the du Qu'et estate, for Morad worked as a scribe for the second Duc. It was known that the Morad married late in life, one of the Ducs eldest daughters. She unexpectedly produced a child, a son, and died of the act, leaving Morad to tend for his young heir. Morad then slipped from history after leaving one of the only historical marks on the age, *The Culture and Customs of the Past Peoples*.

Morads duties as a scribe must have been undemanding for the book is a large one and plunged, that is the right word, into a deep study of all the customs and rituals of the Past Peoples. Only loosely accurate, Morad was not above inventing customs to suit his theories, yet there was no other study of these peoples, and it became elevated to the forefront of scholarly research, to infuriate and fascinate generations of students with its arbitrary order, murky observations, mingled with strange by-ways of philosophical investigation. Morad was obsessed with a philosophy known as the roundrell.

The Duc immersed himself in Morad and the soothing philosophy of the Past People and thought of the one thing that Wenner had not taken from him. Juud, his beloved daughter, had been at a boarding school in Swaleton at the time of the War of the Lords, and remained in the city, growing out of her childhood and visiting her

father every second day. This concession was allowed by the gaoler only because he had become enamoured of the slim, graceful girl who stepped into the courtyard, and who tried to pull her father back into the world he seemed less and less able to comprehend.

## Chapter 3

# 'Aul du'herh summu shre h'ud lua'

*Another digression is needed (sorry patient reader) to describe the influence and effect of the Charmstone upon popular imagination, and how it helped a peasant to find a wife. We introduce two people who will play much larger roles in subsequent events, Herret Grin'kel and his son Cean. The year is 156.*

What was the magic and power the Charmstone hold over men? What was its fascination? And where its origin?

The question does not have an immediate answer. Men had looked intently for something to equal the disturbingly beautiful surfaces and green unreflecting patterns of the Charmstone, but in vain. The Past People surely did not have the skill to wrought such a fine stone? They were a simple agrarian people whose art was limited to decorating the few pots and utensils they used every day, and only one other object as outstanding as the Charmstone had survived beyond the First Kingdom. A curious stone temple, chiselled with old patterns and that strange universal inscription of the Past Peoples 'all dwell in the roundrell'. There were no gemstones set in the temple walls, no gold to be stripped from the roof, so the little building was ignored, and remained peaceably undisturbed in a forest clearing in the upper Furrowdale Valley. The local peasants kept away in superstitious fear of anything unknown and said it was haunted.

The Duc du Qu'ets had owned the Charmstone since times immemorial (so they said) or time immoral (others said), and legends for the incredulous stated that it was Wyrð himself, that diabolical black-clad character with a flopping hat dark as a baldy-birds wing, that had deposited the jewel in one of the Duc's graves. An evil bargain, it was said, for were not the Qu'ets prosperous and uncannily untouched by the dreadful times that afflicted the rest of the populace through the Dark Period? Of course this was nonsense, but during the deep interminable Dark Period the popular imagination combined the strange influence of the Charmstone with the Qu'ets historic right of succession, and so the jewel became less of an ornament and something of a political statement. If it was seldom seen, it was certainly much talked about, and myth embellished how the Charmstone even came to exist.

One story went that it had been made by Wyrð in his fantastic den so as to tempt Brees sister Wene into his arms. And she tempted, and violated, had cast the gem amongst the mortals so that they too would know the vanity of temptation. Another story had it that it was part of a basket of jewels that Strom had fashioned out of a rock that Tilsts great plough had unearthed. Strom had presented it to his wife Stuess, and she forgetfully had muddled her jewelry with her seed and cast out seeds and jewels higgeldy-piggeldy across the land at Sprig. This meant, people said, that there were many other rare and wonderful green ornaments buried in the land.

People are nostalgic, dreamers or romancers, and will invent what is not there. Storytellers will conjure up the fantastic to satisfy the market of many ears. When your lot is miserable, short and brutal, you search for meaning in the stories you hear from the hearth, and remember the deeds of past heroes with much greater affection than they deserved. So the small lords remembered to the glorious time of the First Kingdom. How their families were great then, and might be again if some king like Swivven could arise, and this king was matched with the Charmstone. For what other source of authority was there? The merchants remembered so many years past, when trade flourished and a great king ruled all. The peasants remembered a time when there were no brigands, and that they could crop and copulate with freedom. They invented a happiness of the past, and in searching for a king matched this imaginary hero with the elusive Charmstone. And so the thoughts continued, throughout the tedious shadows of the Dark Period, on ruined estates and in dusty servants halls, in crumbling merchant halls, and in squalid poor villages, the Charmstone was not forgotten, for this pretty thing carried on it the mark of succession, and of something greater, of hope.

Little wonder that Wenner had wanted it. His affection-starved wife would never have seen the jewel except, as the rest of the populace would see it, glimpsed beneath the kings broad chin as a green fire, and they would say 'he has the Charmstone, I saw it, truly, he must be king?' — but it was to happen otherwise. The Charmstone disappeared, along with Wenners hopes, into the muddied Rume River and stories arose that it was destined to be lost till the 'true king' arrived. Lutens Wenner was not the man to be thwarted by some piece of glass, and made himself a crown, and was to wear it comfortably to his death, but he could never quite quell those stories, and he was never to gain the support of those with long memories that he was the right and proper king. There was that sniff in their attitudes that he was still just an upstart.

## II

On the festival of Boden in the year of 156, a peasant Jos Earden, possessor of one cows, six sheep, and leasing some eight acres of land on the banks of the Rume, in other words a well-off man, presented himself to the local baker to ask his permission to marry his daughter. It was the traditional marriage time. The girl would be fit through Croppen and Harvess, carry a child through the dark Wast Time, bear it at the Tilst festival and so be able-bodied in time for planting during Sprig. Putting the ques-

tion was purely a formality for the arrangements had been made over many days before of discussion and close bargaining. It was the custom to present a token of affection and loyalty to the wife-to-be, the acceptance of which would be an invitation to step inside the brides fathers house, feast, then walk hand in hand to the grooms house where the match would be promptly consummated on the freshly aired bed. Such a thing as a religious marriage ceremony for the peasantry had not been heard of. The act of sexual compliance was the seal on the marriage.

The bride came to the door and accepted the token, fondling the ornament in her rough hands and peering into the rich green colours that were buried in it. The baker was impressed, and the doubts he had of the match were eased by the fineness of the object. He kept his curiosity in abeyance till his daughter visited home some days after the marriage and questioned her closely about it. But the poor girl had not been able to find out either. She was already talking of her husbands 'stinginess', for he would not let her wear it and kept it hidden in some secret place of his own. Of course word went around the village, and it became a highly favoured topic to speculate about the jewel and where Earden had found it. But whilst the villagers gossiped to themselves, they instinctively kept silent before strangers, and the matter would have remained entirely local if the lords son, had not got to hear of it. Quite casually he mentioned it to his father who stared at his son, put down his pipe and selected one of his only two books, *The Culture and Customs of the Past Peoples* by Thomas au Morad, and read from it.

He returned to his seat, relit the pipe and studied the fire carefully.

'Well father?'

The son was growing impatient. The old lord did not seem to hear so well these days and spoke almost as if to himself.

'It would be extraordinary' he muttered.

'What would?'

The father looked up at his sons young, mobile face, with its thin sproutings of hair on the upper lip and jaw. He was almost a man.

'If it is the Charmstone'.

The fire leaped and flickered evilfull hope against the wall.

'I don't understand father'.

'You want adventure? Well it might come to you. Ask no more till I have thought on it'.

He stopped his sons questions with a wave of his pipe, one spark skittering out onto the rug. Absently the lord stamped on it thinking aloud all the while in whispered words.

'If it is the Charmstone'.

### III

Three days later, his son visited Jos Earden in the general manner of things, discussing husbandry, tithes, and blessings or otherwise of the weather and, the supposed point of the visit, hunting. Some wild pigs had been seen on the peasants land and all such beasts were the lords property with his the sole right to hunt them. The son discussed with the peasant the sightings and likely movements of the animals and promised to return next day with beaters to flush them out. This was done, and three sows and a fine old tusker were piked. As courtesy to the peasant and an implicit apology for the trampled crops, the hunters left a portion of the meat to him. It would be rude to leave nothing, and foolish, for the peasant could just as well have kept his silence and kill the pigs for himself. In the course of telling the hunting stories the lords son brought the topic around to the peasants recent wedding, congratulating him on the fat, healthy bride, and her on the splendor of her husband.

‘I hear you gave your wife a fine ornament as the love–token’.

Unwillingly, for Eardens suspicions had been sharpened by this sudden attention (and he was nervous in case his chatty wife would let on about the three pigs that were hanging discreetly in his woodshed), he talked a little of the jewel. It had been given to him. A travelling fellow.

‘A wayfarer?’ enquired the son.

‘Aye, that were it. One of those wandering fellows. For a bit of food and shelter.’

Then trying to fill the pause (the other hunters were listening too, intrigued), ‘some three seasons past now’.

‘Indeed. I have heard it’s a fine piece, and would much like to see it.’

The son suggested gently, then shying off at the mans obvious reluctance.

‘But not now of course. Perhaps at Caerp. My father would very much like to see it as well’.

The peasant averted his eyes, but nodded in acquiescence. He could perhaps refuse the son, but not the lord.

Caerp was a peculiarly local celebration held approximately halfway between Boden and Harvess to worship the great golden carp that filled the river with their breeding energy at that time of year. The peasants were allowed to take any amount of fish on that day and then afterwards repair to the lords great hall where the catch would be cooked and eaten with gusto, helped down by the lords mead. Every villager would be there and Earden could not refuse to come. He was neatly hooked and the son congratulated himself, and rode away, not hearing the yells from the fellows wife as she received a beating from her husband, who felt obscurely in his anger that she was somehow to blame for it all.

At Caerp, well into the celebrations, the sturdy peasant was ushered into the lords private chamber, squeezing a package under his arm.

The lord sat the man at the table and gave him a jar of thick local wine. Earden

watched every movement of his master with nervous eyes and lips. This man had the power of life over him if he should find Earden at fault. It would be expulsion and a sure death with Wast Time approaching. To be this close to the lord made his skin itch and his broad hands shrink under the table.

The lord took Morad from a shelf above the fireplace, opened it and began reading.

‘The article is both round and square, a thrum in span and a third of this in thickness. It is wondrously carved from one single piece of gem, opaque in texture and a perplexing green that reflects varying shades of this colour under different lights. Four holes in symmetry are pierced through the piece, and all over the numerous surfaces that result from such a contrivance are strange and twisting designs — spirals mostly, but also circles, double figures of eight, flower-like weaves and other delicate marks between the main patterns. On the outer edges of the gemstone the inner carries an inscription which is difficult to read in some lights, easier in others, which runs as follows ‘All dwell in the Roundrell’. The original is, of course, in the Past Peoples script and is palindromic in nature. That is to say it can be read either forwards or backwards. For the readers intelligence I include the sentence, ‘Aul du ‘herh summu shre h’ud lua’. The entire article is lovely and marvellously worked, the skill of the craftsman beyond this modest description.’

The lord stopped reading and closed the book with a snap.

‘Is this a fair description of the token you were given?’ he asked Earden coldly.

The peasants eyes betrayed astonishment and alarm, and he fumbled at the package, unwrapping many layers of cloth to lay aside the object that it contained.

The lord bent over and picked up the jewel and scarcely able to turn his eyes from it asked the peasant where he had acquired it. Jos Earden had gone beyond wonder at how the lord could know so precisely an object that he had never seen (the inscription had made no sense to him and his wife) and began to fear the consequences of his acquisition. Was it better to lie or tell the truth? The lord might know still more. In a trembling voice the peasant hesitantly explained.

‘Well, yer lord, what I’s said to yer son, wasn’t quite the truth. He scared me with all his questions, so I made’s up that story of the traveller like. I mean there wernt one, an’...

Earden realised even the truth would bring him trouble. He stalled in his explanation and appealed to the lord to see his difficulty.

‘You need not worry over the consequences of your find. I am not interested in punishing you. Only in discovering the truth.’

The peasant still hesitated, so the lord, trying to guess his tenants dilemma, led him into the story.

‘You found it?’

‘I did yer honour. I found it in the river. It wur washed up on the bank’.

The lord allowed himself a smile at the ingenuousness of the tale. A jewel would hardly get washed up from the mud of the river unless it had some assistance. Of course! Now he realised the peasants difficulty.

Oh yes, he had found it, but not on the bank, but in one of his lordships fish, a giant caerp probably, for no other fish would be game enough to swallow such a hard morsel. The fish were famous for the items found in their stomachs. They were so rapacious that not a year went by without someone finding in a caerps stomach, the bones of a poor peasants hand, or large glittering rocks, for they liked things that sparkled. Nails, even small tools, and cutlery had been found undigested in Caerp. Of course all caerp were owned by the various lords and Ducs whose properties touched on the river. So this peasant, illegally fishing, gained a double bounty, neither of which could be publicly broadcast for fear of sudden and certain exile from his land, a punishment amounting to starvation. So he invented the story of the wayfarer to conceal his unofficial activities.

‘And you kept it and presented it to your future spouse?’

‘Yes yer lord, that’s right’.

Earden eagerly agreeing as the story moved past the awkward phase.

‘When did you find it?’.

The peasant could see no trick in this so replied truthfully.

‘Well, lets sees now, it’ll be, nigh on four year ago now. Yes thats right. I found her in Wast Time’ (the lean hungry time) ‘four Wast Times done’.

What peculiar fate had carried the Charmstone down a river via the belly of a great caerp into the astounded peasants hands?

Four years he had held his treasure to him. Such a long time to bide his tongue. How often it must have been tempting to blurt out the find to his labouring companions, but he must have stifled the impulse. After four years he must have thought himself safe, or else the pretty bakers child needed to be won from a father who grudged his prized daughter to the grimy hand of a mere peasant. These thoughts slipped through the lords mind all unaware that his gaze had been steady upon, and was reducing the peasant, to a fearful anxiety.

‘I know it wern’t mine yer honour, but no one spokes of it, an’ after four year’...

Finders—keepers, and so any other peasant would have felt after a steady lifetime of gleaning the little gains from a poor world. The lord spoke deliberately.

‘No, it is not yours, and I cannot allow you to keep it, but you deserve some merit for the find. You were not wrong to tell me and I shall reward your honesty?’

The lord thought awhile.

‘Go to my herdsman. Select the best cattle beast you can find and it is yours.’

Earden jumped up delighted. Expecting to lose a head, he had gained one. All he lost was the wretched jewel which only gave him the worry and fear in his nights wondering who’d try to steal it.

‘Thankee yer honour, thankee. I don’t deserves such, I truly don’t’ and backed slowly out his head bobbing to the lord.

‘One thing before you leave’ the lord halted the peasants exit with a sharp tone.

‘You must tell no one of your find. Or our little transaction. If the villagers ask why you were given the beast say it was a wedding gift. You understand? Break this promise

and I shall turn you off your land’.

The peasant looked pained.

‘Lord I won’t say a word, not a word.’

‘And your wife? Can you keep her silent?’

‘Shes only a woman sir. She’ll not speak, or face me’.

The lord nodded, and the peasant taking this as a sign of dismissal gingerly left the room.

The lord placed the Charmstone in a cabinet and threw the wrapping cloths on the fire. They smelt of wood and earth as they burnt, curling up blue smoke to the ceiling.

He had always been puzzled by Morads description that the jewel that was both square and round, but of course he could see now. The jewel was round, but the design gave an ingenious impression of squareness. A clever Wyrd who made it! He grinned, that curse might literally be true, if he believed in Wyrd, which on some bleak evensuns he did.

Of course, he had no more right to the gemstone than his tenant, but there was no need to say so, no need to say so at all. The true owner could hardly complain, for he, like everyone else believed the stone to be irretrievably lost. Could the peasant keep his silence?

The lord paused in his pacing. It occurred to him that there was a guaranteed way of doing it, but he shook the tempting thought out of his head. He was not a cruel man, and he would have to take his chances with the peasants tongue. On an afterthought, that beast was rather a generous present to give. Earden would have some difficulty convincing the other peasant farmers out of their jealousy that the present was not for other services. He shrugged, he had the Charmstone, how best to act with it?

Sojon must know, and quickly. He called for his manservant who entered smartly.

‘Summon my son’.

## IV

In the quiet heat of the forenoon the only sounds were of a lazily stirring stream and the rough cropping of pasture of his mare. They had paused in the shadow of the great Yiggen tree that gave the place its name, One Tree Knoll. It stood a few leagues from the estate, on the main road to Caroyal. Apart from water and shade, it offered the convenience of isolation, standing as it did alone on a large grassy field and no one could approach without being seen. Locally the knoll had a reputation as a trysting spot for lovers, and sometimes robbers, though that was in the badder days before his time. The most violent thing the knoll witnessed these days was a playful slap, or a quiet struggle in the grass amongst the wild dandelion and ubiquitous clover. It was this that the horse was making such persistent progress on.

The horses rider once more glanced around the still horizons, though he hardly knew what he looked at for his eyes were turned inward.

He argued to himself that he had a right to know. His father was being unfair in hiding it from him. He was of manhood, trusted to run much of the estate, trusted enough to take this important message, but not to know its contents? That was hardly fair. He turned the packet over in his hand. Read again the address on the outside 'Sojon, Guild Way, Alma', and struggled against his impulse once more, and the stern consequence of reading his fathers private correspondence. Then looked at the loosely attached seal with final resolution. It was the excuse he needed. His father had struck the waxen seal badly, so that the entire thing was half off the paper, and the rest could be picked off and restruck with no damage to seal or paper. If his father had been more careful he could not have been so tempted.

With a shrug that tried to push aside the grim mental picture of his father, and his fingers quickly worked underneath the seal, detached it from the envelope and removed the letter. The handwriting was thin and clear, written in the sure, measured, script that he had been obliged to copy through many cold Wast Time nights. A quick glance around. There was no one and nothing except his feeding horse, taking greedy advantage of the unexpected halt.

'My dearest Sojon,

Such urgent news I have to relate to you that you must forgive the usual formalities. The Charmstone has come into my possession. I can imagine your surprise, even incredulity. The Charmstone! A tenant of mine, a Gadabout of a peasant, discovered the jewel in the stomach of a caerp he had captured. These caerp are ravenous, and is quite common to find objects in their cavernous bellies, stones, gravel, even human fingers. After waiting four years the peasant gave the jewel as a token to his bride on their wedding. Through tales and gossip I came to hear of it, scarcely believing that it would be genuine, but there is no doubt.

All that Morad described is matched by this jewel-stone. It is for certain, you must not doubt it, though its manner of arrival is hardly to be credited. The belly of a fish!

Our friends must be informed immediately. This is the chance we could not even have prayed for, and we must not, at cost to our greater desires, let this slip ungrasped through our fingers. The Duc so close, and the Charmstone in our possession, surely we can match the two advantages and wed them into that single-minded hope we have so wearily discussed. We do not need words now. We have at last the tools to lever this odious king and his spurious kingdom from our backs. Let us use them.

Think, and write at once. My son has been instructed to wait on your reply. I will keep myself in readiness for travelling to Swaleton if and when you bid it. At these times the risk does not appear too high.

My son only knows a little of this business. He is not aware of our group, or our aims, neither is he sure of what value the Charmstone is. He does not know that name, but I am becoming fearful of his ignorance and cannot see the point in continuing it.

He has been closely instructed by me and shares all of my beliefs. Question him, see if he merits us, and if so he should be admitted to our group. I feel he will be of great value to us and we need the strength of young limbs to carry our older purpose out.

I beg you to consider these matters quickly, and secretly. Imagine our fates if Wenner finds out. The jewel burns in my hands, and worries my night-time thoughts.

Yours, as a deep friend

Herret Grin'kel'.

## Chapter 4

# Too Late For Surety

*Now a brief study of the education system, and also introducing Givtheem Tallott, a likeable rogue, and the baldymen, a good deal less likeable. Cean is welcomed to Swaleton, there are conspiracies, a doubtful tavern and a hag in that order. Some people will quibble there is no such word as surety. Piffle! The year is 156.*

Swivven the Strong founded the university in the city of Swaleton in a generous moment. He himself had no bookish inclinations and was frankly suspicious of those that did, disparaging them as word-schemers, but his rapidly expanded kingdom required men of learning to administer it, decide on its laws, manage the tax system and control the dozens of bureaucratic annoyances that plagued him. On one bad-tempered occasion he had an irritating deputation from Noll thrown into the palace dungeon. They seemed much more reasonable after two days incarceration, ‘rats among rats’ Swivven called it, but it was hardly a sensible way to organise a kingdom. He at last admitted that he needed men of education, scholarly ability, writing talents and subtlety, qualities not strong in the horse-warrior tribes.

Traditionally, the administrative scholars were Swalemen. A school of learning had been founded in Swaleton for some twenty years before Swivvens abrupt conquest. He shattered that Swalemens independence, but they kept a sense of snobbish pride in their finer education and culture over the barbaric Furrowdale Valley men. Swalemen took pride in their self-appointed role as administrators of the kingdom, and always prophesied that Swivvens rule would collapse without the training and skill of Swaleton people. The galling part of this conceit was that there was some truth to it.

In 58 Swivven founded three universities. One in Beorht, his bright capital, one in Noll and the other in Swaleton. By doing so Swivven sought to overcome the chronic shortage of administrators, secure a continuity of their supply, and help towards a larger identity of the First Kingdom amongst its three thoroughly divided parts. It was a compromise and like most compromises pleased nobody. Worse still, it did not work. Neither Noll or Beorht had the teachers or the willingness on the part of the city elders to support these elaborate encrustations that had been foisted upon them. Swaleton had a history of learning plus the institutions and teachers to maintain its position. De facto it became the university city, and consolidated its reputation by supplying prefectors to keep the other universities alive.

The War of Succession shattered the kingdom and Beorht and Noll universities collapsed immediately once central funding stopped. The stranded prefectors had to

struggle back across the ranges as best as they could, and amazingly, most of them survived the arduous journey and gathered in the relative haven of Swaleton. This exodus became known as the 'Scholars Retreat' and it concentrated virtually all the then educated men of the kingdom in one fragile town. The war fortuitously passed the city by, and the university managed to struggle on with declining income and students, in a rough and ready manner for a few years, before dribbling to a close in the year 67. This residual knowledge was kept and revived in 116, due partly to the efforts of an enterprising group of elders, but more to do with a certain prosperity that had begun to flow through the cities stiffened limbs and open up the trading arteries.

As the economic blood flowed, so did the political.

A small close group of Swalemen met occasionally, mostly they were elderly prefectors and merchantmen, who complained (privately) about Lutens Wenner, upstart monarch of the Second Kingdom. The core of their dispute with Wenner was that they were Swalemen and the king was, of course, from the Furrowdale Valley, an upstart. Mingled with this natural enmity were the more reasonable disagreements with the authority and legitimacy of Wenner's crown, and a horror of the ruthless means by which he had attained it. They wanted a return to Swaleton's independence, as it was before Swivven removed it, and a return to the traditional values of learning and decent respect for elders who held the age-old traditions of the Swalemen in high regard, in other words themselves.

They did not think this selfish. Clearly to them the old world was preferable to the new and they were self-evident representations of this. This grumblings and literate plots did not result in revolution brewing in Swaleton's confined streets, but a steady resentment of Wenner did yearly grow stronger. Put it this way, if someone in a drinking house muttered that Wenner was a Wyrð, there would be a quiet chorus of agreement. Quiet, because of course, kings men drank in the taverns as well. The townspeople were Swalemen, prejudiced against outsiders like Wenner, and they were also taxpayers. Wenner's Second Kingdom was an expensive item to maintain and the fine palaces that resulted in Caroyal were never evidenced in Swaleton. The dislike of country towns for their bustling and lording neighbours was induced as another reason for complaint, especially amongst the lower orders, who though never having been to Caroyal were positive they would dislike the 'poncing in the capital'. Among the higher ranks of Swaleton's citizens, the elders, merchants and prefectors, there was the resentment of having to shoulder the full costs of the university. Repeated deputations to Caroyal had produced only commendations for their splendid efforts and vague promises of relief. A mention of a reduction in Swaleton's taxes to reduce the economic burden of the university only brought a frown to the king's spreading chin.

Another fact. The Duc du Qu'et, who represented for many in Swaleton the legitimate heir to the crown (schooled in their own university to boot) was imprisoned right inside their city. It was an odd oversight on Wenner's part, quite literally, for the king felt so secure that he had forgotten all about the Duc. Why should he care for such old men? However, Wenner might have been more concerned had he known that some of the old prefectors (Sojon included) had hatched a plan whereby they would release the Duc, and spirit him away to safety in the Granry, where that monarch (the Duc's own younger brother) would combine forces and march on Wenner.

Of course this extraordinary plan skirted practicalities. Freeing the Duc would be the simplest part. He was lightly and indifferently guarded, but what the Strom to do with him? Wenner would certainly search the Duc out, and this time would not bother with the luxury of keeping him alive. The Duc could be freed once, and only once, the chance would never come again. Still it was good meat for discussion and the elders and prefectors were not averse to discussion. Their meetings were civilised, wine provided in a cosy club-room atmosphere, making suggestions, amending ideas, putting forth lesser or greater extravagant proposals, their conversation partaken in the unhurried manner of Swaleton people.

‘We must let Wenner become more unpopular’

‘Yes, remember the adage ‘closed doors and claret, heh?’

‘We have the claret.’

‘And its the young who must rush madly into the fray, waiting is a prudent argument’.

‘And our grey hairs turn white with all your delays! Fools! The time will never come whilst we argue. Let us act!’

‘Boldly spoken Givtheem Tallot, we approve, you are of the mettle we need, but less haste.’

‘Wast Time is coming, a year gone will see our position improve, you see, the Council may support us. The merchants become our allies. I have hopes, that this will come ... our strength... gains ... in time’

‘Sojon, you will be waiting in your coffin, the time to act is now!’

They could not see it and argued with him, always they argued.

## II

‘Gentlemen. Our last meeting was a stormy one. I know some of you feel aggrieved at the accusations made by Tallott, but I for one bear him no ill feelings. Indeed, yesterday I received a letter which makes the possibility of bad feeling between us unthinkable. At the last meeting Tallott said to us, nay shouted at us, that we must act. Well, now it seems we must. I shall explain. You are attentive?’

‘This letter came from an old friend who owns a small estate on the banks of the Rume River. His son brought the letter, and waits outside for our pleasure. My friends name is Herret Grin’kel’ Sojon paused ‘I do not think the name will mean much to you, but he fought in the war against Wenner and is an old and trusted confidante. He shares all of our sentiments regarding our noble monarch. It is simpler to read the letter than explain in my own words.’

In slow measured tones Sojon read aloud Grin’kels account of the finding of the Charmstone.

The disturbance was great amongst the eight gathered. Joy and consternation vying with each other as they said ‘The Charmstone’, ‘The jewel is alive’, ‘Can it be true?’ ‘This magic thing will win us the battle’, only Tallott remained outwardly unmoved, yet

he too was stirred.

Sojon resumed his speech.

'This is astounding news, but we must not rush the consequences of it' (Oh no never hurry you Workmen!) 'Grin'kel is reliable and I have no doubt he speaks the truth, but we must make sure'. (Too late for surety my ancient friends) 'we must not be hasty.' (And wait till Wenner hears? For it will not take long to spread the word amongst this pack of gabble-mouths).

'Can we speak to his son?' asked one.

'His son knows nothing, but this reminds me of Herrets request. Do we wish to let Herrets son into our membership?'

Different opinions were expressed, 'He's too young', 'But we need young men' was another's retort. 'Let us hear him speak' one suggested and this was generally taken up. 'Wait' interrupted Sojon

'Do we want to discuss the Charmstone first? This is important business. Herrets son could wait till we have decided on our response. We should not rush' (Fools! Fools!) 'into any decision. Then if we accept him, he will be fully informed as to our intentions.'

That was agreed too. One prefector requested to know more about the history of the Charmstone, and Sojon, as the distinguished antiquarian of the group settled into a long and careful explanation. They did not notice Tallott, still unspeaking, slip from the room with a strange smile on his lips. He looked up and down the flag-stoned corridor and saw a youth standing at one end.

'You Herret Grin'kels son?' asked Tallott walking towards the youth and extending his hand.

'Yes. Cean'.

He pronounced it 'sian', softly in the local river dialect of the Rume, but the grip of his hand was anything but soft, a hard and calloused grip, even at nineteen plainly a hand accustomed to outdoor work.

'Givtheem Tallott'.

Both took stock of each other. Tallott liked the look of fresh vigour in the youths face and the bold, almost stubborn eyes.

'What are they talking about in there?' asked Cean.

'You, and your fathers letter'

'What about me?'

'Whether you should be admitted to their meeting.'

The youth faintly smiled.

'You said 'their' as if you are not part of them.'

Tallott laughed with the sharp observation. He had not misjudged those eyes.

'And so you are right. I come and watch their mutterings and get angry and lose my temper, then cool down and come again. You're a quick fellow.'

'Who are they?'

'Prefectors and the like mostly. Harmless fellows, and useless. Here, there's no advantage in standing here talking. I know a warmer place. A tavern. You'll come?' sensing Ceans hesitation. His father had specifically warned him of the dangers of taverns.

'Come, you are my guest. I don't often find such fine company. You couldn't refuse' and Tallott placed a hand on the youths shoulder and guided him down the corridor.

'Won't Sojon mind' protested Cean feebly 'he told me to wait, I mean, if we leave, he'll be upset won't he?'

'Most certainly lad. Probably have a fit. Especially if he thinks I've taken you away.'

Tallotts voice broke out into a roar, which Cean only belatedly recognised as laughter.

They went down the flight of steps and crossed a courtyard, past an old doorman and plunged into one of the narrow streets that lace the inner city in a fine but erratic web as if a drunken spider had been at work. The geography of dark lanes, fleeting shadows of other inhabitants, and gleams of candle-light spilling from thickly shuttered windows was to Ceans mind both romantic and dangerous. Tallott, completely at ease in this night-flush of streets, led his charge to a heavy door, and pushed it open. A roar of sound and light met them at the door. A large, bustling room, with lanterns set in every corner casting a bold light over the crowded tables. Women carrying tankards swung between the tables and groups of beery men, their faces redder and brighter in the light than was natural, shouting broadly all the time and trying to grab the attentions of the serving maids.

'Over there?' Tallott had to shout to make himself heard above the tumult.

Cean Grin'kel nodded, swallowed hard, and followed his guide through the massed humanity and up a flight of stairs to a balcony overlooking the room. This was quieter, and Tallott picked the less noisy end in a small twin-seat alcove. He must have been a regular here for immediately a large woman busied up and familiarly asked him what 'ee wanted'. Tallott gave her a slap on the backside.

'Not that yet, but some porter. Your best for a country guest.'

You've taken to talking in nines now have yer?' and she looked sympathetically at Cean. 'I'll get you something special lad' and bustled off.

Cean was vaguely irritated by being notioned a 'lad' all the time though he had to admit his senses were overwhelmed by the racket and confusion of this place. The local country tavern was a holdman compared to this.

Tallott leaned on the rough-hewn table and studied his young companion.

'All a bit much eh? Those old buggers don't come here. For this is life' and he swept his hand grandly at the scene below.

Dozens of shouting, arguing men, with women in amongst them Cean realised, not just serving but sitting at the tables (or on the mens laps) gossiping and drinking as furiously as the men.

The large woman returned and loaded two goblets on their table along with a large leather flask, 'drink up young 'un. But watch this Wyrd. He'll have you dancing on the

table before the night's gone. Anything else, let me know,' she winked at Tallott and took his coin with a large kiss on his mouth. Tallott poured two generous servings into the goblets and watched the young man drink up. Cean was determined not to look foolish but the strength of the wine had him choking. The Rume liquor was barely a quarter of the potency. Tallott watched him with a grin 'not bad. How old are you?'

'Nineteen at last Boden.'

'You look younger. I see you're trying to muster a beard though.'

Cean pulled at the tuft self-consciously. He was being baited and he knew it, but the wine had temporarily choked any smart reply.

'Was the journey hard?'

'No' Cean got out with a cough 'I didn't see a thing, certainly not a brigand.' Cean's confidence gained with the second swig 'in fact I was bored.'

'So you're looking for adventure? Swaletons hardly the place.'

Cean thought it quite mysterious and exciting enough, but did not say so.

'Did your dad say what was in the letter?' asked Tallott.

Cean shook his head, then grew bold. Two drinks ago he would have kept his silence, but the wine had given him the bravado to prove himself.

'But the seal was loose.'

Tallott looked puzzled, then gazed at the youth with pleasure. He leaned forward and gripped Cean's arm painfully.

'So you looked!' he said fiercely 'and why not! You've more spirit than those old cronies upstairs.'

Cean tried to lean away from Tallott's huge face pressing closer.

'So you know about the Charmstone?!' he whispered fiercely.

'Yes.'

Tallott hadn't been mistaken. He'd judged this lad well. Here was an ally indeed.

'Good, good.' Tallott slowly eased back into his chair and released Cean's arm. 'Then you know a great deal more than is safe for you. If you wanted adventure, then you've found it. Look!' and Tallott seized Cean's arm again and pointed to a far table downstairs in the main part of the tavern. 'See that table. With those three men? They're kings men. Baldies! Look at their shaven heads eh? If they knew that you knew where the Charmstone was they'd torture you until you told them. You don't believe me?' Tallott squeezed Cean's arm tighter. 'You know what they'd do? They'd take you to their nice little dungeon, strip off your clothes and start kicking you with their boots. Then if you haven't talked they'll put their spurs on and start kicking again.' Cean tried to pull away from the intensity in Tallott's eyes but was only held the firmer. 'Then they'd spread-eagle you and crush your knackers with their nice polished boots. You'd be screaming by then. Be a waste wouldn't it, when you haven't even used them. Look at them!'

Despite himself, Cean gripped in fascination and horror at Tallott's fierce words, looked over towards the rowdy table. One of the three men, fat and red-faced held a woman on his lap with his hand stuffed down into her bodice. Tallott released his grip,

‘They enjoy life don’t they? Have another drink.’

Tallott watched the youth sip nervously, then said in calmer tones.

‘You’re right in the middle of an adventure. And you can’t run home from it. You’ve got knowledge and you can’t unknow it.’

‘This’ Cean sputtered out angrily ‘is supposed to make me scared?’

Tallott liked the boldness in the reply.

‘Doesn’t it? It scares the turds out of me! I didn’t know until tonight either. It could be me on the stone floor. At least I’ve had me fun.’

He looked suddenly sombre and there was a pause and Cean felt trapped and defensive under Tallott’s verbal assault. This must be leading to something, but he avoided Tallott’s eye. He seemed an uncomfortably long way from home, then felt angry with himself for admitting it. Wasn’t he a man now? Almost defiantly he spoke.

‘What do you want from me?’

Tallott had been waiting for this. The lad was almost his, easy now.

‘Upstairs they’re planning and talking and talking and talking and they’ll go on doing that till someone stops ‘em. That’s us. For we have a plan.’

‘We?’ Cean was alarmed. This thing was getting deeper by the bitwick.

‘Yes we. Drink up, we’re in this together. If you don’t think so look across at the bastard squeezing the tit over there.’ Involuntarily Cean looked.

‘What sort of plan?’ his head was befuddled now, and not all of that was drink.

‘That’s better, but not so hasty. You have a place to stay? Sojons? No, that won’t do’ (he’d only just won the lad and wanted to make Stroms blood sure he didn’t lose him). ‘Come with me, wait, wait. There’s no rush, drink your fill. They don’t know yet’ nodding towards the far table ‘that’s our strength.’

Cean found it hard to swallow the remaining liquid, especially as Tallott insisted on him downing his share. He felt distinctly unsteady as Tallott led him down the steps and across to a side-door, not the one they had come in by, but opening out onto a dirty corridor. He saw Tallott whisper into an old ladies ear who seemed to be guarding the corridor. Money changed hands and as he went by, Cean heard a short snigger from the old woman. They climbed steps, Cean tripping at one point, and Tallott having to forcibly lift him up the last few murmuring ‘you are in a bad shape, your pater be shocked lad, shocked.’

Cean thought that Tallott plumped him down on a bed and wishing him fond dreams left. The door shut. Then opened again, and a fat motherly face peered into his.

‘Ow ar’ yer dear? Nice thoughts? I’ll just be a mo’, she chatted as Cean watched in odd detachment as she took off her clothes and blew out the candle. He felt her pendulous breasts touch his chest as she clambered into bed with him.

‘Frum the country ar’ ee? I came frum there too you know. Ere I’ll help you off with these’.

Cean’s last remembered thought was that the hag was pulling off his trousers, and he was not protesting at all.

## Chapter 5

# 'One Who Fares Well'

*A terse chapter on the history of the wayfarers and Mikal Widsith in particular. This is the last of the general historical chapters, so soon there will be no need for more of my rambling historical apologies, and from now on, earnest reader (supposing you have persisted this far), we will be in real time, not the unreal, as I lead you through the events that begin to accelerate, one could almost say, out of control.*

The word 'wayfarer' comes from the horse-warriors tongue. In their sense it meant 'one who fares well' or 'one who looks after himself well'.

Young men in the tribes would be sent out on their own account, hiring their warrior skills to whoever would buy them. An inexperienced youth would have to work hard for little gain, but once he became battle hardened his price (and his pride) increased. At the top the most valued men of this wandering mercenary class were given the honorary title of 'wayfarer'. When the tribes moved into the Furrowdale Valley and began to settle in more established and larger groups, the need for these wayfarers became less. Indeed, they were a dangerous nuisance. After Weal the Worthy collected the tribes into one kingdom, one of his first acts was to ban the wayfarers. He absorbed those that were willing into his army, and hunted out and executed those that resisted. The king found a use for the wayfarers as a sort of fast-riding reconnaissance unit, often sent to explore the fringes of the rapidly expanding kingdom. Swivven had some in his army and used them to good effect in his penetration of the Rume.

After war, the term 'wayfarer' began to be used generously. Anyone could call themselves one, and any brigand did, or gleeman, or thief or beggar for that matter. Encompassing such a range of the talented, bedraggled, artful, sinister, and just plain criminally inclined, it was little wonder that in general their sort were treated with suspicion. The threat to a naughty child that 'a wayfarer will take you away' was effective. Yet, for all that, and in spite of the roguery (or maybe because of it) that was attached to their title, they held a fascination to ordinary folk of outsiders, of people who went beyond the walls. For a loyal citizen who may never have trodden more than four leagues away from his doorstep in his life, this was a wonder.

But out of this mish-mash of wayfarers there emerged some who had gained real knowledge of the kingdom, and with the skills to travel over it, guiding other travellers for a fee. Some wayfarers, poor specimens mostly, just guided between cities, but oth-

ers took the whole kingdom in their scope, and became famous, like Beon Derdane or Pirran Widsith. The best wayfarers had evolved for themselves a pride and duty in their craft, using expressions like 'a wayfarer must leave everything behind but duty', taking pride in their discretion, skill and incorruptability. They usually possessed a map, intricately drawn that laid flat the geography of the landscape and gave for those that could read them the secrets of the wayfarers art. These maps passed on to sons and grandsons, were the most valuable part of a wayfarers kit. They were guarded jealously and rarely carried for fear of loss or theft, though this last would seem unlikely, for the descriptive notes and information that littered the maps surface were written in private codes. The maps for the most part were carried in the wayfarers head, and new details of the landscape added to them when they returned. With these tools the wayfarers offered themselves as guides and carriers of the knowledge of distant places.

The times suited them, for though the Dark Period shut off people from their neighbours, it could not shut off their curiosity. People would pay for knowledge and information, and there were always men needing to go from one part of the land to the other for obscure reasons of their own, who could pay handsomely for an experienced guide. Lutens Wenner was one for example. The wayfarer never asked the reason for the journey. Their discretion was legendary, and a matter of pride to them, as was the privilege and awe held by the ordinary people for their journeying craft. The livelihood was precarious, with disease, imprisonment, suspicion and even death their inevitable companions. Wayfarers lives were lived on the margins of peoples existence.

Such was the occupation of Pirran Widsith, Mikals father. Pirran learnt his skills under the tutelage of the great Beon Derdane until that man, impelled by a strange obsession, disappeared on the splintered ramparts of the Raggerok. Mikal Widsiths father married a Rise woman, but she died and Mikal was brought up by Matha Shallpinier, and at the tender age of eight was taken by his father to explore the difficult places of the land.

As a child he saw many wonders, the great forbidding forest of the Gloreen, the Rume Gap, the ice hinterland beyond the Highlands, and he was never to stop travelling until his fathers sudden death. Then, for the first time in ten years, Mikal Widsith returned to his childhood home on the Rise, but it did not work. After two unsettled years he went back to his fathers trade, returning only sporadically to the mountain village that he now found difficult to call home.

He was a wanderer, a traveller, and a stranger, sometimes even to himself.

## Chapter 6

# No Ordinary Journey

*A longish chapter full of detail, which includes a women who plays virtually no further part in our story. A pity perhaps, but the past is often full of remarkable people who play no part. Givtheem Tallott plots and schemes to some effect, and Sojon is bullied into writing a letter. There is a meeting with a stranger. The year is 156, in the season of Crop-pen.*

Every morning for six days Cean Grin'kel followed the same routine. He would get up lazily at mid-sun, dress casually, have a short breakfast in the private tap-room, visit his stabled horse then wander aimlessly through the city, interrupting his walk only for lunch. He returned to the tavern for a plentiful if coarsely cooked evening meal, hang about the beer hall for a while chatting to the bar-maids then go to bed early, exhausted. Never had he had a lazier routine (on the estate he would rise by dawn!) or a more dissatisfying one. It was Tallotts insistence that kept him here, and he had not seen him for three days since when he had said sit quiet, and take it easy. Don't draw attention to yourself, and don't get drunk.'

That was hardly a problem. Ceans first experience of the local liquor had given him a taste he did not want to repeat. He had been appalled by the grotesque figure that was laying beside him when he awoke.

He had tried to get up without waking her, but his movements disturbed her.

'Yee awoke 'ar yer? More of life in yer now then t'ere was last night.' She giggled, 'couldn't get a thing out o' yer. Ows yer feel now?'

She leaned over, pushing him back on the bed. He recoiled violently and pushed her away so hard that the old woman rolled off the bed and hit the floor with a thump.

'Owww! Yer do that for?'

She shrieked, and sat up on her knees, her thin hair hanging like tallow wicks over her pinched breasts. Cean stood up, felt his head sway and was forced to sit on the beds edge keeping his head between his legs. He'd once seen his mother bare-chested at a water pump and the old womans grey skin brought the image back vividly.

The woman was angrily pulling on her clothes.

'Ust a boy aint yer? Dunno why I bother'd. Why don't yer go back to the country

boy? Yus no good to me.'

Her voice was muffled as she pulled a bodice over her head, but started up again once her head popped through.

'An wat about me money? Didn't get enough 'ast night you know?'

But she looked over at the green youth with his head tucked between his knees, knew she was wasting her time and walked out muttering nastily 'ust a boy'.

Cean searched with one hand under the bed and pulled out a bowl and started retching into it. After a few bitwicks he stopped and felt a little better.

He leaned back on the messed up sheets and closed his eyes. City life was not agreeing with him and for one overwhelming moment he longed to be home. A few self-pitying tears crept down his cheek.

Some adventurer! Taken in by a rogue, got drunk in a brothel and slept the night with a hag who was older than his mother and who thought him 'a boy' for not giving her satisfaction. He could not remember how long he lay there, crying like a child over every cruel embarrassment. Tallott must have taken him for a right Drubbin. A comic country lad! A plodding Tilster! He ladled the abuse upon himself, then sensed someone watching. He opened his eyes and saw a young woman standing in the doorway looking at him with something like sympathy in her eyes. Cean stared back too startled to cover himself or wipe the tear-runnels from his face.

'There, there. You have a cry' she said softly 'it were a right mean trick for Givtheem to play on you. You a lad new too.'

She walked in the room carrying a mop and brush.

'Ol' Katy' s old enough to be yer grand-mother. There, there. It's all right. Don't mind her. I heard her screams from the outside an' wondered what the fuss wur for.'

She came over to the bed and sat beside him. Then pulled her handkerchief from her sleeve and mopped his face, rather like she might have done a floor.

'Quite a waterworks eh?'

Cean found her matter-of-fact sympathy warming and he became awkwardly conscious that he was naked from the waist down. She must have sensed his awareness, and looked up and down at his form admiringly.

'You got a fine body there. Pity to waste it on Ol' Katy. What's yer name?'

'Cean.'

'Thats nice. I'd a brother with that name. I'm Sarra'.

Cean thought she spoke in an accent.

'Are you from the Rume?'

'Yes! You too! I thought you talked familiar. We hardly ever get people from there these days.'

She had stopped wiping his face and gazed down at him with a friendly look.

'Its a pleasure to 'ere someone from there. Are you feeling better?' Cean nodded.

'Why did he do it?'

'Who do what?'

‘Tallott. Bring me to this, brothel.’

He had heard his father use the word but it sounded strange when spoken. Her face lit up with amusement, and she leaned back and laughed. Cean thought it rather a pretty movement.

‘Oh my! Is that what he said? No, we arn’t that. Not supposedly anyway. Though some gives favours, for a bit of coin like. You can’t grudge ‘em, tho they take the risks.’

Cean interrupted, sitting up a little and bringing himself closer.

‘But downstairs. All those women sitting on mens laps?’

‘Oh well, you’re a bit right and a bit wrong. We’re a tavern that keeps a few rooms. Of course the coins made downstairs, and the maids ‘spected to keep the customers cheery. Part of the service, that some goes a bit further and some don’t.’

‘Do you?’ asked Cean, greatly daring.

She looked at him thoughtfully.

‘Well I don’t work in the bar, though, I clean up here. See some sights too. Worse than you this morning.’

She kept a steady gaze on him, and Cean blushed from under it and turned his head. She mistook his confusion and took his head onto her chest, stroking his hair with one hand and enclosing his body with the other. ‘There, there. It’s a bit much aint it?’ repeating Tallotts phrase of the evening before. He felt a delicious warmth around him. Then she suddenly stood up and withdrew her arms as if deciding something.

‘Ere I’ll take that out first’ and she went out with the sick bowl while Cean was left to wonder at what she meant. Then she was back shutting the door behind her.

‘As a rule I don’t, but I’ve taken a fancy to yer, and’ she hesitated for the right word ‘want to help yer a bit. Specially a lad from the Rume.’

As she talked she was unbuttoning her bodice, and released two full breasts to the morning air. Then she kicked off her shoes and untied the cords of her shirt, draping it unfussily over a chair. Her two knee-length stockings followed next leaving only her under-cloth on. Cean watched with wonder at these movements and the memory of Katys crude affections fled his mind. Sarra clambered into bed with him and started rubbing his chest through his tunic. He could hardly contain himself and pressed his body against hers till he thought he might explode.

‘You’re wild. Easy, quick on me’.

She hastened to consummate his energy and pulled him onto her, tugging aside her under-cloth and guiding him between her opened legs. He half sat up glanced down in wonder at the triangle of dark hair, then felt himself push into the moist receptacle. In a spasm that was more pain than pleasure he broke down sobbing into her encompassing arms.

‘There, there. It’s alright. You cry. It takes yer by surprise don’t it?’

Cean must have lain there for a wick or more, drifting in and out of sleep, with strange dreams of a lurid hags face, smiling with broken teeth saying 'there, there' and red-faced men laughing in drunken chorus 'its a bit much aint it?' Finally a bold arrow of sunlight penetrated through the streaky window and fell on his face. He woke up and looked around. He was still in the room. Where was she? Had everything been a drunken nightmare? Even Sarra, and that sweetness in his body? He walked around the room picking up and putting on his clothes. Only the rumpled sheets told him it was not all his imagination, but he could not be really sure till he went downstairs and saw Sarra cleaning the steps vigorously with a brush. She gave him a large wink.

Tallott turned up early in the day, looking sideways at Cean and expecting some trouble but getting only a bland smile.

'Have some good dreams?' Cean nodded.

'Eaten?' Cean shook his head. He was starving.

'Good, come with me and I'll tell you what we're going to do over some bread and beer.' That apparently was Tallotts breakfast diet.

With a mouth stuffed full of fresh bread Tallott explained the situation. Sojon was furious at Ceans desertion.

'That was hardly my fault' interrupted Cean.

'No lad, but you've got the blame. Believe me that old boys fury wouldn't knock a fly sideways.'

'What if he tells my father?'

'Oh, second thoughts eh? The way I've got things planned you can tell your father yourself. He's coming here.'

Cean was alarmed.

'At least he will be' Tallott sputtered through an over large swig 'when I gets Sojon to write 'im a letter.'

Tallott put his scheme before Cean.

'But what's going to happen when you get the jewel?'

'That's all in hand too, but don't get too inquisitive. What you don't know you can't tell. These taverns have ears'.

Tallott glanced around as if too make sure there were not any large whorl-shaped obstrusions on the wall. He lowered his voice.

'I'll tell you this. If the Duc du Qu'et is freed with the jewel, now that's an interesting thought eh? And take both to Noll where the Ducs brother is on the throne. You see? But keep it quiet. Its got to be worked out. What I want from you is your support. You don't have to say anything, just keep on my side. You've got brains, and wit. You can ride and you're fit. You're just the person to help us. This is our chance to overthrow Lutens Wenner. We'll never get a better chance. Your father hates that man, you read his letter. Are you with us?'

Cean was not sure, but the appeal in Tallotts voice touched upon his new found manhood and Tallotts ingratiating words gave it a further polish.

‘How are you going to get Sojon to agree to write the request?’

‘That’s my boy. I’ll scare the Strom out of him. Easy-peasy’.

And so it was.

Sojon was after an old man, out of his depth. Tallott cajoled first, then threatened, then warned, and laid bare the vilest instruments of torture that the kings men possessed. Like Cean before, he threatened Sojon with the knowledge that he now possessed, that he could not unknow, and could not reveal at peril to their lives. He wanted to live? Did they think Wenner would let them once he knew? Cean had to admire Tallotts directness, even though he had time to be shocked at the blatant manipulation of himself. He privately wondered what sort of horse he had saddled himself too. Sojon protested in a babble of noise that reminded Cean of air escaping from leather wine flasks, and paralysed at Tallotts explicit and implicit threats. This game was no longer to be enjoyed.

Sojon even turned to Cean in desperation. Why must he write that letter?

‘Sojon you must! Givtheem is correct. We are all in danger.’

Sojon replied shaking.

‘And in worse danger if the Charmstone comes here!’

Givtheem played his trump card.

‘Your wife? Your child? I only have to speak and these are gone from you forever.’

Sojon quivered and went pale but still tried to resist. Tallott turned on him.

‘You fool. Do you think we’ll listen to you now? Five years of talking has made you’re tongue so long you’ll trip over it soon. We’ve made the decision. You keep that flapping thing in you’re mouth!’

He watched over Sojon as the older man shakingly wrote a letter to Ceans father requesting him to bring the Charmstone to the city within ten days, then watched helplessly as Tallott tucked it into his pocket protesting feebly ‘that this was too fast, too fast.’

Tallott ignored him, and as the meeting broke up Sojon caught Ceans arm.

‘Cean, Cean, where were you last night? You went with Tallott? Where?’

The old man crumpled when Cean replied.

‘What would your father say?’ he pleaded.

Cean just brushed this aside. The warmth of his new manhood was still strong in him, and mention of his fathers name only made him angry.

‘I’m my own man, not my fathers’ and his anger made him want to hurt Sojon needlessly ‘that letter I carried. Did you think I carried it in ignorance? I read it before I came here. I had the right too. Tallott is right. You cannot stop what you have started, we are all in danger now. You need young men to do this job and get rid of Wenner, you are worn out!’

Tallott smiled and took him by the shoulders and lead him out.

Since that stormy meeting, things had rather lost their excitement. Tallott was obscure in his replies to Ceans questions, just saying ‘Be patient. It’s all going well. I’m making arrangements but they are delicate like. If I push too hard we’ll lose everything.’

Cean went around to Sojons house and collected his horse and spare clothing, shrugging off the old mans pleas. He offered to Tallott to take the message to his father but Tallott said that had all been arranged and besides he needed Cean here. What for Cean could not imagine. The days stretched tediously in front of him and the money that his father had supplied him with had all gone. He had had to borrow off Tallott. Occasionally he remembered the rotten trick of Tallotts with the old woman; but then soft memories would come flooding back of the sweet aftermath and washed the anger out. Sarra had returned since, and filled two nights with the scent of her body.

### III

On the seventh morning Tallott was waiting for him downstairs grumbling ‘you’re a late riser. I thought country folk got up at dawn.’

Cean let the remark pass.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked as Tallott strode out the tavern door.

‘To see someone. He wants to see you, tho I cant see why’.

‘Thanks. Are we having breakfast?’

‘No’ and with that flat statement Tallott lapsed into an uncommon silence for several minutes. They had walked up a couple of streets before Tallott started to talk.

‘This meeting is important. He’s giving us his decision as to whether he’ll help us or not. I’m none too confident’ he added gloomily.

‘Who is he?’

‘A wayfarer’.

Cean had heard the term before and did not like the sound of it. He associated wayfarers with the dusty, cringing ex-soldiers that begged at the farm door.

The streets were busy with people hustling to work and stall-holders setting up for the days trading. Most of the wayside craftsmen were already set up in their doorway, for many of them would have started at dawn. Cean had become familiar with their wares having walked frequently this way during his enforced idyll. He knew they were approaching the weneways gateway of the city, but was surprised when Tallott turned off just before the archway down a confined lane that he’d never noticed before. Tallott paused under a sign which held the legend ‘The Wayfarers Inn’.

‘Keep your tongue in here. Some inside are spys for the kings men. I’ve let out I’m just doing a bit of smuggling on the side. They arn’t interested in that.’

'Is this where you've been all the time' asked Cean.

'Off and on. Guard your tongue.' Then he pushed inside into the gloomy interior.

Cean was a little disappointed. It looked a very ordinary tavern, in fact a good deal dirtier than most. Tallott made his way to the bar-stand at the far end, nodding to one or two men in passing. Cean followed timidly. Something was said in low tones between the landlord and Tallott and then the latter drew off a couple of tankards of beer, which Tallott carried to a table. Beer wasn't to Ceans taste in the morning but he made a show of drinking it. Tallott did not pretend and gulped a strong draft into his stomach.

'You live on this stuff' murmured Cean.

'So does Strom. It keeps me fit.'

Tallott looked around at the other tables but didn't see anything to interest him, for he leaned over and whispered sensationally into Ceans ear.

'More murders done in this tavern than any in other part of the city. Everyone for leagues around comes here.'

Cean thought this illogical.

'Why?'

'Didn't you see the sign? It's the Wayfarers Inn.'

Cean was as confused as ever. The beer had loosened Tallotts lips and he was inclined to be confidential.

'Had a Strom of a time getting a wayfarer. There's plenty that want a job but none that's up to doing it. They're all villains if you ask me, can't trust 'em. But I had a stroke of luck. When I came here the second time the landlord told me that a first-rate wayfarer from the mountains had come late last night. The landlord knew him, and his reputation, and reckoned he was alright. That's who we're waiting for. I saw him yesterday and he said he'll think about it and let me know today'.

'What's he like?'

Tallott considered.

'He's a bit young I thought, but he's got a kind of assurance about him. If half the landlord said about him was true he's our boy. Heh up, he's signalling to us.'

Indeed the aproned landlord had made a discreet sign, and the two of them crossed over the room and were ushered into a side-passage.

'He's down in that end room there' the landlord whispered.

Tallott nodded, walked down the passage, knocked and heard a voice say 'come in?'

The room was the first surprise. The Inn was so buried amongst twisting streets and dark interiors that it was a shock to find this room full of light, pouring through wide bay windows that looked out into an enclosed courtyard. Cean caught a flash of green grass and an angle of blue sky over the crenelated city wall that backed out onto the courtyard. Then the man who was sitting at the window aroused further surprise, and interest. Even though he did not stand and his face was a little in shadow from the streaming light behind, Cean could see a youthful face and slim, even scrawny figure.

He was expecting an older man despite Tallotts earlier words.

‘Please sit down’. A quiet authoritative voice.

There was a silence. A bird fluttered at the window mistaking the glass for an entry into the room then flew off after it beat with its wings a couple of times against the pane.

‘He wants to get in and you want to get out. He’d do better with legs and you with wings.’

Tallott smiled respectfully. Another pause. Cean was surprised at Tallotts dutiful silence, but then this man did have a sort of calm, knowing authority.

‘I have thought about the risks to be taken’ an agonising hesitation ‘they do not seem too great’ Tallott grinned ear to ear as he heard the wayfarer say ‘and I’ll accept the commission, but there are some things to be said though. This will be no ordinary journey. Besides the rigours of the mountains we shall have to contend with the kings men. They will not take kindly to the escape of the Duc du Qu’et.’

Tallott gave a start in his seat, and his face went pale. The wayfarer looked amused.

‘Come, you hardly thought that you’re secret elderly gentleman accompanied by his young daughter’ (I believe you said) was likely to fool me?’

‘I did not, think it, er, wise to tell you at first’. Tallott stammered out.

‘You were correct. You need not be alarmed. I would have done much the same, but it raises the price somewhat. I can hardly return to Swaleton again after this little escapade. Or indeed any of the Second Kingdom with any safety. At least whilst Lutens Wenner is alive’.

‘We weren’t trying to cheat you. Don’t get me wrong. Only, this is dangerous, and we had to take precautions.’

Tallott sounded more confident now.

‘I accept your caution. I do not think you were trying to cheat me, but the price still goes up. It’s a dangerous journey to the Granry, and at this time of the year’

Tallott glanced at Cean as if reminding him to keep silent.

‘How much?’ The reply was prompt.

‘Twenty gold sovereigns.’ Cean sucked in his breath. Such a sum could build a palace in Swaleton.

‘Twenty is high. Why not ten now and five on completion of the commission.’

There was no surprise in Tallotts voice as he bargained, though Cean could not imagine for one moment that he had even a fraction of this amount.

‘Fifteen now’.

‘Twelve now, and five later’

The wayfarer nodded.

‘That’s agreed’ said Tallott.

What in Wyrds breathe was Tallott playing at? Cean was incredulous. Only yesterday the man was complaining at lending him money for the lodging at the Inn.

The wayfarer got up and paced up and down several times.

‘On the first evening of Harvess, listen closely to this, your party will go down to the old mill quay precisely at the end of the seventh wick, not a bit-wick sooner or later. There will be a boat there. The boatmans name is Matthew Culler. He is reliable and you must accept whatever orders he gives. Wear dark clothes and travel only in pairs. Carry light bundles, wear stout shoes and be armed. There will be only the four of you?’

Tallott nodded.

‘The Duc du Qu’et, his daughter, yourself and this gentleman?’

‘Cean Grin’kel’ interjected Tallott.

‘He can speak?’ inquired the wayfarer.

‘I’m better at holding my tongue’ replied Cean.

‘Good. Silence is a rarer commodity than speech I fancy. Are you the son of Herret Grin’kel? Yes? We met once in happier circumstances, but we’ll have plenty of time for stories. The boat will take you to the Huss’tt Forks. I will be waiting there with horses.’ he paused in his stride ‘you need not know the rest. Is this all understood?’

‘Perfectly. End of the seventh wick on the 1st Harvess. There will be a lot of people then?’ Tallott pointed out.

‘Of course. You have the money?’

At this point Cean was sure Tallott would admit his deception and plead for consideration. There was something in the brisk, efficient step of the wayfarer that made Cean think that he would not receive it. He shifted ever so slightly to the edge of his seat in order to launch himself on the wayfarer once the cheat was revealed, but there was no need for such preparation. Incredibly, Tallott dug into his tunic and pulled out a small cloth purse and counted out twelve golden sovereigns into his hand, then passed them to the wayfarer who slipped them into his pocket without a glance. Cean watched this extraordinary transaction in amazement. He’d even noted a glint remaining in Tallotts purse that suggested that the sovereigns were not exhausted. He had never in his life seen such money.

The meeting was over. Tallott and Cean backed out, and said nothing on their way through the passage and tavern out into the street. Tallott had nodded again to the landlord in passing. After a couple of streets passed Tallott began to whistle under his breath. Cean could not contain himself.

‘Where did you get that money?’

Tallott only increased his whistling and made a couple of jaunty sideways steps. He looked at Cean gaily.

‘It’s one of Wyrds mysteries boy’ and wouldn’t say another word, despite Ceans fury at being called ‘boy’ again.

## The Resemblance Between Them

*After all my early promises I return you back to history. I am unapologetic, I forgot that this was needed, otherwise you would not see the irony of how the lives of Mikal Widsith and Mial Hest are deeply intertwined. In later volumes this link is expanded and becomes a motive force. Lutens Wenners deviousness is more deeply revealed, and there are also several paragraphs on the geography of the kingdom, read them carefully, they are instructive. There is a map somewhere, look at it.*

The light dimmed as the sun dropped below the city walls, throwing for a few seconds the black outline of the battlements into the room. Still Widsith made no move to rise from his chair. His head was turned slightly towards the window, outlining his face against it, one hand rested on the chair's arm, the other rubbed on his chin. His mind had cast back to Herret Grin'kel and that sunny day on the Rume where the older man taught the patient art of cast-fishing to his young apprentice. The day was vivid in images: fern-banks, blues and golds on the water, his father waving from the shore and a huge flapping caerp in the bottom of the boat. One of the rare times he and his father were not on the move. But his mind did not linger here but went forward many years after his father's death to a curious incident that sometimes struck him as ironical, and at other times fore-boding, his father, came back from the grave to save him.

It happened that he had been camping on the fringe of the forest in the year 154 it must have been, or maybe 155, when a group of huntsmen (following the scent of a stag) burst into the clearing a hundred yards from his camp. They must have lost the trace for they hesitated, while the dogs howled desultory around the edges of the clearing. Perhaps it had been a poor day's sport for they rode over to Widsith and demanded an explanation of his presence. There were four of them, one in particular, plumpish in the face and more richly dressed than the others seemed in command. They did not fancy Widsith's replies, called him bold and mischievous. Did he not know this was the king's property? And what was his business here?

Hot light slanted down on the protagonists, the horses stirring and shadows and camp-smoke mingled in with the scene, which was threatening unpleasantness.

Widsith was standing and keeping his face to the horsemen and eyeing the location of his own mare, cropping grass some longmans away. You could be hanged insisted the leader, for insolence as much as poaching. There was no meat on the fire Widsith responded. We've had bad hunting today why not go for this fellow suggested one of the men mischievously. The leader smiled at the idea. If he's a travelling man he should be able to travel well ahead of us. Widsith stood his ground as their horses pressed closer. There was poor chance of escape in such a cruel hunt. He must keep talking.

'I'm a wayfarer, not a traveller.'

'That's no difference' said another 'we'll fare you on your way. Give you a start in fact'.

But the leader suddenly seemed not so sure.

'A wayfarer? Hmm, we might spare your saucy life after all. I owe a favour to one such. It was a burden on me. I could rid it on you.'

'Sire, you're not let him go?' one reproached him.

'If it pleases me Mr Hest I'll do just that. Maybe we should use you instead. Your folly let the stag slip, I've a mind to try you as a bait.'

With that retort the other men lapsed into silence and the leader pulled around his horse.

'Count this as a lucky day Mr Wayfarer, but do not do the same for tomorrow. Get you along out of this place'.

With that sent his horse into a gallop yelling for the hounds and followed smartly by the other men. In a few minutes the trees swallowed the huntsmen and the natural silence of the glade returned.

Widsith swallowed at the memory. Only a bitwick from death, graciously reprieved by a rich mans whim. He buried a hand in his jerkin and fetched out a pipe, lit it, and saw past shapes in the swirl of smoke. He was sure the man was the newly crowned king Lutens Wenner, and one of the others would be Mial Hest. It had been a close thing, and he sent a word of inner thanks to his father who had guided the young Wenner over the crags of the Fore Range some years before. The wayfaring business gave them strange companions at times.

This rueful thought led him back to the current enterprise.

He yawned. Well, he'd no love of Wenner, and the chance to do him a disservice was appealing. It was no matter that he would not be able to return to the Caroyal plain. For some seasons now he had struggled with the suspicion that the time of the wayfarer was past, and that his future lay elsewhere. He could count on one hand the good wayfarers now active in the craft.

Some had died it was true, others had uncertain fates, yet most had simply retired from the business, preferring the settled custom of life in ordinary work and the contentment of marriage. Their services were simply not needed. Who would play a craftsman for wares out of fashion? Or hire a wayfarer for those who already knew where to go? As the light of enquiry and expansion muted the thrall of the Dark Period, so did

wayfarers become less needed. People could work out the geography for themselves. Forest were slowly getting cleared again, and the brigands were less active. The passes were still dangerous, but that was changing. Wenner was talking about guard-posts all along the old Royal Highway and into the Furrowdale Valley. It was just a matter of time. He had seen maps too in the hands of travelling merchants, pretty crude, and mostly wrong, but they would get sharper. As trade increased so the wayfaring work declined. Soon they would be dispensed with altogether.

These were gloomy thoughts. He cast around for the positive balance, and quickly found it. Twelve jingling coins in his pocket was a profitable beginning; and the adventure itself. Wasn't that always the thing?

Widsith stood up and went to a frayed leather holster that would normally be hung off his saddle. It contained the most valuable of his possessions, a creased and yellowing chart. This he took out and spread on the floor. It was actually a copy of an original still held in his Rise village home, but accurate enough. He knew it backwards anyway and only studied it to refresh his mind. Spread out in this manner the land looked, as indeed it was, broken and difficult country. The success of the Weal dynasty appeared all the more remarkable when considering the geography of the land they had subdued.

The dominant features were the two long fingers of mountain ranges that out-reached across the plains like the thin claw of an old mans hand, his knuckles being the high uplands and ice-fields of the mountain lands. The two fingers stretched to the edge of the vast and little known Marsh kingdom, on Widsiths map a virtual blank, and so effectively divided the land into three parts. Completing the overall picture was a short stubby mountain group, rather like a thumb, called the Keeb Mountains trapping within its arc the great Forest of Gloreen. Beyond the Raggerok was a smaller line of mountains, known as the Cif, which if you could imagine that the old man had lost his fourth digit, curved like a wrinkled little finger of his hand and enclosed the high mysterious tableland of the Sard. Widsith had been there once, when young.

To the skaw was the city of Swaleton and the capital Caroyal on the Rume plain, itself only a rich and fertile pocket in the huge sweep of dry grassland known as the Verd. Nothing separated the Swalemen from this huge emptiness to skaw. Little was known of the inhabitants of the Verd, mostly nomadic herdsmen, eeking out a living, and with fierce customs. It was supposed that the Verd had an ending somewhere, but no one was sure. He had never met a wayfarer from there. He had heard there was only emptiness, but surely there was more than that? It was odd when you thought about it, and the wayfarer had thought about it, that all the edges of the known kingdoms seemed to run into this blankness. Beyond the Granry, or the marsh, or the Verd or the icelands? It was as if the edge of the map had been reached, and these were its definitions.

Yorn on his map was occupied by the Plain of Granry, with its capital town Noll. The Granry disappeared into the rumour of another emptiness. Between the two great bony fingers of ranges was the narrow valley of the Furrowdale with its capital Beorht, and Widsith tapped his own finger idly on the diagramatic ones.

Essentially he had to find a passage over these high mountains to get from Caroyal to Noll. The Fore Range was a thousand longmans at its height, and the Raggerok had spiky glittering peaks well over fifteen hundred longmans. Both formidable barriers at any time of the year.

For generations there had been routes over the ranges between Caroyal and Noll, in fact before even those two cities had existed. On Widsiths map these routes were marked as pale dotted lines and each had a name and a history to go with it. The Royal Road was the breeways route, and the easiest. There was only the one pass, Tol, across the lower Fore Range, and then the trail squeezed between the base of the Raggerok and the marshland. This was the way the young Duc du Qu'et had ridden boldly in pursuit of glory and a wife.

King Weal the Second had taken this way to subdue the Granry Plains but surprisingly the low pass of Tol was not discovered (or remembered) till well into Swivvens reign, which was by then too late for that great monarch, for he had already found the hard way.

The second route was the so-called Traders Track. It involved two passes, both considerably higher than Tol, but whereas the old Royal Road swung a huge wasteful way breeways, the Traders Track cut directly across the land between Swaleton and Noll in a businesslike, no-nonsense fashion. There was profit to be made and no time to be wasted on deviation. The pass over the Fore Range was called Traders Gate, for obvious reasons, and the pass over the Raggerok was called the Passage of Prayer because a monastery sat there to give succour to ailing travellers. It was here that King Weal was forced to spend his last days when it was originally a nunnery. After his great Rume surprise Swivven consolidated his empire by establishing Beorht right on the Traders Track in the Furrowdale Valley, and building a line of forts to protect the merchantmen. These were great days, but now all gone. Some of the forts still stood, but ruined, and no trader had been brave enough to try this route for over seventy years. The road was almost impassable and the lowlands were infested with brigands.

The third route was the Ancient Way. It negotiated two very high passes, Three Thrum on the Fore Range and Capability Col over the Raggerok, both impassable in West Time under deep snows. There was also a third pass, because the Ancient Way crossed the waterless Sard and over the lonely Cif mountains to the Granry at a pass called simply, and gloomily, the Sink. It was a route used by the Past Peoples, and skirted many places where these remote tribes still lived — the Lowleahs, the Rise folk, the Hollwerwalls. It was a convoluted, romantic route, fit for secrets and secret travellers.

Widsith looked at the routes for a very long time, then sighed.

The conclusion was obvious, but unhelpful. The Ancient Way was, oddly in this year of 156, the most feasible. There were few brigands, no inquiring villages, and no kings men. It was also the unexpected way. Widsith envisaged taking horses as far as the foot of Three Thrum Pass crossing into the Furrowdale Valley, and then the stiff Capability Col before West Time set in. It would be a tight race between them and the West Time snows, but he thought they could do it. The Ducs health was an uncertain factor. That is why he planned to cross the bulk of the Swaleton plain by boat or horse. Sneaking past the city of Caroyal was not a promising beginning, but the wayfarer saw no alternative, and it might just work.

Sitting back from the map he could see at a glance that it was the worst of all routes. Cutting over the grain of the old First Kingdom contrary to every natural path. Every mountain range, every river acted as a barrier to them, and it would be hard to choose a more bloody-minded route. As he had pointed out later to Tallott, it was not the route

at fault, rather the destination. Tallott agreed, but insisted that Noll offered the only long-term secure haven for the Duc du Qu'et.

'His brother is the boss.'

Widsith privately had misgivings about this. He had heard of disturbing events in Noll, but allowed the main point to Tallott. There were no other places for the Duc to go. Nowhere on the Caroyal plains or in the Furrowdale Valley could be considered safe. Indeed there was a hope that Wenner would think the Duc would return to his estate, and turn blindly away from his back door. It was this that led Widsith to plot a course so close to the capital. He could only hope the king would oblige.

On Mattew Culler he could rely. He was a good man 'in earth', as they used to say, and Hull would be ready by the Huss'tt gorge, but there there was a palpably weak link between, ex-soldier, horse-trader, inveterate smuggler, Gormiah Threadon. If there was any alternative Widsith would not use him, but his usual supplier of horses had been caught in a piece of stupid smuggling and Hull would be far too conspicuous. He had to trust Gormiah. Or at least trust the mans greed. He'd be there with the horses alright, but could he keep his tongue? On some occasions the wayfarer came near to pulling it out by the roots, but always the measly worm had wriggled out with such plaintive gestures and fawning behaviour that Widsith was ashamed for himself to want to kill the useless creature. He'd once seen Threadon chasing a copper coin into a gutter full of rubbish, burying his arm up to the shoulders in the putrid pile in a desperate search for the coin he had dropped. So he could rely on greed.

There was a light tapping at the door.

'Yes', called out Widsith, hastily bundling the chart into the holster. The landlords face appeared confidentially at the door.

'Thought you should know sir. Two kings men, never seen afore, came in, looked around for a bit, then walked out. They 'ad little emblems sewn on their tunics, right 'ere' sir' and the landlord pulled at his collar. He paused, and whispered dramatically. 'They'd be baldymen sir. First I'd seen 'ere in many a season.'

The news did not seem to have the sensational impact the landlord had hoped for. Widsith merely nodded politely, and after the landlord had hesitated on the doorway, hoping that this wayfarer might want to discuss the news, caught a steely look of impatience and hastily backed out.

'These wayfarers' he later confided to a customer 'keep themselves close, very close.'

Widsith would have been amused if he had overheard. One of the advantages of his career was to receive a much wider knowledge of the world than could ever be garnered in Swaleton. To some extent this was a part of his craft, he could not supply knowledge if he did not collect it. Any traveller with a sharp eye and quick ear could catch much of the information that passed for secret or unknown in other quarters. People were great gossipers. Widsith could have astounded the landlord with intimate scandals of the court in Caroyal if he had a mind to, but it was not his interest. It was the surround of words concealing the pieces of information that were more revealing.

For example, when in Caroyal a season past, he had learnt from a court maid that Mial Hest had been sent on a secret expedition to the breeways, and that the king had

built a fine new house for him and his family in the court grounds. This considered the maid, showed the king's high favour, but Widsith was sceptical. It could show more likely that Wenner either liked to have Mial Hest far away, or very close at hand, nowhere in the middle ground where Hest could act underhand. Once, at a road junction Widsith had been delayed by a passing court retinue, and in amongst the bystanders it was gossiped that the striking lady on the fine stallion was the wife of the baldyman leader Mial Hest. Her beauty was obvious, and Widsith wondered whether the king had been tempted by it.

When Widsith heard that the king was dividing the kingdom into several administrative districts, one based on Swaleton, he bet his front teeth that Mial Hest would be appointed to the governorship of Swaleton. It would be a neat solution for the king. A promotion that Mial Hest could hardly refuse, yet which placed him four hard days ride from the capital in the most provincial and powerless of the districts. If this surmise was correct, then Mial Hest would more than likely take up his position at Harvess, traditionally the great celebration of the year. He would naturally send some of his men to go ahead to prepare the way. That only left one problem. Why should they turn up in this inn? Why was that such a surprise? It was the only known haunt of wayfarers in the city and as such was considered a hot bed of vice. Of course they would inspect the place, and think it tame stuff to the inns they were accustomed to in Caroyal.

Widsith smiled at his logic. If more reason was wanted, simply say that reared on deceit and violence, they naturally gravitated to the places where such could be found. All light had gone from the room and it would have taken good eyes to make out the figure reclining in the seat. Widsith lit a candle and poured from a bottle some liquid in a glass. An observer would be wrong in thinking it alcohol, it was plain water, bought at great price from outside the city. Widsith found the local water poisonous to his stomach.

## II

In another room, on the same evening, a not unsimilarly built man to wayfarer Widsith, was also taking liquids, but this ended the resemblance between them.

The drink was a strong local wine, heavy in texture and flavour that many found unpalatable, but Mial Hest was raised on it. Almost literally, his father was a brewer, and in the absence of a wife weaned the child on his products 'It'll make him strong' he expounded to his cronies, and there might have been something in his theory, for the wiry Mial grew into a tough and vigorous adult, entering a career of soldiery, which his athleticism mixed with a fast intelligence gave him a rapid ascent through the ranks. He attained captaincy of the City Guard at the early age of thirty, and became the Commander of the District Force some two years later, the highest position attainable in those days.

Mial Hest sat, and drank, and remembered.

Secretary Wenner observed this ascent and suggested to the soldier that there were

still places for him to go if he had an eye to a good chance. So a partnership was formed, distrustful, wary, but nevertheless real, between the two rising stars of Caroyal. But of late this thirteen year marriage of convenience had begun to founder. Both had achieved as much as they could, and both were in a sense blocked by the other. Mial Hest as general and commander of the baldymen was trapped inside his military role, and his opportunities for civil authority were diminished by the establishment of the Second Kingdom. He supported it at first, loyalty had been one of his virtues, but cursed himself for a fool later, when he saw King Weners careful establishment of a dynasty that would naturally exclude any non-member of the family.

On Weners part, Hest still controlled the army, the power-base of his new kingdom, and also the potential underminer of it. Wenner too, swore at his stupidity of that generous moment that gave commandship of the baldymen (he had had nothing else to give at the time) to his then trusted ally. He wanted this back. It was a dangerous and trained force, the heart of the army. Wenner could not hope to extend his influence over the rest of land without the help of his loyal general, and this loyalty could no longer be guaranteed. The seeds of distrust between them were nurtured by their mutual ambitions but nothing might have happened (at least quickly) if not a new factor had hastened the conflict.

Mial Hest found a wife. Her name Fioll, a stunning daughter of a prosperous merchant. Took may be a better description, though Hest would say won. He bore an attractive figure, muscular, long-jawed and powerful eyes set in a cruel face. When he smiled the cruelty went from it and he took on the air of the brave and successful soldier he undoubtedly was. The merchant tried to resist his approaches to his daughter, but she certainly did not. At sixteen she had little consciousness of her own body and accepted the compliments given it with the grace of training. Mial Hest passion aroused a response in her limbs that she took for love and she responded to his interest. The merchant alarmed by the violence of the attraction agreed to the marriage, though lamented her loss. King Wenner himself attended the grand ceremony, oh, it was such a fine occasion.

The room was finely hung in tapestries that fell across almost every part of the walls. Only the door and the window were uncovered. The general took the bottle in his hand and slowly poured liquid into the goblet till it overflowed onto the table, and trickled along the clean surface to the edge where the internal tension of the wine balanced it momentarily on the lip, then dribbled it over. Hest watched with colourless eyes. That first night he remembered, and the next, and the next as he poured out his body into Fiolls willing cup. She was deflowered and debauched. Her body ached daily, and she must have withstood what amounted to a virtual war on her young flesh, and returned what she could, but it was not love and in the end she was defeated and repelled by it. The general loved with brothel manners, and to a girl brought up with the genteel romances of a boudoir it was shocking, and it was not enough.

The king enamoured of Fioll at a distance, sensed the disharmony and began paying her closer attention, flattering indeed to a young girl.

She was wooed and bedded in a manner that even the cynical court found cruel. One courtier remarked she was going from 'a bull to a wolf'. The kings wife kept silent, which is more than can be said of the king. He hardly bothered to keep the affair

concealed, nay boasted of it, feeling that his plump body had scored a victory over the handsome general. Fioll, now less innocent of the kings ways, went in desperation from one to the other, seeking to heal the rift of which she was the cause. Mial Hest, once he learnt of the affair, could hardly make her lover be publicly condemned, so he resorted to beating Fioll. Matters came to a head when the general beat her too hard and Fioll half in terror than design, struck out at her husband with a knife she had concealed in her bodice.

Hest was surprised at the blood that poured from the side of his chest and staggered to his room calling for his servant. Fioll fled to the king.

Lutens Wenner grasped at the opportunity presented. He summoned the injured and bandaged Hest, told him of his regrets for the incident and that it might be better if Fioll were to live separate from him for a while. Also, he announced to the general without a trace of irony, that in re-organising the administration of the kingdom he would regard it as an honour if Mial Hest accepted the governorship of Swaleton. The king managed to suggest by his tone that this appointment was a favour to his loyal comrade, who could therefore live away from the capital without suspicion from the comon folk that his marriage was failing. Of course the king suavely added, the general would retain command of the districts forces but would have to relinquish overall command of the army, and also of the baldymen, which were after all the kings bodyguard.

I do not suppose any man hated Lutens Wenner more than Mial Hest as he left that chamber.

He was powerless except to graciously accept the title from his lord, and allow his wife to proceed to his lords bed in his absence. So on this evening, and for many long evenings afterwards in that brocaded room, his head filled with drink and jealous rage, Mial Hest plotted a revenge on his king. A revenge that included in its tortured plans a ghastly death upon his child-wife. No one at the court could feel comfortable that Mial Hest would take the kings insults calmly, and Lutens Wenner was not the only one surprised as the small envoy of men left Caroyal on a misty morning six days before Harvess. He had expected a good deal more trouble than that, and was not altogether sure that he should have let his former comrade go so easily. Fioll was the only person to give public grief to her husbands departure, and in her youthful way it was genuine enough.

In nearly every assessment except one wayfarer Widsith was correct. His one error was in thinking that the baldymen were there to guard Mial Hest, they were in fact spying on him. These instructions had been very carefully given by the new commander-in-chief of their group, Lutens Wenner. It was just an unfortunate coincidence that the baldymen should be present in Swaleton on the eve of the Ducs planned escape. Unfortunate and consequential.

## Chapter 8

# The Folly of Waiting

*Here we introduce Juud du Qu'et, youngest daughter of the Due du Qu'et, a quiet beauty it is believed, though no good description exists of her. Herret Grin'kel arrives in town, angry, Sojon protests, but events are quickening too fast for his comprehension. Gormiah Threadon is introduced, a filthy, untrustworthy, whining little rogue of no real redeeming value, but we cannot shake him! He will turn up at inopportune moments throughout our narrative. The fellow is a leech!*

It was the 60th day of Croppen, six days before the great festival of Harvess. Preparations were taking place in the city for the event. Tallott watched one group of carpenters in the square for a few minutes, slowly raising out of a jumble of wood a large platform that would, when completed, hold the theatrical dramas. Here the various gods would act out their roles in the great cycle of the seasons that culminated in the harvest. Each god had a character, Breet, the sun, Wene, her sister the moon, Stuess, fertility, Gadabout, the comic genius, Tilst, the patient ploughman, Wyrd, the evil magician, Drubbin, Wyrds dull apprentice, and Strom, lord and presider over the court of gods. Tallott turned away, not sure how much he believed in these old figures, but they would serve as a useful enough disguise for the escape of the Duc. Tallott congratulated himself, temporarily forgetting that the idea had been the wayfarers.

At an imposing door on the main town thoroughfare, he knocked and was admitted by a servant. He was shown through a number of rooms, all finely decorated with tapestries and coloured cloths woven in traditional Swaleton patterns. As a weaver's son Tallott had a sharp eye for their worth, but he had not the time to judge for the servant deposited him in a plainer room, and withdrew. A side-door opened and a rustle of a dress quietly announced the person he had come to see. Tallott looked at her keenly. Much depended on her response. She was taller than most women, and this height was accentuated by the long dark hair that was tied up in the fashion of the day in a short top-knot and then allowed to fall back over the shoulders. Her face was calm and her

manner serious. Tallott had met her once before but was uncertain whether she remembered him so he introduced himself with a small bow.

'Please, take a seat Mr Tallott. I think we met once at the house of Sojons, is that correct?'

'Perfectly miss'. Ma'am seemed too old-ladyish an address to this girl.

'What do you wish to see me about. Your letter did not explain. I should add that we must keep the visit short. My guardians disprove of uninvited men'. She said 'un-invited' with a short lift to her eyebrows. Tallott took a deep breath.

'We plan to free your father. Very soon, probably on the first day of Harvess.'  
She certainly did not look surprised.

'We?'

'Sojon, Herret Grin'kel, myself'.

'Why?' she asked simply.

Tallott responded as directly.

'We have the Charmstone'.

'What does that mean?'

'That your father is no longer safe.'

Tallott had carefully prepared this argument.

'Already too many people know that the Charmstone exists. Sojon, Herret Grin'kel and his son, some of the prefectors, and perhaps others. Each day it becomes more dangerous. You know what Sojon is like, he cannot keep his tongue. You know what the Charmstone is?' he asked anxiously, fearing his explanations were getting to far ahead.

'My father used to let me play with it in my sandbox. But why are you really doing this, for my father, or for yourself?'

'Both. We want Weners overthrow, and your father is a symbol of opposition, as is the Charmstone. Together they are a powerful sign, which although not strength in itself, provide the means to gain the strength to bring down this king'.

He paused for breath. She smiled at him.

'Mr Tallott, you sound as if you have rehearsed this speech.' He was taken aback.

'Well I, I know what I wanted to say' he said lamely.

'I'm not sure my father shares your determination for King Weners down ▽ fall.'

'But he'll value his own life surely?'

Judd put her hands together on her lap and kept a steady gaze on Tallott.

'He has been in prison for ten years. Four walls do not help a person to maintain their independence, they only reduce it. Even a young mans will would be weakened by those years, let alone an old man who has lost everything he valued'.

Tallott played his trump early.

'Not everything. He has his daughter. Might he not fight for you?'

Judd considered this.

‘He might, yes he might. If he thought I were at risk’ then a worried note crept into her voice, ‘but this enterprise seems foolish, and the only risk is in following it. How am I to judge that we are, as you claim, in danger?’

‘Listen’ and Tallott leaned forward, forgetting the formality of their situation in the attempt to win her confidence ‘I’m not talking idly you know, or chatting here because of some vague ideal. Lutens Wenner is a ruthless man. He slaughtered your brother and sisters, and ruined your estate. Have you forgotten so quickly? Do yer think you or your father can live under this magic spell forever? I don’t know why Wenner has kept your father alive but you can be sure it is for some evil purpose. Once he hears that the Charmstone is about do you think he’ll spare you? Oh the Duc he’ll say, he’s still alive. I must have forgotten about the old boy. Well, can’t have the old bloke living with the Charmstone, around, better dispose of him’.

Tallotts hand gave a swift cutting motion to the air. In his intensity Tallotts argument became a little incoherent, as Juud seemed to realise.

‘If King Wenner gains the Charmstone and my father is still imprisoned, surely my father will be safe?’

‘You cannot be sure of that’ Tallott picked up his argument again ‘and remember, the Duc is twice the threat with the Charmer free. The king would not risk letting the Duc get free, and you know the simplest way to stop that’.

Juud looked away.

‘So you say we have no choice?’

‘I say you must fight. For what you have lost and for your own self-esteem’. Tallott became brutal.

‘Will you let the last of the du Qu’ets be taken to the wharett and be slain without a squeak of protest?’

Juud paled. The wharett was the public execution place. Her face tightened with anger and she responded with vigour to his rapid words.

‘You speak to glibly Givtheem Tallott, too’ she stopped, unable to trust herself to speak for a moment ‘if you’ve come here to call us cowards’.

Her shoulders sagged and she bent her face to the floor. Shortly she looked up and spoke more calmly.

‘This angers you, my hesitation. Why?’

Now it was Tallotts turn to look away, a little embarrassed by the force of his own words.

‘I’ve seen the folly of waiting. I’m passionate about these things. I never could control my temper.’

They sat in silence together for a while. Distant street noises crept in and seemed loud in the quiet room. There was the sound of a maid next door, thumping and singing to herself as she worked. Several bit-wicks went by before Juud stood up and addressed Tallott seriously.

‘All what you have said today is not as new to me as you might have presumed. I too have known the folly of waiting, and what is worse, known that it may be unending. As

you said, we lived under a magic spell and I began to wonder what would happen to us if it failed. Well' and she smiled thinly 'now it has. At least the waiting is over.'

Tallott stood up and faced her squarely.

'My father will come if I ask him. I hope he will forgive me.'

She paused and looked down sadly at her entwined hands.

'Tell us what we must do'.

## II

Juud had no particular notion of her future, and certainly no hope for it. The well-off family of merchants that had inadvertently become her guardians, did not hesitate to remind her in lofty tones that a girl from a discredited estate, with no private income and a father imprisoned could not expect much of a match. Indeed she'd be lucky to get that (the guardians pointed out kindly), for her education and background put off the kind of suitors that could afford her, yet her poverty discouraged the young educated men of town from the better-to-do families who suited her. The money the Duc had provided for his daughters schooling and private boarding had run out some eight years ago and Juud was permitted to stay only out of the goodness of the guardians hearts (as they nobly remarked), and the intangible, but prestigious honour of having the Duc du Qu'ets daughter in their home. The question of a dowry never arose. Quite enough charity had been given.

These were the facts that were yearly ladled out to Juud as she rose from a clumsy country child into a poised, and attractive woman. This naturally gave the guardians another headache, for quite unintentionally Juud attracted some young admirers who had all been quickly rebuked by their parents for it. Apart from the fact that the woman had no prospects (financial or social) there was always the lingering fear of her distinguished ancestry and the consequences of getting too closely involved with it. This suited Juud, who did not much fancy marriage with any of them, or indeed marriage at all. Unfortunately the other options were no better, a teacher in the girls school she was about to graduate from, or a nun. As she turned her head away from these possibilities her guardians became yet more ill-tempered. Plainly Juud would have to choose, or else have the choice forced upon her.

If anyone had genuinely asked her what she most wanted her answer would have been immediate, 'return to the estate'.

Through all the years of enforced schooling, which still somehow left her intelligent and well-informed, throughout the secret world of her sister pupils with their strange inner gossip, throughout the moving of the robust and sinister characters that existed in the city, she had never once felt comfortable. Her home was in her heart where she kept the precious childhood memories of the estate. Of grass and unshadowed sun, her father reading by the fire, and drawing her closer as the night formed outside. How she had fussed at being sent away to grey Swaleton! Refused to eat or be convinced by

her fathers arguments that he could not educate her, and anyway it was only for two years. Well, his stubbornness was stronger than her childish tantrums. Just as well, for it had saved her life.

So long ago.

After ten years in Swaleton she was plainly becoming a nuisance to her guardians, who could not marry her off, who did not want to teach, and did not want to enter the church, then yesterday Givtheem Tallott had spoken.

There was no-one she could confide in with Tallotts wild plan. The cold had seemed to come in after he had left, and pulling the rug further around her had not helped. Like the stages for drama being prepared in the square. She had doubted whether Tallotts scheme was entirely real, but just some theatrical trick that would vanish after the festival. Her mind warred with doubt and hope. If she hoped too much she could be fearfully disappointed. And the escape itself? What of the risks? She had given her support too easily, she admitted it now, too strongly swept up by Tallotts grim warnings and easy-sounding plan. Yet here was a way to freedom, why could not her mind decide! How her friends would be shocked and excited. There would be talk for years after this, one way or the other. She could be the biggest fool in the kingdom soon.

Juud shivered. Events were gathering like angry clouds about her, and Wast Time was not too far away now, getting colder and darker every day.

### III

On this same day Herrett Grin'kel arrived hot and dusty from three hard days riding. Usually the journey would take four or five days, and long days at that, but Grin'kel had urged on that pace, and made Swaleton just before nightfall on the third day, only moments before the city gates were locked for the night. When Sojons letter arrived in the pocket of wayfarer, Herrett had been alarmed. Why hadn't his son been sent as messenger? The dirty wayfarer was not very helpful, saying only that Givtheem Tallott had hired him, and he didn't know of any Cean Grin'kel. Herrett told him to wait as he went inside to read the letter. It was extraordinary terse for Sojon. Hardly a word of compliment and gossip, just the bald instruction to bring the Charmstone. It sounded like an order, yet the writing was definitely Sojons. Grin'kel read it again then hurried back out to the wayfarer.

'Stay the night here. I'm hiring your services for the trip back. Give your horse to my hosteller, and see my servants for a bed.'

The wayfarer was well pleased with this, Tallott had hinted at a double-hire. Next morning the two of them set out. The wayfarer was kept occupied by finding ways around every little village at Grin'kels cautious insistence, and Herrett brooded about his son. He could not understand why Sojon had said nothing about him, and who was this Givtheem Tallott? There was something dark in all this, and the fear of it sprung more urgency to his stirrups. Off one corner of the saddle was suspended a small

leather holster which Herrett checked from time to time. The Charmstone was moving again.

On arrival in Swaleton, Grin'kel discharged the wayfarer, and made his way to Sojons house. The old man greeted him on the doorstep and poured out his troubles, the wickedness of Tallott and the deceit of Herrets son. Grin'kel could not make head or tail of the old mans fussings and sent a servant of Sojons to bring his son.

'At a tavern he's staying?' Grin'kel was shocked.

'I tell you he's come under Tallotts mischievous influence. He is a greedy, hasty man Givtheem Tallott. He will grind his own sword on your sons nose if you let him.'

This and much more was ladled into Herret's ear so by that by the time of his sons arrival, though he did not give credence to half Sojons bleatings, his heart was angry with his son. The servant showed Cean in, and Sojon moved to the far side of the room, fearing an explosion between father and son.

'Cean. What is this that Sojon tells me. That you and this Tallott are in some sort of league.'

Cean gave an angry glance at the old prefector in the corner, yet kept his temper cool. He had been preparing for this meeting with his father and was going to stand his ground.

'That's only true because Sojon and the rest of them have no purpose, and are paralysed by fear'.

'So it's true?' There was menace in Herrets insistence. Ceans voice rose a tone in reply.

'Is it a league between me and Givtheem because we make the decisions when these worthless old men can't?'

The sons boldness staggered the father, and he came closer to Cean.

'And you opened and read my letter?'

'Yes.'

The simple effrontery was almost too much for Herret and he moved as if to strike his son. Cean retreated a step but continued speaking boldly.

'If I had not read the letter nothing would have come from the finding of the Charmstone, as nothing has come before.'

'But you had no right!!' bellowed Herret.

'Am I your son or your servant? Was I to be sent in ignorance, to die for some cause I'd never heard of?'

Cean was angry now, as if in a mirror, his fathers belligerence captured in his face 'you would not treat your servants that way!'

There was some justice in this sally, but Herret wanted none of it.

'You miserable youth. I decide whether you are to be trusted. You upstart! I'm worried sick over what folly you've got yourself into, three murderous days in the saddle, and arrive to find a demon has seized your tongue. Sweet reward for such an effort!'

They stared at each other in a perfect fury of mutual ill-temper. Another word and

they would be at each others throats. Then Sojon piped up from the corner.

‘See, I warned you Herret. He’s too grand for you now.’

Herret turned on the old man in a passion of irritation, displacing the anger he felt for his son onto the hapless prefector.

‘Shut up you lickspittle! I’d rather have a son of guts than a gutted man!’

Sojon jumped back in fright at the outburst.

‘Herret, you too against me’ he said in a plaintive tone.

Suddenly Herret felt exhausted, and turned away sick of the sight of the pair of them. Three days of riding and restless thoughts had come to this confrontation. After a bitwick he asked.

‘Who is this Givthem Tallott?’

‘He’s a friend of Sojons’.

‘Has he some scheme that you’re involved in?’

Cean decided upon a respectful tone in reply to his fathers subdued questions.

‘To free the Duc du Qu’et and escape to Noll?’

‘Is that all? Why don’t we learn to fly as well’ replied Herret sarcastically ‘we’ve discussed this years ago. This is the old story’.

‘He’s hired a wayfarer, a good one.’

‘He’d better be’ interrupted Herret.

‘He is.’

Father and son eyed each other.

‘He said he knows you.’

Herret was sceptical.

‘Indeed, what’s his name?’

‘Widsith.’

This startled Grin’kel

‘Not a man in his fifties. No, it couldn’t be. He’s dead, his son perhaps?’

‘I think so. He says he knows you.’

‘What’s all this, what’s all this’ came Sojons voice from the corner. He had plucked his bravery together again. ‘You’re not taking their fatuous scheme seriously Herret? I’m surprised at you.’

Herret did not reply. He was surprised at himself. His sons bearing had impressed him somewhat. Cean had stood his ground, not yielding to his fury. There was almost a pride stirring in him for his son, but some of the bad temper was still there too.

‘And you’re to take the Charmstone with you, with every kings man on the plain at your heels.’

His question needed an answer but Cean could not do so simply. He wished Tallott was here to do justice to their side. Then an inspiration came to him.

‘In your letter, didn’t you say something like ‘we can’t let this chance slip through

our fingers?’

The father growled at the mention of the letter, but allowed the point to pass without comment. Sojon muttered something to himself in his corner. Cean relaxed, breathed out fully for the first time in several minutes, scratched his head and kept one eye on his father who sat slumped in the chair with his eyes closed. Eventually, when even Cean had ceased to fidget, sensing the tension of his fathers decision, the old man spoke.

‘Let’s see this Tallott, this Givtheem Tallott. It might be madness but it’s worth knowing how mad.’

He saw the jubilation in his sons eyes, and reasserted himself.

‘Don’t take it too well lad. You’ve won your battle this evening over a man who had been riding five wicks out of every day for three days. We’ll see after some sleep whether or not we’re better matched for argument.’

#### IV

Widsith gave his instructions carefully to the horse-dealer, waving one of Tallotts sovereigns to emphasize his point.

‘Good horses mind. Not stolen, not knackered from army days, and not nags from pulling a plough. Eight good horses.’

He only wanted six all told but was making allowances for Threadons tricks.

‘O’ course sir. Strom knows I wouldn’t let yer darn, and I keep my prayers to im every night. I knows just the horses in mind. Lovely little mares, up for sale at the local Lords. Be just right for ‘ouse you want.’

Widsith grunted.

‘Here’s a piece of gold now and there be another once you bring them. If I’m not satisfied with them there’s no money.’

The wayfarer really wondered how far he could trust Gormiah. He knew too many tricks by half, and worse, thought himself clever when he was only a fool. Gormiahs eyes softened in hurt.

‘Yer knows I’m ‘liable. I’ve never let you darn yet. Those horses will be darlings, by Strom I swears it’.

‘Just bring them’ Widsith said flatly, wearied by the long discussion of Gormiahs abilities. ‘Now go. Be here on the day before Harvess, or you’ll know little more in this world.’

With bows and scrapes, many thanks and cheerful assurances of his health and inquiries after Widsiths health, the wizened horse-dealer seated himself on his horse and trotted off.

Widsith shook his mind off Gormiah and resumed the sorting of equipment and food. He had been out of Swaleton for ten days, sorting and organising the score of

articles necessary for the journey, and storing them in an old farmhouse. It was ideally placed. Only a quarter league from the forks down a good path, and standing isolated from any other building for several leagues. He methodically went through each article, trying to justify its use, and putting it into one pile or another according to the decision. He hesitated over four shapeless bundles, 'baggers' they were called.

They were carrying baskets, woven from a stiff cloth, heavy but excellently made. There was a flap over the top to keep the rain out and loops where the arms could be thrust through and the whole thing carried on the back. They were used by the Lowleahs people who came from the Forest of the Gloreen, and were perfect for high mountain travel, yet clumsy to attach to horses. He balanced the decision in his mind, and finally shifted them to the smaller pile of articles to take. If Gormiah came up with the horses there would be room enough, if he didn't, they had a more pressing purpose.

## V

The party of baldymen, their baggage, servants, and gloomy, silent leader had travelled better than expected and were on the penultimate day of Croppen only a wick or so off from Swaleton. Most wanted to continue but Mial Hest did not fancy the city elders pompous greetings more than a bit-wick before he was obliged to bear them, and ordered a camp. It was a pleasant spot, with good grass, a brook and a nearby village stocked with food and eager to sell to well-paying visitors. One soldier got drunk and was punished appropriately. A larger tent was erected separately from the others. It carried the embroidered colours of Mial Hests old rank and the new emblem of his newly given governorship. Hest removed himself from the chatter of the cortege, spoke only briefly to his servants and made known he was not to be addressed unless it was necessary. He dwelt within himself, and eyed the mockery of his life with an intent gaze.

To reach the summit only to be pushed off by the man he had helped to carry there. Round and round in dark cloisters of thought did he recall the steps of triumph of this king Wenner; and always behind unfacingly stood his loyal general. Like a servant. Well the servant had drunk from the masters cup and had acquired the taste. Mial Hest was not an evil man, he had not the duplicity natural of a Wenner, or the quick, cruel, immediate selfishness of the king, but from this time on he began to wear the kings evil cloak. He'd known the folly of waiting, now it was time to act, but act privately. Keeping his counsel, not showing his hand, watching and waiting. And soon, this new guise he adopted, became part of him. Part of his breathing, his thoughts, and he could no more throw this cloak away in a private cupboard than he could have done his own skin.

There was a sign outside, a servant coughed and led in the captain of the guard. 'Sir' and the captain saluted uneasily.

'Sorry to bother you at this late hour, but a man, barely a man really, says he has some information for your ears alone. Well, I shook it out of him. He says that there is a plan afoot to free the Duc du Qu'et. Says its going to happen during Harvess.'

For a moment Hest had to struggle to recall who the Duc du Qu'et was, then he remembered.

'Show him in.'

Captain Yarler saluted again and half pushed in a thin, weasley old man wearing a faded tunic of a soldier. There was a deep cut across his cheek. He must have given his information too reluctantly for the captains pleasure.

'What's your name?' asked Hest.

'Gormiah Threadon your honour, an' a loyal soljer of yours, with the second regiment I wus. Fought on the Rume an all' he was silenced with a boot from the captains foot.

He shuffled nervously between the two men who looked at him as if he were some kind of disease.

'Why do you say the Duc du Qu'et is planning to escape?' asked Hest.

Threadon saw his chance and launched enthusiastically into his tale.

'Well, yer honour, I was 'ired by this wayfarer down at this farm, by the forks. Eight horses 'e wants. Oh yes I says what for? None o' your business 'e says, so o' course I make it my business to find out. 'E was going to give me 'alf a sovereign for my 'elp. Well you don't give that sort ol' money if yer donts want 'alf a sovereign o' silence.'

Gormiah dropped in the sum of money as a hint to this lord as to how much he was worth.

'Sees, I enquired 'ere and t'ere, you know, sniffing around' The captains boot intruded again with the words 'get to it.'

'Well I heard that 'e was going to rescue a very important pris'ner in Swaleto'n 'an that there couldn't be anyone else but the Duc 'cause ee's the only distinguished prisoner they got, so it stands its him and I very reckon such a good bit of 'formation is worth some consideration dont yee?'

Gormiah gasped out all of this in one long sentence, and managed to squeeze in a pleading note at the end.

'Anymore?' demanded the captain.

'Well knows, jus' that it might be done Harvess time, but not sooner 'cause I 'ave to get horses to this wayfarer tomorro.'

Gormiah lapsed into silence looking apprehensively as Mial Hest matched his hands together in an arch. His first instinct was to have the wretch thrown out, but this had been replaced by another, as yet unworked, idea.

'You can get the horses to him?'

'O' course o' course. Yerve not forgotten your consideration?'

Hest made a sign and the captain yanked the unfortunate Threadon out of the tent.

'Captain.'

'Sir.' The officer returned.

'Give him a sum of money. A quarter will do, and tell him to ensure that those

horses get to the wayfarer.’

From outside came a wheezy voice that must have overheard.

‘Thankee sir, thankee.’

‘Captain. Strike the fellow on his ears.’

There was a loud yelp from Gormiah as the captain willingly dealt out the punishment.

The Duc du Qu’et was one of the weak points of Wenner’s legitimacy. He had never understood why the king had neglected to kill him. If that creature was right and the Duc escaped, wouldn’t it unfix the king’s claims somewhat? It would hardly be pleasant for the king to have the rightful claimant to his throne wandering the countryside and reminding everyone of the fact of his presence. Then, continued this thought in Hest’s mind, might not the Duc seek to reform the league and challenge Wenner? And the Duc would want a general of accomplishment to lead his forces, would he not? This bore more thinking on. There were possibilities here. It was tempting to move too quickly, to grasp out with a hand, and find nothing there.

Hest walked ten paces back and forth across the rush-laid floor of the tent, the lantern flickering as he disturbed the air with his movement.

He knew he could barely trust the baldymen around him anymore. Wenner was in control of them now, though the king had graciously granted permission for Mial Hest to take a group of baldymen with him to Swaleton. Oh gracious king! Hest spat on the floor. He was sure the captain was under the king’s instructions. He would have to make a show of trying to thwart the escape, yet allow it to happen. It would be better to assume that none of the baldymen in his party were reliable. How quickly they’d forgotten their loyalty! He paused in his pacing and gazed out of the door to the soldiers’ campfire. A song came to his ears. A familiar marching song, one that had been sung up and down the Rume as his soldiers had decimated the League. There had been profit in those times, and loyalty, before this shiftless monarch. Hest instantly stopped himself. He must plan to the future. This journey now, which had looked so barren, might yet bear some profitable fruit.

The first instructions that Mial Hest gave out on entering Swaleton were to the captain to put a watch over the Duc du Qu’et.

‘Discreetly, at a distance. Find out who his visitors are. Follow them if necessary. No questions to anyone, and do not tell any of the soldiery based here. Report to me every day, whether or not you have anything.’

The captain nodded and detailed the guard, adding some private instructions of his own.

‘Keep a sharp eye out lads. When you’ve got something, report it to me. Not the governor. Got it? To me.’

## Chapter 9

# On the Eve of Harvess

*A good deal of plotting and planning and everyone is shown to poor effect, except the Duc and his daughter. Matters are looking sticky for the flight. Not too long a chapter, more in the nature of building the excitement, if you've a mind to be 'built' in this way. I state the facts but I do get carried away, tis' true.*

On the eve of Harvess, in the late aftersun, Juud visited her father. She smiled at the gaoler, more willingly than before. He had agreed for her to take the Duc out to see the great evening drama tomorrow. He'd consented readily.

'They should let him out more you know. Ten years is too long. Look how he's aged. Tell you what, between ourselves, any time 'ee wants a walk out you just ask. It'll be alright with me, and it do him good. You too.'

There was a 'consideration' of course. A couple of times he had broadly hinted this to Juud, and once asked her directly if she fancied to 'visit him'. She was repulsed by the thought, but dare not say so for fear of him cancelling the visits altogether. The Duc did not know his daughters dilemma, and Juud felt unable to burden him. She was happy to be making the escape tomorrow, though felt guilty about the consequences of their action for the gaoler and his family.

Only two doors separated the street from the courtyard. The Duc had not been through them for ten years, though he could hear the street sounds, and sometimes smell the craft of a tanner or butcher in the air. He was rather timid about tomorrows freedom, but otherwise happy. Juud felt that the gaoler was wrong, and that her father had not aged very much. He stooped a little more, there were flecks of grey at the hair-ends and his face had deepened in creases; but his eyes were alive and there was a vigour and pride in his bearing. Every day he walked a measured distance around the courtyard, and kept his thin, ascetic frame in a better condition than most outside. If Juud was concerned about any part of him it would be his mind. It was vague, less able to pick things up and slow to change. The Duc was still an intelligent and educated man, but as a body wanes if not exercised, so a mind dims if not used.

Much of her time with her father was spent keeping this mind alive. Of late he

had taken a wandering journey through the ancient philosophies and ideas of the Past People, and become expert in their knowledge. He could have more than held his own on this subject with any current scholar if the chance had been allowed him. Instead he studied and read and discussed matters with Juud, who on occasion tried to lead him back to this world, sometimes with success, though he would never take an interest in the fortunes of King Wenner. Perhaps he had buried the horror of that man too thoroughly to recall.

He showed a lively interest in the re-discovery of the Charmstone.

‘Beautiful but evil I fancy dear’, and wanted to know who’d found it (‘Herret Grin’kel, went to university here with him, he was wild’) and if he could see it. Guiltily, Juud used this as bait to lure him outside. Otherwise he was downright reluctant. ‘There is nothing out there for me’, and could not be persuaded that he was important. ‘Wenner would have had me killed years ago if that was so’, but finally backed down when Juud produced her trump.

‘Yes, yes, I can see that. I would not want you harmed. There would be nothing for me then. Well, I must go, but I tell you daughter there’s nothing for me out there. But if your life is risked by mine, then I will go’.

He asked all sorts of curious questions about ‘out there’ from then on, and it took Juud some persistence in convincing him that things ‘out there’ had really altered very little. She told him he must be ready to leave tomorrow evening at the end of the seventh wick, but to make no special preparations that would arouse the gaolers interest. He must wear dark clothes and strong shoes.

‘Can I bring a book?’.

Juud hesitated, remembering Tallotts instructions.

‘A small one.’

With that she pecked him customarily on the cheek and arranged with the gaoler to open the gate tomorrow. Then walked slowly through the streets already full with out-of-town countryman, peasants and gentry, who had come for the celebrations, clutching at her shawl in faint protection at their close and boistrous ways. Because she was not looking she did not notice the dark-cloaked man following a little way behind.

Instead of turning into her house she continued down the main street to Sojons. At a knock a servant ushered her to the main room where Sojon, Herret Grin’kel and Tallott were already gathered. There was a brief discussion.

‘We’ll go in pairs. The Duc and yourself will go independently of Cean and I. I don’t know where the Strom Cean got to. He said he’d be here. Anyway, you know where the boat will pick us up?’

Juud nodded, and answered.

‘I went there yesterday.’

Tallott nodded in approval.

‘I saw Mattew Culler the boatman today. He knows his stuff. Reckons the river will be higher than usual because of the rain, though he seems to think that’s an advantage. Now you understand, Miss du Qu’et, that you and your father must be there just past the seventh wick. Not later or earlier.’

She nodded. Tallott rubbed his chin.

'That's pretty well it' he turned to Sojon 'there's no point in you being at the wharf' he said tactlessly. Herrett grimaced.

'I would like to see the Duc' Sojon said, rather hurt.

'And be seen yourself?' interrupted Herret 'really Sojon you are far to well-known. You will be best staying out of it' and adding tactfully 'you've done more than enough. It's time the young ones had their turn'.

What Herret had seen of Tallott he had liked, despite his crude expressions and unhappy knack of upsetting people, and he had come around to agreeing with his son that the time was ripe now for freeing the Duc. It was inevitable. Once on their side he had worked harder than anyone at keeping old Sojon sweet, and ensured mouths stayed sealed. He had spoken before some of the others and made his points so considerably and calmly that all resistance to the planned escape fell away. More than anything he was concerned that someone would gabble away their secrecy, but so far nothing had happened.

'Well, my son does not seem to want to make an appearance. We should separate. Do you want me down at the wharf Givtheem?' Tallott hesitated.

'We might need an arm to push off. You're a swordsman too arn't you?' Herret nodded.

'Then come. I'm not expecting trouble, but these baldymen all over the place give me the shivers of Wyrd. Let's hope that the gaoler keeps his word.'

He looked at Juud who could not hold his eye and averted her face. He had privately wondered how she had persuaded the gaoler, but now had an inkling. Tallott suddenly thought 'what about the Charmstone?'

'My son has it now'. Tallott pulled a face, but Herret smiled. He liked the man but he did not entirely trust him.

The meeting broke up, Tallott joining Juud in the street.

'You'll be alright tomorrow?' he asked.

'Yes thank you' she replied and walked off.

He gave a wry grin. She certainly could hold herself he thought. He considered this as he returned to the tavern and decided it was a distinctly attractive trait. He had vaguely started undressing her in his mind when a hand urgently pulled at his jerkin.

'Quick! In here,' said Cean, and he half pulled Tallott into the shade of a narrow alley.

Then looked up and down the street whilst Tallott protested. Dayend was fast approaching and the street was a pattern of dark and deep shadows.

'Shut up' said Cean bluntly 'we're being watched.'

Tallott's face sharpened 'who?'

'A heavy man in a dark cloak. He was watching you and Miss du Qu'et. When you separated he followed Miss du Qu'et. I followed him for a while as she went to her house. She went inside and he sort of took up position opposite. I watched him for a while then raced back to cut you off.'

Cean was breathless.

‘Was I followed?’

Tallott asked. Cean shook his head.

‘I don’t think so. The man couldn’t make up his mind. That’s what made me notice him. I was late and trying to get to the meeting. I was just about to join you when you split up and I saw this man.’

‘Did he have anything on his cloak? Or tunic?’

‘Yes. But I didn’t see it properly.’

‘It wasn’t shaped a bird?’

‘Thats right!’ said Cean excitedly.

Tallott seemed to shrink, and leaned back against the wall looking nervously up and down the alleyway. A peasant came bumping along with a big pole of dead chickens strung on it and had to squeeze past them.

‘He’s a baldyman?’

Tallotts voice was flat. Cean stared at him. Another woman brushed past, and showed a flash of peasant ill-temper in her eyes as she did so. Tallott took Ceans arm and they walked back into the main thoroughfare and in the direction of the tavern.

‘What shall we do? Warn the others?’

Tallott did not reply to the immediately to the question.

‘Hasty, hasty, let’s think about this.’

Was the baldyman following Juud or himself? He hadn’t remembered anyone specially, but then he hadn’t been looking either. No, it was more likely the baldyman had been detailed to follow the Duc’s daughter, that meant at least for a while he was in the clear. He would be just a face in the crowd, the baldie could never identify him. But the baldyman knew of Juud’s connection with Sojons house. Possibly Herret was exposed too. How long had that damn baldyman been watching? He tried to think inside the baldymen leaders mind. He had no doubt that Mial Hest was behind this activity. Did he know of the Charmstone? Strom! This was a mess. And so damn close too. A couple of days grace and the whole world could know for all he cared of the escape of the Duc. He must think clearly. Abandon the escape? Impossible, it was arranged, and anyway how could he contact Widsith to tell him otherwise? Perhaps too, he was over-reacting. This might be a routine inquiry by the baldymen to keep an eye on the Duc and his daughter. Surely, wouldn’t that be the sort of response Hest would make on arrival in a new town. Check up on its more famous inhabitants?

If that was so Tallott thought, then the bastard didn’t waste much time, and made things confoundly inconvenient.

‘We must do something?’ broke in Cean, exasperated by his companions silence ‘surely we must call the thing off.’

‘No, no you fool! And start again? We wouldn’t get the chance.’

Tallott knew that Mial Hest was behind this, and if that general was taking an interest, then the sooner the Duc was spirited away the better.

'But how can we free the Duc if he's being watched?'

That was the point. Tallott had an inspiration.

'We'll watch the watchers.' Cean looked doubtful.

'Surely they'll notice?'

'Why should they? It's Harvess, streets packed with people. They'll have drunk some wine and be eyeing the women, we can watch them. We can be subtle too. Don't you see? We can't throw the game away now?'

They stopped outside the tavern. A beggar came up hesitantly, but recognising Tallott shuffled off for better custom.

'We should tell the others' insisted Cean. Tallott hesitated, then let his ruthless streak gain voice.

'But they'll want to come. Where would we put them? The boat won't be big enough. Your dad's fine, but we don't want old Sojon. Then we'll have to take his wife and daughter.'

'You wouldn't say no to the daughter' Cean got in hotly. Tallott was taken aback by the remark. Sojon's daughter was a plump, pretty thing. 'Anyway, I don't want Sojon anymore than you, but you know what the baldymen do to their prisoners, specially if they want information in a hurry. You told me of their methods, remember?'

Tallott remembered alright. He cursed himself for his luridness.

'Alright, alright, I'll tell them. Strom knows this is all going wrong.'

Tallott shook his head, then a thought occurred to him, and he looked cunningly at Cean.

'You go on about me and Tysa, why were you late today?'

Cean blushed, and stammered, 'I forgot the time.'

'Course you did, course you did'.

This inspired an idea in Tallott's mind. Two ideas in fact, one clever and the other treacherous. They separated, Cean to the tavern, Tallott towards Sojon's house.

Later that day the baldyman reported to captain Yarler.

'Nothing much cap'n. His daughter turned up today, and I got Mallil to follow her. She went to some merchant's house he said, then went back home. Got talking to the gaoler though. Apparently he's letting the old boy out tomorrow evening for a special treat. I reckon the buzzards got an eye on the Duc's daughter. She's not a bad looker either.'

The captain silenced the prattle.

'What was the merchant's name of the house she visited?' The baldyman looked embarrassed.

'You didn't ask, did you, you Tilster?'

'It was some woman chat probably sir' he added weakly 'she didn't look like she was scheming anything.'

The captain ignored him. So the Duc was getting out and about was he? That might bear some fruit. He'll keep the two men on, and be around himself. There might be

something interesting in this. Perhaps freedom would go to the Duc's head.

'You're on watch again tomorrow. You and Mallil, since you obviously haven't learned the art, this will give you some more practice.'

'Yes sir' saluted the baldyman. What else could he say?

The captain reported to his commander.

'Everything quiet with the Duc sir. His daughter visited today, but nothing else.'

Hest nodded and dismissed the captain. That at least was a new tidbit. He had forgotten that the Duc had a younger daughter. He thought they had all been killed during the war. In fact, when he came to think of it, by his own orders.

## Chapter 10

# Before the Burning

*An explanation of the festival of Harvess is given, a joyous affair; the eight day festival between the seasons of Croppen and Wast Time, which contrasts unfortunately with dark undercurrents. A sexy little maid plays her part, but everything goes wrong, and squabbles, promises and blood lies heavily upon the side of a swift river.*

*'Harvest in the crop, before the celebration*

*Gather in the nuts, before the leaves*

*The man who earns his bounty, Stuess weaves*

*The man who doth not, Stuess sieves'*

*(poem from the 'The Articles of Faith' written by Doao)*

Night was over the city, but the usual thick prisoned silence of shut doors and empty cat-scavenging streets was gone. This was the first day in the festival of Harvess. The crops reaped and gathered, the fields empty, the storehouses full. Country and city citizens could face the bleak and too long Wast Time with confidence, and with a splurge. Petty criminals had been released that morning, and started queuing with the beggars and urchins outside the city meeting house. As the elders left they scattered coins amongst the scrabbling men and kids. Later a stall was set up in the square and food was distributed free by the city to those that wanted it. Basins of grain, low quality apples in sacks, turnip ends, and a rough sort of bread, baked from the coarsest of the wheat, but much prized by the hungry. The poorest food, but in abundance, and all free. Other stalls sprang up. Some sold spicy Harvess cakes, twirled in the shape of a snail. Then there were the marzipan figures of the gods, decorated with raisins for eyes and a peel of a rare lemon or orange for a mouth. Usually this stall had a centrepiece of a giant marzipan god. Often it was Strom, with whole iced cherries for his fiery eyes and locks of liquorice hair. Rare and wonderful of all, a hat of chocolate. The children would stand back and marvel over the creation, which was on display throughout the festival till it was cut up and served at the great banquet that finished the celebrations.

For the adults, other stalls opened, selling fancy goods of needlework or leather, usually worked at through the dark *Wast Time* by the women peasantry and presented for sale at this one time of year. There were stalls for every kind of taste. Carved wooden figurines, basketware, fine brocades, exquisitely wrought and tempered swords, all the best of goods that could be found in the kingdom were for sale at *Harvess*.

The holiday started officially at high sun but little work was managed before that. The taverns did a roaring trade and the first drunk had collapsed on the street before the middle of the day. A long procession started from the Town Hall and wound its way through and around the city, gathering people as it went. At the head were eight or ten men carrying a giant wooden figure of *Sturess*, the fertility God. *Sturess* was garlanded with flowers and strings of fruit and vegetables, and these were added to as the procession continued. The platform on which she was carried would soon become so laden with food offerings that as many as sixteen men would be needed to lift it up. Indeed it was never allowed to touch the ground, so the men would take the load in relays. Usually they were dressed all in green, with long, narrow hats cocked on their heads and topped with a baldybird's feather. At every tavern the landlord would give his contribution to the cortege by bringing out brimming flagons of beer or wine for the carriers, so it was little wonder that some did not make the processions end. By the time it reached the square the entire body of the God would be covered, only the smiling head remained clear.

A little boy was usually kept on the platform, stacking the accumulating food and trying to stop too much of it roll off onto the street where dozens of kids would run around after the morsels. At last in the square the figure and its offerings were set up in prominence and guards put on it to stop thieving of the huge tempting array. Throughout the day smaller processions from the country would come in till the square was full of large and small Gods, all smiling benevolently from their platforms upon the bounty of food below.

Minstrels and clowns following the procession and would perform in the square and the taverns around, until the plays began on stage. Gleeman who would have been thrown out of an inn at any ordinary time for their damned wailing, were dragged in and made to recite old poems till exhausted. A fever gripped the crowd, and focussed through the late aftersun and dayend on the masked actors as they began the sequence of theatricals. Torches were lit all round the square and threw ragged light on the excited crowds.

Sometimes it would get out of hand. People would be roughed-up or stabbed in flaring arguments, and the wardens would have to move in, sorting out the violent disputes with their long clubs. Frequently there were robbers and pocket-thieves mingling with the crowds, a situation exasperated in letting the gaols empty for this day. But such was the custom. Tomorrow they would be locked in again, if they could be caught. A clever thief could disappear and enjoy the entire freedom of the festival, slipping through the hands of the wardens till the streets were bare again. Then they would give themselves up. There was no where to hide in the city at *Wast Time*, and gaol, bitter and cruel as it was, was preferable to being placed beyond the city walls where only death had its home.

Respectable people, the gentry, the elders, the wealthy would usually leave the theatrical performances early, before the great burning, preferring the more moderate entertainments during the rest of the festival. Their withdrawal acknowledged that this day, above all others in the festival of Harvess, or indeed of any other festival, was for the peasants and the meaner inhabitants of the city. It was their greatest day, and they flocked to the square to enjoy it to its full. Drink, eat, squabble, laugh, debauch, wench, fight, copulate, and perform as much as the actors on stage, and go sodden home with stories to tell through the long Wast Time.

At the close of the last play a signal from the stage indicated that the Gods could be stripped of their food.

A fury of men and women attacked the statues, stealing the many Sturess of their vegetable, meat and fruit ornaments. When this was finished, and it was finished quickly, the platforms were set alight and the crowd gorged on the food in the fierce light of the burning Gods.

Juud had watched the procession from her window and seen the evening gather in gloom and roaring crowds. As a guest in one of the respectable houses of the town she was of course not allowed out into the street. Only with great caution could she collect a small package of clothes together, feign a headache, retire to her room early, put on a dark cloak, and step hesitantly into the jostling thoroughfare. She walked quickly, her stout shoes feeling clumsy and unaccustomed on her feet. It was easier to wear than carry them.

The gaoler let her in quickly, and spoke to her confidently 'get back before the Gods get burnt. I'll be around then. I've a room upstairs, you can stay there. It'll be too dangerous for you to return wouldn't it?' he suggested.

She nodded dumbly, and his eyes lit up. The Duc was dressed darkly she was relieved to see, and carried a small parcel under his arm some clothes' he said 'and Thomas au Morad. I cannot leave my good friend behind.'

The gaoler let them out on the street and gave Juud a wink in passing.

'Fore the burning, my dear. Remember that, be back 'fore the burning.'

Whilst this was happening a strange pantomime was taking place opposite. The two baldymen nominally on guard had been taking an interest in a pretty little maid who'd bumped into one of them and dropped her leather cask of wine. She flirted outrageously, altering attentions between them, and plying the wine liberally. And they, poor males, with their senses tempted and pricks stiff, were in a very short time sitting on a stool on either side of her, with their arms piled around her waist, trying to top each others lurid stories.

From another doorway Cean Grin'kel watched the proceedings with distaste. Tallott nudged him.

'Here comes the Duc and Juud'.

He glanced back at the baldymen who hadn't noticed a thing. One had his hand up her skirt.

'She's done a grand job' said Tallott in praise as he watched the Duc and his daughter turn the corner. 'Come on' he urged, and the two of them left their shelter and fol-

lowed the other pair, Cean glancing back at a muffled shriek of laughter from the trio on the stool.

‘Will she get away from them?’ he asked as he caught up with Tallott.

‘Don’t worry about her. She can handle those slobs. They’re practically on the floor now.’ They moved closer to the Duc and Juud.

‘But if they take her somewhere?’

‘For Stroms sake don’t worry. She wanted to do it. She’s handled more men than mops I’ll warrant. They’ll get a bit of feel and then she’ll give ‘em the slip. She saw us go, even if they didn’t’. Tallot chuckled.

‘You’re sure of that?’ Cean was still worried. Tallott was in a fine humour.

‘Because she’s the first woman you’ve had you needn’t fall in love with her.’

Cean almost hit him in his anger. With an enormous effort he controlled his trembling fist and glared at Tallotts thick amused face.

They were keeping about ten paces behind the Duc. Juud was staying to the busier streets as instructed, walking with the crowd but separate from it. The Duc looked once or twice sideways in a bewildered fashion, then shrunk into his cloak. Ten years of solitude then this jostling human company! Juud knew his alarm and took his hand, guiding him more surely. At one intersection she hesitated, but took the correct way. At another a beggar sidled up to her but was brushed aside. She only once glanced behind and was startled and pleased to see the two men behind. Tallott signalled her to carry on. Juud led her father off the bustling street into a narrow lane that threaded across a number of side-alleys, and came out onto the river bank. A stone wharf could be seen a few yards further through the gloom. Tallott caught up.

‘Why were you following?’ she whispered to them. He whispered back.

‘It’s a long story. Tell you later. I think we’re early eh. Let’s wait in that doorway. We can see the wharf from there and no-one should be able to see us. Most are too drunk anyway.’

Back on the other side of the city, as Tallott predicted, Sarra had indeed slipped off and the two baldymen were looking around, somewhat baffled by her absence.

‘Has the wench deserted us?’

‘She was a healthy un’.

‘How far did your finger go, eh?’

He tipped up the leather cask but only a few drops came out. There was a sharp step behind them and one turned hopefully, thinking the girl had returned.

‘Fools! Drubbins! Wyrds!’

Yarler knocked the cask out of Mallils hand and shoved him to the ground. The other baldyman jumped to his feet, putting a feeble hand up to field off the blunt end of the captains staff as it hit his stomach. He joined Mallil on the ground, gasping for air and trying to fend off the flurry of kicks from Yarler.

‘You’re be begging for this. Is this keeping a watch? Has the Duc left?’

He saw it was a useless question.

‘Follow!’.

They struggled to their feet as the captain hammered on the gaolers door.

‘Who’s that?’ came the gaolers grumbling voice.

‘Captain Yarler of the baldymen. Open up.’

There was a turn of the latch key and the door opened a fraction as the gaoler peered out. Yarler kicked the door back violently, throwing the unfortunate gaoler to the floor.

‘Has the Duc gone worm?’, the Captain demanded.

‘What’s up? Eh, the Duc? He went a bit-wick since, with his daughter. What’s all this’ the querulous note went from his voice as Yarlers sword was pushed into his throat.

‘Where?’

‘I dunno. I swear I don’t. There to be back ‘fore the Burning of the Gods. I told ‘em that.’

Yarler pushed the sword deeper against the hapless mans throat.

‘If they don’t return.’ Yarler pulled out his words slowly and menacingly ‘you’re be hanging tomorrow with you’re tongue nailed to your foot.’

Though it sounded anatomically impossible the gaoler had no doubt the captain meant it, even if he had to chop off one or the other to pierce the nail through.

‘Capn, cap’n, scuse me sir. I think I know where they might have gone’ Mallil broke in desperately. Yarler turned to him.

‘Yesterday, the daughter walked over the river by an old wharf. It didn’t make sense but maybe that’s where they went tonight. She was jus’ checkin’ the route like.’

The captain realised at once that this was the likely way of escape. The river, swift, dark and unobserved, they would never be caught once there. He screamed at Mallil ‘lead us!’ then looked at the terrified man on the floor. He was a fool and of no use now, and deliberately, Yarler leaned his weight behind his sword, pinning the gaoler to the ground like a wriggling fly.

At the wharf the little group huddled in the doorway.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that the baldymen were watching’ said Juud.

‘There wasn’t time. Besides what would you have done?’ Juud shivered. ‘You made sure they did not follow?’

‘We’re safe I tell you, as long as Culler turns up. Where is the bastard?’

‘What about Sojon?’ Juud persisted ‘did you tell him.’ Tallott did not reply. She insisted ‘Did you?’

‘No’. Flatly and decisive. She looked at him horrified. The Duc was puzzled and started to say ‘Old Sojon, is he com...’ when Ceans higher voice intruded.

‘But I did.’

‘What?!’ Tallott tensed like a hunting dog.

‘You’re a bastard Tallott. I didn’t think you’d say anything. So I went back that day and made sure. They’re coming tonight.’

Tallott with an oath sprung at Cean and there was a short scuffle till Juud tore at them saying stop this! There's someone coming, someone coming!

The two men broke away and Tallott pulled out his sword. Three figures, no four, thickened out of the gloom. Cean recognised his fathers confident stride.

'Father' he hissed, and the older Grin'ke1 came over followed by the other three. They were all carting bundles. Herret had a trunk on his shoulder, which he swung to the ground.

'I've Sojon, his wife and daughter here. No thanks to you Tallott. Are the others alright?'

He glanced around and saw the Duc.

'Sir. Do you remember me? Herret Grin'kel. Strange events have brought us together again.' He offered his hand and the Duc accepted it.

'Is the boat not here yet?'

Tallott shook his head, then pointed at all of the luggage.

'We can't take that. They'll be no room.' Herret glared at him.

'Maybe we should throw you overboard to make some. You swine Tallott. You'd have left them to die wouldn't you?'

'Yes' replied Tallott hoarsely 'rather than risk the Charming!'

In another moment they would have been fighting if Cean, who had been peering down stream, hadn't made out a low shape on the water and said excitedly.

'Here's the boat. Quickly.'

The boat was being rowed against the current by a single oarsman. It looked larger than expected though still painfully small for the eight of them. The boatman edged the craft under the wharf and jumped nimbly out securing it to a bollard by a rope. He was surprised at the number when they came up to him.

'Seven, eight? I was told four. Is that you Givtheem Tallott? Are you all going?'

'Can you take us' asked Herret.

The boatman looked doubtful.

'It'll be tight. Might do.'

'All of us are now at risk. We have to flee.' Tallott said nothing.

Culler scratched his head slowly.

'I dunno. She'll sit low on the water with this lot, and the rivers strong. That's what held me up.'

There was a short moment of silence, then Herret spoke and took command.

'We'll try it. I'd rather take my chances on the river than with the baldies.' Culler nodded then hopped back into the boat.

'You first love' he said pointing to Sojon's wife. She was handed down into the craft which rocked unsteadily under her feet. She gave a slight gasp of nervousness.

'Don't you worry old girl, she'll be steady as a rock once were off'.

He said reassuringly. Tysa followed, then her father and the Duc. Juud was just

about to follow when running steps were heard coming towards them.

‘Quickly’ hissed Herret, and turned to face the approaching feet drawing his sword. Tallott too swung beside him and pulled out his rapier. Three figures illuminated by a sudden uncovering of the moon burst out of the ally and onto the wharf, their cloaks flapping behind.

‘Baldies!’ shouted Herret.

Juud jumped into the boat, whilst Cean hastened to back up his father. Culler scurried over the people in the boat and unhooked the rope, holding the craft to the shore by the grip of his hands.

It was a short fight. The first baldymen ran too close to Herret and was struggling to free his sword when Herrets sword cut him down instantly. The second baldyman slashed at Tallott, missed but forced him to step back stumbling on a bollard and tripping backwards. Yarler, only a bitwick behind the other baldyman had made a thrust at Herret but had misjudged, and the blade swept short. Herret stepped back and brought the flat of his sword onto the second baldyman spread-eagling him to the ground. Cean leapt over Tallotts grovelling figure and stabbed the helpless man through the back.

But in that brief moment captain Yarler had regained his poise and jabbed his sword up into Herrets stomach. The old man staggered and fell knocking Yarler off his footing with a last desperate strike. Cean saw his father fall and leaped towards the captain who had rolled right to the lip of the quay. Yarler saw Ceans sword descending and twisted himself off the quay into the dark river. There was a spluttering and swimming noise as he rose to the surface and struck out to the opposite bank. Cean turned and saw Tallott standing over his father. It was all strangely silent.

‘Come on’ said Tallott pulling the young man to the boat ‘he’s dead. Come on’ he urged, and half jerked Cean into the boat.

‘Hurry, I can’t hold this much longer’ gasped Culler.

Tallott remembered something, picked up Herret’s sword and bundled himself into the boat, sprawling on top of Sojon and his wife. Culler gratefully released his hold on the rope and nipped over the sprawling bodies to the tiller. The boat swung out into the current and was launched downstream into the night.

‘Herret’s dead’ Tallott bluntly told the boat, ‘Here lad, here’s his sword’ and he passed the weapon to a dazed Cean ‘what the Wyrd am I sitting on?’

‘My clothes box. Be careful, it has my best garments’ spoke Kalmentier, Sojons wife, the first words she had spoken all evening.

Tallott took hold of the box and threw it overboard, where it bobbed for a few perky moments before filling with water and slipping under the rivers dark surface.

## Chapter II

# The Thunder Disappeared Behind

*Another chapter carried on at a chaotic pace, as this fragile group of travellers make their escape from the baldymen. Widsith has his problems, and the baldymen show a surprising persistence under the very able leadership of Captain Yarler. It is the 1st of Harvess 156, but it remains night all through this chapter, confusing and never ending.*

The river twisted dark and silent through the night landscape. Occasionally a flurry of foam would disrupt the even blackness where the river gashed against rocks, or swept along a sheer bank. Released from the wharf the little boat had flashed past buildings and under the arch in the city walls before the company had even settled in their seats. A glow of light from the square, a moss-lined wall dripping damp, then Swaleton was behind. There was a thin scream from Kalmentier as her trunk was tipped overboard, then that too was swallowed and left behind with the city. Matthew Culler called out to Cean to sit up in the prow and keep a lookout for obstacles. The boatman was intimate with every curve and current of this river but it still held surprises, and his eyes were dimmer than the days he could see the glitter of a caerp lying idle on the riverbed.

Tonight the river was high and fast, and the moon only intermittently lit the way as it shied amongst the clouds. By peering at the gloomy shapes of familiar landmarks, trees, houses, a distinctive rock or a known curve of river, Culler could steer an accurate path down the middle of this fluid highway, and they hardly saw the banks, testimony to his skill. There were two narrowing rapids before the forks, where the river squeezed between steep sides. The first was rapidly approaching. Culler got Tallott to pass around broad-bladed paddles to those that sat on the outside, which meant everyone except Kalmentier and the Duc.

Swiftly the boat approached the rapid. Culler yelled 'Paddle!' and they were amongst the white water.

Juud plunged her paddle in the foam and was sprayed with water for the effort. The boat lurched up and down, Cean in the prow catching the worst of it, was soaked from

head to foot in a bitwick. Culler shouted instructions urged them on ‘paddle! pull!’ and he got the idle Duc and Kalmentier to bale out the water slopping over. Despite the load Culler felt the craft handle well, and the river eased into flat reaches beyond the rapids, he shouted his encouragement to them ‘Well done, rest a while. There’s another falls in a few minutes, then it’s plain way to the forks.’

Juud found the pace of the boat frightening at first, as they hurtled past dark blobs of landscape, but the rapids exhilarated her, so much that the quiet flow afterwards seemed suddenly sluggish. Tallott grinned at her in the darkness.

‘What a way to travel, eh? On a horse this ‘ud take all night and we’ve only been going a few bit-wicks.’

She smiled and nodded, sharing his excitement and trying to brush her hair out of her eyes. Wet, long, hair was a nuisance. Then there was a shout from Cean and she heard a roaring sound.

‘Get ready’ shouted Culler ‘these are bigger. Now, PADDLE!’, and the cranmed boat swept into the middle of the noise.

The Duc squashed between Juud and Tysa began methodically bailing with his hat, failing to make any impression on the water pouring in. This outside world was more alarming than he had suspected. The boat rocked violently as it plunged into the rapids. The swollen river leant a sharp profile to the waves and the obscuring troughs which clawed at the craft.

Juud’s paddle was wrenched out of her hands and she gripped the planking tightly. Tallott in front of her was paddling like a maniac, his huge shoulders burying the paddle into the water and drenching Juud with its backwash. Even old Sojon had his teeth on his lips, pulling furiously at the current, sometimes scraping his paddle on Tysa’s. Neither took notice but pulled and pulled till their soft muscles ached. The boatman half-crouched over the tiller, steering a seemingly magical course through the tangle of water and rock, swaying with the craft’s motion, never out of the balance, his instinct penetrating the hidden twists and fancies of the current, and his tiller hand responding to every quick judgement. At the prow, Cean was enthralled by the broken spectacle of rapids in front of him, wondering when it would end, when abruptly it did. The boat relaxed from its diabolical movement and the thunder disappeared behind.

The paddlers slumped on the thwarts breathing deeply. Only Culler did not relax, keeping a sharp lookout for familiar landmarks. The Duc was still bailing in a bewildered fashion and Tallott leant him a vigorous hand. In a moment the boat was dry. Kalmentier could only rather uselessly flap her sodden bonnet and cling to her husband who wiped his forehead from sweat. Despite his age, soaking clothes and chilled hands, he was feeling uncomfortably hot.

‘On the prow?’ Culler called ‘lookout for the forks.’

Cean waved an acknowledgement. They had only been travelling half a wick but made an astonishing distance of eight leagues. Any pursuit, except by river would be futile, and would the pursuers have the skill of Culler?

Tallott also gave a silent cheer to wayfarer Widsith for the prescience of his plan. He glanced back at Juud who was tying her hair up and then over to Tysa who was leaning close to her mother and saying something. Kalmentier looked up at that point and

stared angrily at Tallott. She turned her face away. If her luggage was not safe from that man then neither was her daughter. The thought of her finery sunk to the rivers bottom brought fresh tears to her face.

Cean gave a shout and Culler ordered them to take their paddles up again. Entering the forks was a tricky manouever. They needed to be on the far side of Huss'tt and to do that they had to cross the wide strong current of the Varra River which joined here. If they were too slow at crossing or got caught up in the Huss'tt or Varra currents they had precious spare time to make safety before the river dropped rapidly into the deep Huss'tt gorge.

Culler kept the boat close to the left side of the Huss'tt, once scraping a log jutting from the bank. Though he hadn't had the time to explain what to do, everyone had caught his concentration and were waiting tensely for his word. There was a bubble of backwater then the bank fell away and the boat was carried onto the confluence. Culler kept up a chant of 'one-two, one-two' as the paddlers bit into the Varra which was as full and heavy as the Huss'tt had been. In a bitwick the battle was won and the boat was drifting on the easy side of the river flow. Culler steered past a tangle of branches and found the quiet backwater he had been looking for. The boat had just enough momentum to drift in and bump shortly against a dilapidated jetty.

'We're here. Careful now getting out sirs and ladies. That jettys got holes in it.'

The boatman hooked the rope to a pile, then handed up the others as they clambered shakily up onto the jetty. It was strange to feel solid ground again. Cean for his part was tired and acutely hungry.

'We've a walk of quarter league to an old farmhouse. The wayfarer should be there. I'll lead.'

So speaking Culler led the bedraggled party along a overgrown path. Kalmentier tripped frequently over her skirt and had to be helped along at a slow pace. Wene had disappeared completely behind a thick bank of cloud, then perversely, came out of hiding once they'd reached the farmhouse.

It was empty.

'Where's the wayfarer boatman?' Tallott asked.

Culler shook his head.

'He'll be around sirs. We should sleep a bits'.

On one side of the room opposite a large fireplace was a long low bench covered in straw. Kalmentier still had enough life in her to be appalled by the prospect.

'Is that the bed?' she said incredulously.

'I reckon maam' Tallott was cheeky 'sorry we can't manage the feathers. Maybe I could catch a chicken?'

The joke was not a bad one under the circumstances but everyone was too exhausted for it. Sojon grimaced, but it was Cean who spoke flatly.

'Shut up Tallott. I'm cold. Let's do something, not just stand here. There's blankets here.'

He would have liked something to eat, but there was nothing. The men changed

outside into clothes that were damp or outrightly wet. Each curled into their blankets and private patch of straw and slept. Cean was kept awake for a long, long while, numbed by the sudden death of his father.

Was there nothing more he could have done?

He was relieved that he was on good terms with his father but his father was dead? The man who ruled his life, who made him and ordered him and guided him. The moment Cean tried to rebel, then his father died. Was it really his fault? He was bothered for weeks by these jumbled guilty thoughts of his father, and that furious river escape, till thank Strom nothing was made sensible and he too fell into an exhausted and deep sleep.

## II

By the end of Harvest day no horses had arrived, so Widsith took his own mare and galloped down river two leagues to the bridge across the Huss'tt River. It was a rickety affair, spun uncertainly across two rock buttresses which were the doors to the long gorge through which the Huss'tt tumbled most of the way to Caroyal. Widsith led his horse gingerly over, then rode her hard upstream to the first village. He enquired after Gormiah Threadon, but no-one had seen him. It was the same in the next village and the next. Widsith went in a methodical and increasingly futile circle of villages, but everywhere it was the same.

'Gormiah? No, havn't seen that rogue for a while' usually adding 'thanks to Strom.'

Widsith knew it was hopeless to try and buy horses. The villagers could barely afford the old plough nag they kept, let alone the cross-country horses he needed. Finally at nightfall, discouraged by his failure to find Threadon, Widsith turned back, riding the tired mare slowly past the dim-lit villages and black countryside. Several times he had to lead the mare when the track became too treacherous to follow in the dark, and so by slow stages he turned to the farmhouse, arriving a little before dawn, tired and hungry.

## III

The captain had seen the boat slip away and swam heavily back to the wharf. He was not a very good swimmer, especially when unprepared.

He hauled himself out and stood dripping on the stones, then turned over Herret Grin'kels body and peered into its face. He did not know the man but he admired his swordsmanship. A good man to have around. He picked up his sword and walked away without a glance at the two dead baldymen. At the headquarters he roused five out of their game of cards.

‘Get yer horses ready, and mine. We’re going for a ride.’

They were amazed at Yarlers soggy appearance, but they could see his temper was not to be tested with curious questions. Yarler was trying to remember what that sneaky little sod Gormiah Threadon had said about the wayfarer. A farmhouse by the forks he thought the man had said. By the forks? Which forks? Not at Caroyal surely?

‘Oy! Beno! You lived here. Can you get a boat all the way to Caroyal down the river?’

If you could they’d be no point in pursuing. They would be far to far ahead.

‘No captain.’ The reply was brisk, Beno was keener than the others. ‘Only as far as the forks, thats about fifteen leagues. Below that the Huss’tt River goes through a gorge.’

That was the forks then. The farmhouse might be on the far side though.

‘Is there a bridge?’

‘Aye sir. About two leagues below the forks.’

‘Can you get a horse across?’ Beno hesitated.

‘Maybe. It was old.’

‘Okay saddle up. You lead. That’s where we’ll go.’

‘Tonight sir. Now?’ asked one doubtfully.

‘Yes! you Wyrds sons. Now’.

The Duc had escaped once but not again. Mial Hest would never give him more than two chances, and besides, if he got the Duc instead of Hest the king would be very pleased.

They had trouble getting the gateman to open up. Like most Swaleton citizens he was drunk. With lanterns strung from the pommels the six riders thundered into the blackened fields and villages, leaving behind a glow from the great burning of the gods in the city square, which was weirdly reflected from clouds overhead. At times they had difficulty following the thin road and despite Yarlers urgings frequently had to slow to a walk. Even so they went too fast for one horse that stumbled on a bank and fell taking the unfortunate rider with her.

The others left baldyman Bulm to limp back to Swaleton, but as a consequence of the fall the captain moderated the pace somewhat. There was a long night ahead.

## Several Horses Galloping Hard

*Mikal Widsith joins the group and they find themselves short of horses and temper. Tallot does not stop scheming and Kalmentier raises her hackles. The baldymen catch them up and there is a short battle and several people find death unexpected and sickening. You may avoid the last few pages reader if it upsets you, but then these are not pleasant times. You cannot make a true history without some loss of blood.*

Something clattered in her head and Juud woke with a start. She sat up and looked around the farm room picking out the bare details of her surroundings in the thin morning light. Two small windows let in only a little daylight, but the white painted walls exaggerated it and filtered it to the far corners of the room. It appeared cleaner in the morning. Pots dangled from nails hammered into the two great beams that supported the roof. Around the edges of the walls she noticed piles of equipment and gear, harnesses, saddles, coils of ropes, and different shaped bundles of many sizes. Opposite her was the gaping fireplace that held a small crackling fire in its grate. The clatter that had woken her must have come from the man squatting before the fire and stirring something into a pot. He looked up and saw her watching him.

On her part she saw a man, perhaps Tallotts age, perhaps younger, with grey eyes that inspected her with an air of quiet assurance, and a rather direct manner of looking. In turn Widsith saw a calm-faced girl, with serious blue eyes and long black hair that fell over her shoulders. The blanket had slipped a little and the pale skin below the collar-bone contrasted gracefully with the dark strands of hair. Black on white with a deeper point of blue was the image that remained in Widsiths mind. She did not seem disconcerted by his stare and pulled the blanket up under her chin.

‘Who are you?’ she asked softly.

‘Mikal Widsith’ he replied, then hooked the pot over the fire and kept stirring. There was a warm oaten smell in the room.

‘Is that breakfast?’

‘Yes, but I was not intending to cook for this horde. Who are they all?’

He stood up and started counting the blanket forms. Tallott had sat up by this time, and was rubbing his eyes with the back of his palms.

'You know me though' said Tallott by way of introduction.

'There's eight of you here. Couldn't you leave the rest of the city behind?'

Givtheem scowled.

'No more's the pity. We've got a few extras.'

As the others awoke Tallott briefly told the wayfarer of the nights adventures. Tysa was the last to move, and had to be prodded awake by her mother so as she could receive a mug of leafen, which she took in her hand and stared blearily at. Widsith nodded to Tallotts story as if he'd been expecting it. He turned to Cean who had pulled on his heavy-cloth trousers and was finding his way through his jerkin.

'I'm sorry for your father. He was a fine man. My father always spoke well of him

'We got two in return. Maybe three if that other hadn't jumped in the river' Cean spiritedly replied 'it was he who killed my father.'

'We will see him again no doubt, and there will be more to fill the gaps we make. Here, drink this leafen. There's some oats cooking on the fire.'

Kalmentier sat up and started complaining to her husband.

'What a fine place this is and what am I supposed to wear with all my clothes under the river?'

She glared at Tallott, and then tried to pull a comb through her hair but it got stuck and she yelped a little where it hurt.

'Tysa, wake up. Comb my hair.'

So Tysa was taken up with a task normally done by Kalmentier's morning maid. She continued her complaints.

'It's foolishness Sojon. I do not see what risk we were at. One of the best houses in the city, with a brother-in-law who is an elder and related to practically everyone else of importance how could those horrible men harm us? We should have stayed. As it is we'll have to go back. I can't live without a wash.'

'Hush dear, hush.'

Sojon was alarmed at this chatter but had not the strength to silence it. In truth he wondered whether they were wise to have fled with the others. If they went back now wouldn't everything be alright?

Tallott snorted in disgust at the exchange, standing up and stretching to the ceiling, which with his height he very nearly touched.

'Drubbins! Do you think they'd let you live with your knowledge?'

'What my husband knows is not what I and my daughter know.'

The implications of this pronouncement on her husbands fate seemed lost on Kalmentier but Tallott looked at Widsith, shrugged and helped himself to some of the bubbling oats.

'But mother' Tysa protested 'we couldn't leave father.'

'Ouch! Child you are pulling too hard. That's better. We would have stayed in

Swaleton and explained to that new governor that my husbands activities is just foolish old mens games.’

There was something so ludicrous in the thought of this woman carrying out this plan that Widsith had to smile. There was even a little truth in what she said. They might have survived in Swaleton. He doubted if Hest would be very interested in a collection of faded prefectors, it was the Duc he would want. Thinking of which reminded him of his manners. The older, monkish looking man must be the Duc.

‘Allow me to introduce myself sir. Wayfarer Widsith at your service.’

The Duc dipped his head in acknowledgement.

‘So you’re to guide us over the mountains are you? These old bones might prove fragile and slow I’m afraid. Do you know my daughter?’ Widsith smiled politely.

‘I’ve told her my name, but she has not told me hers.’ Widsith knew anyway.

‘Juud du Qu’et’, she replied, again in that soft voice.

‘A word of caution miss, and this applies to all of you. Do not mention the word ‘Qu’et’. It is far too distinctive and might give us away. Keep to forenames.’

He looked around at them as if arriving at a decision.

‘Have some leafen and oats before they cool. We must be off in a wick. He gave a wry grin, ‘I too have had problems. We only have three horses. The rest have failed to appear. What is worse you can be sure the baldies will be here by this morning, so in any case we would have had to alter our route. I will explain this later. We really do not have time now. Tallott, Grin’kel, Mattew, could you step over here.’

The three men huddled with Widsith in a corner whilst the other men began to dress. There was a curious constraint in the women. Kalmentier started to say ‘surely, he doesn’t expect us to dress in front’ when she was stopped short by Juud who had decided to resolve the dilemma by buttoning her bodice up under a discreet blanket and who now stood up in her petticoat and pulled on her dress. Horrified, was Kalmentiers expression, as she watched this brazen activity before all these men. She certainly would not allow this for herself or her daughter, and badgered Sojon into erecting a barrier of blankets across a corner where the two women dressed in cramped discomfort.

Tallott had watched this little scene out of his eye but did not stop listening to Widsiths instructions. He was brief and to the point.

‘You could not help it but Sojon, his wife and daughter are going to be problems. Gormiah played his nasty tricks and did not come up with the horses so our situation is worse. Sojon and his wife will have to ride on a horse each and we will load up the other with baggage. Mattew, can you help us as far as the forest?’ Culler nodded ‘good. We have to carry most things so we will have to go light. Once into the forest we leave the horses behind so only the absolutely necessary items are to be taken. I will sort the stores out. Cean, can you saddle up the horses? They’re in a paddock behind the house. Tallott, sort out the arms. Everyone, that includes the women, have to carry something. A dagger, a knife, whatever.’

The two men went off on their tasks, and Widsith was left with the boatman.

‘Well Mattew. This is a rag-bag lot and no mistake. Without the horses I think we’d have got through, but that family...’ he did not need to finish the sentence. Culler

agreed, and gave his opinion.

‘The ol’ mans not too bad, but he’s weak. And his wifes a nagging bitch’ he shook his head dolefully ‘but the girls not bad. She was paddling like a Wurd through the falls. Didn’t have to encourage her.’

Widsith looked across. Tysa was now dressed, and blowing and gulping down the hot oats as if she’d been born to the stuff. She had a strong hearty appearance, plump but energetic, like a peasants daughter.

‘Was the river strong?’

Widsith picked up a bowl and started imitating Tysa, blowing on the oats to cool them down.

‘Naaah. It was heavy, but smooth. It was a good crew, apart from her. You should have heard her yell when that Tallott threw her trunk overboard.’

Culler chuckled. Widsith grimaced. He had not known about this. Everyone was getting on like a house on fire.

At this point Kalmentier chose to burst into tears and scream hysterically that her dress was torn. This first outburst, degenerated into a prolonged and loud wailing. Sojon looked helplessly at Widsith. The wayfarer stepped forward.

‘Shut up.’

She looked blankly at him, and he took a step forward and slapped her hard on the face. Kalmentier was shocked into silence.

‘Sojon. Every time your wife yells I suggest you hit her. If you do not, I will. Like it or not, and I do not particularly like it, you have to come with us. Your lives will be worthless in Swaleton. And our lives will be worthless if she carries on like this. Another outburst and I will leave you both to the baldies.’

He stopped and looked at the ashen Kalmentier.

‘But I will keep your daughter. There’s no need for her to die for your foolishness.’

Tysa stared at him and blushed. Juud was shocked at the scene, but did not say anything, perhaps it was necessary?

Widsiths brutal speech seemed to have its effect. Kalmentier did not say another word and allowed herself to be laden onto a horse without complaint, just occasionally dabbing her eyes with a delicate handkerchief. In a shambling way the group set off, Widsith and Culler up ahead, then Tysa, leading her mothers horse followed by Sojon on his, and the third horse tied meekly to the second. The Duc and Juud followed and a few paces behind them Tallott and Cean.

Everyone was carrying a load of sorts. Tysa and Juud lightly with two small packs of clothes and a few toiletries. Tysa had a dagger given to her by Tallott with instructions to go up under the ribs with it. This she was delighted with. Juud had opted for a bow and quill of arrows which did not sit quite comfortably on her back. The Duc had only a small bundle of clothes whilst Sojons and Kalmentiers few things were strapped to the horses. In Kalmentiers case she really did not have much else. Virtually everything except a tiny black purse which held several gold coins and a diamond necklace was gone. This was kept in a ‘womans place’.

The third horse carried the bulk of food but even with that help the men were laden, Tallott and Widsith particularly, for they were the strongest. Around Cean's waist, barely noticeable except when his jerkin was off was a leather belt with a small pouch sewn on. Nestling snug and secure the Charmstone was now at the son's side instead of the father's. Thinking on it led Cean to speak to Tallott.

'Does the wayfarer know of the Charmstone?'

'No.'

Cean thought of this.

'Should we not tell him?'

'Perhaps, later. I don't know.'

Both men distrusted each other a little since the altercation on the wharf. Their time had been so occupied with battles and fast rivers that only now did they remember that dispute, and lapsed into a cautious silence as a consequence. But it set Tallott thinking as he walked. He pondered the advantages and disadvantages of the wayfarer knowing the Charmstone was present. Like most people, Tallott had inherited a natural suspicion of most of these wayfaring types. Scoundrels most of 'em, even if the opportunity only half presented itself. No, it wouldn't do to tell this wayfarer. He'd warn the others to keep tight about it too. One slip with the knife and the wayfarer could be off, and the rest of them would look pretty sick. The Duc without the Charmstone was a good deal worse than the Charmstone without the Duc. On its own the Charmstone was worth a fortune, something that had never escaped Tallott's mind.

Widsith led the party on old tracks, passing neglected and overgrown farmland. They crossed an old dyke and sometimes had to avoid thickets of scrub before picking up another track. The wayfarer seemed to know the direction precisely. If it wasn't for the weighty baggers the day would have been pleasant with a fine Harvess sun dispelling the chilly mists and sparkling on the dew-wet grass. They startled a number of wild pigs and a hawk lingered over them for a while, before twitching its wings and gliding off for smaller prey. The ground was wet after the rain, and crisply retained the hoof prints and eight sets of footprints. They might as well have painted arrows on the ground saying 'this way' thought Widsith, but there was nothing he could do. There was no time for cunning stratagems, just escape, and hope the baldies took their time.

As the mists cleared, they could see the mountains looming quite close above them. Clad thickly in forest to the skyline where a bluff, crenelated like a fortress wall, seemed to wriggle along the entire top of the forest.

'The first scarp' said Widsith to the boatman.

'Aye, and there's more behind?'

'One more.'

'They don't know I spose?'

'I hope not.'

These were the Keeb mountains as he explained to Tysa at the first rest stop.

'Yes, we have to go over them.'

'Have you been there?'

‘Yes’ then he would not say any more.

As the sun heated up the day the walking became more tiresome, but Widsith encouraged them to keep going. In a few leagues they would be in the forest fringe where it was cooler and where the baldymen would not follow. Kalmentier was beginning to recover some of her old self and was making irritated comments to Tysa. And once to Juud about her ‘nakedness’ in front of the men, but she was ignored, which infuriated her. The Duc was explaining something.

‘Those are the Keeb Mountains my dear. Thomas au Morad says that some of the Past People retreated there when the people from the skaw came. That is people like Sojon and his wife. Not them of course, but their ancestors.’

The air and spaciousness of the farmland had made the Duc quite alive, and he looked at things with a brightness of interest that was a pleasure for Juud to see. He pointed out the plants of his youth, drawing on an astonishing knowledge of botany. Later he fell back to talk to Sojon and they talked almost animatedly about their ideas on the world generally. So much so that Tallott strode ahead to get away from the irritating discussion. He caught up with Widsith.

‘Do you think the baldies will come?’

‘Well if they do it will have to be soon. There’s the forest. The wayfarer pointed out the bushy green line that interrupted the old farmland.’

‘Why doesn’t anyone farm there? It’s good land what we’ve seen.’

‘For the same reason that the baldmen won’t follow us into the forest. This is Low-leahs land.’

Tallott was puzzled, but could see from Widsiths expression that he characteristically did not want to elaborate. He had the habit of short comments of a take-it-or-leave-it-kind. That conversation lapsing, he eased back to Juud stepping alongside her careful pace with his swinging stride.

‘Yer dad has found a mate.’ Juud glanced back. ‘It’s good in a way Sojons here. Gives ‘em both a bit of company. Sojon must get sick of his bitching wife all the time.’

‘Throwing her clothes into the river hardly helped Mr Tallott.’

Conversation was hard going this morning.

‘Call me Givtheem.’

She nodded unenthusiastically.

‘We’re getting close to the forest now. About nine leagues in three hours. This wayfarers a slave-driver. If we keep this up we’ll be in Noll by the end of Harvess.’

No response, so he gave up and slipped back to the rear.

Juuds shoulders ached badly even with her light load and she wondered how she would ever be able to get to Noll. The quill dug in her back and her heavy shoes were pinching.

Widsith stopped, looked about and lowered his bagger gently to the ground. It was typical of his judgement that they had stopped in a small circle of trees, about a hundred longmans off the main forest. Not only was there shade here, and a good view, but it would be difficult to be surprised. The others straggled in and slipped off their loads

and sat with relief on the ground. It was intensely hot now, with no wind.

'Nearly there' said Widsith as he squatted and pulled out a stalk of grass to chew on. Cean imitated him, but lay at full length for better comfort. The quiet air was heavy, almost oily, as it lapped up and over the group.

The first scarp of the Keeb Mountains could be seen on the skyline, four hundred longmans above them. Widsith studied them. They looked daunting. Beyond that she could see another scarp with another four hundred longmans or so between. Only then did the forest straggle to an end, and the mountains showed their real guise in towering rock flanks that ran to a height of over a thousand longmans. Even in the sunshine this thought gave Widsith a shiver. It was a long way for any traveller, let alone a brace of old men, two girls and an old woman. Laughably, the Keebs were not even an important obstacle on their way, but the wayfarer felt no need to elaborate on that. Having chewed one stalk down the wayfarer started another and let his vision roam around. Something caught his eye. A smudge of dust hanging over the farmland a league away. It might be wind, but there was no wind.

'I might have spoken too soon' he murmured.

He stood up and glanced around. The main forest was hundred longmans off. Too far to run and risk being caught in the middle. He considered the little circle of trees they had rested under. They might do, they might have to do. Five trees closed quite tightly together and enough space in the centre for the horses. He gazed back at the horizon. Definitely dust being stirred up and closer now. Several horses galloping hard. No farmer would proceed at that pace, surely these were kings men.

'Sojon, Tysa, take the horses into the circle of trees. The Duc, Miss du Qu'et and Kalmentier stay inside that circle. Men, arm yourselves.'

His words electrified the group who jumped up and stared around at the peaceful scene. Where? What?

'Look' pointed Culler.

At that moment horsemen came riding furiously out behind some trees only a league away and saw them at the same time as they were seen. Widsith was relieved to see only five, bad enough, but not impossible odds.

'Tallott take this pole. Watch Mattew. He'll try and unseat the riders. Grin'kel, your job is to kill them on the ground.'

He turned to Juud standing on the edge of the trees.

'Use your bow. Fire at the horse if you can't steady on the rider.'

She was sickened by the idea but prepared her bow. For two summers she had used to practice on dead targets, stumps and wooden poles, now there were live targets. Flesh and blood. She could feel her breath, short and rapid.

'Steady all of you. Five's not so much', Widsith shouted and had bare time to get his own bow off his back before the horsemen were upon them.

The first horseman was Yarler, bent low over his steed with his sword gleaming in front. He presented the lean profile of a horseman in attack, with a low position and balancing on the stirrups. There were two riders close behind and a small gap intervened before the next two. Widsith realised that that gap might be crucial. It gave them

time. At twenty longmans Widsith drew out an arrow, cocked it in the bow with one smooth movement, aimed and released. It was a brilliant shot.

The bolt sunk into the captain's chest and although the horse thundered on, its rider was toppling and dying. Doubtless the other baldymen might have hesitated if they'd known their captain had been slain, but they followed their leaders mad assault. A moment after Yarlers horse had roared past the second rider came up, swung a wild sword at Cullers head, missed grandly, and hurtled by. The third rider, Beno, came in at a slightly awkward angle and had to sheer off at the last moment exposing too much of his body. Culler poked the pole under the Beno's chest and tumbled him off. Cean leapt forward and buried his sword in the hapless lieutenant, then the other two riders fell amongst them swailing their swords desperately through the air. Tallott ducked and dived then swung his pole full upon one rider, but didn't dislodge him and had to leap back out of the dancing mares hooves. Culler had taken another baldies off his horse but blocked Cean in doing so. Juud screamed a warning as the second rider had wheeled his horse around and was coming upon Tallott from behind. Widsith moved in abruptly, and sliced his sword at the first seated rider, felling him, whilst Tallott hurled himself on top of the toppled horseman and stabbed repeatedly. The dust, blood and shrieking of horses mingled in a maelstrom of violence in an otherwise indifferent, even lovely, country scene. The people sheltering in the trees could only watch the fury of warriors in helpless fascination and hope that their side would succeed.

Juud had seen the second rider returning and shrieked her warning. Tallott had heard, but could only dodge the rider as the pole twisted uselessly out of his hands. Only Culler with his back to the rider hadn't heard Juuds warning shout and was cut down as he stood watching Widsith attack the fallen baldyman. The lone rider, wheeling his horse around suddenly realized his isolation and galloped off a way, then turned to look back.

Tallott was bent over Culler who lay face down on the soil. Cean walked towards the pair. Widsith stood strangely isolated, straddling the body of the man he'd killed. Over the snorting of the horses was the sound of Tysas sobbing. Juud embraced her, and that eerie silence returned. It was not hard to believe that in a bit-wick five men had been slaughtered. The air was sticky with the smell of blood. She dropped her bow and arrow which had remained unfired and comforted Tysa.

The last baldyman made no move to ride away, possibly thinking he was out of arrow range, and that he was safe. Widsith glanced around and stepped back a few paces to a riderless horse standing quietly beside the trees. In a swift movement he was upon its back, wheeled it round and galloped furiously towards the baldyman. This rider, seeing the danger plainly now, urged his horse back across the farmland. Widsith got closer and forced the baldyman to travel left along the line of trees. The watching group suddenly saw Widsith slow down and then the baldyman sharply check his horse and turn it round.

He'd been caught in a loop of a stream, and either had to jump or face the wayfarer. He turned his mare back again and urged her towards the stream, which though not wide was deep and the banks slippery. With nowhere near enough momentum the horse landed half on the far bank and half off it. The rider had to jump off to avoid being crushed by his own horse and found himself up to the waist in water. Thrashing

down the stream the baldyman, started to clamber up the steep bank, digging his nails into the mud walls to secure a grip. With an effort he pulled himself over the side, his face and clothes smeared with mud. He twisted around, and Widsith was standing before him. He made one terrified attempt to get to his feet before he saw a glint of steel and felt a sword bury itself into his stomach. With a choking groan he slid to the ground, kicked and was dead.

Widsith walked back to his mare and rode her back quietly to the ring of trees. Juud and Tallott were kneeling beside Culler, Cean standing a little aside. Mattew was still alive, but Widsith saw at a glance it was hopeless. Someone had tried to bandage the huge wound in the boatmans back but the blood would not be contained, Widsith caught Juuds eye and shook his head.

She stood up and he saw her hands red from Cullers blood. Widsith knelt beside his old friend and gripped his hand. There was a shudder and the boatmens eyes went empty.

After a moment Widsith shut the staring eyes of the dead man and stood up. No one had anything to say. They wrapped Cullers body up in cloaks from the dead baldymen and strapped it to a horse, then picked up their baggers and walked towards the forest margin. At halfway stood the captains horse and the captain himself lying on the ground staring wide-eyed at the sky with Widsiths bolt in his chest.

‘That’s the man that killed your father’ the wayfarer said to Cean. ‘Captain Yarler I think. He will not need this.’

Widsith jerked out the arrow and wiped it clean on the dead mans cloak. Cean looked uncomprehendingly at Yarler then followed the others into the cool forest.

## Chapter 13

# On the Flank of the Mountains

*This chapter can be treated as a breathing again, for matters become quieter and subtle with no immediate threats, except those within. Juud du Qu'et learns things about herself, as does Cean, unwillingly. We learn of the Lowleahs, but do not see them. The crossing of the Keeb mountains is achieved with great effort but it does not unite them. A long chapter, possibly the longest but how the Strom would I have broken it in smaller pieces without them becoming shards?*

The woodland enveloped them in a dark moist atmosphere. The undergrowth was sparse under the canopy of trees and only occasionally would there be a flourish of flowers where a pool of sunlight fell. The ground was a litter of broken twigs and dry brittle leaves with odd bright spots of fungi bursting a little colour into this dank underworld. Large trees had sometimes fallen and the party would have to skirt around them, the network of upraised roots becoming a host for small species of perching ferns. Here and there shallow streams would trickle aimlessly through the woodland, gurgling against banks of moss and providing one of the few sounds in a strangely silent forest.

At first Sojon and his wife could sit upon their saddles in comfort. The massive trees, generously set apart, allowed an easy passage for horse and riders, but slowly the trees crammed in and branches drooped lower to the ground. After some bitwicks of dodging his head under obstacles, and twice clouting it when he was not quick enough, Sojon gave up and walked the horse. Kalmentier held out a little longer (she was a head shorter), but eventually had to join her husband on the ground, tripping over her dress and losing her slippers at frequent intervals.

At the first dell, Widsith stopped and with Tallotts help unstrapped Cullers body from the horse and laid it in a small depression. They had no spade so piled stones over the corpse. Widsith removed Cullers shoes as an afterthought. All this was done in silence. The shock of the battle was still on them and they had walked as if in a trance, mostly blind to their surroundings.

Tysa dipped her hand in a stream and rubbed her face with the clear cold water. Juud washed her hands and watched Mattews blood seep into the stream.

‘Tysa bring me some water dear’ asked Kalmentier, perched on a log a few yards away.

Tallott felt like reminding the exasperating woman that Tysa was her daughter not her slave. Obviously Kalmentier had foistered the role of servant maid onto her daughter. Tysa jumped up and loosened a pannier on the horses back to get out a cup. She dipped it in the stream and gave it to her mother whose only comment was ‘there’s a twig in it.’

Widsith had spread out his map on the forest floor and was looking intently at it. Tallott squatted beside him. He had heard of these maps but never seen one. It was fairly large, yellowing at the edges, the markings inscribed in a fine nibbed pen which made a general view of it confusing. He peered closer trying to follow finger.

‘We’re under these mountains here’ the wayfarer tapped the spot with his finger. ‘It is flat forest up to here, then by this river, it climbs steeply. We cannot take the horses beyond that point.’

‘What’s that?’ said Tallott, pointing to a dotted circle by the river.

‘A glade. We will stay there tonight.’ Widsith folded the map up and tucked it into its holster.

A small bright bird flittered amongst the group. Inspecting them from one angle, flicking its tail, then darting to the next tree for another look.

‘That is a Tuit’ the Duc told Juud ‘listen to the sound it makes.’

Perhaps the bird was aware of its audience and responded with two sharp calls.

‘Everyone had a rest?’ asked Widsith, then handed Kalmentier Cullers shoes ‘try these. Matthew had small feet.’

She recoiled in disgust.

‘Dead mans shoes? Never! Take them away. A vile thought!’ then adding practically ‘they will not fit anyway.’

‘Better than what you’ve got’ growled Tallott.

‘I would rather walk barefoot first!’ Her slippers had already been slit down their sides and the back heel of one crumpled up. Widsith observed.

‘You will be soon’ then he turned to Tysa ‘care to try them? Your sandals are not much better.’

‘I forbid you Tysa’ ordered Kalmentier. Tallott snorted.

‘Quiet dear’ shushed Sojon ‘it might be practical.’

Kalmentier would have none of it and angrily denounced one and all for the callousness of the idea. Widsith put the shoes back in the pannier with a wink at Tysa, who blushed and looked away.

They moved on. Steadily the forest grew thicker and Widsith had to make wider and wider diversions to skirt thickets and tangles of logs. At every glade he would stop and peer through the trees to catch a glimpse of the peaks. Once he climbed a tree

and came down apparently satisfied. It dawned on Tallott that the wayfarer was lining himself up on a particular peak and taking a rough bearing from that. The horses got occasionally stuck in a thicket and had to be backed out, and once Sojon slipped up to his knees in mud by the bank of a small stream. Only the wayfarer seemed completely at home in the forest and had a knack of slipping through the woods as if the trees were not there.

It was aftersun before a low roaring sound was heard and the travellers broke out into a spacious grassy glade. A river cut along the far edge but otherwise it was completely enclosed by forest. Standing above the glade the flanks of the mountains towered high into the blue sky. After the coolness of the woodland the glade had a welcoming warmth and openness, and the gold of the dry grass stood like a field of unharvested wheat. Everyone cheered up and Cean broke into a whistle. Widsith lead them to a sprinkle of trees close to the river and began unpacking the horses.

‘This is where we camp.’

Craning his eyes up into the sun Cean made out the wall of rock that tipped above the forest.

‘That’s the scarp, I think’ he said turning to Tysa who was also squinting up.

‘Tysa come here. Comb my hair please.’

Kalmentier was concerned at the way the young men hovered around her daughter. In truth they had hardly spoken to her, but Kalmentier did not consider it proper.

Evening slowly spread richer colours across the glade, for a moment burning the grass an intense gold, before fading and slipping into darkness. Bold stars appeared in the wan sky and Juud tried to count how many she could see. There was a large fire crackling by their camp and a thin pillar of woodsmoke rose into the air and disappeared against the stars. Widsith had peered at it anxiously a couple of times, though he did not think there were any people around who might be interested in their location. The Lowleahs might see it perhaps, but they would not harm them.

Their accommodation consisted of two large sheets of cloth, with cords tied to the corners and strung between trees in a roof-like shape. In shape it was a standard soldiers canopy, though of lighter and finer construction. The weave and material was unknown to Sojon who as a cloth merchant, thought he knew most.

‘The are made by the Lowleahs, from the Forest of the Gloreen.’ Widsith explained. The Duc picked up his ears.

‘So they still exist wayfarer Widsith?’ the wayfarer nodded ‘and will we get to see them?’

‘If they wish’. Tallott pulled a face at this.

They were gathered around the fire and ate a meal of bacon and a starchy tubers called ‘brutens’. Kalmentier had retired early with fatigue and her husband followed shortly.

‘You know’ said the Duc generally to the company ‘Morad has stated that the Lowleahs are the oldest tribe in the kingdom. Their customs and habits have not altered for hundreds of years, and live utterly in the forest and never come out’.

The Duc was warming up, and at the other end of the fire, bored by this historical

stuff, Tallott got into conversation with Tysa. Her ready laugh, and strong plump body appealed to him. He considered Juud too serious and thin for his taste. Cean suspiciously watched the two, half distracted by the Ducs words and a little jealous of Tallott, with his air of assured manhood. His own recent attainment of that state hardly satisfied him and he regretted he had not spent more time with Sarra. He had discovered the first rule of sexual manners, that they never ceased their demands.

Juud had her eyes half-closed, trying to make shapes in the fire, and occasionally glancing up at the darkened mountains above them. The black ramparts of forest looked forbidding. It was difficult not to think of how high they were and what was beyond them? She overheard Tallott ask the question to Widsith 'what happens when we get to the top. Go down again?'

'Exactly' was the reply. Tallott scratched his forehead and muttered 'I asked for that'.

Once when Juud looked up at the mountains she saw Widsith watching her.

Was he trying to judge her merits for the days to come, and did he think she had coped so far? She found the wayfarer enigmatic and off-hand, the way he handed Cullers shoes to poor Kalmentier. Of course he was right, but he did it so casually. Almost brutally. The wayfarer did not show much feeling for his friend, Culler, but perhaps in his trade you weren't allowed to. Juud mentally sighed, and drew the blanket around her. What was ahead? More of the same forest. She had envied the men in their trousers as she had disentangled her dress for the umpteenth time. Every bramble and sharp stick seemed to catch it. It was already torn in several places and although the holes could be sewn-up she wondered if it was worth the effort when tomorrow would just make new ones.

Someone was talking of the battles and she heard Widsith say something strange.

'A bloody beginning to this roundrell.'

The Duc excitedly elaborated the wayfarers comment.

'That's an old old expression wayfarer Widsith. It is a saying from the Past Peoples. It means a people with a common purpose, perhaps on a journey, though not necessarily. Circular and without ending. They used to call the seasons a roundrell. You can see the notion. The seasons are rather like a journey'.

The conversation passed to other things. The Duc talked a little more before he tired and went to bed. He was sleeping with Cean, Tallott and Widsith under one canopy whilst the three women and Sojon slept under the other. Tallott was disappointed with this arrangement, one that Kalmentier had insisted upon. He went to sleep feeling he had made progress on young Tysa, and the wayfarer did not seem like a threat. He yawned, and let a pleasant vision of Tysa young virgin body slip into his mind, but just as he came to the unravelling he fell asleep.

Tallotts dreams were sweet, but might have been less so, if he had seen the brief movement between the wayfarer and Cean. A hand working through the folds of Cean's clothing, and fingers teasing out a object that momentarily gleamed in the moonlit like a green eye. The object was returned and wayfarer Widsith leaned back and smiled.

The wayfarer was the last to leave the fire and the first by it in the morning. The

sky was overcast and watery. The dry twigs he threw on the fire caught quickly on the overnight embers, and he was so busy that he did not see Juud approach, and he looked at her with puzzlement. She pirouetted, and he smiled faintly as he realised the difference. Juud had exchanged her dress for a pair of her fathers breeches, and buttoned on one of his shirts instead of a bodice.

‘Sensible’ was his mono-gramatic comment, but Kalmentier was appalled and took Juud aside to explain how a lady should behave with all these men around.

Juud was not to be dissuaded. She did not mind looking like a man if she had the mans advantages. As to Kalmentiers thinking she would lose her reputation as a lady, well there were few gentlemen here to observe it. Kalmentier talked to the Duc, but he did not seem interested. She began to feel that the spirit of revolt was obscurely Givtheem Tallotts fault, and took the matter up with him, but he only laughed. So unhappy was she that when they left she was too upset to notice that her daughter was wearing Matthew Cullers shoes.

They had to leave the horses behind. This simply meant that their baggers got heavier. Kalmentier still carried nothing, but everyone else gained loads that they now found even more uncomfortable.

‘The horses?’ Tysa asked as they were leaving the glade.

‘They will be fine. There is nowhere to stray to. Unless the Lowleahs pick them up. They should be here in a years time. Probably fatter’ added Widsith.

He was more concerned at the articles they had to leave behind. Ropes, two swords, several pieces of crockery and cutlery, and especially the food. There was little chance of getting more till the Gloreen Forest, and there were the Keeb Mountains to cross first. Every item, rope, spoon, knife, wooden bowl had been counted and judged as to whether it could be taken. Fortunately Kalmentier had lost most of her clothes and had to share between Juud and Tysa (Tallott had done them a favour there!). Reluctantly Juud had consigned her best dress to the unwanted pile, and by joining forces with Tysa compromised on some of their toiletries. Only Kalmentier held out for every item. She had not been taken by the spirit of this adventure at all.

## II

Once across the river, taking their footwear off for the purpose, the land steepened sharply. The easiest way to travel was in short little zig-zag bursts sometimes using the trees to pull up on. The soil was loose and slippery underfoot, and in a short time people were breathing heavily and pausing occasionally against a tree to grab back their breath. Widsith kept them moving, sparing the odd word of encouragement but mostly keeping silent as they struggled up after him. He frequently had to stop to let them catch up, but did not give them a proper rest for some time. When he did he passed around some chewy, black substance that had a sweet, woody flavour.

‘It’s called ryet. It’s for energy’, then he urged them on again.

For one slow wick after another they crawled up the steep slope. Fallen trees further hampered progress. Widsith would invariably find a quick way past but the others could not match his skill, and exhausted themselves taking the clumsy alternative.

Juud was pleased with her breeches. The freedom it gave her limbs made the early part of the days work a pleasure, but soon the continuing strain of the climb began to tell. Her breathing became harsher and her back sore from the weight of the bagger. At the stops she tried to pick out the dirt from under her nails only to see them clog up again as she had to scabble up the next slope. The trees grew thicker and closer. There was more scrub here and the effort of pushing uphill against a sturdy shrub was sometimes too much. Her face channeled with sweat and her long hair got tangled in the branches and seemed to pick up every stray twig on the way. Her quiver was strapped on top of her bagger, and invariably dug into the most tender parts of her skin, and the bow got into arguments with every bush. When she stopped for a pause and looked back she could see that the others were faring no better.

Tysa looked hot and flushed. Her father was tired and irritably helping Kalmentier along, whilst old Sojon had fallen way behind. Cean was helping him. She looked up and saw Tallott and Widsith looking down, waiting impatiently.

She thought she heard Widsith comment offhandedly.

‘I do not like the look of Sojon.’

Then to her despair they adjusted their loads and walked on. In one desperate patch, when Juud was trying to clamber over a log she caught Widsith watching her a short distance above. As she slipped backwards, she became furious with the wayfarers impassive face and burst into tears till Tysa caught up and comforted her.

On and on. Have a rest. Eat more ryet. On. Stop. Eat. On. Stop. Eat.

Widsith always insisted on them chewing the ryet even if they didn’t swallow it. She chewed reluctantly, knowing that once she had stopped it would be time to move on again. If anything the forest had thickened and the trees shrunk in size to large shrubs, which determinedly interlaced each others branches to make it impossible to break through. You had to crawl. On one desperate stretch just when Juud despaired of getting past a particularly entwined clump of shrubs, and was uncertain where the others had gone, she heard Tallotts voice, sounding surprised, just above her.

‘Well Strom be damned’, he said distinctly. She pushed under the thicket and in a bit-wick collapsed onto the source of Tallotts surprise.

It was a narrow clearing. No it wasn’t she realised foolishly, it was part of a track. She looked up in such surprise that Tallott laughed.

‘Your face is a picture Miss du Qu’et.’

Widsith looked at him sharply, and Tallott realised his mistake.

‘Ooops, Juud.’

Her name sounded rough in his accent and for the first time she realised that Tallott had an accent. It was not a Swaletons tongue. The interest of discovering the track distracted her from this thought and looked at Widsith enquiringly, too short of breath to actually voice the question that was in her mind.

‘It’s a Lowleahs trail. It was higher than I supposed. We have gained nearly four

hundred longmans and are right under the first scarp. Look.’

As the wide trail sidled across the slope it made a clearing through the forest through which could be seen the grey-stoned faces of the bluffs they had seen from below. As the others straggled up they too were pointed to the scene as reward for their efforts.

‘It’s wide. Could take two people abreast’ said Cean taking stock.

‘Its designed for the Lowleahs beasts. They have herds of them through this side of the mountains.’

The Duc, who had been sitting regaining his composure, came to life at this.

‘Yes. They are called ‘stuppen’ I think? Am I correct wayfarer?’ Widsith nodded.

‘They are a sort of half-sheep, half-goat, but you would know the history of that sir.’

Indeed the Duc did, and explained carefully how the Lowleahs had cross-bred the two to come up with this strange hybrid animals. Normally Tallott might have been bored but he was feeling the strain on his shoulders up this hill and was grateful for a rest. He guessed (correctly) that Widsith would not move on until the Duc had finished his story so encouraged him to elaborate it. Apparently the Lowleahs were one of the Past Peoples, and believed to be the oldest tribe in the kingdom, with unimaginable wisdom. They lived mainly in the heart of the Gloreen, but came up onto the Keeb Mountains during the summer months.

‘Are there many Lowleahs people now?’ asked Tysa leaning against her bagger.

The Duc looked doubtful. Morad had not mentioned that. Widsith came to his rescue.

‘No, not many.’

He stood up, and this was the general signal for the others to follow suit. Cean came up to Widsith and whispered in his ear.

‘I don’t like the look of Sojon wayfarer. This is too much for him.’

They both glanced at the old man who was adjusting his bagger with Tysas assistance.

‘The going is easier for a while. Keep an eye on him. I will travel slowly.’

Surprisingly, Kalmentier for all her grumblings (which she always managed to find breath for) was not struggling as hard as her husband. A tough old stick thought Widsith, as he swung along the broad Lowleah trail. At that appropriate moment there was a scream behind him and a torrent of words from Kalmentier. She had noticed her daughters footwear. Tysa was not going to budge a thrum and Juud supported her. Sojon was too tired to be interested and mumbled ‘perhaps its for the best dear.’ Eventually Tysa had her way (there was some of her mother in her after all) and the party moved on down the track.

This followed an ingenious course along the side of the escarpments slipping past rock outcrops and wriggling in and out of stream gullies. It was sometimes like a fussy garden path — brushed and well-tended. The spoor of a few animals told Widsith that Lowleahs had been here within a few days. After the battle up the woodland face the track was a welcome respite, and Cean summed up the relief by whistling again. It was a

bawdy taproom tune he had picked up in his dreary wait at the tavern, and Tysa embarrassed him by asking if he knew the words. He had to stammer no.

A league or so on Widsith became more circumspect, inquiring into every side-stream, examining carefully where streams broke the track. Tallott followed this with interest. He was rapidly assuming the role of deputy leader. 'What yer looking for?' he enquired of the wayfarer, but got no response. Widsith ignored him checked his map again. Finally at a stream that gushed from a narrow vertical crack in the rock-face Widsith took off his bagger and went up the stream bed. The walls of the scarp here stood a clean eighty longmans above them. Sheer in places, they were often broken by sharp ribs of rock that might hold a desperate shrub or yellow lichen. There was certainly no way up there Tallott thought, so what was the wayfarer up to?

The others caught up as Widsith came hopping back over the rocks.

'Thats the way we go. Up there' and he waved towards the shadowed split in the grey walls where the creek burst through. No one looked very pleased at the idea.

'I don't see how' muttered Tysa, voicing their collective doubt.

'You will. Tallott we will need that rope. Here, I will take it. You are all going to get wet. Don't bother taking your shoes of you will need them to grip on the rocks.'

With that flurry of advice he sauntered up the stream, while the others timidly followed. The stream gushed over layers of plate-like rocks which fell back in steps to the foot of the bluff. There was no way of avoiding the stream. Widsith took a criss-cross route up it, wading up to his knees at one point. He crossed in front of a small waterfall and seemed to those following to walk miraculously up the face beside the waterfall, and then to compound the trick, disappeared!

Once beside the waterfall Tallott immediately saw how Widsith had managed this feat. A track was cut out of the rock, and it twisted up and around the waterfall. It was barely 12 thrums wide and Tallott found his bulging bagger brushed against the rock-wall, pushing him out over the twenty longmans or so of sheer drop back to the stream. He was relieved to edge around the corner where the wayfarer gone, and found himself swallowed into the gloom of the giant crevice. The contrast made him hesitate till he could pick out the path in front of him, which demonstrated a new marvel by cutting up the side of the crevice in a series of steps. Who ever designed this track had strong nerves. There was a distant roaring sound which Tallott guessed must be another waterfall. It was obscured from his view by the curving sides of the gorge. There was a sharp breath behind him and Tysa was standing by his elbow.

'You're mum will be loving this.'

Tysa looked around in awe.

'Its amazing'.

From the steps the path neatly turned a rock bluff and dropped to the base of a lovely ribbon waterfall that made Tallotts eyes widen. Widsith was standing at the foot of a deep green pool, which accumulated the waterfalls energy then pushed it down the gorge. Tallott could see no way out from this spot. The waterfall was easily thirty longmans high, issuing from the smallest imaginable crack in one clean leap to the cup of rock at its font. On all sides the walls had completely closed in, and rocks sheer to

the skyline. He craned his neck to see if the track was cut in some magical way up these walls, but could see no sign. He walked down to where Widsith was standing. The thunder of the falls made talk almost impossible.

‘Wyrds work’ he yelled.

Widsith nodded, waiting until the others joined. Cean was helping Sojon who was staggering from rock to rock. Kalmentier looked pale. Widsith set off again and hopped around the rocks beside the pool and came into the range of the spray mist that filled the base of the waterfall. The rocks were slippery and several times Tallott stumbled trying to watch his step and keep an eye on the wayfarer in front. He couldn’t imagine where he could be going. Swiftly Widsith crossed the last of the rock before the base of the waterfall and walked behind it. Tallott blinked, and hurried after him and saw a tiny gap between the curtain of water and the rock. Behind was darkness and he took a brave leap through the gap and felt himself land in a foot of water. An arm grabbed him and pulled him out.

Widsith shouted in his ear.

‘Follow this ledge round! There’s a sandy cave at the end. Wait there!’

Tallott nodded, and feeling his way with his feet on the ledge and one hand against the wall he crept along. His eyesight returned a little after the sudden darkness and he could make out some shapes in the gloom. After a few tentative bitwicks he felt the ledge widen and grow soft under his feet. He bent down to touch the ground and scooped a handful of sand. Slowly, like blind people, the others joined him. Tysa was soaked. She’d fallen full face into the shallow pool behind the curtain of the waterfall and cut open her knee. She could feel a hot trickle against her leg. The waterfall was visible by the filtered sparkle of light that came through the water, but everything else was black as Wyrds hat. Widsith got them all to join hands and rather like children in a blindfold game led them to the back of the cave. Juud felt she must have hold of Tysa in one hand and Sojons on the other; she could feel a wart on the inside of one of his fingers. How Widsith could find his way was a mystery to her, but she supposed he had been here before.

With one hand outstretched Widsith led the chain of people along the cave wall groping its surface with a cautious hand. He sensed the walls were shrinking in and felt a puff of air on the front of his face as though blown down from above. The ceiling scraped his head (Tallott was not so lucky and gained a bruise), and the surface climbed steeply. There was a pale wash of light at the tunnels end.

A bit-wick later and the light dramatically increased. He let go of Tallotts hand and stepped out of the tunnel onto a stone platform that jutted a few feet behind another waterfall, glittering like Stuess scarf.

This was an astonishing place. One marvel after another. Juud would have thought this track impossible if told of it. The gleam in Tysas eyes showed that she shared the magic, whereas Kalmentier looked fearful and her husband tired. Cean had been helping him constantly and was becoming more and more concerned at the old mans frailness.

‘We follow behind the waterfall?’ bellowed Tallott to the wayfarer ‘where next?’

The wayfarer took his arm and pointed up at the face behind the falls. There was a

row of neat iron bolts going up for six longmans to the lip of a dark cave. Tallott was incredulous. The constant spray soaked the face and encouraged a growth of green slime all over the rock surface. There were only the bolts to hang onto. Two vertical rows spaced about half a longman apart. A single slip and you would fall into the waterfall below, and no doubt have your brains smeared on the bottom rocks thought Tallott. Strom!

Widsith did not wait for Tallott to tell him this but set down his bagger grabbed hold of the first bolts, lifting himself up. The others watched soundlessly as the wayfarer with fast agility ascended the bolted track. Only for one heart-clutching moment did his foot slip off a bolt before he regained his balance, and disappeared over the lip.

The end of a rope came down and Tallott taking the hint tied on the bagger and watched it get whisked into the air and swallowed into the cave. The rope came down again, and this time Widsith's head appeared over the cornice and shouted. The word 'Juud' floated to them. She gulped, and let Cean take her bundle as Tallott fixed the rope around her waist and pulled it up under her arms.

'Go slowly' Widsith shouted, 'concentrate on climbing. Don't look down'.

She felt the rope tighten, looked up and saw Widsith's hand wave her on up. Much later she was unable to remember how she climbed that wall. The only thing that stuck in her mind was the roaring of the falls and the smell of the slime which tainted her clothes and lingered for some days afterwards. From below they saw a figure ascend methodically, neither looking up or down, till she reached the lip and a strong hand shot out and pulled her out of sight.

The rope came down again. The bagger was hauled up and then it was the next person's turn.

Juud gasped on the stone ground as Widsith unravelled the rope from her body and threw it down. She crawled into the cave a little further just as her bagger arrived, her mind dizzy.

'If you go along there you will come out into a small valley.'

She obediently followed these orders. The 'cave' was really a narrow gully that opened out into a wide basin at the top. There was grass, and a strange looking animal feeding on it, a sort of long-legged sheep. It jumped away startled when it saw her and Juud dropped her bagger and collapsed on the soft green grass letting tears of relief come naturally as she buried her face in the ground.

All she was doing was crying this day.

One by one the others climbed or were lifted up the bolt path. Cean came up after Juud and leant a strong hand to the rope. Kalmentier did not need much assistance. Possibly terror had so overwhelmed her that her body responded like an automaton to the directions of the others. The Duc went up stiffly, only Sojon was completely helpless. He dangled like a sack of brutens from the rope as he was carted up, and quivered on the stone ledge for several bitwicks before being persuaded to move.

They sat about on the grass alternatively silent or talking in rapid excitement about their feelings on the ascent. Fear was engulfed by relief and even followed by a sort of pride.

They'd done it! Strom knows how, but they'd done it!

Tallott punched Cean playfully in the chest and they laughed at each stories, exaggerating their fear, or elaborating the details till the bolt path stretched halfway to the heavens. Widsith bandaged Tysas knee and kept an eye on Sojon who was looking wonderingly around as if he had never expected to see grass and sky again.

Stretching her limbs luxuriously on the grass Juud turned over on her back and slowly focussed on the landscape around her. The shivering in her body had eased, and relief was overcome by an extraordinary sense of well-being. In a short life of nineteen years she had never been challenged to such limits as today. Always she had been the capable, assured one, in the classroom and the farm, and in a lifetime of easy success she had been in danger of thinking that life itself was easy. The last few days had crumpled that notion. She had felt helpless during the sharp battles and only marginally useful on that harrowing descent down the flooded Huss'tt. That bolted track had been the worst of all, but she was still here. Alive and more anxious to remain so. The closeness of death was also its spice.

Tysa came over and sat beside her and they gave each other a hug. They'd both come of age this day.

By the grass valley there were three small caves in the breeways wall, each connected to the other by a short tunnel, and with natural wide 'windows' cut into each. A fire in the outer cave spread some warmth and flickering colour to the others. It started to rain. After Tysas show of disloyalty this morning Kalmentier was keeping a close eye on her, and making sure that Tallott didn't. Most were suffering some form of ailment, blisters, sore feet, back ache or cuts. The Duc's feet were red and sore with the skin rubbed off in many places, and he could only maintain a hobble the next few days. Kalmentier again surprised everyone with her remarkable resilience. Her slippers hung on by a thread here and there and like it or not she would soon be forced into wearing Tysas cast-offs. There was little talk around the fire and all went to bed early, Widsith last as usual listened to the dripping rain at the cave entrance and hoped for better weather tomorrow.

### III

It wasn't to be. The cloud crouched on the tops above them, and from the grass valley a good track wound through a thinner forest, lazily zig-zagging upwards for almost 200 longmans. An effort but nothing to the struggle of yesterday.

Sojon seemed to have perked up and now it was the Duc's turn to suffer, and Juud attended to him through the day. Kalmentier had relented and marched along in Tysas old shoes, keeping her daughter busy in attendance on herself and her husband. Seeing the land lying against him Tallott kept away from Kalmentier's shrill tongue and kept up with Widsith through the day. Cean was content in his adopted position at the rear.

At the foot of the second scarp they were almost completely in cloud wreaths of

which hung in and about rock crags intemittently clearing and obscuring the mountain. The wind was absent and sounds of rocks clattering loosley or soft voices would echo strangely loud in the silent air. The higher altitude was chilling and several people pulled on an extra jerkin or pulled scarves against their faces. The wayfarer led up a loose stone gully then around and across the top of the escarpment. It was simple. Widsith had explained to them that it would be but Tallott was still surprised. Immediately from the scarp the slope flattened and the last few trees shrunk and dwindled on the open rock. The wind sharpened and tugged at the tough little alpine grasses that were the only inhabitants of these desolate heights.

Widsith picked his way cautiously upwards trying to follow a thin vestige of track. Mist shut off the mountains like an invisible and oppressive wall and it would be easy to lose the way up here. The top of the Keeb Mountains was rounded and bulged in masses of rock outcrops that projected weirdly from the stony ground like grotesque figures. It was hard to distinguish one from the other and Widsith certainly did not attempt to do so. He kept his eye to the ground picking up the small clues that the Low-leahs people made. A pile of stones here, the wisp of a trail there, and the occasional hard, dry droppings from the stuppen beasts.

The others followed obediently, blind in this mountain fog, relying completely on the wayfarers skills. On the open ground Juud walked beside her father steadying him when he stumbled. Cean supported Sojon who after the mornings brisk start was beginning to fade. Several times they could sneak rests when the wayfarer went on ahead to find the track, but these became uncomfortable once the cold seeped into their skin. They chewed ryet at the stops and drank from the occasional tarn, saying nothing and feeling miserable.

The mist would trick their eyes into believing the rock shapes were moving. Once Cean swore that they were, but blinked again and saw nothing. A bird screeched overhead then disappeared and the odd lizard swivelled its eyes at them and popped back into its hole. The rocks seemed full of eyes and mouths and limbs as if they were moving, like shrouded giants, on some eerie business of their own. Widsith stopped frequently.

The track was elusive to the point of not existing. The shifting stones and gravel would often conceal what bare trace previous feet had left. Tallott had been instructed to build little stone piles at every 30 longmans or so in case they had to return and wait it out for clearer weather. Twice Widsith was tempted to turn back. The cold was penetrating into everyones bones and made the slow progress more uncomfortable. The wayfarer knew that on this stretch of the Keeb there was a bolder cluster of outcrops which hid a cave in their midst. He had been their before, but in this murk everything was obscure. Widsith walked a little further and sensed rather than saw a thickening in the mist of the outline of a large rock pile. Just as Tallott caught up with a complaint about the monotony of his task Widsith said 'we're here' and a bitwick later the party stumbled into the cavern.

They were to remain for three days.

As Widsith patiently explained they could not risk descending off the mountains whilst the cloud hung so heavily over them. So they had to sit it out, dry, but often cold. There was no firewood at this height and they were obliged to chew on the ryet

at breakfast, lunch and supper. Every wick or so Widsith would prowl about the rocks vainly seeking a slight easing of this endless grey. He would light his pipe, the embers flickering, and burning poorly in such a damp atmosphere, and the hotherb smoke would linger for wicks in the unmoving air. There was no wind, and without it to drive away the clouds, little hope of leaving.

The constant waiting tempered their tongues and flashes of irritability would grow without any assistance into outright words of anger.

The girls in a fit of boredom attacked their hair, Tysa going the whole way and chopping her long tresses down to a short, bouncy, bob. Kalmentier was furious with her daughter when she saw the result, but no amount of fury could glue it back on. She could not understand the girl. What was wrong with her? Juud had been more modest, and only trimmed her hair, and folded the rest up. Anything was better than a hairful of sticks and dead insects.

Cean and Tallott once again were barely speaking after an altercation where Cean suggested Tallott was 'out for himself and was only on this journey for greater designs of his own'. Tallott responded by calling the younger man 'a loud-mouthed pup who'd only just got his horns up'. This infuriated Cean who whispered violently that Tallott wanted to satisfy his own lust on Tysa's body. When Givtheem smugly replied 'Yes, before you do', Widsith had to intervene before the others caught the gist of the dispute. He cooled them down by saying 'point your hot words at poor old Sojon there so he can warm up on them'.

The prefector had gained a hacking cough that grew daily more cruel on his body. They piled blankets around him and prayed for wind.

#### IV

On the second day there was a curious incident. Cean, fuming from one spell of bickering with Tallott, strode off into the mist and was none too careful to check his position. So when his mind became bored with hurling sharp rejoinders to Tallott's sneers (pity he could not have thought of them at the time!) he began to realise he was uncertain of the direction of the cavern.

The mist was as pervasive as ever. There was no wind that he could feel on his cheek, but still the mist seemed to move about, thickening in one place, then thinning tantalisingly somewhere else only to recondense again when you moved to the clear patch. At least he supposed it was the mist moving, and not his imagination.

Cean at first strode off confidently towards one rock outcrop he was sure held the cavern, only to find a totally different cluster of rocks. He thought again, then realised his error. He'd gone away from the cavern because he had shuffled 180 degrees as his mind tackled Tallott's hurtful words. This time he turned carefully around and marched steadily 30 or 40 longmans till he saw with relief the familiar rock cluster. He gave an inward grin. That had been a nervous bit-wick, and felt not a little pride at getting

back.... His step faltered. The rock shapes that emerged were not those of the cavern. In a sudden panic he shouted hoarsely out, then ran around the damp rock pinnacles. Nothing there. And when his feet stopped scrunching on the scree the silence grew ominous.

He sat down, this time making no confident assertions of his position, and breathing deeply, tried to think out the last few of his movements. It was hopeless. He could not fathom the direction he had taken and all the criss-crossing back and forth had weaved a tangle in his mind that no seamstress could untie. It was futile to try again. He began cursing himself for a stupid Gadabout for falling astray so easily, and had a moments regretful thinking of the sweetness of the maid in Swaleton, so long ago ...

Strom! He must concentrate. He still could not be far away from the cavern. He'd have to shout for help. Reluctantly he let out a short yell, mindful that if the others came Tallotts quick sneers would soon berate him.

He yelled again, slightly louder. Then listened for an answer. Nothing. The third time he really shouted, a huge bellow that seemed to fill the space around him and even move the mist. Then he listened.

Nothing.

Cean groaned with despairing realisation that the others buried in the cavern would probably hardly hear him if he shouted outside the entrance. Only when they went for a toilet, or if Widsith exercised his pipe would anyone be outside, it was too clammy and chill to stay out of the cave long. So methodically Cean started a series of chants, trying to sing them, for he'd heard that singing often travelled further than a shout. Then when that produced no result he tried whistling.

Still nothing.

He pulled his jerkin closer and pushed his hands deeper into his pockets. The cold began to creep along his skin and he stamped his feet to warm up his toes. There was no cubby-hole in the rocks behind that he could squat in till the others came looking, though he was confident they would. This cold was hard to resist. He tried running a few laps around the rock cluster and felt better for that, but then the sweat chilled on his skin once he'd stopped and he felt even colder.

Every moment seemed slow and drawn out, perhaps a wick has passed now. The mist, seeping and shifting around mysteriously, invaded his imagination and for a while he played with making shapes out of it; well-known figures and little fairy-tale things from his childhood which somehow changed into the unpleasant grins of ogres and the laughter of Givtheem Tallott sneering at him. He tried thinking of something else. He imagined they might come looking for him after a wick had elapsed, certainly after two...

Strom! Something moved!

No, he had fancied it. It would be too easy to go mad here. But now he had started the game of making shapes he could not easily take his mind away. Misty shapes started to people the rocks with alarming populations and most of them looked ghoulish and nastier than before.

Strom! There it was again! Something had moved! Ceans senses tingled. This was

not some fantastic creature of his mind. There was a movement there, a solid shape where there had been vacuous mist before. There it moved again! Cean cursed himself for not bringing a sword. He drew out his dagger which seemed ridiculously useless against that phantom out there.

It moved again! This time there was shape to it. Human shape thanks be to Wyrd! Legs and arms enough, why it might be Tallott or Widsith. Cean shouted but the figure stayed still, and the sound of Cean's voice came back in a mocking echo in the mist.

Cean realised he'd given his position away with certainty now, but then the creature may have been watching for wicks and wicks. Still the thing stood still, just in greyish outline of human shape, not especially tall, who was it? If he wanted the advantage Cean realised he must approach the thing. As he stepped forward he felt his lips dry and licked them with his tongue. After a few steps of approach the creature drew away. Maybe the creature was as scared of him as he of it. With this encouragement Cean moved closer but the creature moved back, still keeping a distance between them. Once Cean lost sight of it and in a panic ran forward a little. Human or not this thing was living and might have shelter close by. Cean did not want to be back by himself again in this dead world, but the shape re-emerged and their strange progress continued. Cean advanced the creature slipped back. Several times it disappeared completely then reappeared to the left or right, so Cean moved forward again. He got exasperated by this elusive retreat and several times spurted into a sprint, but always the shape stayed ahead moving as quickly as Cean, always staying just on the shadow line of the mist where it was impossible to discern any detail to it.

Near a bolder cluster of rocks the creature suddenly vanished. Cean waited a while but there was nothing. He shouted. Then to his surprise there was an answering shout and Widsith appeared from the rocks. He was back at the cavern!

Cean ran forward and excitedly told of the shape close to them. The wayfarer nodded and did not seem surprised. Tallott came out, and Juud also, muffled in a heavy wool jacket over her jerkin and bodice.

'Who was it?' she asked as Cean had stammered out his story again.

'Lowleahs' said Widsith.

Of course! Cean realised at once.

'Very shy, kept slipping away all the time. Everytime I approached'.

Tallott looked concerned. Strange figures fitting about the mist could hardly be trustworthy, but the wayfarer gave a sardonic knowing look.

'Odd that you got back to the cavern isn't it?'

Cean looked puzzled but Juud realised at once.

'He was being led' she exclaimed.

Widsith knocked his pipe out on a rock digging his finger in the bowl to get the hotherb remnants out. Tallott gave a short satisfied laugh.

'Nice, friendly Lowleahs eh? Just as well for you lad'.

Cean blushed hotly. It was all embarrassingly clear now, but before it had seemed so obvious he was chasing the fellow.

The others were interested and amused as well. The Duc made an entry in the journal he had started, on a leafed accounts book that for some obscure reason Sojon had decided to bring.

‘At least’ the Duc said to Cean ‘you have seen an Lowleahs. More than most I dare say. Except you wayfarer.’

‘They’re pretty shy.’

Tallott had been thinking. ‘Why are they friendly to us?’

‘They’re not especially. They are friendly to me. They recognise me’ said Widsith.

‘Ahhh’ the Duc said alertly so there is some point to your misty ramblings.’ The wayfarer nodded modestly.

‘But they could show us out of here’ burst in Tysa.

‘They could’.

‘Then why not ask...?’ began Tallott, as keen as all of them to get away from this place.

‘They do not choose to. It is not their way’.

Widsith sighed a little, everything seemed to need an explanation. ‘They are a shy, rare people. One of the Past Peoples. They don’t much trust the people from the plains now.’

‘Wise I should say, wayfarer’, interrupted the Duc softly. Widsith continued.

‘Be grateful they have not harmed us. That is assistance enough. We will see them, in the Gloreen’.

He would not talk anymore and wrapped himself up in his blanket.

Cean cocooned himself in the blankets and as his shivering eased, he rambled over the incident in his mind, imagining meetings with these obscure people and winning their trust, and vaguely wondering how Widsith had won theirs, till sleep reached up a hand from its deep chamber and pulled him down.

## V

On the third night the wind came and the day broke bright and clear. The flanks of the Keeb Mountains swept down to the vast Forest of Gloreen that loomed rich and matted before the sharp upthrust of the Fore Range ended their domain. Beyond that, still further, might be glimpsed an icy peak of the massive Raggerok. All the steepness of the Keeb Mountains had been on the scarped side, the skaw side. The yorn edges were broad and soft in slope, descending like an easy rock beach to the lapping forest.

Spirits were high as Widsith led them down to a narrow rock tongue that intruded deeply into the forest. It was a natural pathway and Tallott could understand why the wayfarer had insisted on waiting those three miserable days in the cavern. On either side of the rock rib were deep gullies choked with forest and swiftly descending streams.

They walked above this like a charm and in half a day had struck the margins of the great forest. The end of the spur flattened into a parkland scattered with thickets of trees and bright-eyed lakes. Sojons cough had not deserted him and the wayfarer decided to take advantage of the sunshine and fine camping to rest him further. Giving orders to camp he disappeared in the forest to reconnoitre the next days travel.

The three days enforced rest on the mountain had really been nothing of the kind. They only fretted, slept poorly and shivered, so they enthusiastically built the fire up and the first cooked meal for three days was gulped down. Fat pieces of bacon and as many bruten as they could fit into their stomachs left everyone with a bloated and indolent disposition, which was spent the lazy hot aftersun sleeping off. By the time Tallott woke up from his nap it was approaching dayend.

The wayfarer had returned and was sipping a cup of leafen by the fire and chewing on a cold bacon end. Juud was with him, stitching one of her socks. Some cloud had appeared on the mountain, wisps of it hooking on some of the rock outcrops and trailing behind. Tallott squatted by the fire.

‘Some sewing, eh, Miss du, er, Juud.’ He grinned at the slip. This reminded Juud of something she had thought of days ago. It was his pronunciation of Juud that jogged her memory.

‘You are not from Swaleton are you Givtheem? Your accent is different from there.’ Widsith looked up.

‘I bet the wayfarer knows’ said Tallott.

‘It’s Furrowdale, but softer. I do not think you were born there.’

‘I wasn’t. Caroyal I am pure and straight, but my father came from that valley, and I must have picked it up from him.’

‘What does your father do?’ Juud inquired snapping off a thread and knotting it. Tallott hesitated and looked curiously at the wayfarer, as if suspecting that Widsith knew this already.

‘He was a weaver first, but settled in Caroyal as a merchant.’ Juud knew a few of the merchant families in the capital and asked him which one.

‘Yussaf.’ Tallott stabbed the fire with a stick. ‘You knew?’ he said to Widsith ‘some of the boatmen told you probably. We worked a bit together’.

‘But you’re not a boatman?’ asked Juud.

‘Who said anything about boats girl! They looked after the water business of things. I did the land.’

Juud stopped her stitching and looked at him. This was very queer.

‘Were you a smuggler?’

‘Yep. But not just that. A dealer in cloth I was. Inherited the skill from my father. Before he died.’

‘Before he was poisoned by Wenner?’ inquired Widsith.

Tallotts face hardened.

‘You know that story. Yes, the bastard’.

Tallott spoke quickly and in harsh sounds. In that merchants large house he had watched with indifference, then distrust as Lutens Wenner rose to his position of power within the family. He had heard his sisters screams through the thin wall as Lutens beat her into a submissive silence and seen that fearful twitch in his fathers eyes as Secretary Wenner walked into the room. Tallott had thought his father a fool for letting the smooth-faced country boy insinuate himself so easily into power, and in disgust left early from home and wandered around the plain in an aimless pursuit of pleasure and adventure. He often pretended to be a wayfarer and once or twice took on a short guiding trips, but could not settle in these. Sometimes he worked on estates in a multitude of labouring jobs. He picked up the knack of weaving which together with knowledge of cloths often provided him a job on the isolated estates where such skills were rare. There was another knack of his too, cultivated amongst the fine ladies of the landowners, who would dress publicly in his clothes and take them off privately for his pleasure. Several households he had to leave in a hurry, unrepentant and as bold as ever. Occupying himself this way he came to Swaleton, got in thickly with the local smugglers and rapidly established himself as a particularly artful trader in the black market. News of his fathers death hurried him home, and what he saw and suspected made him speak louder than was wise. Another son, fearing Wenners patience if Tallotts accusations came to his ear, packed money into Tallotts pocket and sent him off. Tallott fought in the battle on the Rume against Wenner, and had to flee when the army crumbled.

The next ten years saw him lose one fortune and gain another, travelling and whoring and cumulating in himself a burning hatred of this man Lutens Wenner. He returned to Swaleton eventually and took up with Sojon, a former friend of his father. There were big profits to be made in cloths that dodged the kings taxes and the pair prospered in smuggling, and under the table trading. Juud was shocked by this part of the story, as she had been by Tallotts salicious accounts amongst the estate ladies. She had always thought Sojon a pillar of respectability. Tallott leaned over and spoke harshly in her face.

‘Nice old Sojon. He’s a rogue. As much as me, and I’ll tell you I dealt with practically every respectable merchant in Swaleton, most of them elders. They’re worse than I am ‘cause they keep they’re little greedy thoughts private. They’re like my father. I didn’t respect him. Wenner got him through his love of money. Played at him like a child lured by a pretty coin.’

‘But you love money’ she returned heatedly.

‘And love spending it!’ he roared ‘I don’t niggle it away like ol’ Sojon or the family you stayed with. I bet they gluttonised themselves and starved their servants. Eh? And they’re better than me? Eh?’

There was some painful truth in Tallotts words, but she wasn’t going to admit it publicly to this braggard. She bit her lips. The family she boarded with had been obsessed with their riches and the display of them. They made it quite plain that she was a poor benefactress of their benevolent wealth. She had seen the mother get into a shrieking rage when her son gave too much money to a servant ‘He’s not worth it. He’s filth!’

Widsith pulled Tallotts story back.

‘You had to change your name?’

‘Course. The name of Yussaf wouldn’t have kept me alive long. Tallott was my mothers name.

‘I linked up with Sojon and his mates, and little good it did me, till that lad turned up’ he nodded to Cean Grin’kel who was walking across to them.

‘You missed a good story lad’ he shouted ‘my life history.’

Cean looked disconcerted.

‘Well, I’ll tell it again sometime.’

Cean looked between Tallott and the wayfarer in a puzzled way.

‘Did he explain where he got the twelve gold sovereigns?’ asked Cean. This brought a shout of laughter from Tallott.

‘So you’re still worrying about them? They’re mine lad. I earned them. Strom, I earned them!’

## The Heart of the Gloreen

*We plunge into the cool moist forest, and the travellers are making good progress but the undercurrents remain. One of the travellers is in love and the other takes what he can get. They encounter an almost legendary figure, an uncanny character who plays a strange soothsayering role throughout our little history.*

The Forest of Gloreen filled the vast basin between the long finger of the Fore Range and the short thumb of the Keeb Mountains. Huge though this forest was now, it was nothing compared to its former glory. Before the coming of the horse-warriors, the forest reached as far as Caroyal and went beyond on the yorn bank of the Rume River, almost to the property of the du Qu'ets, but this had mostly vanished. Here and there on some of the estates there were still traces of the old forest, a few scraps retained by the lords for their hunting. And under the foothills of the Fore Range a thin skein of forest still edged an unbroken green between the dry plains and dryer mountains.

The horse-warriors had vigorously burnt-off the lower reaches of the forest, cutting through the swards of green with a sharp hunger for cleared land. It was only the Dark Period that ceased this activity. There were no people to clear the land, and few left to inhabit the spaces made, so the Forest got its quiet revenge by seed and thistledown to reclaim its former inheritance. Weeds choked the untilled land and larger shrubs followed behind, providing a protective cover for the delicate tree seedlings that in time broke through the shrub canopy and stood on their own. It was a patient advance, purposeful but even in the seventy years or so of the Dark Period it was never substantial. Men could destroy in one year what it took the Forest a hundred to replace. Yet the forest did expand, not so much by way of trees but in covering wide stretches in thick and tangled shrubland that confused the traveller and hid the brigand, and this matted regrowth acted as a buffer protecting the fuller and established forest behind. It did its job well, and people were rare visitors to the Forest. Only the exiled, murderous and

desperate ventured into the Gloreen itself, which suited the Lowleahs well enough.

At the forest core, where the Rume River slithered through banks of dark and mossy green, was a lowland region, a general depression in the basin. Here the surrounding greenleaf forest, with its high canopies of old trees, gave way to a strange tree mass called 'barewood' or 'bacat' in the Lowleah tongue. A prickly, thorny entanglement of trees, that had no leaves but an armoury of thorns. The forest looked dead, yet was alive, with curious animals, odd sapsucking flowers and the enigmatic tribe of inhabitants called Lowleahs. It was not the name they chose for themselves, but given to them by the horse-warriors settlers who found them mysterious and elusive. It simply meant 'hard to find'.

## II

On the last day of Harvess the travellers slipped into the shade of the Gloreen Forest. It would be many days before they would see any large slice of sky or bathe in Breets rays uninterrupted by clutching leaves and branches. Tallott remarked on the end of Harvess with the comment 'It'll get chilly', but just to confound him, Stuess turned on her warmest disposition and for some seven days flooded the forest in sun and balmy winds, infuriatingly so, for there was no unshaded place to enjoy them. The trail twisted along one dark glade after another. Moss hung like ragged tapestries from the trees and filled every nook of groundspace in a continuous cushion. Although the track was well-defined progress was slow. They were going against the grain of the land, obliged to ferret in and out of stream gullies all day long. Seventeen gullies in one days travel alone, and the track stayed undeviatingly to its direction, purposely running towards the heart of the Gloreen.

Despite the frustrations of the track the party kept in good spirits. It was pleasantly cool under the greenery, the days short (Widsith kept them deliberately so) and roaring fires every night and morn ended and started the days in a peaceful pattern. The only metaphoric cloud in what was literally a cloudless seven days was the health of Sojon, which despite the care of his wife and daughter seemed to decline, but not from any specific illness as far as the wayfarer could understand.

Perhaps he was dying?

His health taking its natural descent in unnatural circumstances. In Swaleton, a rich merchant like Sojon could expect the best of attention from a flock of servants, extending nature beyond her normal limits simply by a close and comfortable cosseting. Out here, once death approached, it came swift and could take a healthy man from vigour to senility in a season. A countryman would know this and accept it, but Sojon would not, and could not (no more than his wife or daughter) accept that he was dying a peasants death. Kalmentier kept a watchful, even fearful eye on her husband. If he should die who would look after her? Every day was making the friendship between Tysa and Tallott more plain, and though she tried to pull her daughter away by demanding attention for herself and Sojon, this was too obvious a ploy. As Sojon faded so did his authority,

and Kalmentier lost daily ground to the new independence of her daughter.

Tysa would often walk with Tallott, and sit next to him by the fire. Once Kalmentier found her mending Tallotts jerkin and snatched it from her daughters hands. She loathed the man. His size and physical strength frightened her as did his boasting stories, and crude remarks. Inevitably, all the traits in Tallott that Kalmentier despised, attracted Tysa. This air of worldliness, and tales of escapades and skull-dugery told with a roughish wit that was a breath of earthy air to Tysa. Such people as Tallott had been kept well away from the strict and cloistered world of Tysas preparatory school. She had caught some whiffs of scandal from incautious servants but nothing had prepared her for the sheer, raw, ebulliance of Givthem Tallott.

Once on the track she had slipped and almost fell over, before Tallott caught and pulled her up with strong arms. The touch was thrilling and for days she turned over the incident in her memory and sought to be close to Tallott again so that his rough skin would linger on hers. In a city this schoolgirl crush would have remained at a demure distance, but in the enclosed forest with this isolated group of people, her emotion had no other place to go, and grew into an infatuation, and worse a hunger. She thought it love.

Tallott meanwhile told his stories and caught her blushing eye to eye, knowing full well what he was about. He was a born womaniser and felt starved if his senses were not stuffed with the smell and touch of woman. Tysa was desirable because she was available. Juud was too much the sophisticated lady to interest him, and too thin! By Strom! He favoured a good bit of flesh for his arms and Tysa had the flush and boldness of a peasant girl. The means of getting Tysa for himself, pleasantly occupied his private thoughts, but he'd have to be quick. There wasn't just Kalmentier to deal with, Juud was forever talking to the younger girl and if he didn't move sharp his virgin prize would fall to the older girls ideals. Much good those were!

Whilst Tallott considered various schemes of seduction the two girls talked. Juud was nineteen, Tysa sixteen. They had gone to the same preparatory school with the same tedious instructions on good etiquette and gentle manners which succeeded with Juud, but never rubbed off on Tysa. Both came from similarly wealthy parents (or in Juuds case guardians) who endlessly sought out suitable matches for the girls hands. Of the two, the seniority and worldliness of Juud, (she had after all travelled and her father was a kings prisoner), gave Juud an advantage in conversation, but both gained from this early-flowering friendship.

Juud found Tysas enthusiasm infectious and wanted to let go, whilst the younger girl found Juuds calm assurance and reasonable judgements on everything a revelation. She had grown literally not trained to think for herself. The school did not encourage such values and her parents certainly did not. She was already betrothed when they had fled, and in her parents eyes this was her only necessary function. To marry into another merchants house and so extend the families wealth and connections.

'I've never met him. And I'm virtually his without a word on my part' she explained to Juud.

Up till now she had accepted that this should be the normal pattern of her life. Juud thought this was right in its place, but not before a girl had some time for herself, and

she insisted to Tysa that she should marry by choice as well. These were heretical ideas and Kalmentier was kept well out of earshot of these girlish discussions. To Tysa they opened up a world. Between Tallotts masculinity and Juuds independence she was a ball that bounced willingly from one to the other, learning about her womaness from Juud and her sexuality from Tallott. But the girls did have one moment of disagreement.

It was early dayend, and they were cutting up their dwindling supply of brutens for cooking, gouging out the bruised or rotten pieces and popping them into a pot that bubbled happily over the fire. For some reason no one else was around. A thump amongst the trees indicated Tallott and Cean were chopping wood for the morning fire, the Duc was reading his only book, Sojon was resting (with Kalmentier in attendance) and the wayfarer was off somewhere on one of his mysterious errands.

‘Do you like Givtheem?’ Juud inquired searchingly.

Tysa did not pause in her work of preparing the brutens.

‘Yes. He knows everything, has done everything. Those stories he tells, and what have I done? I haven’t seen anything, till now’ she added.

Juud was not sure how to mention the thought in her mind to Tysa, so became direct.

‘He seems to have known a good many women.’

‘Oh yes he has told me of them’ this startled Juud, but Tysa continued happily ‘he said they were all horrible, and they let him down when he fell in love with them.’

This was worse than Juud had imagined. So that was how Tallott explained his conquests. Tysa continued,

‘He said that he boasts too much too. Half of them don’t exist except in his stories. Isn’t that funny?’ Tysa looked wonderingly at Juud ‘he loves telling stories so much that he invents things to fit, or how people think he should act.’

Juud was appalled. The level of Tallotts deceit was becoming confusing. Stories on stories. Perhaps it was a childish invention on Tallotts part, or although then again perhaps not, for Juud could look into Tysa’s young eyes and see what Tallott would see, a child’s mind in an adult body.

‘I should warn you Tysa. Do not think me interfering, but Givtheem is a worldly sort of man, he might hurt you’ here Juud stumbled for the right words to explain the sexual act ‘if you’re not careful.’

This was woefully inadequate as Tysa seemed to realise.

‘But if he loves me.’

‘Has he said so?’

‘Oh yes. I love him. When this is over he wants to marry me.’

‘But he’s well over forty’ protested Juud.

‘So was my betrothed’ replied Tysa with devastating simplicity. Juud had no answer to this. The trouble was she was as little expert in these matters as Tysa, and had she told Tysa to marry for love? Tysa reminded Juud of this.

‘Yes I know, but, it’s different. Your family would not approve of Givtheem but they obviously have of you’re betrothed.’

‘Only of his money’ replied Tysa boldly.

Really, thought Juud sadly, she had instructed Tysa too well. She could see but not explain to the younger girl that Tallott would simply enjoy her, and then discard her like an old jerkin. He had done so so many times before, as his stories made implicitly obvious, why should he change now?

‘Please be careful Tysa. He’s so much older. I can’t explain, it’s too difficult, but be careful.’

She had stopped peeling the brutens and gazed earnestly at Tysa.

‘What’s to be careful about? Really Juud don’t fuss. It’s all so simple. We’re in love and we’re going to marry. I don’t see the danger in that.’

She was getting piqued by Juuds assumption of superiority in the matter and said something that was not intended as hurtful, but cut the conversation to a silence.

‘I mean it’s not as if you know about how it feels. You’ve never been in love.’

### III

They had begun to look and act like travellers, and their city habits began to slough away under the necessity of keeping alive and keeping warm. Beards were sprouting across the mens faces and although the Duc persisted for a while in shaving, he too allowed this daily ritual to lapse. Juud thought the beard suited him. They washed where it was practical and not out of desperation for an impossible cleanliness, they even talked less and about matters that were suited to the journey. Wherever they camped, they fell into habits of duties that did not need the wayfarers reminders. The tasks had to be done, and so were done. They went to bed early and got up the same, their days regulated by Breets inclinations. In the matter of clothes the women had to adapt more than the men. Thin and frivolous items were discarded in favour of the strong and practical. Juud kept to her fathers clothes, and wore her thick homespun jacket over her fathers shirt and trousers. She kept one good dress and bodice back if ever, that remote eventuality, a town, was reached. In truth she rather liked her costume, and felt sympathetic to Tysa. She was obliged still to follow her mother in a long trailing dress, but muttered awhile. On cold days she borrowed a stout jerkin from Tallott and wore it despite Kalmentiers protestations. Kalmentier alone of the women stuck to her petti-coat and city style, refusing for a moment to allow that this journey was anything more than an interlude from the pleasant manners and costume of the town.

On the seventh day of their travel through the Forest they came to the bank of a large river, not the Rume itself, but a muscular tributary. It cut deep and swift and would have given some difficulties in crossing if a huge log had not been felled across it and steps chopped into the trunk to give a grip on the slippery wood. On the other side was a track junction, the first they had seen. Widsith laid out his map and studied it. Tallott bent over. He was getting the hang of this map-reading, and although he could not decipher the coded inscriptions, he could place himself pretty quickly.

‘The down river track leads out to the Rume Plain’, Widsith explained, six, seven days away. The upriver one is less sure. According to the map it just peters out four days upriver, but that is maybe only because no one has gone further. No wayfarer I know of has used it.’

‘Perhaps it goes to the ice lands?’

‘At any rate it is not our direction. We have an appointment with the Lowleahs’.

Tallott looked at the map and saw no tracks marked.

‘No tracks?’ he inquired.

‘Oh yes, but not like this one. This is used by the Lowleahs, or at least it used to be.’ It had a faded air that considered was further sad evidence of the Lowleahs decline. Cean who hated to be left out of these map discussions joined them.

‘Can we get food from the Lowleahs?’ It was a good question.

There were two meals, at most three, of the brutens, some ryet and only a bagful of beans left. Most evenings Widsith had brought back a couple of small birds and this had supplemented the meagre diet. He always got people to eat a selection of fern roots that he boiled up each evening even though the taste was vile. Once he had slain a deer and they had feasted well for two days and still had a little left. It was a lean if adequate diet, though there was a slight thinness about Tallotts stocky face. His appetite was the most affected by the food restrictions and he badly craved his breakfast tankard of beer.

On the other hand the Duc thrived. Whether it was the food as such or just the exercise of body and mind it was not very certain. He carried his bagger well in a rather stiff but spritely walk, that ate up the ground in the same way as his mind eagerly absorbed the new surroundings. Some of his perceptions were acute. Far more than the others in the group he had an idea of the scale of the venture they were engaged on course his reading of Thomas au Morad was mostly responsible for this. Its detailed descriptions of places and times of travelling customs in the early kingdom revealed a great deal of information to a patient reader. The Duc had grasped the geography and difficulty of their route much more clearly than say Tallott, who of course had never been off the Rume Plains. But then he had never read Morad either.

It occurred to the Duc that this journey was really for his pleasure. To reach Noll was not the end of the matter for him, but the beginning, where he was, he supposed, designed to position himself in power so as to overthrow Lutens Wenner. This idea struck him as odd, and he could muster no enthusiasm for it. He suspected privately that the ambition was all Tallotts.

It was a relief for Widsith to see the Duc so fit. He only wished Sojon were too.

‘We will camp here tonight, then in a day we should get to the edge of the barewood forest. We have a place to stay there. A rock overhang right on the edge of the cliff. There may be some food there.’

It was a traditional stopping place for wayfarers, and sometimes even the shy Lowleahs would visit so there was often food left by previous travellers to be found.

‘But even if we cannot get food there, we should be able to get some from the Lowleahs.’

‘Will it be hard to find them?’ asked Tysa ingenuously.

Widsith replied briskly.

‘They will find us.’

#### IV

Next day the travel was brief. The roaring from the tributary increased markedly after they stopped for lunch at and setting off afterwards they realised why. The tributary descended a steep series of rapids as it escaped from the highland of the greenwood to the lower barewood basin. The track was stepped closely to the tributary amongst large rock boulders that were slippery with green weed. The tributary turned a huge corner and was suddenly swallowed by the Rume itself. They crossed another log bridge over the tributary and the trees thinned and the sides of a cliff wall pressed against the river. At this point the river backed away in a elongated loop enclosing quite a large area of trees, dotted with small grass clearings. Widsith ignored these and followed the cliff till it fell back and a huge natural roof of rock striated with different colours leaned out of the cliff-face. It was difficult to decide whether it was a cave or an archway. It would have accommodated Sojons mansion quite comfortably and left room to stable horses. The floor was covered in a light dry fern that crackled underfoot. At the back of the vault there were two small holes, storage caves, and above their doors a series of inscriptions chiselled with great care into the surface of the hard rock. To one side of the vault was an elaborate fireplace. A wisp of smoke came from it.

Widsith glanced around quickly as the others trooped in. He thought he had heard a sound from one of the storage caves. He slipped off his bagger, drew his sword then sidled up to the entrance of one of the storage caves, keeping out of the line of sight from the door. He selected a stone from the ground and threw it in, heard the sound of it rattle against the rock inside and caught the faintest catch of a persons breath.

‘You there’ he commanded sharply ‘come out. Now!’

The others were watching, rather baffled by this business. Cean had drawn his sword and was walking towards the door when a voice came from within. Much later Cean was to remember that unexpected moment. The grey stone arch of rock shadowed even from the sun, the startled group of watchers, his sword which glinted on a stray sunbeam, and most of all the curious voice of the person within.

‘Eee, its I am

Sollo Wramm

Squeezed the voice from the cave in a cracking hoarse voice. A male anyway.

‘Come out’ the wayfarer repeated, and there was a shuffle from the door and a figure stood blinking in the cave door.

‘Eee, Wramms me name

Sollos me mate

you're a large party  
an aint that a mistake?'

He was an extraordinary figure. Short and stocky with a wide toothy grin, deeply creased face and thin black hair to his shoulders. A cloak covered over a long jerkin fixed by a belt and worn leather boots. On his head was a black wide-brimmed hat, the sort a priest might wear but it held an unpriestly set of small bird bones under the headband. The use of these was shown immediately as the strange character plucked one out and started to chew on it with broken teeth. His green eyes were lost in a mass of crinkled skin, and there was a dirty fuzz of hair all over his face but stronger and darker on the chin and under the nose. Widsith was clearly amused, slung his sword back in the scabbard and went up for a closer look.

'Sollo Wramm? The trader?' The old man nodded cheerfully.

'Thats me I am  
Sollo Wramm  
an' I'll trade in fat  
and I'll trade in ham.'

This ditty provoked a guffaw from Tallott who joined Widsith in inspecting the oddity.

'Do you know him?' he asked.

'My father did. He should be dead by now. Are you seventy? No, he can't be that old. Sixty?'

'Heee, me ages a secret  
but I'll trade it for a biscuit  
I'm hungering I am  
Sollo Wramm.'

Tallott fished about in his pack and brought out a bruten which the trader took eagerly and chewed it raw, but not before carefully replacing the half-chewed bird bone. The others came up for a look only to find that close inspection was not the best idea. There was definitely an offensive smell about Mr Wramm. Tysa wrinkled her nose.

'Do you live here?' Sollo considered this.

'Is trade in places close and remote  
sometimes homes here and sometimes it's not.'

'That doesn't rime you old fool' laughed Tallott. Sollo had an answer to that too.

'I rhymes as I likes and chooses,  
sometimes I'm close and sometimes I loses.'

The others laughed.

'It looks as though we have a clown wayfarer' spoke the Duc. Widsith scratched his head.

'I suppose you've eaten all there is here' he asked of Wramm. The trader nodded repeatedly and tried to speak with a mouth full of raw brnten, spitting out bits to Ka-

lmentiers disgust.

‘Me eats  
till complete.’

‘Does he always speak in rimes?’ Cean seemed incredulous.

The trader swallowed the last of the bruten, and smacked his lips. Juud and Tysa exchanged glances. This was a poor specimen of a man and rather offensive. Cean had gone into the two storage caves and confirmed the traders remark.

‘Clean as a wine–vat at Harvess.’

The Duc asked the trader.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘A season or so

an’ then I go.’

Tallott tried to decipher this.

‘Does that mean hes been here a season or hes going to stay another season?’ Widsith shook his head.

‘We’re staying here, eh?’ Tallott asked Widsith, the wayfarer nodded.

‘One night at least.’

In fact they stayed for two, mostly because of a good piece of fortune. Cean had stumbled across a live deer with its leg broken lying at the foot of the cliff and to Tysas distress it was a simple matter to cut its throat. Butchering the meat and curing took a day, and there was too much to carry so everyone feasted. Not least of them Sollo Wramm, who gobbled huge quantities of roasted flesh skin and offal, dribbling to himself

‘tis meat  
is sweet’.

But there was more to Sollo Wramm than rhymes and a capacious stomach. In the twilight of the first camp Widsith as usual inspected his map unaware that Sollo Wramm was watching with some curiosity. With a scuttle across to his baggage the trader brought and presented before the wayfarer another map. It was tattered at the edges, grimy with finger-marks and lined with creases that showed a disregard for any particular method of folding it, but still undeniably a map, and a good one, as Widsith found when he inspected it. Sollo cocked his head on one side and squatted beside the wayfarer.

‘Eee, yours is like mine  
and mine is like yours of cours’.

‘Where did you get it?’

At first Widsith thought it was a wayfarers map and looked at it suspiciously. A wayfarer would never relinquish it unless he died, or was killed. Perhaps it was stolen from some wayfarer who was murdered for the sake of it. That was why the inscriptions were usually in code, to prevent thieves from being murderously tempted. Yet as he looked closer Widsith realised that Wramms map was in a code he did not recognise,

and further, many of usual ways of marking bridges or tracks were absent. Instead there were some quite unintelligible symbols.

‘Where did you get this?’

Sollo grinned.

‘Me made it’

myself a bit

Widsith was astonished.

‘You?’

He nodded and sung.

*‘Herbs and jewels*

*potions and wools*

*a trader I am*

*Sollo Wramm.’*

He must have sung that little tune in a few markets in the kingdom. That’s what his father had sung to him, that little catch-song. Widsith turned to the map with renewed interest. He recognised the general geography and was struck by the emphasis on the Sard and Noll Plains. These were covered in little symbols and notations. This was obviously home country, whereas the Rume Plains were comparatively bare of details.

‘You know the Sard?’

‘I does, and Noll

that I well know’.

Something else his father had said about Wramm came back into the wayfarers memory. That Wramm had been a true wayfarer once but had slipped from the craft. The map turned his thinking about Sollo completely. From regarding him as a vague and worthless remnant of his fathers generation, he saw that Wramm could be of considerable use to their journey. He put this to the others. Kalmentier was shocked.

‘Take him with us? That odious little man.’

Wramm was sitting not ten feet away and just smiled pleasantly at her as if she had just passed a compliment to him.

‘He’s not odious mother. Just because he smells.’ Tysa defended the trader. This ensued a short argument between mother and daughter which Widsith eventually interrupted.

‘Tallott, what do you think?’

‘If he can help us why not. But look at his appetite? Can we feed him?’

‘He eats like a pig’ Kalmentier asserted. Sojon nodded and seemed to agree with her, which was his usual contribution to any discussion these days.

‘He knows the Sard better than me’ Widsith reminded them.

‘Well let’s take him’ Tallott said.

‘Does he want to come though?’ Juud asked sensibly. She was personally repelled by

the idea of the trader being with them but could see the sense of Widsith's suggestion.

'Do you want to come with us to the Sard? Help us to cross them with your map?'

'Sard, eee yes, I'm read  
To travel with you all I need  
Pay me grub and money  
Or spices and honey.'

The trader in him was coming out now.

'Yes. Both' replied Widsith

'Then it'll be a pleasure me fellows  
and we'll soon measure the tallows.'

This remark was unintelligible to the gathering.

'Does he mean time?' Tysa asked.

'I mean time that burns life  
like a nagging wife

Eee! Money is grand

I know the Sardee like my hand'

And he held up a grimy paw to emphasise the point. So that matter was settled.

And he had another surprise. On the second day Tysa twisted her ankle and it looked as if they would have to remain until it mended. It was painful to walk on. Wramm seeing the dilemma, disappeared into the forest and came back with a bunch of leaves, which he insisted Tysa ('me miss') should wrap next to the sprained joint with bandages. Reluctantly she did this with Wramm chanting.

'Round and round the leaves be bound,  
this i'll makee foot be sound,  
and off ye go with a bound'.

And he leaped ungrainly into the air to demonstrate the effectiveness of the cure, and he was right. In the morning the sprain had gone. Kalmentier called it a plain coincidence whilst Sollo Wramm merely chuckled to himself, repeated his little song, and crunched a bone between his dirty teeth.

*'Herbs and jewels*

*potions and wools*

*a trader I am*

*Sollo Wramm.'*

## Chapter Fifteen

# The Shadow and the Shadow-Throwers

*Now we learn of the mysteries and the intricacies of the barewood forest and of its strange inhabitants, the Lowleahs. Unusual food is offered to the travellers and Widsith tells a tale. When they break free from the Gloreen a strange figure is seen.*

The Rume is a dark river, its banks sheer and tangled with roots and decaying trees. It flows thickly and blackly, like a water-snake through the forest, and where it met the bright blue tributary, it swallowed it up. The Lowleahs were not bent on encouraging visitors and had declined to build a bridge for a travellers convenience. Widsith had some trouble finding a ford and not less of a problem persuading the group across it. It was waist deep on the wayfarer and Tysa got an unexpected swim when she stumbled and dipped her head below the surface. Tallott made a grab and pulled her out on the bank, where she gasped for breath. After this Widsith put a rope around each one till all were safely across, where upon Sollo Wramm leaned his face into Kalmentiers and sung.

*'Hows yer daughter in the water?'*

*'See how Mr Tallott caught her'.*

The shrewd Wyrd had already somehow learnt that this was Kalmentiers sensitive spot, and she spat at him, but Sollo did not seem to notice. They walked at right-angles from the river in a mixture of green leaf and barewood trees. Travel was easy and the birds plentiful. The Duc remarked on it.

'The Lowleahs do not hunt them. They regard birds as spirits of their ancestors'.

Widsith added parenthetically.

'So lets not make ourselves unpopular by killing any.'

They were far too pretty and lively to do so thought Juud and she and her father made a game out of spotting the different ones. By the aftersun they'd counted eleven,

though one in particular was ubiquitous. A tiny diamond of a bird, with a red and gold plumage and bright squeaky call. In ones and twos it would dart ceaselessly among them. Once there were as many as ten over their heads, fluttering like great golden butterflies. They were nectar seeking and would search out the vivid sap-sucking flowers that sprouted from the trunk of the barewood trees. Sometimes whole colonies of flowers would be in residence upon one tree, establishing a column of colour in what was mostly a full brown forest. It was a strange sight. Cean stuck a flower behind his ear and looked gay.

Imperceptively over the next two days the forest changed from the spacious arches of the greenleaf forest to the tight and prickly constriction of the barewood. It was hard to say at what point the transition occurred, they melded together. The barewood did not have leaves (hence their name) but long pointed stems like thorns, that were sharp enough to cut through a tunic if pressed against. After a days travel few of them were without gouges on their skin, particularly where the hands and arms were used to bend back the pricklesome branches from the face. Sensibly Kalmentier wrapped cloths around her sore hands and the others followed suit. There was little in the way of a trail to follow, though Tallott observed Widsith taking great pains over the route-finding. Examining trees and bushes before inscrutably passing on to the next.

As they penetrated into the forest they had to contend with mature barewood trees that grew such a mess of branches and steely stems that they resembled nothing less than huge bird nests binding themselves around in a whirlpool of branches. Curiously these 'nests' always grew in one direction, either clockwise or anti-clockwise. So if the traveller went clockwise with the twirl of branches the thorn-stems would all be facing away, so it was like walking through grass that was blowing away from you. But to attempt to go against the growth was hopeless, it was like driving your body into a wall of soft nails. One step and you were pricked in a dozen places, as they painfully discovered, their limbs soon streaked with dribbles of dried blood.

This phenomenon of the barewood trees was called by Widsith its 'turn'. You had to take the turn, not force it. The trouble was it was not at all easy to distinguish at a glance which way the tree was 'turning' and there were some bloodied faces and arms as a result. Only Widsith (and unexpectedly Sollo Wramm) had the knack of reading the barewood and escaped with almost no cuts. Sollo never even bothered to wrap his hands in cloth and at the end of the day the others could only marvel that he had not shredded them into raw flesh.

They cursed the 'turning' of the barewood, yet without it progress would be inconceivable. It was impossible to push through two nests that were turned against you, and even if only one half of a pair was a wrong 'turn' it was a fierce struggle to break past. And hardly worth it, for if you scouted around there were always pairs of trees that mutually turned away in your favour, and you could push between them as if you were a slip of fat between two fingers. As the forest grew thicker the route took became more devious, winding the party through the forest like a thread through a spinning wheel. The birds followed with glee, their tiny bodies flickering through the trees quite impervious to the needle-like thorns. The Duc surmised that any bird larger than his palm could not survive in such a place, it would eventually be impaled on a thorn.

On the third day the travel got worse.

The barewood grew so heavily that even with a pair of right-turning trees it was an effort to break past. Baggers and swords and tempers invariably got caught, and Kalmantier was at last forced to copy her daughter and wear a pair of her husbands trousers, her dress was all but tatters. Far too often now they would have to crawl on hands and knees, sometimes dragging the baggers after them or getting the next in line to push it through. It was exhausting work. On that third day they made only a league throughout the forest. And that seemed to be in a virtual circle, so Tallott angrily thought. What was the point of this?

Finally they reached a place where it did not seem possible to move. The barewood trees ahead 'turned' against them in every way, and of course there was no prospect of retreating. They sat around stained, bloodied and exhausted from the toil with the trees, not even speaking to each other. The Widsiths ration of water did not ease their thirst. In two days they had crossed only on stream, a muddy trickle of liquid that visibly shrunk as they gulped it down. As Widsith had warned, this was a dry forest. To get sustenance in such a forest a creature had to become a parasite, like the sap-sucking flowers, burying their roots deep into the bare wood trunks for the liquid that gave them life. Humans had no entry to this cycle of existence and so went thirsty. It was no use praying for rain either. The rain was captured by the barewood canopy above them and only a spatter would penetrate to the ground. Even in torrential rain Widsith remembered that hardly enough water to fill a cup had seeped through, but this was a poor story to tell thirsty people so he tried to encourage them with some better news.

'Another half-league and we should be on the Lowleahs trails.'

Half a league! Strom! That last had taken them all of the morning, scraping on the ground like worms, or better snails thought Tallott as he viciously remembered the large encumbrance on his back. Nobody was cheered by the warfarers words. Following blind in a forest of thorns, dry, hot, everything catching and jabbing, a half a league! Tallotts obscenities for once summed up everyones silent feelings on this wretched travel. He even wondered aloud if they were really following a track at all? But Widsith just smiled grimly and carried on.

It was a trail, but the faintest possible, and little wonder that Tallott had trouble noticing it. Once, Widsith had glanced back and saw the smuggler peering at a tree, then look away sharply when he realised the wayfarers eyes were upon him. What Tallott looked in vain for were not the random scratches on the trunks of the trees, but rather the way that the bark was peeled away. On a young barewood tree it was quite easily picked off with the finger, and every now and then it was clear someone had done so, for a complete ring had been pared off, encircling the trunk. Sometimes there were two rings, and Widsith suspected these indicated track junctions, though it was never clear which it was best to take. As the mature barewood replaced the juvenile, the sequence of rings became scarce. As a rule Widsith kept pressing to the thicker parts of the forest, for he knew that was where the Lowleahs dwelt. Now he searched for a tree with three rings. He knew that it indicated that the tunnels were close, but it was not going to be easy to break into them. The barewood was more impregnable than stone.

After a lean midday meal, where Sollo Wramm provided some entertainment by producing indescribable lumps of something from under his voluminous cloak and proceeding to eat them, they continued. Tallott had lost his temper once already and

was building up for another explosion when Widsith pointed with his finger.

“Three rings, see?”

Tallott did not see, but took the wayfarer's word for it and watched as Widsith scrambled around under the edges of the barewood nests. Then with a furious wriggle he disappeared completely. The others had joined Tallott by the ringed tree and heard a cutting noise from within the ‘nest’. After a few moments they heard Widsith shout to them.

“Tallott? Are the others there? Good. Follow where I went. I’ve cut some of it away but you will have to get down on your bellies.”

Enticing words.

Tallott went down under the thicket where Widsith had vanished and saw that the space cut was a small fit for his bulk. He slipped off the bagger and dragging it after him squirmed under the sharp stems and tightly bound branches. Twice he tried crawling but the branches pressed him back. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder pulling him out into a clearing. He dragged his bagger out after him and sat up in what was barely a child's high tunnel, neatly cut and trimmed as if part of an ornamental garden.

It took half a wick to bring the others through, Juud furious with her bow and Sojon weakly struggling, needing all of Ceans strength to literally pop him through, like a old cork in a wine flask. Kalmentier was no better, and this final ignominious loss of dignity made her break her exhausted silence with sobbing tears.

It was a blessing to everyone to be in the passageway, and it obviously led somewhere. Hopefully, as the Duc expressed it, away from these ‘infernal thickets of trees’. At a crouching walk the party followed Widsith for a bitwick along the narrow tunnel into a wide dome-like clearing. It was quite high enough to stand up in. Possibly two longmans in fact and easily the reach of five longmans across. The central space was occupied by a fireplace and this made Juud wonder. It hardly seemed safe having a fire in the middle of this bone-dry forest. It occurred to her suddenly that they must be in the middle of one of those ‘nests’ they’d spent so much energy and anger against, but if this was the middle of the tree where was the trunk

The Duc was alerted to this oddity immediately and the wayfarer had to patiently explain that only the younger trees have trunks.

“This is mature barewood, and there is nothing but branches left.”

He pointed out the thick supple stems on the outside of the dome, that wrapped the empty space in an entwined wall of branches.

“The trunks function has been supplanted by the branches that bury into the ground and take root. That is how the forest expands.”

“But those other trees were separate?”

This was Tysas question, followed by a sharp wince of pain as Juud dabbed some ointment into a deep cut on her face. Tysa always went hurly-burly into everything.

“Not really. The root branches go underground and then grow up elsewhere.”

“Tysa” interrupted Juud ‘be still’ as Tysa half turned to the wayfarer and said excitedly ‘so the whole forest is just one tree?!’ Widsith nodded.

The Duc's eyes gleamed, this was the stuff of Morad! Truly he was following in that learnt scholar's footsteps. Sojon spoke wearily from his collapsed seat on the ground.

'Do we stay here tonight wayfarer Widsith?'

'Yes.'

'Will the Lowleahs find us wayfarer?' the Duc was eager to meet this legendary people, his tiredness quite forgotten.

'They already have' Widsith replied, exasperated with all the questions, and added irritably 'the noise we make is enough to wake their dead. When they choose to, they will make themselves known.' He added a cautionary remark. 'Never go more than ten longmans from this clearing, or at least never beyond another junction. You will get hopelessly lost. Till the Lowleahs come to us we cannot be sure they will be friendly. You would disappear and you would not return.'

Widsith was fairly sure that the Lowleahs would be friendly, but he did not want anyone wandering off.

As the evening drew in the little sparkling birds disappeared and the sounds of bird calls gradually diminished till by darkness there was a complete silence. No owl hooted, no stream gurgled noisily in its sleep and not a slightest shift of air occurred that could be called wind. As the Duc explained from his memory, and Thomas au Morad, the Lowleahs had no word for wind.

'You can see why' said Tallott who was following Widsith's example and walking around the edge of the clearing snapping off twigs. Juud was doing the same, and a reasonable pile was accumulating beside the fireplace.

'Is that firewood' Tysa asked 'but it won't burn will it? It's still green?'

'By tomorrow it will' said the wayfarer 'the sap dries in about a night. We are just replenishing what we will use tonight as a courtesy to the Lowleahs.'

'Lowleahs, Lowleahs, all we ever hear about is the Lowleahs' complained Kalmentier as Tysa brushed her hair in the evening ritual.

'But they must exist mother.'

'I'll believe what I see' muttered the old lady.

For her as well as Sojon it had been a wretched two days. They were both reaching the end of their tethers. Never a day passed without some barbed comment (usually to Tallott, who was in their eyes the villain of this misguided adventure) about the folly of the journey. Their thoughts turned back on their comfortable lives in Swaleton, to the respect and attention of their servants and esteem of their merchant class. All this had been thrown away for torn dresses, bloodied knees and laboured muscles. Their plight had not gone unobserved. Widsith had frequently turned his mind to the problem. He could not imagine getting either Kalmentier or Sojon over the Fore Range let alone the Raggerok, but to leave them behind was akin to murder. Somewhere he was going to have to find a solution or invent one. He would have stood any amount of prickles from the barewood forest rather than have to put up with this pair of thorns.

'What's become of our house?'

This was a daily question from Kalmentier to no one in particular, and so no one

replied. Tysa kept brushing her mothers hair. Once straight and long with a golden sheen it was Kalmentiers pride. Now it was mostly matted, with thin ends and several streaks of grey running as a line down her back. Tysa had not told her mother about this and it was fortunate she could not see it.

'Burnt to the ground now I should think' was Tallotts brutal response, then a mischievous thought came to him 'or probably taken over by Gosswert.'

This was a malicious suggestion, for Gosswert was the 'outsider' amongst the Swaleton merchant class, a rich upstart who was socially beyond the pale for an established family such as Sojons. Kalmentier bit back.

'Givtheem Tallott you are a curse, and no better than a dog. Once we are free of this journey I will personally see you finished in Swaleton. You're filth, just plain filth! And keep your distance from my daughter, I do not wish her contaminated with your dog diseases!'

'Mother' pleaded Tysa and looked desperately at Juud who had been startled by Kalmentiers expression. She had been ready to support Kalmentier against Tallotts sneers, but the use of the word 'filth' reminded her of that insult handed down by another dowager. It made her bridle at Kalmentiers assumed superiority to judge who was and who was not 'filth'. In the end it was Cean who came to the rescue.

'Shut up Tallott. You're making things worse.'

'Me?' Tallott was fake injured innocence 'I'm only enlarging on the possibilities for our noble lady here. She should not have asked the question if she were not prepared for an answer.'

Cean was reluctant to press the dispute. In truth Kalmentiers whinings got on his nerves, and he and Tallott had only just begun to be on friendly terms again, as long as they did not mention Tysas name

A silence fell on the group. Kalmentier started to sob and Juud went across to comfort her. The wayfarer continued snapping off the twigs around the wall. The sound made a dry clicking noise. He arranged the stones of the fireplace in a circle and lit a fire in their midst. A murmured conversation grew between Sojon and the Duc, some historical subject the basis of it no doubt. The fire crackled and scattered light against them as they sat hunched in a circle around it, causing grotesque shadows to be thrown against the wall of barewood like a group of ghostly companions. They talked a little over the meal, but softly, as if trying not to let their shadow partners overhear their words. Their water was all but gone and no one knew where any more would come from.

Juud disappeared into her own thoughts trying to catch the future in the flames. She had forgotten completely about the Lowleahs when she felt Tysa stiffen by her side and grab her arm with a whisper.

'Look, Juud, over there.'

Standing in a tunnel entrance were two figures, of short, almost childish stature. They were too much in shadow to see properly. With a glance around she saw four or five others standing silently in the deep shadows. One stood a little closer and a gap in the ring around the fire allowed some light to fall back on the creature. Barely half a

longman tall it was obvious why the tunnels were so low, they could easily walk upright in them. Apart from a loin-wrap he was bare-skinned and in this light it looked tinged with green. He was hairless. Juud assumed it was a 'he', there were no breasts. The strange bald scalp was the most disconcerting thing about the little man.

The others had by now all observed the Lowleahs, and were waiting in expectation for something to happen. Widsith did not seem especially interested. Tallott leaned over to him and whispered.

‘What happens now?’

‘Wait.’

This made Tallott rub his head as if to say ‘what do you think we’re doing’. He looked about him. There were definitely more Lowleahs now, perhaps nine silent and watchful figures. Strom knows how they arrived in the clearing, they did not seem to move, just appeared. No matter how hard Tallott looked he never saw a Lowleah enter the clearing yet every time he looked around there were more to be seen. After about thirty had appeared, four of them detached themselves from the watching circle and came forward into the firelight and placed gifts of food and water beside the travellers, then retreated and squatted down. All the other Lowleahs followed suit, and now there were four rings in the clearing, the shadows and the shadow-throwers.

‘Now I have to return the gift’ Widsith said getting to his feet.

‘How? We don’t have enough food for them?’ Tallott was doubtful.

Widsith stepped closer to the fire and squatted by it. As the others watched the wayfarer started to talk, in a low sing-song tongue. He swayed on his haunches slightly and modulated his voice in time to his body movement. Gradually he spoke louder, swinging his head around and looking through the group to the Lowleahs beyond. He was speak-singing directly to them. Tysa could not understand a word but was fascinated by the rhythm of the wayfarers speech. It grew louder again, and changed slowly into a steady singing chant. Abruptly Widsith stood up and moved his arms and hands powerfully through the air, expressing the songs physically. Lower and behind Widsiths voice was a deeper hum as the Lowleah bent forward to catch the wayfarers words and responded to them by rocking back and forth on their crossed legs moaning as a single body. It was hypnotic. Despite herself, Tysa could not pull her eyes from Widsith who was now circling the fire slowly, his actions more abrupt as his speech gained in power. The clearing was full of noise and movement, yet no one hardly moved. As if all their movement was focussed in the one circling figure in the centre, turning and gesticulating in the fire light as though itself become a flame.

Subtly the song lost its tempo. Widsiths movements slowed down and became still, only his voice alive now, quietly speaking and not a song any more but rather the lilt-ing speak-sing language he had begun with. The low humming of the Lowleahs had stopped. Widsith stepped back from the fire and sat down in his former position in the inner ring.

Silence. He looked tired Tysa thought. The spell was still woven over the company and by the time it was dispelled the Lowleahs had gone. Slipped of into the shadows as effortlessly as they had arrived. Widsith was made to explain his words. He told them that in offering the food and water the Lowleahs had accepted their presence there and

were offering also a passage through their land. In return was the gift of a story. They are so isolated that they hear very little of what passes outside.

‘They recognised me and knowing me to be a wayfarer wanted to hear what I should know. That’s what I was singing for.’

‘What did you tell them wayfarer?’ asked the Duc.

‘I told them our story’. The Duc looked doubtful.

‘Was that altogether wise?’

The food offerings were unknown to them but tasty. Widsith explained.

‘The meat is called ‘nupper’, it’s a small animal that lives here (he did not elaborate that it was a sort of rat that the Lowleahs bred specifically for their diet) Kalmentier was chewing on it avidly at the moment. The white, rather tasty berries are called ‘homeberry’ and grow in clusters on the barewood. The cabbage-like leaf plant was ‘maccrimon’.

‘I can’t remember those names but it’s good’ said Tallott.

Sollo Wramm would have agreed only his mouth was bulging. Between the two of them there was a steady eating competition. There were skin-bags of water and Juud found herself drinking continuously.

For a day they rested in the clearing, the Lowleahs laying out food and water in the morning and aftersun, and Widsith singing his songs in the evensun. It needed a sharp eye to catch a glimpse of a Lowleah, their pale whitish-green skin blended perfectly with the barewood forest. On the morn of the third day a Lowleah presented himself to the group. Widsith introduced him.

‘This is Smy. He will be our guide for the way through the barewood to the green-leaf fringes.’

Smy gave a grin and a bob of his head as the others looked at him curiously. This was the first Lowleah they had seen that close. He had a maze of fine wrinkles could be found all over his skin, suggesting he was older than he looked, though he moved with the deftness of youth. He seemed a bright, friendly sort of fellow, but only ever stayed with them during the day, disappearing each day-end only to be found in the morning standing patiently waiting for them to wake up.

The next two days they journeyed through a myriad of inter-connected tunnels and domes, each one looking precisely the replica of the one they had left, with no apparent means of telling the difference. So much so that Tallott was led to ask in a worried tone one day.

‘You don’t suppose the little bugger is leading us around in circles? I’d have sworn we’ve been here before.’

Travel was tiring, stooping at a back-cramping height. Cean and Tallott being the tallest suffered the worst, though the wayfarer could not have found it any easier, but he was silent on the matter. Tysa and Kalmentier managed, but instead of aching backs it was cricks and pains in the neck that was their complaint, their heads just had to tilt that fraction to avoid the roof as it twisted above them in a fantastic fashion of entwined branches. Sometimes Juud had to pinch herself, the place seemed unreal.

They never saw another Lowleah, excepting Smy, till the evensun, when Widsith would sing his song.

'You must not have very much left to say wayfarer' commented the Duc. Widsith grinned.

'I dont say much. Most of it is pure drama. I am expected to perform you know'

'You do it very well' said Juud.

'I was well taught'

'By your father? she asked shyly.

'Yes'.

Towards the end of the sixth day after they had met Sollo Wramm, the barewood began to thin, and the tops of greenleaf trees appeared. It was plain that soon their guide could be dispensed with. They finally reached a clearing where there was no tunnel, except the way they had entered. Smy scabbled underneath the barewood at a small opening and they followed. With a sigh Tallott squeezed under, but was pleasantly surprised to pop out in a grass clearing. He looked around. They were standing on a precise edge between the greenleaf on one side and the barewood on the other.

'No struggle?' he asked Widsith.

'No struggle.'

The others dribbled out. Sollo looking brightly around at the open forest. He chanted.

*'Free of torn and prickles*

*Easy on back and not so fickles'*

Widsith turned to the little Lowleah, who was still smiling before them and thanked him in his own language. With a nod Smy grinned, and in a twinkling disappeared under the barewood. Juud was sad to lose him, but pleased to see the spacious greenleaf at last. She was always thinking quietly, and noticed the abrupt transition between forests.

'Why isn't there any young barewood here?'

'It is dying.'

'But it isn't on the other side?' Juud had a stubbornness of purpose that was equal of Widsiths mono-grammatic comments.

'The barewood is a moving forest. A complete entity, and moves up and down through the Gloreen, taking a century or so for a full pattern'.

This was astounding to Jund, and she heard Tysa gasp. A moving forest, that was in fact one tree, living and perpetuating itself in a permanent cycle of quiet purpose. What made it move? Was it a thing? Widsith shook the questioners off and suggested that Morad would know. But the Duc shook his head sorrowfully, the great four-fingered scribe had not explained the secrets of the barewood. Only the Lowleahs knew.

They hoisted the baggers onto their backs and moved into the greenleaf wood and after only a short time they came to the edge of a big clearing, and saw the mountains of the Fore Range quite close upon them. There was a light dusting of snow, a poor

sign thought Widsith and trudged across the grass flat with his mind occupied on how to get this group over the range. There was a shout from behind, Ceans voice, and Widsith turned and saw along Ceans pointed hand to the far edge of the clearing where a tall, impossibly tall, figure, stood still and alone.

Watching them.

## A Squabble of Narrow Lanes

*A short chapter, necessary to recapitulate events that have happened whilst the travellers were engaged in the Gloreen. Mial Hest holds a series of interviews and plots to himself a whimsical way of revenge at Lutens Wenner. Baldyman Bulm makes an inept entrance, well, we cannot all be heroes, and the world would be too boring without the odd fool or two.*

Four streets led out of the main square in Swaleton. Two were important thoroughfares and led respectively to the two main gates of the city, one opening onto the road to Caroyal, the other facing across to the vast grasslands to the skaw, generally known as the Verd. It was believed by many that the original Swaleton men had once come from here, had been nomads in fact, living on the edge of the known world. Effectively this gate looked to their past whilst the other looked to their future.

Of the other two roads out of the square one immediately divided into a squabble of narrow lanes that led erratically to the quayside. Here was the home of the merchants and traders that used the river for the cartage of their legal (and illegal) business. Oddly this area was also the home of the university. It always struck an out-of-town visitor as peculiar that the cities proudest institution should be housed in its meanest quarters, and that the unwordly scholars should have to daily confront the bustling world in the shape of hard-headed traders, scurrying clerks and sharp dealers. Yet no Swaleman saw this as a strange contrast. The juxtaposition of mind and business was only right and proper, for did not the existence of the university depend on the wealth of its merchants? Without pennies there would be no philosophers. You could hardly argue against that.

Though the merchants worked in this part of the city they choose to live in another part, off the fourth road. Everyday, if a beggar had nothing better to do, he could watch the dignified procession of merchants leave their houses and walk across the square to their shops. It was said that most of the citys business took place on the stretch of paving between the two roads. The fourth street was called Guild Way, which

the locals punned into 'Give Way' passing a comment that you always had to bow before a personage in 'Give Way' street. Most of the merchants, city elders, prefectors lived here, in tall two, and sometimes three, storied stone houses. Each house was prompt against the other and on both sides of the street there was an impressive facade of stone and ironwork as each house-owner tried to demonstrate with his piece of the terrace that his standing was the greater.

It was in this street that the new governor established himself. A deliberate ploy. He moved with his entourage and bodyguard into a vacant merchants house and in one action established himself, not only literally at the centre of the city, but figuratively. His neighbours could hardly ignore him. It was the simplest geographical way of asserting his authority.

After waiting two days for Captain Yarlers return, Mial Hest sent out a group of to find him. The news they brought back was dis-couraging.

Five of the baldymen were dead, including Yarler, and no sign of the Duc. His escape had caused a sensation in the city and the new governor was well aware that every citizens eye was on him to see how he would face up to this inauspicious start to his appointment. Yarlers death was inconvenient. There was a great pile of bodies with very little explanation as to how they had come to be there. Hest would have relished an interrogation of the captain, but in his absence followed the usual procedure of dragging everyone in who might be of assistance in the matter.

It was quite a parade of people. Some of the cities meanest inhabitants and some of its richest. The house where Juud du Qu'et was a guest for ten years 'such an ungrateful girl' said the lady and a number of prefectors who kept trembling and trying to explain their business with an obscure group of malecontents. All denied their particular part in it and insisted that Sojon and Givtheem Tallott were the real leaders. Mial Hest found the group ridiculous and would have let the prefectors go, if it were not for the shadow of King Wenner looming watchfully in his mind. He had the prefectors arrested and sent them to Caroyal for Wenners amusement.

The landlord of the Wayfarers Inn told him the name of his well-organised opponent, and various doubtful traders explained with exaggerated detail the character of Givtheem Tallott. Adding the interesting titbit that Tallotts real name was Yussaf. The servants at Sojons house supplied the details connecting Tallott with Juud du Qu'et, and their master with the man whose body had been found on the quay, Herret Grink'el. Sarra, a pretty type of serving wench, knew a little about Herrets son, and a terrified woman explained the death of her husband at the hands of Captain Yarler. Mial Hest could not understand why the captain had killed the gaoler, but it was becoming obvious that he had been acting a good deal on his own account, and could have told an interesting story in the governors dungeon. If he was Wenners spy then he was certainly no loss to himself, but the king would have to be assured that Yarlers death was not Mial Hests fault.

The good citizens of Swaleton had poured out their stories to Hest. Whether out of fear of the reputation of their new master, or seeking some glamour from the occasion of the Ducs disappearance, the governor was not inclined to find out. It was enough that they talked. So well indeed that by the end of the Harvess the governor had constructed a fair picture of the escaping group. Wayfarer Widsith and this Givtheem

Tallott were clearly a capable pair, the dispatch of no less than seven of his baldymen for the price of one was a satisfactory demonstration of this, as was the well-managed flight. A bold idea to leave by the river, and at night. Was that the wayfarers or Tallotts scheme? He suspected that the plan of escape had gone wrong somewhere about the forks. The obvious move would be to transfer from the boat to waiting horses and were not these animals the same ones that the wretched Gormiah Threadon was to have supplied? Hest had already sent out two parties in search of the ex-soldier, so far with no success. If Threadon had failed to deliver the horses (and here Hest remembered the horse-traders ingratiating face with distaste) a not unlikely possibility, then of course the group would have been forced to walk and in that way were surprised by Yarler in the clearing.

Hest was pleased with these thoughts. He leaned back luxuriously in his chair and watched from his second floor window some of the merchants returning in unhurried strides to their doors. Beggar boys were holding the merchants long cloaks above the dirty pavement, to be dismissed with a nod and a coin. He saw two merchants closeted together in a whispered discussion that apparently came to a satisfactory agreement with one of those curious Swaleton handshakes. The governor was prepared to wager that the business was illegal, smuggling untaxed alcohol and cloth past the royal tax-collectors, or some such activity. One of the merchants gave a quick glance at the governors window and seemed disconcerted to see that personage watching him, and hastily hurried away. Hest gave a short laugh. He was not remotely interested in their dubious past-times, he had larger gains in mind.

Now, if he could see himself into that wayfarer fellows skull it should not be difficult to anticipate their route of flight.

If the final plan was to flee to Noll, then the landscape posed limited alternatives for the escapers. Tol Pass he dismissed immediately. It meant crossing the entire Swalemens plain with all its busy-body and suspicious populations. Traders Pass too was unlikely, that left the Ancient Way. Like the wayfarer many days before, Mial Hest took the same internal turnings in his mind to arrive at the same conclusions. Of course! Horses would have been ridden around the Gloreen under the noses of Weners troops before the king was even aware of the Duc's escape, a fine touch. So, all that would be needed, was a force established below the pass in a position to intercept the Duc and the lot of them nicely brought to account in Caroyal.

Here Mial Hest hesitated. Did he want the Duc captured?

He leaned back in the chair and studied the light from the window as it wrinkled the curtains. It was no advantage to him, only to the king, which was a good enough reason to let the Duc go, but if he did not make the attempt would not the king suspect his governors motives and act against his former general? Yes! in a blunt word. The problem was how far could he ignore the escape without engaging the kings wrath. It would be better to make a pretence of action, but he would still have to send soldiers. A dash of rain spattered against the window and dribbled down the pane.

A very clever thought entered the governors mind. Did he not now have a vacancy for a captain? It should be filled, and with some capable person to be given the task of arresting the flight of the Duc? Hest had the very man, and quickly sent for him. This man eventually arrived, and tripped over the door lintel before straightening to a salute

before his lord.

‘Bulm?’

‘Sir’ the youth said nervously.

‘I am appointing you captain to replace captain Yarler.’

‘Sir?’ the look was surprised to say the least.

‘You have something to say?’ The gangling man shifted uncomfortably but could hardly dare voice his apprehension at the promotion. He supposed it was his fathers doing again. He was pleased of course, he supposed.

‘Nothing to say at all?’ the governor was maliciously enjoying himself.

‘Err, thank you sir’ What else could he say?

‘Good. You will be leading a party of baldymen to intercept and capture the Duc du Qu’et as your first mission. I need not remind you of how important this is. Your success will be well rewarded.’ Hest did not mention the word ‘failure’. Bulm visibly gulped.

‘Sir?’

‘I will write you some instructions but you will largely have to act on you’re own initiative. See me tomorrow for these orders.’

‘Sir,I...’

‘That is all Bulm. Dismissed.’

The poor baldyman could only miserably salute and take his leave. He knew as well as did the governor that he was totally unsuited to the task. Only three seasons before, at the insistence of his wealthy father had the necessary strings been pulled to allow this bland twenty-three year old youth into the sacred ranks of the baldymen. Such privileged admittances were rare and he was considered a particularly poor gain. Slow, cumbersome, downright clumsy, and with a solid inactivity of mind that his fellow soldiers called him ‘brainless Bulm’ almost to his face. Mial Hest considered that if any person was capable of letting the Duc slip through his fingers it would be this wealthy papas lad, though it was doubtful if the Duc would ever appreciate the governors generosity.

A smile, wintry and cool passed over Hests face. Three days later Captain Bulm in the company of four baldymen and twenty ordinary soldiers was dispatched on his thankless task. As he dropped his hand from his salute of the governor (who had taken the pleasure of watching them leave) Bulm cut it against the hilt of his sword. The cut bled over his saddle and did not heal for days.

## Chapter 17

# Hull

*Another short chapter, the reader should be pleased. We introduce a man of substance you might say, and Gormiah Threadon makes another inimitable, ignoble appearance.*

His name was Hull. As a child he was as tall as a man, and as a man taller than any ever seen by the people of the Furrowdale Valley. By the age of twenty-five (if that was his age) his muscles had caught up with the skeletal frame and he had broadened into a man who stood a longman and a half in his bare feet and could swing a full barrel of wine over his head as if it were a toy. He spoke a curious language of his own. Perhaps it was invented when as a young child he was passed as a sort of oddity from one village to another by a minstrel who had bought him off an old couple. It was never clear where the old couple had found Hull, it certainly was not theirs. Years later when Widsith tried to trace Hull's origins he only encountered well-worn village tales, and an old rumour that Hull had come from breeways (though that was the marsh land so how could that be?), stolen from some family by a wayfarer and dumped at the couple's doorstep. They were at first delighted with the child, having none of their own, but Hull's hugely expanding frame literally ate them out of patience with the child, they simply could not feed it. Reluctantly they sold the boy to a travelling gleeman and his troupe, and treated Hull as an exhibit for the show. A sort of dancing beast. He was fed poorly, and Hull recalled he was always hungry. The villagers were frightened of him and the gleeman often kept him chained. He tried to escape, several times, but was always caught by the troupe and beaten like an animal. After a number of miserable years the gleeman re-sold him into the farm of a small landowner for the princely sum of a meal and a night in a barn. Hull was thought an idiot by the landowner and given the same work that a horse might do, and no better food than that. When Hull became ill it was only his human shape that stopped the landowner from butchering him, as he would any old nag that could not work. Instead he sold him to a passing wayfarer. This fellow took him to a highland village, nursed him, and tried to understand the giants' language.

Widsith was never sure why he bought Hull. Out of curiosity more than pity. He needed a travelling companion, for like most wayfarers he found the long seasons alone less bearable than anything the harsh weather or indifferent comforts of the road could

offer, but he did not want a talkative man; that would have been worse than having no companion at all. He was accustomed to his own thought and wanted no intrusion of meaningless chatter about the weather or ailments. He wanted a companion as silent as himself.

Hull was almost ideal. He was strong and fit, could carry a good load and kept to himself. When he did speak it was in a tongue that no one understood. Out of this beginning there grew between wayfarer and giant a friendship, that was cemented as the shared dangers, experiences and years accumulated. Widsith came to understand some of the words Hull spoke, and in doing so was made to wonder a little. For it was no simple childish invention but a real and developed language, one that had only begun to be grasped by a child's mind before being snatched away. As if a person had heard only a part of a story and filled the rest in with his imagination, so Hull enlarged his language with words from various Furrowdale Valley dialects. He could understand more than he could express and so had been forced into an unco-operative silence for most of his adult life. Hull also told, him, hesitantly and in an inarticulate way, of a vision of being carried by his father into a huge hall where vast pillars seemed to hurl themselves to a roof that night have been the sky.

Hull remembered his eagerness when he first walked inside the great church of Caroyal, but what was inspiring to most, disappointed him. These buttresses were not the ones of his memories, but he never doubted that such ever existed. Somewhere, Widsith mused, Hull had grown up in a world of people who spoke as he did, who loomed as large in stature, and carried their heads with the same grave dignity, but where was that world? And if Hull had been given a name, then he had no recollection of it, he was and remained a single syllabled giant.

It had been arranged that Hull would wait by the waggon ford on the banks of the yorn branch of the Huss'tt, by the fringe of the Gloreen Forest. And he had waited, and waited. After the third day he knew that something was amiss and headed back up the skaw branch. He circumspectly investigated the farmhouse where the others had left some five days before and found it being watched over by two soldiers. They were careless in the task and Hull managed to see that the house contained no prisoners. He overheard the soldiers talk and learnt of the wayfarers' escape and the name of Gormiah Threadon, this was ominous. The giant could smell Gormiah's treachery. Why else would Widsith be walking? He was pleased to hear of the dead baldymen and felt sure they had escaped into the Keeb mountains. His first thought was to return to the Gloreen, but then he remembered Gormiah and decided to seek him out.

Keeping off the highways and moving mostly at night Hull travelled slowly towards Swaleton, hearing in various places that Threadon had come here, 'boasting as usual' that 'he'd got drunk here' that 'he'd been seen at the tavern only a day back.' Gormiah was apparently making a rather royal progress on the largess of wayfarer Widsith's money. Finally in a hamlet only fifteen leagues yorn of the city he came across an unexpected bustle of horses and men. At dayend he crept around the backs of the cottages to a larger house where twenty or so horses were stabled. High up on the back wall was a small window, with light filtering through it. An average man would have needed a box of sorts to stand on but Hull could peer through on stretched toes.

He was looking into a large common room full mostly of soldiers and the paraphe-

nalía of their riding equipment and weaponry. A couple of servants moved about them dishing out a meal from a large tub onto the small wooden bowls the soldiers handed out. Quite close under the window was a man with the insignia of a captain of the baldymen. Hull recognised the black emblem with a twinge of apprehension. This captain was talking to another man, a peasant by his dress with his back to the window. Then this man turned his head and Hull recognised Gormiah Threadon. His voice was quite distinct.

‘Don’t sees why the governor of Swaleton wants me sir? I played me part. And now I should bows out like a good actor once the dramas ended. Says you?’.

Captain Bulm recalled the governors particular instructions on the matter.

‘You’re to go to Swaleton. And just to make sure I’m sending you in the company of one of my soldiers’.

Bulm thought this a good idea. The sudden burden of office was weighing on him and he wanted to take no chance on Gormiahs slipping away. He was becoming rather fed up with the mans whining excuses and the cut on his hand ached.

‘Sir, sir. You’re doing a diservice tos yerself and yer Lordship. I’m small fish for such a net-weaver as yer Lord. ‘e probably only wants to thank me. Well you till ‘im I’ve thanks enough in service to ‘im. ‘ees a busy man your Lord, ees no need for a humble servant to clutter up his time.’

Threadon was badly frightened by the prospect of visiting the governor again. His skin around his neck itched when he thought of Mial Hests cold eyes inspecting him, and he had a suspicion that he might get lumbered with the blame for the baldymens failure to capture Widsith, and did not trust the length of his life if this were the case.

If he had been a few bitwicks quicker he would have been gone out of the back of the village as the soldiery rode into the front. Instead he had been drinking in the tavern courtyard when he was confounded by the body of baldymen and soldiers thundering in. It was bad luck all round. One of the baldymen recognised him immediately and he had been locked into a room with many loud protestations until supper time, where a soldier had dragged him before the captain who made a half-hearted attempt to question him. Bulm felt sure that Yarler would have had the man as a quivering mess on the floor within a minute. The notion that the governor wanted to see Threadon just so as to thank him was so ludicrous that even BuIm could smile thinly at it.

Threadon, mistakenly interpreted this as making progress on the captains willingness to release him. In Threadons convoluted mind he was hatching all sorts of intriguing ways of persuading this young captain to let him go, when Bulm gave a nod to the soldier standing behind and he found himself yanked off back to his cell where he had the time to curse his weakness for a ‘bit o’ ale’.

The captain stood up and made a rather ineffectual attempt to get himself heard over the hub-hub of army conversation when his lieutenant stepped in and bellowed them to be silent. Bulm cleared his throat, and tried to make his young voice authoritative.

‘We are going to be off at dawn tomorrow so get some sleep’.

He tried to think of something else to say but nothing obvious came to him.

‘Err, thats all’.

One baldyman, who like the rest of them, could hardly take this raw youth seriously asked boldly.

‘Where are we going sir?’

From the look on the other faces of the soldiers this question needed some sort of answer. Bulm overheard someone whisper ‘Caroyal’. He thought he ought to at least squash this pleasing idea.

‘We are going to Caroyal but then carrying straight on. To the Forest of Gloreen’.

Bulm cursed his tongue. Had not the governor warned him to keep quiet? But he was always too eager not to look the ‘boy’ before these hardbitten veterans.

Errr, that’s all’.

And he walked out hastily hearing a muttered conversation break out in guffaws poorly smothered.

For the watcher at the window the conversation had been elliptic but there was sufficient to it to warn him that if these soldiers were going to the Gloreen the wayfarer must be told. He begun to creep back along the darkened line of cottages when a thought struck him. He would have dearly liked to have throttled Gormiah Threadon, but perhaps that pleasure could wait. Pity.

## Chapter 18

# An Unguarded Spark

*Personal matters are sorted out in this chapter. Tallott is alarmed by Hulls appearance, Sojon and Kalmentier are just tired. Many difficult decisions have to be made and nearly everyone is unhappy. It is a turning point of sorts. It is the 13 Wast Time in the year 156.*

The even-tempered weather of the days through the Forest of Gloreen broke and was dispelled by cool winds from the skaw. On every one of the five days that they walked through the shrublands, there was a little rain. Sometimes it was heavy and they had to shelter under a tree or in a ruined farmhouse, or even put up a canopy over their heads. Frequently the mountains were obscured and when their peaks did stab through the grey skaw cloth the whitish patches seemed to grow from day to day. It was a poor outlook for the crossing.

Hulls appearance had startled the party. Even after Widsith had explained about the giant there was still a vague air of unease. Tallott felt that they were accumulating far too many odd sorts on their journey, what with Sollo Wramm and now Hull, though admittedly the last two were no hindrance to the party. He felt vaguely outnumbered. Were they really in control of this journey or the wayfarer? He took Cean aside one damp evening and mentioned these things, but did not get any satisfaction for his doubts.

‘So what if the wayfarer has a companion? We can’t tell him to go. Besides we’re going to need the man to get Sojon and Kalmentier over the range’.

‘But don’t you see’ hissed Tallot angrily ‘sposing Sollo Wramm is’n league with Widsith as well, they could slice our throats and take the Charmstone. There’s only you or me between them and the jewell’.

Tallott did not add his private thought that Cean was not much use either, what with hero worshipping the wayfarer, and now going soft on Juud, hanging around her, getting into conversation and generally acting acting dopey, just at the time when they needed their senses alert he was falling in love. Cean pooh-poohed these suggestions.

‘Sollo’s hardly a threat, and what would the wayfarer do with the Charmstone anyway? It’s time you learnt to trust people Givtheem Tallott instead of thinking the worst’.

With that rebuff he walked off leaving Tallott to fume about youthful follies.

Cean was trying to establish his place amongst these larger-than-life adults, and whilst the others had teased him about his growing locks, and the fine stubble that was sprouting on his chin, he was rather proud of it. It might make them take him more seriously instead of treating him as just the boy. Quite unfairly, he thought, for he more than held his own with the others, even Tallott or the wayfarer. Fighting the baldies, working around the campsite, looking after old Sojon, with little thanks for it except jests against his emerging manhood. It was really only his manner that made them treat him lightly; his boyish enthusiasm and unlimited energy that was forever being expressed in short explorations of the countryside. Tallott would probably never treat him as anything but 'the lad', but that did not matter, it was the wayfarers approval he craved.

Food was plentiful in the shrublands. A lot of small game that was easily captured and an abundance of wild fruit, still ripe from Croppen. Much of this had been planted years before by the long departed settlers and still patiently returned a crop even though there were no hands to pick it. There were wild brutens in the ground and sometimes groves of uncut wheat that blew heavy swells in the early West Time winds. On one day the wayfarer got the party to reap such a field, all day long in intermittent showers they worked, cutting the wheat and separating the ears from the chaff. At an old farmhouse Hull laboured for wicks, grinding down the wheat till they had several sacks of flour. Two of these Widsith made into ryet by mixing the flour in with oats and a special concoction of molasses, that bound the flat brick-shaped loaves into a hard and chewy consistency.

Sollo Wramm added to his pile of herbs and curative medicines by disappearing for long wicks into the shrubland and returning with little packets of leaves and unnamed wild flowers. He had a jingle for this activity too.

I pick and I take,  
the best to make  
the cures to mend  
the bones that break'.

Wramm extracted honey from a wild hive and on one memorable evening made a clever if vile tasting alcoholic liquid. Tallott appreciated it, but the Duc declined with a laugh, 'it would kill me'. Tysa got tipsy for the first time in her life, to Kalmontiers angry disapproval. On the fourth night in the shrub lands Widsith, gathered them together around the campfire to explain their prospects of getting over the mountains. Rain had dampened the air earlier but had now cleared and one star had made a bold attempt to escape the sullen cloud. The campfire crickled and cracked with the bones and fatty remnants of a meal of pig. Sollo Wramms collection of bones had now completely outgrown the capacity of his headband and he had to reluctantly let some go to waste. He muttered over the fire to himself as the others talked,

'Bones is meat  
for them without,  
so I knows how sweet  
the bones they throw out'.

Widsith had scraped a patch of ground bare of grass and drawn a diagram on the

earth.

‘The pass is called Three Thrum’ he began ‘it is in three parts, the main pass, the middle pass and the defile’.

He marked each name beside what he had drawn. There was a low flat dip on the right, obviously the main pass, then a brief crest and higher, above the main pass a smaller dip which he had indicated as ‘middle’. On the far left he had pictured two sharp lines forming an acute ‘V’ shape which cut down to below the middle pass. This was the defile. There was another crest between the middle pass and the defile.

‘The pass is around eight hundred longmans, no higher than the Keeb mountains that we crossed, but a steeper ascent. There is likely to be some snow’.

The Duc peered through the gloom to study the map more carefully. ‘I trust we take the main pass wayfarer?’ he enquired hopefully.

Widsith hesitated.

‘No, the defile’.

Immediate concern appeared on several faces so the wayfarer had to elaborate further.

‘At this time of year there are likely to be brigands around the main pass. The early snow might drive them off but I doubt it. We should expect them. There is an old fort on the main pass which they use as a summer base for raids into the Furrowdale Valley, so the best way to avoid them is to take the defile’.

Even on plain earth drawing the place had a sinister look. No one looked happy at the prospect. Sojon was mumbling something to Kalmentier who whispered to him to keep quiet.

‘There is another problem. The baldies will be waiting for us.’

This did cause an uproar, everyone talking at once Sollo Wramm looked up and grinned wickedly his wide hat obscuring his eyes. Hull remained impassive, Widsith pulled his jerkin closer, in the hub-hub the fire had been allowed to fade, and patiently explained Hulls story. Spluttered Kalmentier.

‘Why did you not tell us this before’

‘There was no need’.

‘Twenty soldiers and baldymen, wayfarer we can hardly match that’ was the Ducs worried comment.

‘We have to’ weighed in Tallott ‘otherwise we rot here. Right?’

This was a cat amongst tender pigeons. Kalmentier was shouting.

‘We will not go. This is too much. And what for? What have we to gain by being chased over a mountain and killed by soldiers? They are not our enemies. We are not against the king’.

By ‘we’ and ‘our’ she evidently meant the Sojon family. Perhaps Kalmentier had forgotten her husbands role with a group talking about the overthrowing of Lutens Wenner.

‘Day after day we march, hungry, tired marching, marching. For what?’ she turned

angrily to Tallott 'for Givtheem Tallott and his ambition' she spat the words out. 'My husband is exhausted, I am tired, my daughter is tired' (this was palpably untrue, Tysa never looked healthier) 'we shall not go on. Tysa, myself and my husband will not continue'.

'Mother' Tysa tried to interrupt.

'We shall return to Swaleton and explain ourselves to this new governor. He will see our innocence, for what have we done? and let us resume our lives before we ever heard of Givtheem Tallott and the accursed Charmstone'. She ended her speech on a high note and glanced around in triumph.

Widsith was sorely tempted to let Kalmentier have her way. The three of them gone would be a good riddance but, allowing they got back to Swaleton safely, a worn out old man, his tired wife and inexperienced daughter, would Mial Hest be as kind to them as Kalmentier assumed? He looked around in the silence that followed Kalmentiers declaration. Tallott was frowning with a look that said 'well go! and good riddance!' Ceaw was watching the wayfarer, as was Juud, who looked aghast at the turn of events. Tysa was trying to say something to her mother who replied.

'You'll come with us. You're our daughter and you have no say in the matter. We are decided'.

In the end it was the Duc who decided to speak.

'Sojon, old friend, do you want to return?'

Here it was then, a decision one way or the other. For a moment Sojon did not seem to understand. Kalmentier made a movement to speak, but something she saw in her husbands eyes stopped her. Sojon looked slowly around the group, huddled by the now cold fire. His eyes were sorrowful and his words so soft that if anyone else had spoken they would have been lost.

'Yes, yes, I think it may be best. I, I cannot match this pace. And the baldies again?'

His voice was overcome by a fit of rasping breathing which made the matter more plainer than any apologies. He could travel no further. Oh, it had been bold enough to sit at home, comfortably with a jug of warmed ale, arguing with friends over historical points and sipping at the stories and legends of the past. He could imagine the old prefectors there still and longed to be there amongst them again. They probably wondered where old Sojon was now and would not he have a dozen stories to regale them on his return?

'So it is settled' Kalmentier firm and final.

Tysa looked around desperately. To return with her parents was suddenly an awful prospect. She could not live away from Tallott now, who had replaced the crumbling authority of her father with his male vigour. To leave was frightening. She would lose Tallott, Juud, to return to a stuffy city and an arranged wedding. For the first time in her life she was living, and now her mother wished her not to live. She would not do it. She would not!

It is curious how we change, so often for years accepting a scheme of life, its daily duties and obligations without a hesitation, then comes a different experience. It might

be a death, a new friend, or sudden idea that burns a hole in the established tapestry of life like an unguarded spark. And no patches can cover the gnawing discontent that will not be satisfied till change is embraced. There seems no way to prepare for the event. If it happens it happens quickly, a door opens and you are pushed through. You turn and the key is heard in the lock. For better or worse you are on the other side.

'I won't go' was Tysa's first stubborn affirmation.

Kalmentier waved the suggestion aside.

'You are not old enough to make that decision dear. Sojon and I have agreed. You must come with us'.

Tysa then appealed to Juud who took a hand in the dispute.

'Do you really need her Kalmentier, Sojon?' looking at each, and realising the foolishness of the question.

It was not possible to change by argument a social custom so deeply imbued. She was their daughter, there really could be no discussion. Kalmentier rightly got her hackles up at this. Juud tried again.

'I mean she wants to stay, with Givtheem'.

This erupted a furious outburst from Kalmentier.

'I love him mother' insisted Tysa following Juud's words. Nothing worse could have been said.

'That monster! Never! Sojon, stop this nonsense. You do not approve of this. Say so.'

Sojon was getting weary with the whole business, but he still had a part to play and Kalmentier insisted on it.

'Tysa. You will come with us'.

The poor girl burst into tears and Juud went over to comfort her. Neither Tallott or Widsith had spoken a word. The wayfarer squatted by the fire and tried to poke a few dead embers into life. This was a ticklish matter. Clearly Sojon had not the strength to cross the mountains or face the baldymen. Clearly too, Kalmentier would stay with him. Equally, Tysa should remain with her parents. It would be the best way to end this foolish infatuation with Tallott and with the six remaining they had an excellent chance of crossing the range. At one stroke they would be stronger and more cohesive, but although Widsith was not sure that he cared much for Sojon or Kalmentier's fate, yet Tysa was a different matter. He had grown fond of, her boisterous ways, and it seemed a pity to waste her on her mother's blind will. The wayfarer knew that the shrublands masked many brigands and general outcasts. The Sojons would hardly survive a week amongst this company, yet (this coin had another side) could they survive with them? His duty, what he was hired for, and paid for was to see the Duc to the gates of Noll. To fail in this task would be to fail in his purpose as a wayfarer. If that was the case then really he had no choice at all, the Sojons had to be sacrificed.

Tallott was not at all sure what he wanted. Tysa's declaration of love alarmed him. The stupid girl! Still it roused a degree of sympathy in him that was a little more than just lust. His thoughts did not dwell on the fate of Kalmentier or Sojon. If they chose to go back then they took their chances and good luck to them. They were old anyway.

He certainly did not fancy their making it but that was no business of his, only it was a shame to let them drag Tysa to the same fate. How the Strom was he to sort this one out? He was more used to handling women than girls. Tysa was looking at him and he was embarrassed to find he could not meet her in the eye.

The Duc seemed about to speak when Widsith stood up and with a tired voice spoke to Sojon and Kalmentier.

'You realise that you have very slight chance of survival in these shrublands on your own. They are infested with outcasts. If you elect to return to Swaleton, and decide to take your daughter with you, you are probably taking her to her death.'

He silenced Kalmentiers protest with a wave of his hand.

'She is sixteen. If you care for Tysa you will give her the chance of life and let her stay with us. There is no point in dissuading you not to go. In your fashion you are right, neither of you are capable of crossing the mountains but' he added meaningfully 'your daughter is'.

None of this appeared to have effect. Widsith became more brutal when he saw the set lines around Kalmentiers face. He felt an exasperated pity for them both. Could they not see their fates?

'If you are captured by outcasts you will be killed. If Tysa is captured...' he let the sentence run unfinished. At this point Cean burst into the discussion. He had an idea.

'Wayfarer, what about the baldies, wouldn't they take Sojon and Kailmentier prisoner? Take them back to Swaleton?'

Tallott took up the suggestion eagerly.

'Yes, they would by Strom! The new governor would want to know our little scheme. It would be an easy ride to Swaleton.'

Widsith considered it. It was possible, only, what happened to the Sojons after the governor had extracted his answers? He nodded to Cean appreciatively and the young man backed away, pleased.

'There are risks, but it is better than facing the shrublands. What do you think?'

'Tysa could go with us and be safe' Kalmentier was pleased 'I think it might be best dear'.

Sojon nodded hopefully. A safe journey to Swaleton away from this mad adventure and away from Givtheem Tallott. Only Tysa looked unhappy and could not understand Tallotts desertion. He would not look at her in the eye. Was this his love?

'But what about me?' she pleaded.

'You are our daughter you must come with us'.

Tysa looked at the wayfarer with begging eyes, but he shook his head, and she burst into tears and ran off. Some rain began to fall lightly on the camp. The fire was well dead and everybody realised how cold the air was. Argument had kept them hot.

As the others retired Widsith bent over to Hull and spoke something confidentially in his ear, then clapped the giant on his shoulder with a smile. Hull stood up and walked off to bed and Widsith turned round to find Juud still standing by the fire waiting for

him. She wiped a few wisps of damp hair from her face.

‘What will happen to Kalmentier and Sojon in Swaleton? Will they be freed?’

‘I’m not sure’. He privately doubted it. Mial Hest was a ruthless man.

‘And Tysa?’ she searched out his eyes.

‘Poor Sojon and Kalmentier, everyone cares about Tysa, well, she might be’.

‘What do you think’.

Judd was having no evasions. This was important. Widsith sighed. Never had he had an assignment that was as talkative and complicated as this.

‘I think she will be questioned and sent to Caroyal. They will want to know a lot about us. Where we’re going. Have we got the Duc. The Charmstone. If she tries to conceal this, they will torture her. As your father should know, once imprisoned in a kings cell it is rare to escape it.’

Judd stared at the grey sodden sky. Tysa’s spirit would be destroyed. That decided it. Life would be better with a heartless Givtheem Tallott than a brutal gaoler. She thanked the wayfarer and went to her bed of cut grass and damp blankets.

## II

On the fifth day in the shrublands they stepped onto a worn trail. The Duc was delighted.

‘The Ancient Way’ he exclaimed ‘now we are truly in the steps of Thomas au Morad’.

Sollo Wramm sprung in time with the Duc’s mood.

*‘The way of ancients is our doing*

*On the Ancient Way we’s a-going’.*

The Duc was struck by the first line.

‘The way of ancients? That’s from Thomas au Morad? Surely you have not read him’

It was an extraordinary notion to the Duc that this dancing buffoon knew Morad.

‘Tis you that’s muddled up and plain

Morad ‘ere ‘fore ancients came’.

Hull had been closely inspecting the dust disturbed on the track, then spoke a few words to Widsith who nodded and passed on the observation.

‘Horses. Twenty or so. Shoed kings style’.

Cean gasped.

‘He can pick the type of shoeing’.

‘Clever lad isn’t he?’ said Tallott wryly.

Despite the rain the trail was dry and there were few hoofprints to stir its thin surface into mud. In fact there had been little in the way of traffic on this route for many years. Brigand groups kept it open as much as any, and the occasional pursuing kings troops, the odd wayfarer and a few misfits completing the list of travellers.

Widsith led the group off the trail into a small clearing, guarded from view by a circle of bushes.

‘This is where Sojon, Kalmentier and Tysa should stay. The baldymen will return this way.’

‘Providing we leave some alive’ boasted Tallott.

Widsith ignored him. ‘We’ll leave some food and one of the canopies. If we go over tomorrow you should only have to wait a day or two at most. Is that clear?’ Tysa looked miserable. Judd looked at her sympathetically.

It only took a few minutes to arrange the separation of equipment then it was time to stand about awkwardly and take each others leave. No one was very happy, except Kalmentier, who was already visualising the inside of her home and giving imaginary orders to her servants to clean out the house and prepare for guests. Sojon too had an image of himself in the best drawing room giving modest accounts of his adventures to his cronies. He was glad the long adventure was over. Judd was whispering something in Tysas ear who looked startled.

‘It has been a hard task for you and you did well’ the Duc had taken upon himself the duty of formal leave-taking ‘my friend Sojon and my friends wife and daughter, Kalmentier and Tysa, we wish you well and safe journey to Swaleton. My old friend, Sojon, I am sure we will read Morad by candlelight again.’

The Duc embraced the old merchant who was genuinely moved by the display of affection. Cean shook Sojons hand and bade a timid goodbye to Tysa. He was relieved she was going and was surprised she was taking it so well. Not even a tear. He felt that he and Givthem could get back into their former camaraderie without her distracting influence. Judd embraced Tysa, whispered something, shook Kalmentiers hand thinly and nodded to Sojon.

‘I trust Judd du Qu’et’ Kalmentier said formally ‘that you will return to Swaleton one day. This adventuring will ruin you for a marriage, but I think I will be able to bring off a suitable match if you wish it’.

Judd thanked the merchants wife, and assured her that she did not need it. Kalmentier sniffed at such independence. Widsith picked up his bagger and gave a few terse words of instruction.

‘Stay here. Keep your heads low. Make sure the horses you stop are the kings, not a brigand party. The covers of the kings soldiers are always blue and gold. There’s water in a stream over there, good luck’.

With that he turned and walked away. Hull followed with his long stride and Sollo Wramm scuttled after. The others broke away from the family and started after the wayfarer. Cean looked back once and saw the trio of people looking strangely small and pathetic. Tysa, he noticed, was still not crying.

### III

They kept to the Ancient Way. Hull had gone off ahead to scout the land and Cean was instructed to keep back a few places in case someone came from behind. The trimmed party made brisk time, freed at last from the slow encumbrances of Sojon and his wife, and Tallott started to whistle a jaunty tune till the wayfarer told him to keep quiet. He was amused rather than hurt, he could see little reason for the wayfarers concern. The day felt empty. There probably was not a brigand for leagues and the soldiers would be at the foot of the pass, he was confident of that. He felt relieved at going away from Tysa, though a stray thought or two crept in that it would have been nice to have had a try of her body, still, you can't have everything, eh? Leaving Kalmentiers shrill voice behind was a fair compensation for the loss of a soft one. He slowed his pace and fell back to the young Grin'kel. For the first time in many days he and Cean chatted together as equals again. They were on the march. At last they were going somewhere. He looked up and saw Juuds slim figure walking beside her fathers. Well, why not? She was a woman after all.

They were very close under the mountains now. Widsith could make out the individual notches and bumps on the ridge line, though he could not see the pass itself. There was not as much snow as he had first feared. What there was looked light and fresh which rain or a day of hot sun would dispell. The Ancient Way now snuggled up beside a wide brook which he knew fed down from pass itself and would now be there noisy companion all the way to the top. A long forest finger from the Gloreen was probing along the foot of the mountains. It was never more than a league wide at its best, and stretched in a practically unbroken line to the Ducs former property. This forest fringe was one likely place for the baldymen to be hidden, but Hull would see to that. Widsith felt content to have his old travelling companion alongside again and relieved that this group was much more manageable. The only unpromising aspect of the day was the weather. A mass of cloud to the breeways was building a platform for itself so as to cumulate more constructions of cloud.

Widsith studied it critically. If those were storm clouds it might be an advantage to pass the baldymen tonight. By now the others had caught up and were resting, the Duc breathing heavily, for the pace in the last leagne had been fast.

'Strom' commented Tallott 'we'll need a good sheltered place tonight wayfarer. That's a big one too. Eh Sollo? Whats your rime for storms?'

Tallott was not entirely expecting a reply but the poetic trader obliged.

'When Strom is angry gets yus home  
till Stuess smiles and lets yer roam'.

Cean grinned and was ready for some comment when spotted Hulls waving arm and got them to move again.

There was no sign of the baldies in the forest but Hull was sure that they had been there. He pointed to an old campsite and the clean freshly broken twigs. Widsith made

up his plan quickly. It was important to find out where the baldymen were. He and Hull followed the ancient trail whilst he sent Tallott and Cean to investigate in a wider loop to the weneways. In the event they were both back shortly.

‘They are hardly being subtle about it’ remarked Tallott.

The baldymen were camped by an old stone toll house right at the foot of the pass, at the point where the Ancient Way had to ford the brook before zig-zagging in lazy diagonals up the mountain slopes. There was an old bridge there once but that had gone leaving only the pillars to stand. Hull had counted roughly twenty man and horses all grouped conveniently about the crumbled house. The baldies were making it pathetically easy for them. On either side of the old toll-house were a number of rocky shrub-filled gullies any one of which could be used to dodge the waiting soldiers. Unless there was some hidden trick in this their task looked deceptively simple, but Widsith was not having any of this. He told Hull to inspect the position more closely and went off himself another way, staying out until well into dayend after the others had exhausted their patience in wondering where he had got to.

‘What’s the verdict’ asked Tallott directly on his return.

He was both relieved to see the Wayfarer and exasperated with the long wait through storm-brewing day. Hull had long returned.

‘We go tonight’ said the wayfarer.

‘Isn’t gonna rain?’ Tallott screwed his face to the sky ‘Strom, I’m sure it is.’

‘Good’.

Juud was alarmed. ‘Tonight, and in the rain?’

The wayfarer nodded and instructed them to gain some sleep. She made a show of getting to sleep, but was careful to position her blankets close under a tree and in deep shadow. Hull was on watch yet some distance away and he was keeping his eye to the baldie camp.

After letting a wick slip by, Juud felt impatient to move. It was still only twilight but if she was careful she would not be seen. She heard Tallotts snores and made out the black hulk of Hull sitting with his back to her. Quietly she eased out of her blanket and rumbled it so it looked as if someone was still lying there, then slithered around the back of a tree and around some bushes trying not to crack too many twigs beneath her bare feet. After a bitwick she put on her shoes and headed back down the Ancient Way. Once she hesitated, felt a spatter of rain on her face, doubtful whether this action of hers was right, then swallowed these doubts and carried on at a half-trot through the darkening forest.

## Confounded by the Apparition

*A night chapter, where the travellers avoid the baldymen but cannot avoid some recriminations. Tallott is for once at a loss for words — now that is unusual my friends!*

At midnight it started to rain heavily, the large drops splattering through the trees and soaking the bare earth. Thunder growled, and the glare of lightning lit up the mountain face, yet all this bluster it was clear that the storm was passing breewise. Looking back over the Gloreen Cean even saw a faint star low over the forest.

The group followed Widsiths steps out of the sheltering forest and onto the Ancient Way, quickly getting wet in the downpour. Juud had wrapped a cloth over her head to keep her hair dry but already she could feel cold trickles of water against her scalp. She looked back anxiously once or twice. Widsith was making no pretence of concealment, the storm managed that, and was pushing quickly towards the toll house. Cean who as usual was bringing up the rear saw Juuds backward glances and shouted encouragingly above the rain.

‘Don’t worry Juud. Not even Wyrđ will be out on a night like this. Not even the baldies’.

And so it was.

Within twenty longmans of the toll house Widsith paused to let the others catch up. For one tempting moment he considered the idea of marching straight past the toll house on the main road. In his bones he knew that every baldymen was wrapped up under cover in the house, seeking what dry patches of shelter they could find from under the remains of the roof. If it was just him and Hull he would have certainly taken that course, but taking six people under the baldies dripping noses was a bit too cheeky, so instead he took a diagonal route from the road to the brookside, downstream of the toll house. The water was up to their knees and swift for it had only a moment ago tumbled off the mountain side and had not spent its force. On the opposite bank a long open gully led upwards to a sort of shelf that ran along the side of the hill. Some scrub and a few large rocks provided only temporary obstacles and in barely no time they had all

scrambled up the gully and were resting on top, breathing heavily from the sudden exertion. The rain kept up its steady downpour. Juud felt her hair saturated by now and she envied Sollo Wramms large rimmed hat that collected the rain and poured it off in streaming waterfalls to his feet. They had to shout to make themselves heard. Somewhere close there must be a waterfall which was adding to the thunder of the storm.

Juud tugged Widsiths heavy jerkin.

'Wayfarer, I twisted my ankle slightly. Can we go slower?'

Widsith looked curiously at her and nodded. Already they were above the toll house and probably well out of danger. The laziness of the baldies had made this nights travel ridiculously easy. The only unpleasantness was the rain that persisted in crawling thin cold snakes down the back of their necks. Further up on the hillside was an old shepherds hut, better roofed than the toll house and used by Hull and himself before. He shouted this to the others as encouragement. He guided the group along the rocky shelf till it crossed the main trail. Tallott grinned as Widsith pointed to it.

'Maybe we should wake the baldies up' he yelled 'they've had it too easy'.

This idea appealed to the wayfarer but he regretfully let it pass. There was little point in making themselves known.

'We have a half-wick of hill climbing' he shouted to them, and turned to Juud 'how is the foot?'

She nodded and smiled slightly, replying that it did not hurt too badly. Tallott offered to take some of her bagger but she curtly refused. A brief flash of lightning ignited the mountain slope above them and jarred them into movement. Widsith and Hull taking the lead, with Sollo Wramm, Tallott, the Duc and Juud following. Cean came last keeping an eye on Juud as she stumbled occasionally and dragged one of her feet awkwardly. It was a steady climb, made easier by the tracks long switchbacks and paved pathway. Widsith moved slowly keeping them together. The rain eased somewhat and the storm shifted over the mountains. The blackness hindered their walking, and gave a comfortable security against prying eyes.

Cean at the back had long ceased paying attention to what happened behind him and was lost in his own thoughts. His jerkin sat heavy and sodden on his shoulders and he was constantly wiping an irritating tuft of wet hair from his eyes. He made out the stumbling shadow of Juud ahead and paused a few moments to urinate against a stone embankment. The wayfarer was not going fast but certainly steady. He approved. It was the correct pace for the people and the weather. In fact there were few actions of the wayfarer Cean did not approve of.

Just as he finished he glanced back down and gave a start as he saw a distinct black movement up the track. For a second he thought it was a stupen of sorts then he saw it was upright and walking quite hastily up the track not bothering to hide its movements or stop the clattering rocks it disturbed. Cean pressed into a nook on the stone wall and waited tensely for the black figure to come level with him, slipping his knife from its sheath. With a yell Cean hurled himself on the figure and brought it to the ground. He leaned his knee against the persons back reaching one hand around its hair and pulling the head upwards baring the throat. 'Who are you' hissed Cean but there was only a gurgling response. With a shock Cean realised that the soft fleshy body he had so easily

pulled to the ground was that of a woman. He let her head fall back and demanded his question again.

There came a grasping voice.

‘Cean, Cean, it’s me. Tysa!’

‘Tysa??’

Cean rather stupidly leaned forward digging his bony knees further into her back. Then he realised what he was doing and stood up and roughly hauled the bedraggled girl to her feet.

‘Tysa? What are you doing?’

He was incredulous, and angry. He could have killed the girl.

‘I, I, I followed you’.

She gasped, breathing rapidly and leaning on him for support. His sudden attack had winded her and scared her into believing that it was baldyman who had grabbed her.

‘You followed? In the dark?’

‘Yes, yes.’

It had been harrowing. She had lost her footing in the swift brook and got soaked and then twice thought she had lost sight of them, stumbling frantically in dread of losing her way.

‘I didn’t see you’.

Cean was rather disconcerted that she had been following all the way and he had not seen her earlier. Some guard! What would the wayfarer say?

‘Come on. We better catch up with the others’.

He led her on up the path clutching her hand and wondering what the wayfarer would make of this surprise. By the time he had caught up with the rest of them he had had the opportunity to get angry about Tysa, he could have killed her! What was the wretched woman thinking of!

They caught up with the group by the door of a low stone building. A gleam of light came from inside, and voices within. Only the wayfarer stood outside.

‘You look wet’ he coolly remarked to Tysa, otherwise he did not seem at all surprised at her appearance.

Not so Tallott, whose mouth dropped open comically at the sight of Tysa rushing in and embracing Juud. He stared from Tysa to Juud to Cean then back again to Tysa, confounded by the apparition. This time it was Tysas turn not to catch his eyes. Sollo Wramm followed the scene with interest.

‘Ere’s Tysa,

Sojons daughter

as Tysa caught Tallott

or ‘as Tallott caught ‘er?’

‘Shut up you bag of words’ was Tallotts furious reply to the little traders neat poem.

The wayfarer came back into the hut, looked around at the candle-lit scene, Juud drying Tysas hair and smiling broadly at Cean who was telling the Duc the story of his assault. Hull sat in the corner, as immovable as ever, Sollo Wraam was crunching a harebone and Tallott was rubbing his forehead and glaring in sheepish confusion at the company. To be so embarrassed, by a sixteen year old girl!

The wayfarer summed it up.

‘Now we are seven’.

## Chapter 20

# Drama of High Peaks

*Once again it is time to negotiate more mountains (it is hardly my fault the kingdom is wretchly divided by these knobbly, mountainous fingers) over what is called the Three Thrum Pass. We learn some history and see the awesome Raggerok in the distance. Another night journey and some people die at the end of it, ahh, but it is not what you think.*

Mist covered the shepherds hut in the morning and Widsith felt it safe enough to start a small fire that crackled cheerfully in the dark chimney place. It was as well the mist obscured them for the fire blew out the soot of many seasons from the chimney and fouled the room so badly with smoke that the wayfarer had to prop open the door with a stick. The baldymen might not see the smoke but they would smell it soon enough. He boiled up leafen a pot and cooked some oats in another. Oats had been their staple breakfast diet on the entire journey and the custom of eating it had become part of a morning ritual. Whether they liked it or loathed it, it was eaten every day. The wayfarer did not even need to insist on the point, it was gulped down out of habit.

Tysa at least never seemed to tire of it, and set to her bowl of cooked oats with a will to replenish the energy lost in last nights activities. There was a constraint between her and Tallott. Neither knowing for the moment what to do about it. On Tallotts part that word 'love' made him unusually diffident. He felt vaguely he was making a fool of himself, and sensed that the others, particularly Juud and Cean were watching him distrustfully, daring him to declare his intentions. In other circumstances Tallott would not have hesitated. He would have lied through his teeth in order to charm the lady into bed, then be on his way in the morning. Here he was surrounded by damn chaperones, who, and this was the worst of it, expected him to treat Tysa in the manner of his previous conquests. They expected the worst of him and he was buggered if he was going to oblige!

Juud was awake now, straightening her hair automatically with a hand. She received the wayfarers proffered bowl of oats with an abstracted air slowly stirring the mixture as if with the greatest meaning. She looked up and spoke to who was arranging a few more twigs on the fire.

‘Did you know what I was about last night wayfarer?’

Like her father she found it convenient to address Widsith by making a title of his trade. To call him by his forename seemed somehow inappropriate. He was their leader and needed to be distinguished in some way.

‘Yes’.

‘How? Was it my ‘sprained ankle’ that you were suspicious of? I had to think of something. I was worried that Tysa would fall behind and miss her way.’

Tysa stopped eating her oats and nodded with a full mouth as if to say that she very nearly did get lost. Widsith remarked.

‘I saw you slip off from the forest camp’.

Juud looked sheepish.

‘And I had thought I was being so careful. I was sure no one had seen me’.

The Duc had sat up now and was listening to the conversation.

‘My dear, I do not understand’ interposed the Duc ‘what about Kalmentier and Sojon when they find Tysa has gone?’

‘Oh, I left them a note’ Tysa said hastily.

The Duc frowned. He thought this an inadequate excuse. He had been brought up strictly in the tradition that children obeyed their parents, even well into their adulthood. He shook his grey head sorrowfully.

‘I do not think I can condone your actions my dear’ speaking to Juud, ‘it seems shameful to desert ones parents like this, Tysa was to have known no better, but you...’ Juud blushed.

Her father only rarely disapproved of her actions, and to do so in public was hurtful. In the end it was Tallott who came to the rescue, not so much for Juud as for himself. He thought he could see a way to get back in Tysas good books again.

‘Old Sojon and Kalmentier would have gone straight to their deaths. Would you have the girl executed because she was a slave to her stupid parents? Ha!’

Cean always the last to wake up, had sat up as the conversation grew more heated. If Tallott was talking there was bound to be trouble. He had the tact of a cow. Tysa had looked quickly at Tallott, almost a gesture of thanks for the interruption. The Duc was not so impressed.

‘The trouble with you Givtheem Tallott is that you feel everything is correct that suits you. There are the customs of loyalty to be observed, the duties to be honoured. If a life is sacrificed in such a duty then it may be that this was the intent of that life in the first place. Only the Higher Lord knows our individual destiny. We must be content in our position.’

Tallott guffawed. He had a dozen answers to this.

‘Were you content to stay in prison? That may have been your fate, to wither over Thomas au Morad till your skin was as parched as the leaves of his damn book’.

This was unfair of course but the Duc was too confounded to reply. Juud bit her lip and kept silent. Tallotts words had unwittingly made her part doubly shameful in

her fathers eyes, for assisting Tysa against her parents will, and for urging the Ducs own escape against his inclinations. Tallott was crude, too crude, and made what was complicated, black and white for his own purposes.

A silence fell on the company. The wayfarer as usual pulled them back into the journey.

‘When you have finished with you arguments we shall get on our way.’

He could personally see no point in the discussion. Tysa was here and could not be sent back. If he had wished he could have stopped Juud but he had chosen not to do so. Perhaps his own motives were obscure in this regard, but he did not share the Duc old-fashioned notions of duty and honour. Duty that sent a young girl to imprisonment and death was futile. As they packed up in preparation to leave, Tysa came over to where the wayfarer was standing. She looked shyly at him.

‘Thank you’.

Both glanced at each other and understood what she meant.

## II

The climb up to the pass was uneventful. The mist had broken in places and it was possible to glimpse small peaks decorated with a frosting of snow. Here and there waterfalls bubbled amongst the rocks discharging last nights load of rain. Above the shepherds hut the last of the shrubs has shrunken into tiny crevices and sheltered rock nooks, for the winds were too cold up here to let them flourish. Instead alpine grasses and shy delicate herb flowers covered the ground, and on the higher cliffs, lichens would stain dull greens, reds and faded yellows. The mountains were never completely without colour. After the shepherds hut the slopes eased in upland basins covered in wild grasses and dotted here and there with small tarns. As they climbed the rush of the streams faded, then ceased, and only the wind could be heard and the lone cry of a hawk searching the mountain for prey.

The Duc was puzzled to know what the bird could live on at these heights, but the wayfarer pointed out the tiny burrows that lay under some of the tussocks. The home of a mountain mouse, the only mammal apart from deer to be able to survive up here. Unlike the deer they hibernated and the hawk would follow the shepherds down to the lower slopes and survive Wast Time on berries, bark and the odd frozen carcass. Sometimes a sheep. Sometimes a man.

Near the pass Hull and the wayfarer went ahead as the others rested. The mist was nearly all gone and spaces of blue appeared against the higher grey cloud. Already it was hot. The Duc dipped his handkerchief into a nearby pool of water and mopped the sweat from his face. He could taste the tang of salt on his lips. With Sojons and Kalmentiers departure he had got a bad bargain, for now he was clearly the slowest of the party. Cean had transferred his attentions to the Duc now and lessened some of the weight of his bagger. Apart from Sojon the Duc reflected, none of the others

had much inclination to listen to the Duc's explanations of what Thomas au Morad said here, or what others had observed about this, or such and such was recorded. It was a pity he thought, they missed so much. The wayfarer had at times shown an interest, but he was busy with other matters. Tallott was hopeless. Juud at least would listen, though he was still a little too annoyed by this morning's affair to engage her in conversation at the present. It was enough effort just to catch his breath.

Whilst they sat the high cloud drifted down over them and for several moments a wet clammy mist stuck to their skin and clothes. Then a shift of wind swept it away and revealed a brilliant blue sky above a puffy white ocean of cloud. The sudden effect was magical. The plains of Caroyal lay somewhere below, mysteriously cloaked in long swells of cloud, whilst behind them the peaks of the Fore Range stood bold, sculptured against the intense sky.

The weather can affect us like a charm. The bleakest spot improved by sunshine and the drama of high peaks made yet more theatrical by a golden declining sun or a pale moon in a starry sky. If we move from rain to sunshine our tempers follow us and we can thank the world with hearts free of a single trace of the rancour that we might have felt in the morning. Of course, the weather can move us the other way, a happy mood dispelled by a cool wind sprung up from the skaw, or a drizzle of rain that turns the streets into a soured mud. At least adults are affected so, children do not care so much. Mud and snow are as much fun as sun and warm temperatures, but the adults forget the play in the weather, and let the weather, instead, play them. But I digress reader, I digress...

The party of travellers perked up under this warming sun and the Duc spoke some words to Juud, and forgot his annoyance. Sollo Wramm wandered off in his flapping cloak and came back with handfuls of flowers which he stuffed inside his cavernous tunic. Tallott sat beside Tysa and engaged her in a whispered conversation, that although Cean strained to hear he could make no words of, so gave up and leaned back against the prickly grass chewing a stalk down to its butt then selecting another and repeating the process, letting Breet warm his face. It was some time before Hull and Widsith returned, and in the meanwhile the group had made themselves so comfortable that they thought it a shame to move. Widsith brought mixed news.

'There have been people up on the pass recently. Whether brigands or not I cannot tell but it's likely. We will be safer to skirt underneath the two passes and go through the defile'.

He pointed out the route. Sluggishly they set off, Widsith hopping nimbly in front of Hull's rolling stride, the others following in their particular fashion. It got hotter as they travelled and Tysa wished Sollo Wramm would remove his black-winged hat. She did not understand how he could bear to keep it on in this heat. Perhaps the trader listened to her thoughts because he turned directly in front of her and grinned with his cracked teeth.

'tho its 'ot,  
I'm not'

And bounded on, leaving Tysa staring stupidly after him.

They came within sight of the defile exactly as the wayfarer had sketched it. Sharply

angled and shadowed, it cut the rock as if with a giant knife. A brook ran from it. Juud realised the walls of the defile stood higher than she had imagined, perhaps 100 long-mans and scoured clean to a smooth surface. In places water dribbled down the faces tinging the bare rock silvery and lower down moss had collected, heavy with water and yielding to the touch like a sponge. They stepped up a natural rocky staircase to the foot of the defile and entered, the sunlight snapping off behind them as if a candle had been blown out. It was cool here. The rock faces soared upwards to a slit of blue sky and Juud was reminded of the great church in Caroyal where she had been taken as a child by her patron. There voices had filled the cloistered vault whereas here it was the noise of the brook amplified off the walls that filled her head, though perhaps, after all this sound was not unlike voices in song.

At first the travel was awkward. The brook filled the defile and its spray dampened them in a slippery film of water and slime. Several people fell. The Duc badly once and would have landed worse if Cean had not sprang forward to catch his arm. Tysa as usual cut her leg but ploughed on regardless. After a quarter of a league the brook leapt upwards out of the defile in a cascading waterfall. Past this shower of water the defile was dry, and silent, and it was queer this silence.

The air had a hollow empty sound. A rock clattered and rang against opposing walls. Widsith warned them to keep quiet, and also to watch for falling debris.

‘A stone only the size of your fist would crack open your skull. If you hear something, dive to the walls’.

The others took the cautioning to heart and strained their ears for any warning clatter and it was a long league or more to the far side. Widsith never stopped and when he looked back he saw the party strung out well down the defile. At the yorn end, a rock slab sliced off the base of the gut, but crude steps had been cut down here to a thin scree gully below. Once the others caught up Widsith showed them how to descend, by facing into the rock and stepping backwards down the steps and dropping onto the scree with a small jump. He had jumped back into sunlight and he had to screw up his eyes to see the others descending more slowly. The rocks in the gully were warm to touch.

Cean helped the Duc going down the steps then looked around at the scenery opened up to view. The Furrowdale Valley lay before them, a slip of green between the two ranges of mountains. The Raggerok Range looked vicious. It was the first time Cean had seen it, and he scared by its jagged set of teeth, like those in a giants jaw, all tipped with a shining cusp of snow. It was daunting to know that they had to progress over these. The wayfarer pointed out a few features.

‘See, a low point on the range? That’s the Passage of Prayer’.

Cean’s sharp eyes saw something else as well.

‘I can see buildings’ he said excitedly ‘one big building with towers’

Widsith was impressed.

‘It’s the monastery. The King Weal II was imprisoned there by his son, Swivven the Strong. It was a convent then. King Weal died there too’.

‘Rather dubiously’ added the Duc.

'Why father? Was he murdered?' asked Juud. The Duc was embarrassed.

'Err, no dear. He was, how shall I put it, he, errmm, got some of the nuns, into problems'.

Now of course Tallott was interested.

'Did he? Randy old bugger. What did they do to him?'

The Duc looked more embarrassed. This was hardly a fit story for his daughters ears. He was always rather shocked that Morad should include it in his history.

'Nothing, he died in his sleep'.

'How many did he knock off?'

'Really Tallott' the Duc was upset 'you need not take such pleasure in such an unsavoury incident'.

'Sounds less of an incident, more of a career' was Tallotts lewd reply.

'Over there' the wayfarer interrupted, pointing yorn 'is our goal, Capability Col'.

Sollo Wramm looked up in surprise and the wayfarer sighed when he realised he had unintentionally made a rime.

'Yus playing my tricks wayfetter  
and sounds alls ter better'

'I can't see it' said Cean, craning hard in the direction the vwayfarer had suggested.

'It is not much to see. Only a break in the mountains. Very high, and covered in snow at this time of year'.

The Duc was gazing at the unbroken ramparts of the Raggerock.

'And you will take me through this terrible land wayfarer?'

'Yes'.

Juud shivered, despite the warm sun. This journey stretched on and on, and the obstacles grew greater not less.

Hull came back from his reconnaissance and spoke quickly to Widsith, whose face changed to a frown. They spoke together for a while, looking upwards across and across the gullies to the base of the pass.

'Poor news again. There are brigands camped right on the middle pass.'

'Would they see us' asked Tallott. The wayfarer nodded.

He spoke again to Hull who pointed to the sun. Widsith seemed to agree. Tallott waited impatiently for this unintelligible conversation to cease.

'Well. What are we doing?' he demanded at last.

'Another night journey. We are going to be tired people by the time we reach the Furrowdale Valley'.

'Can't we go another way?' asked Tallott.

Widsith shook his head and the Duc chimed in.

'We have not got wings Givtheem Tallott, only feet'.

### III

A cold and miserable night they had of it. The only place that was convenient to shelter in was in the defile. At sundown the wind remembered its calling and started to blow harsh cold drafts up the dark alley of stone. Tallott and Cean set up a canopy and this warded off some of the wind, but only gave a temporary comfort for the wind found subtler ways to reach the skin. Its moaning irritated an already irritable Tallott. At least he had the warmth of Tysas body close to him, soft and yielding in places. He had tried one exploration with his hand and had met only a small resistance. 'They'll see us' she whispered, leaving no doubt in his mind there would be a time when such activities would be permitted. Sollo Wramm had squeezed in under the canopy as well and even the wind could not remove a lingering smell that was unmistakably emanating from Sollos unwashed body.

'Don't you ever wash' asked Tallott bluntly.

The trader grinned, and tilted his hat up showing his deep-set eyes. Tallott was surprised to see they were pure green, and he could not recall ever seeing such a strange colour.

'Eees Mr Tallott,

I's never got into the custom'.

'You didn't rime that' reminded Tallott.

The trader grinned his broken teeth again.

'Me rimes are for childers and cust'mers  
and zems I'ms not so sures after'.

'So are we more trusted now? eh?'

'I've inspected yer'.

Tallott shrugged. At another time he might have been interested in the strange fool, now he was just searching for an outlet for his irritation and Sollo was not obliging him. Where the Strom was Hull and Widsith? They'd been gone for wicks. He looked at the others who were all sleeping fitfully, or at least they had their eyes closed. He turned back to Sollo Wramm he had not moved his eyes.

'How old are yer? You never answered that?'

Wen i's wus born,  
the kingdom was torn  
when I's die  
it will unify'

'You're a prophet too then' said Tallott sarcastically.

I sees backward in view,  
and frontwards into you

A flash came from the traders eyes. Tallott had stumbled on something.

‘And what do yer see old man?’ he demanded with a sneer.

You’ll be brave to suit yourself  
and a coward, with others health’.

Tallott went pale in fury and pulled the trader by his cloak to him, disturbing Tysa in the action who murmured in her sleep.

‘What do you mean prophet’.

He pushed his face close to Sollos and menaced his words by twisting the traders cloak in his powerful hands. The traders green eyes never flickered, and there was a clatter of rock and Widsith popped under the canopy.

‘I think we can go now. It’s dark enough. Wake up everyone, you to Cean’.

‘I wasn’t asleep’.

Cean looked oddly at Tallott, so Tallott knew that he had heard the conversation with Sollo Wramm.

Sleepily they pulled down the canopy and retraced their steps back down the rock slab. Hull was waiting, and at a nod from Widsith led on around a series of small gullies to the edge of a large grassed basin. As they stumbled across Cean could see the dim light of a lantern shining from a stone hut at the top of the basin. He thought he heard voices as well but that might have been the wind. It was obvious now why the wayfarer had insisted on waiting. Nothing could have moved across this basin without being observed from the hut, and turning around, Cean could see the moon glint on bare cliffs that lay just below the scree gullies. Only the foolish would go down there. The grass masked any of their stumbles and the group flitted smartly over the basin feeling acutely highlighted in Wenes generous light. They reached the far side and the safe shadow of the mountain wall. Cean saw the clear line of the track winding up to the pass and further around made out the inconspicuous middle pass and the dent that must mark all that could be seen of the defile. Something made him start. A dark form lying across the moonlit track. He turned to the wayfarer who was allowing them to catch their breaths.

‘Is that a body?’

‘One of the guards the bandits set out to watch the pass.’

‘There were others?’

‘Three on this side’.

Cean turned back and knew that somewhere about them lay two more corpses, evidence of a brutal nights work. Tallott had been listening closely.

‘Not bad. They’re in for a surprise in the morn’.

Then he glanced at Widsith. He was almost going to ask why the brigands needed so many lookouts but something on the wayfarers face told him that there was a good answer to this question.

They travelled downhill. It was steeper this side and it was a fortunate thing that the moon bathed the track in light otherwise there would have been more stumbling than there was. Tysa slipped again of course and even the nimble-footed Wramm tripped

over and fell into the solid back of Hull, who hardly flinched. The track zig-zagged erratically down scree guts and sheer rock faces. It was always wide enough for two men walking abreast, or a burdened mule, but this was poor comfort on a cold night in a racketing wind that blew them unsteady on their descent. On and on, the wayfarer allowed only the briefest of stops and then urged them to continue. Past the scrub line then into the forest fringe where pockets of trees lay scattered about in weird moon cast sculptures. The forest slowed the pace somewhat but Widsith did not give them much relief and kept them moving.

Once Tysa had to stop for a rest and Tallott queried why the frantic rush downhill. Widsith ignored him. Down they went, till the forest seemed to lighten above them and Tallott knew it was the pre-dawn. At last they came out of the forest and could see plainly to the valley floor a few longmans below. Tracing the track down Tallott saw it twist into a small hollow where a small village lay snuggled. It looked neat and attractive from here. A small wisp of smoke came from one chimney, indicating one early riser.

It was a perfectly clear morning and the tips of the Raggerok were outlined in the finest rays of gold light, whilst the lower mountain slopes loomed darkly, patiently awaiting their turn for the warming sun. The wayfarer led them off the track and angled across the grass and scrub slopes on a route that was clearly intended to make them avoid the village. Tallott looked down at it regretfully, they might have some ale there or even wine. It was the first village they had seen in almost thirty days and they were passing it by. Some sheep scattered at their descent and they reached the valley floor as the first full light of Breet revealed the countryside around. They joined a narrow trail, then turned and followed that upvalley. The Duc was deadly tired and stumbled frequently, Juud and Cean on either side gave him a hand. Another wick of this and he would have to stop, wayfarers permission or otherwise thought Tallott, but as always, Widsith had a trick up his sleeve.

They crossed a small wooden bridge then took a side-trail through a pocket of woodland and into a clearing where a woodcutters house stood. There was smoke trickling from the chimney. Widsith rapped at the door and a man came to it.

‘Why, Mikal Widsith! What a surprise, come in, come in. You’ve guests? They can come in too. Welcome. Did you come over Three Thrum? Strom how did you manage that? Come in, come in, theres some stories here, and I’ve some stories for you too. Things have been happening in the Furrowdale Valley. The whole world is visiting us these days.’

## Chapter 21

# The Rises

*Once again my historical instincts are brought to the fore (I warned you reader about my weaknesses) but I hope you agree that this is a most interesting piece of history. It explains something of the origins of Mikal Widsith and in particular details his acquisition of a wife. Those readers romantically inclined will enjoy this episode, though a proper historian of course, has no use for love, it is not a fact, in the accepted sense. Matha Shallpinier is a formidable woman, well remembered.*

The Furrowdale Valley was home to wayfarer Widsith, or more precisely the upper Furrowdale, where the Furrow River gouged three huge 'steps' that divided the pastoral lowlands from the mountain people beyond. Each 'step' was a hanging valley, separated from each other by a sequence of natural cliffs that acted as imposing barriers to travelers. Locally these steps were called 'rises', and each was defined by the dominant tribe that lived on it. So the lower step was known as the Rise of Goil, the second the Rise of Bleen and the third as Yutts Rise.

The tribes all came from the same stock, and bred with little discrimination between each other. They lived in scattered hamlets, raising lean crops of wheat and barley on their rock fields, and attended devotedly to their cattle with an enthusiasm that was fanatical. They were a tough-spirited, feisty lot, for the weather was fierce on these Rises, with insistent winds, and heavy snows in Wast Time. They also had to withstand the regular aggression of kings and brigands from the Furrowdale Valley, and so perforce had gained a reputation for being stubborn, difficult fighters. The cliffs that marked off each Rise made natural defensive walls, and only the Rise folk knew the torturous mountain paths that threaded through them. Administratively the Rises were part of the Highlands kingdom, and sent regular representatives to the great yearly Meet, but the geography of their homeland bred a spirit of independence that gave them unique traditions and customs.

Mikal Widsith was born in the Rise of Bleen thirty-four years ago in the year 122 in a small village called Hummer. The inhabitants would have considered the adjective 'small' derogatory since it was the largest village on that Rise. Yet the Bleen Rise was the smallest of the three. Goil and Yute had wide enough basins to accumulate a depth of soil, and to hold good crops and even trees, whereas Bleen was more like a wide rocky

ledge between them, with only enough soil for grasses and shrubs and the occasional miserably stunted tree. It was a bare landscape, strikingly so between the other Rises, and was jestingly called the bald patch in the middle of the old mans head. Yet this barrenness had some advantages. It was excellent for cattle and Bleen was known for the quality of its beasts and the skill of its breeders. It also had ample quantities of stone, and in the absence of much wood they built their houses in copious amounts of the local material and developed no mean skill in the process. All the best stonemasons were men of the Rise of Bleen.

Widsiths father, Pirran, had married a young woman in Hummer and she promptly gave him a son. He returned after four years to inspect the lad, then came back four years later for another look. By this time the mother had died and the care of the boy had passed into the hands of a widow, Matha Shallpinier, who was the matchmaker of the Rise. On this second visit his father took pleasure in getting to know his son and filled the young Mikals head with stories of exotic places and challenging adventures. As a child Mikal had known that he was different from the other children of the village, and they did not tease him in the normal way. The village took it as an honour that a women in their village had been chosen and pointed at the young boy to visitors with pride 'a wayfarers son, the only one on the Rise'. Of Widsiths generation only one other youth was brought up as a wayfarer, Solas Sharp.

At the age of ten Mikal was visited by his father for the third time and on this occasion left with him. He made no juvenile protest. He had been raised for ten years to expect this moment, and his fathers tales had excited his imagination him, and he wanted to see for himself the places painted by his fathers vivid words. For twelve years father and son travelled together the length and breadth of the land, experiencing every hardship and seeing practically every corner of the kingdom. Some gaps remained. Only once as a lad of twelve had they crossed the Sard, and they never managed to travel to the remote marshland, but the Keeb Mountains and the vast Gloreen Forest, the Hollering Hills were all known to Widsith before he reached manhood. Beyond the Highlands, they had travelled to see great sheets of ice and snow, where barely a living thing was seen, except the soaring swings of the carrion eagle, the greatest bird in the kingdom, and said by some to the God Fellowman in winged form.

The journeys of father and son ended on the banks of a swollen Rume River, where Widsiths father, testing the waters depth, was captured by it and swept away. After two days of desperate search Widsith found his fathers drowned body on the river bank. He buried it and returned to Hummer. He tried to settle in the Rise way of life, but something in his blood called out to him to far places again, and the villagers were disconcerted that their folk-hero had returned. So he left his fathers estate to a manager and walked down to the Furrowdale Valley. Here, by chance, he found a dumb giant and took him as a companion in the year 148 and resumed his craft of wayfarer. That same year incidentally that Lutens Wenner proclaimed the Second Kingdom, and himself master of it.

After three years Widsith returned to the village and went to the house of Matha Shallpinier. She was very old now, but still formidable as matriach of the village and still the matchmaker queen of the Rise. Widsith spoke briefly to her explaining his purpose, he needed a wife.

The old woman nodded. She was seated in her large winged chair beside the fire, one hand resting on her lap the other stroking a huge fat cat that was reputed to be as old as her mistress. Mathas face was creased with a torrent of wrinkles that ran in deep gutters from her forehead to her neck. Yet these gave her an air of great calm, almost tranquility. She would see what she could do and dismissed the wayfarer grandly. He had presented her with a challenge, to find a wife for a wayfarer!

She of course had found a wife for his father and it was a pleasure to do the same for the son, all the same it would not be easy. She brushed the fur of the cat backwards, which irritated the feline (as the old lady knew it would) which arched up and reshuffled into another position, giving her disturbed fur a brief straightening out with her tongue. Widsith had two advantages for being married. He was propertied, substantially, with one of the best houses in the village, and he had high respect in the community. When Widsith was at home on the Rise he could expect all manner of visitors bringing gifts, seeking advice, or gossip and sitting respectively silent as the wayfarer recounted stories and gave judgement on developing situations. He would only have to be in the village a few days before the locals would be bringing their little disputes and tribulations to him begging him to settle in their favour. The kids would peer with large eyes around the open door and then run away to play games of being a wayfarer, only to fall abruptly silent when the great man would walk by.

Widsith found all the attention rather embarrassing and the announcement that he was looking for a wife caused a considerable stir amongst the village women. Everyone had an opinion on who was suitable.

‘So and so is too fat, but I fancy that Grogers girl’.

‘She’s only fourteen?’,

‘But a strong girl, and quiet too!’

‘How is it she’s so favourable now? Not because she is your niece of course’.

And so they would prattle, each scoring a dozen points off the other in manoeuvring their unmarried daughters to a favoured position. Matha Shallpinier listened to this but took bare notice of their gabbling. She knew it was impractical for Widsith to marry someone in the village. Too much sneering behind backs and vindictiveness against the chosen woman (‘who hasn’t half the looks my Shanta has’). Matha had seen such unpleasantness result in one poor woman being tortured to despair by the hatred of the women until she, Matha Shallpinier, had stepped in and ordered them to halt this nonsense. There were other considerations too for finding a wife for the wayfarer. She should best be a widow.

To understand this one has to realise that girls were married off at a very early age to their selected husbands. Fourteen was not unusual and thirteen on rare occasions.

Such a young wife would bear a child almost immediately, perhaps even before the wedding and settle down quickly into the village life. But there could be no such prospect for the wife of a wayfarer. She was marked out as separate and different for the rest of her life and the child that she bore was always considered more important than the mother that bore it, assuming it was a son. To be a wayfarer's wife imposed a considerable strain on a young girl, one that had been demonstrated in the past, as being too much. She, as was natural in a child, wanted attention for herself, from a loyal husband who would make her acceptance into her adulthood a companionable one, but no wife of a wayfarer could expect much of a husband from the marriage. He would be gone four years out of five and she'd always be second fiddle to her son and husband. She would have status in plenty, but also loneliness, much loneliness.

So with these thoughts Matha dismissed in her mind the possibility of a child-wife for the wayfarer. But a widow, she would have to be young, to be able to bear a child, in this case the sole point of the match, and reasonably good looking, a wayfarer after all had to have the best. And from another village, or hamlet on the Rise. These considerations were enough to rule out most who would have considered themselves eligible. There was no shortage of widows, but most were far too old, but there were one or two young widowed women and it was to these that the matchmaker cast her eye.

It was the custom on the Rise to marry a virgin and so a suddenly bereaved woman deprived of her husband was of course also deprived of one of the essential qualifications to make another match. What exacerbated this cruel custom was a plentitude of women over men so that a young widow could barely hope to marry again. If she did not have children from her marriage she would probably never have any of her own. Such women, in the eyes of the rest of the village were a nuisance to the community. They lost their livelihood and had to move into the cramped quarters of a large family and act as nursemaids and general unpaid servant for their keep. It was a poor harsh life for a girl in her twenties or teens. She was often treated badly by her relations and the family as a useless encumbrance and usually gained a reputation (quite unfairly) as being an 'easy' woman available to any man with the courage to ask. Some widows did slip this way, out of loneliness and desperation and became figures of scorn as their misdeeds became known. Some eventually, having run out of men to sleep with, they would turn to the boys in the locality. It was a commonplace for a young man to lose his innocence on some such old widow. In a way these women performed a sort of service for the growing, lusting boys, but were only cursed for it.

Deep in Matha's mind, below all the practical considerations of matching the wayfarer with a suitable wife, was the bitter remembrance of a failure.

A particular girl, from the Rise of Goil, who she had married off some five years ago and then who was widowed by the death of her husband two years later. She had been a strong-willed girl and had provided Matha with some difficulties. She had astounded parents and friends alike by refusing to marry the first man selected, and had been cool on the second. Only strong pressure from Matha had obliged her to accept the third, a weedy-looking man, but adequate enough. Matha had to use all her persuasions on the girl who had a well of stubbornness almost as deep as hers, and had drawn some secret admiration from the matchmaker for it. But this girl went too far. In one heated exchange she said she did not want to be married 'and have one child at 18, the other at

19, and ten by the time I am thirty and haggard'. Such courage (insolence Matha had damned it at the time) was unusual and the opinions expressed were so strange that they were sufficient to have her sent away if they had become known. Fortunately the words had been kept between the two of them and the girl had finally broken down and agreed to the match. At the wedding the girl went through the ceremony lifeless and indifferent, and for the only time in her long career Matha felt that she had made a poor match.

In the course of time Matha was to hear of the girls widowhood and learnt that her wish for no children became true. On the evening that wayfarer had made his request, this girl instantly came to mind. Strong, independent, pretty, childless and young. There was just that problem of her lack of children, but Matha had sniffed out a rumour, a suggestion, that the childlessness of the couple was not her fault. Her husbands physical weediness had other aspects he'd heard. There was the final consideration. Would the girl accept? But here Matha felt on safer ground. If she was living the normal life of a widow in a normal village on the Rise, the offer of a marriage, any marriage, would be grasped at. The old lady was settled in her mind. Tomorrow she would send out her servant to collect the girl who lived in another village.

She stroked the cat with her heavy worn hand. Perhaps this time she had made her match.

### III

The woman was summoned and closely questioned by the matchmaker on her arrival. Normally the womans opinion would have played little part in the proceedings yet because she was a widow she rather curiously had the right of refusal (and even discussion) on her suggested groom. It is odd that in a society that gave the lowest place to a widow on the social ladder, yet allowed the highest possible right to her, the right of refusal. Of course it had never been known for any self-respecting widow to refuse such a Strom-given offer of re-marriage, but Matha was taking no chances. The woman was now twenty-three and went by the name of Mirren Thomlan. She was thinly built (a point against her, the taste was for rounder women) short in height with clipped dark hair that was almost a little too unconventionally short, yet suited her. Her eyes were calm and brown, her face smooth yet with a little cluster of lines drawn from the tear ducts of her eyes, as if she had known some suffering.

The servant had not explained the purpose of the summons, but as it was from Matha Shallpinier it was clear enough. Her 'family' had let Mirren go for the day, grateful for seeing an opportunity to get rid of the 'nuisance' widow, and Mirren arrived at Hummer excited and nervous. Matha was at first vague about who the match was with, but the whole Rise was full of the gossip of the wayfarers nuptial business. The matchmaker questioned Mirren closely on that most delicate but crucial matter, her fertility, and was apparently satisfied with the answer. Pleased, she put Mirren in a back room and summoned the wayfarer. He did not like the sound of 'widow' till Matha told her

age, neither was he happy with the childless marriage. The matchmaker agreed that that was a problem but she thought that the woman herself could explain. Would Widsith care to see her? She was waiting next door. He nodded, and gulped.

Mirren was ushered in and sat facing the wayfarer. Matha watched these moments closely. All her experience in these matters told her that no matter how well-suited the couple were might appear, only the acceptance of each other through look and manner in the first bit-wicks of introduction would count for a happy marriage. Of course, many couples would get married anyway regardless of their opinions, but in this match Matha felt particularly that it was on her honour to make it a success. She nodded quietly to herself. Mirren had from the first looked boldly at the wayfarer, and must have liked what she saw for she bowed her head and smiled shyly. Widsith too was impressed, but kept his features composed. There was an awkward silence as both inspected each other, yet without actually meeting eyes. It was the custom in these proceedings to initially speak through the matchmaker but as Matha opened her mouth to introduce the couple, the girl spoke.

‘My name is Mirren. Mirren Thomlan’.

Matha was shocked.

‘Woman you speak out of turn!’ Widsith laughed and interrupted her protestations.

‘Hush Matha. She speaks well, and we can be simple in this matter. She knows I am wayfarer Widsith seeking a wife’.

He stared at her, his confidence returned, and for the first time they looked properly at each other.

‘I think you Mirren, would suit me.’

This was most upsetting to Matha where the proper procedure was for the woman to offer herself first if she wished. The wayfarer was risking a rebuff.

‘Can we not do this ourselves?’ answered Widsith to Mathas complaint.

He did not think Mirren would refuse him, and he was correct. Mirren saw no reason to be coy.

‘Yes I am willing’.

Matha gasped. No discussion of property, dowry or anything. This was too much. She protested loudly.

‘I cannot allow this meeting to continue. It is improper. You must discuss the match in the right manner, by starting first with your prospects wayfarer and...’ Widsith smiling smiling, waved her silent, this woman who had sustained and led him out to the world.

‘Hush, hush, Matha. We know our own minds. Young people, what can you do with them? Our decision has already been made. Either the conversation continues here or elsewhere. Would you like us to continue it on the street?’

Mathas servant who had been listening behind the door, giggled loudly at the old ladys discomfort.

‘Just like your father, wayfarer. As stubborn as him. Well, have your way, but I do not approve’.

With these grand words Matha lapsed into a formidable, glowering silence.

‘You have no children from your first marriage?’ Widsith asked.

‘No’.

‘Why?’ Mirren had been expecting this question and the Matchmaker had primed her on it.

‘My husband, was an ill man, he did not have the spirit of children in him.’

‘Even after, what was it, two years?’

She nodded, Widsith sat back. The last objection had fallen away. He rubbed his chin and looked at her steadily.

‘There are some things you should be forewarned of. As your husband I will be rarely present. I want a child, a boy. Your duty will be to care for him up to that age when I will take him away as my apprentice. Any other children, girls or other boys are yours to raise as you wish but the first son belongs to me and I will insist on him being raised in the manner I decide. Is this understood?’

She bowed her head gravely.

‘For this loyalty, you will be able to live in my house receive the income from its land and the income from the cattle I own. You will be quite comfortable. On my death’ she looked up ‘which will happen one day, you will be given a set proportion of my income, plus the house that is occupied by my manager’.

This was generous, and guaranteed her security for life. It was her turn to speak and she looked steadily at Widsith as she did so.

‘I accept these conditions willingly and will be a loyal wife for yourself and your children, especially the first son.’

Then something of the happiness she felt at this occasion bubbled up ‘I accept happily’ and her face burst into a spontaneous smile that was like sunlight in a glade. The lack of a husband year after year was no disadvantage, and she was to leap from the dismal neglect of a widows role to be a leading figure on the Rise. She had gained new life from this evenings arrangement, air to breathe again. Widsith smiled at her enthusiasm and they smiled together while the old matchmaker sulked between them.

So it was done. Some villagers were disappointed, some pleased that their rivals did not get their daughters placed. All agreed she was pretty and some even said it was a good match (high praise indeed!) and reflected credit on Matha, which of course it did. The formalities of the wedding were the worst in Widsiths mind. He as groom had to go to his brides parents back door and beg admittance, to be formally accepted as he passed through to the front. Sometimes this never happened and the young man was kept waiting at the back door for days, until it was plain to even his dull mind that he had been refused. More often the groom would wait a decent morning for entrance, but Widsith only had to stand a bit-wick and even then he was given a drink of ale by the red-faced father, embarrassed at having such a distinguished guest standing on his grubby back door. Once admitted, details were settled, the matchmakers price agreed (the groom always paid and Matha had made a steep charge for her service, more out of pique than anything else) and the wayfarer walked out arm in arm with his new bride to a hall where the villagers were gathered to celebrate the match.

This celebration lasted some time and it was twilight before the matched pair could reasonably leave to their new house. The wayfarer because of his prestige had been expected to put on a grand show of food and drink for the villagers and he had not disappointed them. It had been some years since anyone had seen such a feast, and there would be many sore heads in the morn. Those of the guests that could stand followed the pair to the house singing a traditional wedding-song round. At the house the pair entered and went to bed. Mirren was not a wife till the marriage had been consummated, only here, lying together, did they feel their first embarrassment and shyness. They talked quietly for a while, then Widsith blew out the candle. There was a drunken cheer from outside which made them both smile. They moved closer together and by gentle touch and small affections with the eye and hand overcome their separateness and become one.

A year after the wedding Mirren produced a son, Pirran (named after his dead grandfather) and two years later a daughter, Siri, the loveliest little thing ever seen in the village. Widsith had gained his son and Mirren her independence, and on those terms only, it was a successful match. But in another way, and deeper, through all the arrangements, bargaining, division of properties, dowries and settlements there was something else. You would not have called it love. But neither would you call it habit.

## Chapter 22

# Then the Vision Faded

*Another digression, what happened to the main story you might ask? But in a sense the soul of Lutens Wenner is part of the main story. No man, no matter how grand or wealthy or possessed of woman can necessarily count himself happy.*

After three days of waiting, sitting and sitting aimlessly under storm, then hot sun, Sojon and his wife decided to walk back along the Ancient Way to the foot of the pass to try and find the baldymen. They were becoming frightened that the baldies had gone home another way home. The full measure of Widsiths earlier warnings were now having some effect, these were desolate empty lands, in which they could not hope to survive if left alone in them. They felt small, helpless, and rather old. Their daughters desertion added to their misery.

On arrival at the toll house they were met by a plainly puzzled Captain Bulm, who turned white when the old couple explained to him that the others must have slipped through three days previously. One of the other baldymen overheard and laughed, smothering it when the captain glared at him. Circumstances were making a Drubbin of Captain Bulm yet again. There was little point in remaining, so ordering the seizure of Sojon and Kalmentier (to their relief), (at least thought the Captain they were some sort of prisoners to show a wrathful Lutens Wenner) the group saddled up and in five days reached the city of Caroyal. In the captains mind he rather hoped that King Wenner might be interested enough in the two prisoners not to get too upset about the escape of the Duc.

As it transpired, Lutens Wenner was not especially interested at all, in Captain Bulm, or his pathetic prisoners.

Sojon and Kalmentier were not admitted to the kings presence and Kalmentiers carefully rehearsed speech was wasted. She had been rather thrilled at the prospect of meeting her Lord. Sojon had been terrified. Wenner paid little attention to the captains story and he could not see any reason to be worried about a threat from a tired old Duc and a dull gem-stone. Perhaps he should be concerned? But how could they harm him? In truth once he had been very keen on getting the Charmstone, but then his position had been insecure, and his legitimacy doubtful. His brilliant war campaigns had

established his legitimacy (ha! ha!), with the help of that good general (what's his name?) and anyway, ten years as king was legitimacy enough by Strom!

As Bulm tediously explained his story, the king's mind wandered, and he sipped his wine and nibbled at a delicately prepared sweet. Wenner had always had a weakness for sugars and what was the use of being the lord of the kingdom if you could not indulge a whim or two? He was getting rather corpulent as a consequence and his short figure becoming well-rounded on the rich and heavy food that was his daily diet. Of course, no one in court said to his face that he was fat. The euphemism was 'well built' or 'established figure' or as one lackey put it ambiguously 'the weight of a king'. Wenner yawned. This captain's story was beginning to bore him. He had shown a slight interest in the prisoners till he learned they were just another of that lunatic bunch from Swaleton who had some uninspired scheme to overthrow him. Pathetic! He was king. Felt a king and looked every thrum a king. Damn these people with long memories, but he'd wear them out. He was only 42 and would outlive all of them. The only sound left to these old fools would be the wind as it whistled past their stone monuments. This pleasing thought made the king laugh out loud, to Bulm's discomfort; he had not thought this part of the story very amusing, but if the king laughed? Bulm risked a slight smile, and the king grandly waved him away. The captain quickly scuttled out of the royal presence and thanked Strom for lord Wenner being in such a royal good humour.

As Wenner approached his tenth year as undisputed ruler of the second kingdom he was inclined to contemplation and reflection on his achievement. He had set up a group of scholars to chronicle his rapid career for posterity to admire, and taken to generously endowing this church institution or that school, and listened to the speeches of thanks with a genuine pleasure. He felt the people loved him. He had given them much, prosperity, security, honour too, in his name and his impressive career. Of course they loved him. Every day brought fawning deputations begging with extravagant praise for some king's favour to this project or this invention. There were admittedly always one or two who overdid it, Wenner was embarrassed by them, but by and large he could sense their honesty, knew that they trusted him and relied on him, and he gave his valuable time generously to them, pleased that they still needed him. Lately he had instituted a special court for the peasants where the meanest person (selected of course to eliminate the worthless or whining types) would lay some problem before the king for his personal attention. Wenner took particular pleasure in these sessions, had even increased them in fact. He fancied himself a shrewd judge, and the Head Chamberlain loyally commented, 'you know their cunning insides Lord'.

Lutens Wenner had grown lazy to the throne, dispensing justice with one pudgy hand and tasting a morsel with the other. His former quickness of mind was dulled through lack of use. Perhaps if he was inclined he could start another war somewhere, but where exactly he really had not the patience to worry about. There was only the Furrowdale Valley, unless he cared to conquer the empty Verd. He signalled to his servant, who whisked away the food and replenished the wine. He had no enthusiasm for either project. Who wanted vast tracts of grass? And wasn't his brother trying to control the Furrowdale Valley?

Wenner had thought a lot recently about Slorty.

He had not seen him for fifteen years and heard he was some sort of leader in the Furrowdale Valley but not yet a king. What had he been doing with his time? He should have had the lot under his finger by now but there were still coming back reports of fighting and bickerings in his court and rebellions: Slorty was plainly struggling. It pleased Lutens Wenner, that he who had had no advantages at all, had risen to such successful heights, whereas Slorty, who'd been virtually gifted a small kingdom by their mother (that scheming bitch!) had been struggling to hang on to it, let alone enlarge it. If Karee was alive how she would fume, the old buzzard never gave much attention to her youngest son. Always it was Slorty who got the best and now he had turned out the worst. Ha!

Wenner decided to write to his half-brother. It was time to see what he was about. Maybe he could offer assistance, vaguely expressed of course, Slorty had a temper especially when he was patronised. Perhaps the two could meet up and unite the Caroyal Plains with the Furrowdale Valley? There was a fancy.

Weeks after Bulm had arrived with the bedraggled Sojon and Kalmentier, Lutens Wenner's mind began to stir, agitated with the idea of some more conquest, especially if it was easy. For the first time in years Wenner was actually excited and pictured the grand scheme in his eye. With the plains and the valley united it would be a simple matter to sweep Ogen from his petty throne in Noll (so much for the Duc du Qu'ets hopes there) and then he would be master (with his brothers assistance) of the whole land, why it would equal Swivven the Strongs realm.

What a vision!

The king sat back in his velvet-padded chair and gazed down at the long majestic ante-room to the far doors at the end and the two personal bodyguards, standing patiently. This was a fine room to hold the final triumph. One day deputations from the Furrowdale and Noll would come through that door, granting him sole authority over the land. There would be ceremony and pomp, glittering uniforms and obsequious eppaulettes and tiaras, standing in an unbroken line where he, king of the Rume plains, lord of the Furrowdale Valley and Noll would walk alone. He would be master of everything, all the known world. The vision filled his head. He saw everything clearly. How he would speak, what he would wear, how he would forgive and pardon those who fought against him and how they would shout his praises. It was a grand spectacle. He was so young, forty-two, in the prime of life. He could achieve this if he wished. He downed a goblet of wine in celebration of the future.

Then the vision faded and a sinister shadow slipped behind all the gold and pagentry. Mial Hest. That serpent! Why did he let him go?

The king stood up and paced to and fro beside the ornate desk. As you disposed of one enemy you gained another. Could you never get rid of them all at once? And Hest was the most dangerous. He had thought the shift of Hest to Swaleton was a cunning move at the time. He had put the scheming fellow at a distance and sipped at the lovely cup of Hest's wife, and for many weeks she filled his senses till he was sated, and desired no more.

He was always surrounded by weak people, and shallow women that gave themselves with no resistance and clung to him, draining him dry. Like parasites, they sucked

at his blood and gave nothing in return. Fiolls charms had quickly diminished and she had been left to weep sadly in her secluded suite. The king never spoke to her now and she had no friends to confide in. The court ignored her.

Mial Hest out of sight was not Mial Hest out of mind. The man preyed on his mind, partly through fear and also strangely, through guilt.

No man is completely free of his conscience and the king had the luxury of time to realise that he had treated Hest badly, and gained an enemy in what might have been a friend. And such an enemy! Wenner knew in his bones that the new governor of Swaleton was planning revenge and there was little he could do not to prevent it. The folly to send him away! He stamped his foot at the memory. If Hest had been at court the king could have had him quietly arrested at any time and disposed of silently in the dungeons, but at Swaleton Hest was out of reach of Wenner's claws. And the king had sent him there! Idiot! Drubbin!

Unintentionally he had said this aloud and the two guards had glanced knowingly at each other, the king was in a foul temper, best warn the others.

With a sigh Wenner slumped back in his chair. He tired easily these days. The time when he could have rode twenty leagues in a day had long gone. Even walking was an effort and his breathing sounded heavier in his ears every season. Even his mind seemed to wander about the place. People told him things and he did not seem to hear. Was he going deaf as well? But he was only forty-two. What was that about Slorty? Oh yes, he must draft a letter. He called for his scribe and then immediately forgot why because he shivered. Wast Time was coming and he must keep warm. He summoned his servant who brought in the king's heavy coat. It was burdened with silver stitched designs and gold brocade, with fur around the collar. Inside the king seemed to visibly shrink, as if the coat was holding him up, not the other way round. He walked majesterially out of the ante-chamber, the servant following respectfully. The man had conquered a throne and now the throne was conquering the king.

In another part of the palace the following conversation ensued.

'What do we do with them?' asked the lieutenant of the king's personal guard 'do I let them go?'

'Strom no! Keep 'em. Put them in the dungeons. He'll remember, and when he does we had better have kept them if we fancy an old age.'

'But he did not explicitly say' persisted the lieutenant. The Chamberlain was firm.

'We need not fuss about them. I was surprised he let that idiotic Bulm get off so lightly. He's getting old. Surfeit of food and wine, and women.'

Having delivered this opinion of the king's abilities the Head Chamberlain marched off. The lieutenant kept quiet. The court was a dangerous place to express any opinion, especially a loud one.

He gave orders and they hustled Sojon and Kalmontier into the crowded dungeons below the palace. Ironically, they gained the same cell as some of the old prefectors, who had been sent to Caroyal and imprisoned without an explanation, forgotten as were Sojon and his wife by a king with other matters on his mind. Kalmontier went into shock. The shame of her imprisonment was simply too much. She could withstand

the harshness of climate and torture of blistered feet, but not the public humiliation of imprisonment. Her tough little soul was punctured by the disgrace and within a season she was dead. Sojon, as the weaker physically of the pair survived her, but grew steadily weaker with the gripping cold that came with Wast Time and seeped like cancer into the dark cells.

## Their Mothers Ambition

*Driac Slorty has a barbaric name to match his personality, larger than life, more vicious than death. A fascinating character, but I anticipate. It is not a charming study of brothers, but I fancy from my researches, not an untypical one.*

The relationship between Lutens Wenner and Driac Slorty was riven, yet united, vastly different in temperament, yet with much the same ambition, born together in blood, yet having no love for each other. They were not brothers but half-brothers. Their mother Karee wore out one husband and took another, which she also outlived. Slorty the oldest, was born from the first match and took his fathers name whilst, Wenner, born six years later took the second husbands name. Apart from their surnames their respective fathers left no mark upon their sons, it was Karee, who stamped her children into her own vigorous mould.

Beneath Karees dominating voice and violent temper was also a precise and calculating mind. Whenever her temperament slipped out of control it was the cooler brain that pulled her back. If the mind failed in its cunning workings the temper of her character would often as not push the matter her way. The two aspects together were irresistible but fortunately for her enemies they rarely worked in such sweet harmony. Her division of character she passed on to her two sons, but rather oddly, not by giving them one part of each half but by giving one half solely to one or the other. Lutens emerged as the cool, pragmatic son, weak in physical strength but powerful in his thoughts. Slorty inherited his mothers foul temper, wild behaviour and impressive, almost charismatic personality. Both men had charm. Wenner was subtle and diplomatic whereas Slorty would hug his friends in huge Strom-like arms that would have killed them if his love had not restrained him. Slorty was perhaps the more attractive of the two men. It was often the case with Wenner's subtle ways that people could not quite place his face in their minds, and when they did it was too late. Slorty's face filled the minds of those who saw it.

Yet there were similarities between them. Both had been nurtured at the breast of their mothers ambition. They craved power, and each sought it in their individual

way. Both men came to be universally loathed and both became rather corpulent in their fortieth years. Karee's favourite was certainly Slorty, her oldest and brashest child. He demonstrated the visible characteristics she recognised in herself. Her favouritism pushed Slorty more easily on the road to power. Whilst Lutens Wenner was politely entertaining the ladies of Caroyal in the drawing rooms, and handed around delicate sweetmeats and cakes, Slorty had established himself as the leading lord of Beorht, and set out to subdue the village tribes and pockets of brigands in the lower Furrowdale Valley. Twenty years later Wenner was a king and lord of the Rume plains whilst Driac Slorty was still trying to subdue the village tribes and pockets of brigands in the lower Furrowdale Valley.

What had gone wrong?

Mostly the fault lay in Slorty's own character. The lower Furrowdale Valley was a mess of different tribes, each with their own customs and rituals and petty agreements with their neighbours. This system had survived in its ad hoc manner for seventy years, ever since the War of Succession, and they did not see why things had to change because some jumped-up lord from Beorht began to throw his weight around. Complicating the landscape were bands of brigands, some of them well-organised, and almost as well established as their less nomadic villagers. These brigands fought amongst themselves and strove to terrify the village tribes into submission, not always with success. Sometimes the brigands were of a rather quiet disposition and preferred to bargain an arrangement with the village tribes, food for non-interference. It was surprising how well such inoffensive arrangements worked if left alone.

The problem for Driac Slorty was that no one on the lower valley could particularly see the necessity for his existence. This might not have mattered in itself (Slorty had the forces of arms to persuade them of the advantages) but he was too impulsive. He did not have the strength to subdue the whole lower valley at once and had not the patience to understand the intricacies of the tribal agreements and subtle inter-dependencies. Consequently he blundered and threatened his way around the valley, forcing one village into his camp only to see them change their minds when he was off subduing another. His methods of punishing these recalcitrant tribes only resulted in alienating them further and they would form private armies amongst themselves, or with the brigands, to resist Slorty's heavy handed 'friendship'. The delicate checks and balances in the lower Furrowdale Valley had been upset by Slorty's arrival, and his impatient temper only worsened things. As intermittent war and guerilla attacks swept back and forth across the lower valley the relatively prosperous land fell into decline. Suspicion became the common characteristic of a Furrowdale Valley peasant. Cattle was kept hidden, crops harvested quickly, then hoarded in secret places, trade vanished, and distrust increased, whilst in futile persistence, Slorty kept his men circling the plains, aimlessly trying to order a unity on a country that had been broken by the churning actions of his own army.

He had to deal with rebellions in his army, and worse, the wrath of Karee, who poured scorn upon her son's head via long and poisonous letters. She did not limit herself solely to vitriol, however, and gave suggestions as to how Slorty might settle the muddied pond he had entered. It was sensible advice, from a seasoned schemer, but Slorty did not heed it. He had surrounded himself with like minded cronies, fine

on a horse, or with a tankard of wine in one hand and a woman in the other, but roar and thunder and kill as they might these officers were no better at controlling the tribes than he was. Still they kept him company in song and drink and listened to his boasts with roistering approval. Karees death freed Slorty from her hounding, but it did not improve matters for him. He stuck to his old ways and so the Furrowdale Valley continued to bleed from a scab picked over many times.

Once, just once, Slorty had chosen an able subordinate. He was sent, rather grandly to subdue the higher Furrowdale Valley, which, to everyones surprise he accomplished in the quick time of two years. His name was Het Sheriat.

He had the subtly and diplomacy that Slorty lacked and with persuasion of voice rather than sword (only once did he ever attack a village) he brought the disparate tribes into a general federation under the leadership of the city of Beorht. Sheriats strength lay in leaving the villages their independence but gaining their sense of obligation to him by destroying one by one all the brigand groups in the upper Furrowdale Valley. This he did so methodically that he acquired the admiring nickname of 'Sure' Sheriat, his efficiency and skill becoming a byword. And sometimes he flashed into brilliance. When confronted by a particularly clever brigand band that were based on the Three Thrum Pass he took a small body of men along the ridge line from Traders Gate and descended on the unsuspecting robbers like a wolf on the fold. This daring and unorthodox detour won him the day. The destruction of these brigands virtually eliminated the class as a whole from the upper Furrowdale Valley, and the only tarnish to the success was the death of three guards overnight, murdered in all probability by some of the brigands creeping back under cover of darkness for a revenge.

The establishment of the confederation of villages brought prosperity to this part of the Furrowdale Valley, and noisy markets were now to be found everywhere. The merchants of Beorht who benefitted most by Sheriats achievements thanked him with the rather splendid gift of a house in the city, and murmured in secret amongst themselves that it was a pity the young man could not replace that old drunkard to the skaw, who only squandered the cities coin in futile raids against vanishing armies. It was just as well that 'old drunkard' did not get to hear of these complaints, for there was still some kick left in the lord, enough to hurt the wide backsides of the merchants at any rate. Publicly Slorty praised the young captain, raised him to a commander and gave him a splendid medal. In private, surrounded by his less than sober comrades he mocked Het Sheriat.

'The pup! A piece or two of good fortune and he preens himself like a Gadabout. Give him a year or two and he'll trip over his own conceit'.

This prophecy did not seem very likely to his officers but they did not think it wise to say so. They felt uneasy at Sheriats success, perhaps it was time to change sides? Sheriat was already showing a marked disinclination to be in the company of his boss. Was it just a matter of time before power shifted, or had the power moved already?

The poisoned words of the merchants, his mothers death and his own officers shallow looks should have warned Driac Slorty that his luck was dribbling away. But he did not see it. Above his head was scratched the mark of death, but he did not look up. Instead he peered as his bedroom door opened and a young girl stood frightened.

## The Dell of Azel

*An idyll, and although this pleasant moment comes at a timely spot in our narrative it is necessitated out of historic fact. This actually happened, I cannot stress that enough. We meet Solas Sharp and hear of the mythical Marshmen, and the philosophy of the Roundrell is expounded by the Duc, as love, with all it's ramifications, overshadows the travellers.*

The scream carried over the clearing, high and wide it filled the sky with bitter sounds. Tallott, startled out of his nap looked up and saw two hawk-like birds circling the clearing calling in thin piercing voices till they turned out of sight, their cries fading into the mountains.

'What were they?' he asked of no one in particular.

The Duc stared after the birds.

'Rare birds. A good omen I think?'

The wayfarer, fixing a loosened strap to his bagger was not so sure.

'They've been disturbed from the pass. They do not come down here often, except in Wast Time, they're known as baldybirds?'

Tallott was surprised

'Baldybirds? Is that true?'

The Duc was nodding his head vigorously as if remembering something.

'The same name as our friends. Well, birds of prey, I rather fancy it suits' remarked Tallott. 'I think you're wrong Duc. They can't be anything but ill omens?'

'Not so, not so, Givtheem. You cannot blame these magnificent birds because Wen-ners secret police stole their name. They are champions of the air. Free spirits, like us perhaps?'

'We don't soar. Crawl, perhaps, like lice' and a wicked smile crossed Tallotts face.

'Some of us soar Givtheem, at least in our minds. Do not you yourself have soaring ideals?'

Tallott looked dubious. All he wanted was Weners death, and Tysas plump little body and perhaps some power for himself. To look further than that was beyond him. He switched the conversation.

'Heh, wayfarer, do you think those damn birds were disturbed by the brigands?' Widsith smiled thinly.

'Disturbed by someone at least'.

His cautious words aroused Tallotts interest.

'I thought you and the wood-chopper were thick this morning. Where's he's gone? Up on the pass then if they weren't brigands who were they?'

Widsith was busy on his mending and did not reply.

Tallott shrugged and leaned back on the grass. The day had started clear but threads of soft cloud were creeping across the sky and threatening a pleasant day. Those damn baldybirds of course. The Duc was reading from his book, about the only time he was silent about Morad to Tallotts mind, and the others had wandered off in different purposes of their own. He heard a high girlish laugh, Tysas, coming from the pool behind the hut. A tiny stream trickled into the back of the clearing and accumulated crystal mountain water in a rock pool. Tallott could hear another laugh, Juuds voice this time, sharing in the fun and freshness of the water after two grubby nights out. Rather mysteriously Cean had gone off with Sollo Wramm to 'learn things' he said. Wramm had cocked his head on one side and offered the rime.

'That if ee wants to learn

I'll teach in, slow and firm'.

Cean was still looking for heroes, and now it was Sollos turn.

The wood-cutter hurried into the clearing and squatted by Widsith. He did not bother to conceal his words and Tallott and the Duc listened with interest.

'Yes it's as I feared wayfarer, two of his men came down to the village today. But they seem to think it was brigands that killed their guards and they are looking for them, making enquiries you know?'

The wayfarer nodded and explained for Tallotts and the Ducs benefit about Sure Sheriat and his men. Tallott whistled.

'A right Wyrds den. Is it safe to stay?'

The wood-cutter looked concerned.

'I put out this story of seeing four or five people skulking off down valley, so that should set 'em wrong for a while, but the rest will come down today or tomorrow'.

He did not say the obvious. The wayfarer stood up.

'Thank you. We will go. Otherwise we put you at risk. Tallott, see if you can find Sollo and Cean, yes, and tell the girls to prepare for leaving.' Then he heard a laugh from the wash-pool. He wryly grinned.

'On second thoughts you best not do that. You have a poor enough reputation already'.

'Then it can't get any worse. I'll tell 'em' and he winked at Widsith. He got the re-

sponse he had expected. The Duc was outraged.

'You will do no such thing Givtheem Tallott' he scrambled to his feet and put a restraining hand on Tallotts shoulder 'the very idea! They have a right to their privacy, especially from your lurid eyes.'

He looked so determined to stop Tallott, by force if necessary, that the ex-smugler roared with laughter. The wood-cutter looked anxiously from one to the other fearing some sort of squabble, but Tallott clapped a huge hand against the Duc's slight shoulders.

'Don't fuss old man. Your daughter is safe. I'm only having a tease'. The Duc was doubtful, but he saw the wayfarer smiling so he supposed it was alright.

'You go too far Givtheem Tallott, too far', and shook a warning finger at the huge man, for all the world like a schoolmaster reprimanding a naughty child.

'That always was my weakness' replied Tallott smartly, and the Duc realised the ludicrousness of his words

## II

They were to spend ten days in the valley of the Furrowdale. The villages were friendly and the brigand groups, thanks to Sheriats efficiency, non-existent. This was the wayfarers home country and his face was well-known amongst the villagers. Their natural suspicion of any travellers relaxed when they recognised him and Hulls tall, striding, walk. They would shout out from the streets or fields 'Hail wayfarer' 'Does it go well?' 'Wayfarer Widsith? So you live, come inside, there's a story here'.

At every village the party had to stop and suffer the villagers friendliness. Tallott would quaff the local brew, the Duc would chat with the elders and Widsith would be obliged to endlessly retell their adventures. It was hardly discreet progress, and Widsith lamented this at one point to Juud.

'Every dog knows from where we came and where we are going'.

'Does it matter?'

'Dogs bark' was his terse rejoinder.

Juud and Tysa were comforted by the women folk of the villages who were concerned in a busy-bodyish sort of way for these girls health.

'That wayfarer Widsith, he'll take you to Wyrds Den if you don't watch him, but oh, he's a grand one for stories'.

They frequently enquired if the girls were married and were shocked that they were not.

'Two single girls with these men. It's unnatural I says. This wayfarer, he'll ruin you' they would advise with meaningful expressions.

Several times the girls had to refuse offers to stay in the valley and both found it

convenient to say that the Duc was their father and Cean their brother. The women found this more acceptable.

Cean was bored, though he felt a certain pride when the young men of the village would sidle up to him and ask him admiring questions. But the pace of walking! So slow! Two, three villages a day and these were never separated by more than two or more leagues a piece. Every night they stayed in a village, being fed fatly on meat and vegetables, for this was the end of Croppen the most bountiful time of year for the valley. Cean privately thought that they would not have seen half this attention if they had come through at Mid Wast. Most evenings he watched the day fade on the flanks of the Raggerok, and they made him long to quicken their pace. Once Juud had sat beside him as the evening fell and observing his agitation he blurted out to her his irritation at all this 'hanging around'.

Juud was sympathetic, but certainly did not share his feelings. For her the chance to rest was beneficial.

'The days will go soon enough. Do not get impatient Cean. We will need all your strength later on'.

Cean was grateful for the comfort and took a certain pride in the remark, and in the fact that Juud had made it. Yet still they crawled along the valley floor! For one person at least there was nothing restful about the Furrowdale Valley.

At night stories would be told. The others learnt of Sure Sheriat and also about the nefarious Driac Slorty.

'A brother of Wenner eh?' Tallott mused. He had never heard of him before, not that it mattered. He was on the wrong side. 'He sounds a pleasant sort of chap' he commented after one particularly grisly telling of a story by a village elder. 'I should not think he will ever bother us' Widsith said as comfort to Juud when her face blanched at the story.

Sollo Wramm had resumed his old occupation and started to sell various oddments from his bundle. It was a poor collection and he did not take very many coins from the canny villagers. He had a few trinkets for the women, pipes and a weedy type of hotherb for the men. Each dayend he would concoct some sort of sweetment to sell to the children. He was as sharp with them as he was with the adults. No child ever got a free gift from Sollo Wramm.

Cean would watch the transactions with fascination, the old traders eyes gleaming as a bargain was struck. But it was the wrong time of year as he moaned to the others.

'Theys all fat from Croppen.

Give em a season and they'll be hopping

to buy from 'ol Sollo Wramm

just for something to pass the tam'

The sweetments were in fact the best sellers. Only the poorest of the peasants bothered with the hotherb and no one touched his magic youth elixir, but he was in demand for his knowledge of herbs and curative plants. A lifetime of wandering had given him an extraordinary knowledge and no ailment need be neglected. What was interesting to Cean's eye was that they very often worked. The villagers had had themselves a lifetime

of working with folk medicine, but no one had Sollos skill in preparing and mixing the precious ointments. If he was vague about everything else Sollo Wramm was precise in this craft and his gifts were much in demand through the villages. Often on arrival he would be persuaded to visit some sick child or poorly elder and he never left without a consideration. He had a true healers gift. The young ones might have been appalled by foul breath and rasping eyes but at a touch of his hands they relaxed and felt strangely comforted. Wramm could soothe the most difficult child, Cean had witnessed it, time and time again and found it a wonder.

### III

The Ancient Way disappeared in the middle of villages in the upper Furrowdale Valley, so they followed the banks of the Furrow River heading upstream for twenty or so leagues to a place called Fromms Ford, the first possible ford on the river. Of course they could have taken a boat at any point but Widsith preferred this route. It took him to the haunts of old friends and away from Sure Sheriat. Also it faced up the valley and when on occasion the cloud lifted Widsith could see the distant Rise that was his home. He was barely two days away from Mirren.

Just by Fromms Ford a rider appeared, galloped hard up to the group and wheeled around with a great shout. Widsith smiled with his arms akimbo watching these furious antics. The man leapt off his horse and embraced the wayfarer, then Hull, and walked with them to the village. His name was Solas Sharp, a wayfarer, and a noisy one. He kept mainly to the Furrowdale Valley and often travelled down well below Beorht. Probably no one knew the by-ways and secret places of the valley better than he. Widsith and Solas had been school friends on the Rise, but two different people as friends it was hard to conceive. Solas was as lively and excitable as Widsith was steady. He looked younger when in fact he was a year older. His craft was more reliable than Widsiths for he was often hired by the Highland tribes for the purposes of keeping an eye on activity in the valley, and then earned himself a return hire by the merchants of Beorht, anxious to keep an eye on the Highland kingdom. With such a convenient arrangement he prospered, and although starting with poor means he now owned some of the best land on Yutts Rise, and a fine house with a fine wife to accommodate it. His one failing was a certain impetuosity which more than once put him into dark corners, but then his boyish charm weaseled him out again. He talked incessantly.

'So another adventure Mikal? And you've had some fun too, eh? Slipping past that Sure Sheriat. Oh yes! I know all that. Of course I do! I know everything in the Furrowdale Valley. And you are not staying long? Arrr, I thought as much. Capability Col eh? There's early snow up there, you'd best be careful. I heard a traveller could not get through last week, so, be careful my Mikal. Did you see Gormiah Threadon in Swaleton? That slimy toad! Did you know I left a client in his hands, to direct him to Swaleton, and you know what the trickster did? Stole the clients money and left him to walk to Swaleton. Gormiah would sell some of his old nags to Strom himself I bargain.

Wretch! One day I will skewer him. It will be a blessing for society. And you've a fine crew here, you must introduce me. She's pretty eh?' nodding to Juud 'well of course I've a fine wife, but she's not here eh? Yes a fine crew, and Sollo Wramm' here he whispered in the wayfarers ear 'don't touch his elixer. It's lethal. Talk about the giver of youth, it nearly killed me' then roared with laughter.

'You see I'm well. Slortys keeping me jumping. Such a tiresome man. One day one of his men will kill him, or I will. Now Sure Sheriat, a different pot altogether. No holes in that villain. Oh he's not so bad. He's even popular. At least with the fat merchants in Beorht, yes, even here, you look surprised? He's a man to watch. Especially for you, wayfarer Widsith. He'll learn your name so it's well you're moving out. Oh yes, a man to watch. This valley' and Solas threw his arm in an expansive gesture 'could be his when you get back. Yes, I'm serious! Not the Rises I think. He will not tackle the Highland tribes. He is shrewd. He doesn't talk just listens. Just like you. Not like me eh?'

He laughed again, the air ringing in sound. They had reached the village and the usual flurry of kids and dogs hurried out to inspect them. Much later, at night, Solas drew Widsith aside and whispered other things, his voice hushed and serious.

'Something strange is moving breewise, have you not felt it? We have here. There's rumours from the marshes, nothing certain, but mysterious. Slorty lost some men on the edge of a marsh village and they say it was not brigands that did it, or village tribes, but giants. Huge men with helmets and hacking swords. Another village got destroyed not so long back. Just wiped clean of all men, women and children. They say it was punishment for killing a marshman. Who knows? Not even animals left, or a house standing. Well, perhaps, it's strange. It might be brigands dressed up as Marshmen, trying to scare the villagers. Well, they have! I have never seen the area so jumpy, and these are not easily scared people you know. Not after ten years of Slorty. But still, listen to this, I've seen a helmet. A huge thing found after the village was obliterated. If it is not brigands who else can it be? They say Slorty is worried, and well he might. He cannot control the tribesmen let alone these rumours. If it is true imagine, two hundred years of silence, and they move. There is something stirring in the marshes. You remember Beon Derdane, and the tales he was supposed to say? He never thought the marsh kingdom was gone. He said it was sleeping, well, now they are waking up'.

Solas left them that night, speaking a last word to the wayfarer.

'Tell me how Noll fares on your return Mikal. I will see Mirren for you. Good luck. Strom be with you' and he galloped off sending dust like a wind behind him.

## IV

At Fromms Ferry they crossed by boat but the river was almost too shallow, and at one point they got stuck on a mud bank and had to lever themselves off with poles. The sky was grey, sullen and impassive over their heads. Above the river were a set of

low hillocks, that stood isolated in the valley. They were clad in shrubbery and the occasional taller tree. The Duc got excited by the sight of them. He caught the wayfarers sleeve for attention.

‘Wayfarer, are these not the Dells of the Furrowdale Valley?’

‘Yes’.

‘We will stay here?’

There was a pleading expression on the Duc's face. The wayfarer would have preferred to go around them, for the very reason the Duc wished not to. He was reluctant.

‘It is quicker to pass Weneways of them’

‘Oh but we must stop wayfarer!’

There was something pathetic in the Duc's face. Juud who had been listening to the exchange stepped in.

‘I don't understand father. What is special about this place that we must visit?’

The wayfarer scratched his ear and made a gesture to the Duc as if to put the explanation in his hands. Tallott stifled a groan. He could see history coming up.

‘The Dells of the Furrowdale Valley, why’ the Duc tried to collect his words ‘they hold the only example of art by the Past People, apart from the Charmstone of course’. Tallot winced and hoped the old boy was not going to let slip their possession of it. There was no need of fear of that for the Duc was thinking of something else.

‘What is this thing’ asked Tysa impatiently.

‘It is a temple. No one knows who built it, or why. It lies somewhere in the dells. You know the place wayfarer? Excellent. Morad says it lies in the Dell of Azel. What is that pray?’

‘It is a valley of flowers’.

This intrigued Juud.

‘A temple amongst flowers? It sounds lovely. Can we see it wayfarer?’

He shrugged. He was not happy. The Dell of Azel was a disturbing place, some called it magical. The villagers never went there, except the boldest of the young men, and they came back with headaches and sick feelings, ridden with nightmares. Well, they would find out for themselves what it was like. Besides, it was so many years since he was there he might have imagined the disturbances in his mind, or let his youth exaggerate them. Surely there would be no harm?

‘It's a strange place. But you shall see that for yourselves if you wish’.

‘Dangerous?’ asked Tysa.

‘No’ he could not find the word he would use to describe the Dell. Sinister? No that was not true. Disturbing perhaps, but sometimes pleasing.

‘The temple’ extrapolated the Duc, summoning to his mind's eye the page Morad had written about it ‘was perfectly round in shape, a perfect circle with a domed top, and the walls covered with the inscription ‘All dwell in the Roundrell’ on the outer rim’.

Widsith gave in.

The approach to the Dell of Azel was not obvious. The tracks were little used and the group had to push fiercely through the shrubbery at times to make and sort of progress. Juud got angry with her quiver and bow, which became a useless encumbrance in these circumstances, but Widsith insisted she carry them. Amongst the dells it was confusing. Little valleys and hillocks, with open glades, strangely silent except for the tinkling of quiet streams, which ran in all confusing directions as if not sure themselves which way to escape. But Widsith knew the way, and that the Dell of Azel lay deeper than the others. The peculiar condition of the dells was that they drained inwards, carrying the small moss-bordered streams with them. It was as if the dells focussed onto the Dell of Azel which was at the lowest point, and collected the various streams into a crystalline pool that was reputed locally to be bottomless. Widsith's pragmatic mind had searched along the banks of the Furrow River, and found the secret outlet of the pool some leagues downstream. The waters must run through many caverns to reach that distant point.

Faint paths led them into the heart of the dells, where the scent of flowers perfumed the air like a heavy incense. There were no songbirds, no sound at all but their own footsteps and the rustling of the myriad silver streams. It was a charmed silence. Automatically they lowered their voices and in an awed state they entered the Dell of Azel, a sequence of grass clearings occupied in the middle by a still surface of water. Scattered throughout the dell were clumps of old gnarled trees, called teasel trees, that seemed to murmur amongst themselves like old bent men, and surrounding each of the grass glades was a dense wall of shrubs, glowing in a mass of colour, reds, pale orange, blues, specked with diamond drops of yellow, violets, every imaginable hue decked the glade with unearthly rainbows. It took their breath away.

Tysa was lost to it, and ran off to sniff at the bouquets of flowers. Almost casually she followed the brightly rimmed edges of the clearing and came across the little temple. The others followed.

The temple was perfectly round in shape, a perfect circle with a domed top, and just as Morad had described, the walls covered with the inscription 'All dwell in the Roundrell' on the outer rim. A narrow arched doorway faced the lakelet and looked down the clearing. Tysa hesitated at the door till the Duc came forward unlatched it and stepped wonderingly into the building. It was bare inside apart from one small stone table that occupied the central place. Only with a squeeze could they all stand in it, Hull excepted, and Tallot's head brushed the curved roof. On the inside wall was etched the same enigmatic inscription in fine cursive lettering. Juud wondered again what it meant but her father was too enraptured by the temple to answer her query, and sat marvelling the precise knitting together of the stonework, and the clean simple polish on the surfaces. It was every part as mysterious and beautiful as Morad had described.

It was later aftersun and the people had settled randomly about the clearing each absorbing the perfumed magic of the Dell. They spoke quietly and walked slowly, as if in some sort of mysterious trance, as if a spirit was moving out of this place and into them. Widsith felt it. It was as he remembered, subtle and strange, as if instead of you looking at the Dell, the Dell was examining you.

'What does it mean father? All dwell in the Roundrell?'

Juud was sitting beside the pool, trying to fathom its depths. The Duc had been

reading Morad again and looked up at his daughters question. This was the second time she had asked. Her father was lost in himself, quite captured, spellbound.

‘Well dear, I do not really know. Thomas does not seem to say clearly. He talks of it as being a kind of sacred saying, of praise to some God of theirs, but I am not sure. You see it is on the Charmstone as well. It meant something of great significance to the Past People’.

He paused and gazed out across the lake. The sky beyond was breaking a little and the blue of an old day was here and there in patches.

A murmur of voices came from Tysa and Tallott who were seated on the grass some distance away. She knew what her father meant. Something was talking to her, but it was as if it was in a foreign language, for no matter how hard she tried to listen it never became clear. She was not even sure where the words were coming from? Was it the streams? Or the wizened, muttering old teasel trees, or from,her own head. She shook it, took out her hair clips and her long black hair fell loosely over her shoulder.

‘What is the roundrell?’ she asked again.

The Duc looked up and listened whilst she voiced her confusion, the roundrell appeared to mean so many things. A journey, the passage of seasons, was that the right explanation, or was it something greater, or littler? The Duc fancied, and he explained this carefully to Juud, that the roundrell was a sort of philosophy of the Past People. This was Morads conclusion of course, and the Duc like the author developed the idea passionately.

‘It is a kind of way of life, a pattern to live by. As all things change, so people must adapt. The roundrell is all things that move in a circular, unceasing way, and to fight or obstruct that way is to halt the very stuff of life, its current, the very currency of living. Perhaps there was a body of literature drawn up, and now lost, except for this one sentence, which explained the right behaviour of an individual, gave a set of ethical and moral standards for them to abide by.’

This appealed to the Duc, for it was something he felt his own times could well do with. A sort of rule book. Perhaps the Past People had one and called it the roundrell? The Duc turned to his beloved daughter.

‘Did you know dear that it has long been rumoured that Thomas au Morad wrote a companion volume to his first work, indeed he hints of such a project towards the close of that book. And that he explained and elaborated the concept of the roundrell in much more detailed terms’.

Juud was surprised, and her father elaborated further.

‘Oh yes, several scholars think it existed. It is tantalising is it not, if it is true?’

‘But’ there was something puzzling in this thought Juud ‘he was an old man when he wrote the first history and he wrote up to his own time. What could he write about?’

‘Ahhhh, that is the exciting thing. It could be a prophetic book’ the Ducs eyes gleamed ‘a prediction of our times.’

‘Oh father, you don’t believe such things do you?’

The Duc breathed deeply in the soft air and spoke ever so gently,

'Perhaps not daughter, but what a book it would be to study. Now I would give my life for that!'

To another of the glade side a fire crackled. Hull was hunched over it, guiding the flames onto more wood. The wayfarer stood by, Cean watching also. Sollo Wramm had stuck an azel in his hat band that went oddly with the bones. As evensun dimmed the glade, the sky washed away the remaining traces of cloud and shone a fair blue, and Wene hung wispily in a corner of the sky. The perfumes of the azels filled the twilight and the branches of the teasel trees rustled, even though there was no wind. A weak star wavered in the darkening blue and the fire chuckled across the clearing.

Widsith put his back against a teasel tree and followed the flicker of the fire skywards. He always had an uncanny sense that the teasel trees resented the fire licking against their old wood, yet the aromatic smell from the woodsmoke was like a thick woody incense, floating like a balm around them. The others drifted into a circle around the fire, Tysa huddling close to Tallott.

They had a simple meal, fresh vegetables from Fromms Ford and a shining caerp from the Furrow River, seasoned with some of Sollos herbs. Widsith brought out his pipe after the meal and carefully lit it, adding the tang of hotherb to the sweet scented air. As the dark fell, the trickling streams seem to quieten and the moons pale glow filtered delicate shadows amongst the gnarled branches of the teasel trees. A hundred or more stars burnt in steady brightness over the clearing, and looked friendly, and Juud thought of them as being an umbrella over her head instead of an open unsheltered sky. The azels made her feel drowsy and her movements languid. Even to speak seemed an unnecessary effort. Widsith and Hull murmured something in that curious pidgin language of theirs, and the Duc recounted a story about Morad.

'He was a scribe on our estate you know' Juud hardly heard, but leaned back and traced patterns in the web of stars.

The group prepared for bed by laying their blankets out underneath the twisted teasel trees to avoid the dew-wet grass. As the fire died into embers Juud wrapped herself in her blanket and thought about the so very distant world she had left behind. Only with an effort could she portray the face of her patron in her mind, and the rest of that family refused to yield to her memory. How long ago was it? Forty days? So, so long ago. That old life had changed for something more fickle and elusive. On some nights Juud had peered into her future but had never seen anything. She supposed she would marry and have a fine house on some estate, that at least was the patrons portrait of her future and Juud could see no reason to alter it. Those nights she was sometimes frightened at the very uncertainty of her life. Yet the morning would bring sunlight, Tallotts banter and the wayfarers wry comments, and then this wild adventure became the very spirit of her existence, and she could never imagine changing it.

But tonight, this azel full night, she did imagine a glimpse of her future.

Was it half awake, or half asleep that she saw pictures in her mind of the old Qu'et estate and of herself in the fine old drawing room managing Qu'et affairs. There was somebody beside her, a man definitely, but his face was always turned away and no matter how hard she looked his features remained hidden. She kept turning to see him fully, but always a shadow was there, the face always slipping out of sight, but she could feel

his unnerving presence and was not sure that he meant well for her, as if the shadows that hid his face also hid his heart. With a start she woke up.

The stars were still out but a grey talon of cloud was creeping over the sky. She propped herself up on her arm and glanced around. Her father was snoring unevenly and she saw Ceans form curled up tightly under his blanket. The wayfarer and Hull were a little beyond, sleeping quietly. Tallotts blanket was empty. She blinked and looked again. So was Tysas.

Her feelings were mingled somewhere between alarm and curiosity, really there should have been no surprise, yet to her own puzzlement she was surprised, almost disappointed in Tysa. That was silly. That something of this sort might happen she should have been expecting, but now that it had it was stupidly unexpected. What was happening anyway? For all her sophistication Juud was ignorant of the relations between men and women. It was the custom to keep young girls uninformed about these matters, so of course it encouraged a greater trepidation and fascination than before. Juud was now too agitated to sleep. Quite automatically she got up and buttoned on her bodice and pulled on her fathers hard worn trousers. It was not her intention to spy on Tallott and Tysa, it was, and she could not have explained it any further, a strange needing to know what was happening. Perhaps a protective sense for Tysa as well, for Juud still fancied herself as the older and wiser 'sister' of the pair.

She slipped away from the sleeping forms and walked barefoot across the grass of the clearing, her toes feeling the prickles of the damp blades. The air was warm and soft, a true Croppen night, hardly Wast Time at all. Wene suffused the clearing, tinting the trees and flowers in a uniform grey-blue. Nothing stirred. Nothing could be heard. Juud paused in a pocket of teasel trees and from that dark shade looked down the dell over the glade of grass. She was not surprised and should have glanced away but something held her eyes in fascination on the couple.

Tallott and Tysa were in an embrace, their clothes discarded in a heap and their skins yellow with Wenes light. Tallott's hands were moving assuredly over the young girls body, and Tysa was shivering with the pleasure of it. The watcher was hypnotised. Tysa fell back, and Tallott eagerly pushed himself between the girls accepting legs. There was pushing, coupling, mutual gasps and cries, and suddenly Juud broke away and walked back trembling with anguish in her heart. She felt hurt, stupidly envious and vulnerable.

By the lakelet she bent and scooped a handful of water up and rubbed it on her face. The sting of the coldness cleansed her and she could see herself. She overwhelmingly alone, and she allowed tears to form in her eyes then screwed them back with her eyelids angry at the pity for herself. What right had she to be happy? Or sad? She passed the lake and touched the sides of the stone temple. On an impulse she stepped inside and sat on the cold stone floor shutting the door behind. All the secrets inside her poured out into those bare walls. The determination of her public actions collapsed into a private misery of doubt and confusion. She felt alone and helpless, a little girl lost, the stars cold and the world empty.

The temple began to glow softly and the walls gained a bluish sheen where there had been previously a dark blackness, Juud did not notice at first and when she did, she imagined it must be the light from the open doorway. But the door was closed, she

realised in dismay. The blue light in the temple swelled and as Juud watched the thinly engraved inscription began to stand outlined against the walls its letters illuminated by a golden gleam 'All dwell in the Roundrell'. The words stood distinct and bold, as if they were trying to say something to her, only she could not understand. Suddenly she realised it was not the temple that was full of light but that the outside moon of Wene was penetrating into it, as if through the focus of a lens. The walls had become transparent. She could make out the stars through them and for one extraordinary moment she felt transported by well-being and delight as if some mystery had been unveiled before her sceptical eyes, a mystery so plain and obvious that only a seer, or a child, could see it.

Then the light dulled, the walls blackened and the temple covered Juud in darkness again. Trembling she stepped outside.

All was as before. The moon lower perhaps, but the stars in place and the little temple standing innocently by the lake. The teasel trees were still talking to themselves.

Was it a dream? A strange one to be had awake, but if not, a vision. Of what? What was the secret? Already she had forgotten, or had it only been imagined? No there was more than imagination in this. She had entered the temple distressed and emerged calm, no longer fearing the future of her own weaknesses. Her life was worth its living again, and she walked slowly back across the glade she saw the night differently — the stars sharp, the universe full.

## V

It seemed only with a strong will was it possible to raise himself from sleep and rouse the others to wakefulness. The scent in the air hung even more thickly upon them as if wanting to lull them into everlasting sleep. Widsith resisted it, and struggled to pull the others from it. A cup of the lakes chill water thrown over them quickly sharpened their senses, though no-one thanked him for it.

All they could talk about were their dreams.

'Strange and curious, yet wonderful' was the Ducs opinion of his night 'I saw Thomas au Morad you know. In his study. I talked to him. A strange character, dressed in black, very old. Reminded me of Sollo actually, very odd. The room was cluttered with knick-knacks from his travels I suppose, and on the table I saw a copy of his prophetic book. I can detail even the binding now, a heavy red cloth fixed with brass studs on the edge, and a marvellous scroll pattern cut in the cloth.'

Tallotts dream had been rich with the wonder of some woman whose face slipped by his memory. Yet she was a princess, both in her status and her arts. He scratched his head and wondered whether he'd muddled Tysa with this vision. But he was sure not, because Tysa was beside this princess, angry and crying.

Tysa was silent on her dream. It had been a simple terrified vision of a huge oiled snake, its jaws seeking her out no matter where she turned. Juud was not sure whether she dreamed she had been awake, or had been awake. She told them of the temple, but

not of the hidden man. Ceans dream should have been of women, but instead it was of a monastery with strange cowled monks. It seemed full of evil. Then the dream ended

As they straggled out of the Dell of Azel, Cean took one last look back and caught Sollos eye who appeared to think the occasion needed a song, for he chanted over and over again.

‘Yers never can tell in the Dell of Azel,  
tether its false or tether its real’

## 'Men, they stinks'

*Sollo Wramm earns his keep as the travellers leave their dreams and and clamber up to the Raggerok. Widsith is geographically embarrassed but they see the Sard, the last real obstacle on their journey to Noll. A good hard chapter, full of incident.*

For two uneventful days they crossed the remainder of the Furrowdale Valley and camped overnight in a village at the foot of the Raggerok. The weather hardened with strong winds and flurries of sleety rain, almost in anticipation of their attempt on the col. Certainly Tallott sensed this, and remarked one evening on seeing distant forks of lightning high up on the range.

'That's Strom, sharpening his sword for us'.

The wayfarer suspected that they might be too late for the crossing, or rather the snow had come too early, but he hid his lack of confidence in a flurry of preparations. Each pair of boots came under his judgement and were repaired as necessary. Footcloths, leggings, tunics and under-cloths all came up for inspection. He got all of them to put away their linen shirts and substitute the heavy woollen vests of the region. Gloves were bought from the villagers as well as the common 'skulm' hat, a close fitting woollen cap with dangling earflaps. Tysa and Juud bought soft breast-bands and loin wraps.

'For a long day, possibly two, we will be in snow'.

Privately he hoped that he was not true. Two days would kill some of them, especially the Duc. When Tysa tried all these substantial garments, her fairly stubby figure ballooned into a veritable ball.

'We'll just roll her down wayfarer' was Tallotts jest, as Tysa waddled around the room.

Widsith was equally particular about food. They had ryet, and carried malep, a local sweet jam to spread on their flat cakes. Much more Widsith could not do. He had taken all reasonable precautions and could only hope the weather was kinder than it had been over the last few days. There was one piece of good news. A shepherd who rather tardily brought down his flock for the Wast Time reported heavy rains high up and much of the snow on the lower slopes was being washed into the streams. He also

offered the use of his hut for the party and told them where a cache of food was hidden should they need it. This was valuable. Widsith had pared down the quantity of food to a hungry minimum, six days, no more. If they could not cross in that time they would have to return.

‘What would we do then?’ asked Juud.

‘Wait over’.

As Juud stared up at the grey shrouded flanks they were soon to climb she could not help think that the prospect of a long wait in the Furrowdale Valley, with its friendly people and warm fireplaces, was infinitely more attractive than what they intended tomorrow.

They had barely set out from the village and started up the long winding track to the col when hustling clouds like baldybirds swept a black gusting rain upon their heads. Up the track they plodded, heads down and fingers numb as Strom gathered his tempestuous cohorts together, spiralling winds against their flapping cloaks and dancing pellets of hail on their muffled bodies. It was a miserable ascent. The wayfarer and Hull wandered around in the murk for an unpleasant wick whilst the others shivered by the track, trying to locate the shepherds hut with only the aid of the shepherds vague instructions. It was a good few curses later before Widsith picked up a narrow sheep trail that led to the hut door. The others squeezed into the comfortless place, and covered themselves up as best they could to keep warm, huddling together away from the slate walls that were chill to the touch. The wood was saturated and would not catch despite Hulls stubborn efforts. At least the hut was dry.

Tysa huddled closely to Tallott. The fact of their relationship was accepted by the others now with barely a glance. Yet now it was accepted she was not so confident it was true. Tallott was off-hand, friendly but casual, as he was before, but this was not as before. The azel night still flooded her memory with joy. She hugged the moments of it close to herself repeating its wonderment. Once, twice when she tried to express this rapture to Tallott he only nodded politely and smiled. If Tysa had been less enamoured she would have realised that Tallott did not share these feelings about that dell because he had nothing to say about it. It was a moment, then gone, and taking with it the irritation in his loins.

Overnight the wind battered the little hut and seemed to be shouting in Stroms thunderous voice. By first light it had lessened to a stiff breeze and later dropped almost completely away, leaving the blanket of mist to settle undisturbed on to the mountains. Widsith had hesitated at first. The wind was too strong but as it faded he began to think that the col was worthy of an attempt. Unfortunately when he finally decided to go it was the beginning of the forenoon, a late start for the difficulties they might have to face. This would be their hardest day so far. More than four hundred longmans to climb, then across the col trudging through heavy snow perhaps, then a sharp drop of another four hundred longmans to any shelter. He struggled inwardly with the decision then settled for continuing. They bundled their layers of clothes on and struggled to get their thickly clad arms through the bagger straps. Widsith put a piece of rye into every ones pocket.

‘Chew it if you start feeling weak’, then led them out and up into the clammy mist.

The track was plainly worn on the ground, more by sheep than men apparently, for the shepherd had told stories of having to chase his flock off the very col itself during the summer time.

‘They fancy the flowers up there, you know, and the foolish things nibble on right to the top. If there wur flowers on the peaks they’d go there, mark me.’

As they panted uphill the odd patch of snow appeared, sodden with the rain and dirty with the soil. Tysa bent down and tasted some on her lip. Slowly the patches extended and linked in with each other enclosing the tussock and rock in jig-saw pieces with ill-fitting edges. Eventually the snow covered the ground uniformly masking the trail and blurring the distinction between the land and the whitened sky. Widsith followed the track upwards by dint of the assembled cairns that stuck above the snow with their own little white hats on, trudging out the steps that the others mimicked. Through the opaque mist there was the drift of an occasional speck of snow, but so far their luck had held and it had not thickened. All sound was muffled in this strange world of whiteness.

The wayfarer and Hull took alternate turns stamping out tracks. It was not cold and Tysa almost felt too hot in her swaddle of clothes, and would have taken some off if the wayfarer had let them stop. Sweat trickled down her neck and then chilled uncomfortably against her back. She took off her gloves and brushed her hand into the cool snow. Not even in the terrible Wast Time of 148, when she was eight, had she seen such splendid snow. It would make a fine snowball.

At the head Widsith was trying to keep on the trail. He and Hull were spaced out with half a dozen longmans between them so that they stood a wider chance of picking up the cairns. This meant harder work for them, but the snow as yet was only ankle deep with an occasional knee-deep drift concealed in a hollow. Once he stopped and had a brief consultation with Sollo Wramm who knew this pass better than he. The traders brimmed hat carried a comical load of snow that could not have possibly accumulated from the snow falling. Of course Tysa was behind him.

The col itself was only a low point in the great range of the Raggerok, not so much a pass than a notch, and it would be simple to miss, and Widsith was concerned that he might do so. His memory was being tricked by the different shapes the snow formed over the summer cleared rocks. Even Sollo was not sure. If the mist had lifted a fraction they would see, but there was small chance of that. At least there was no cramping wind to fill in their footholes. The gradient steepened and the snow got heavier and deeper as Widsith beat a diagonal uphill line through it. It was a hard effort to stamp out the leading footprints and the mist was as impenetrable.

They had been moving all of the morning now and it could not be far to the col but which way?

‘Tis dark ees white  
darker than night’

Was Sollo Wramms judgement on their position. The angle of slope steepened and disconcerted the wayfarer. He did not remember this though it was possible the track zig-zagged where they had to climb straight up. Twice he had blundered in soft snow up to waist and had to find another way around. Soon, if this slope did not ease they

would have to turn back. This could not be right, surely?

To make progress at all now Widsith had to put out his hands for support plunge them in and kick up into the snow. As often as not the snow would crumble underneath his feet and leave him floundering in a deep trench of his own making. Hull was struggling and cursing in the soft snow and the strain was apparent on Tallotts face. Just as Widsith was convinced that they had taken the wrong route, the slope flattened and he felt the wisp of a wind on his cheek but a yorn wind, a wind blowing over the range from the other side. The flatter was squeezed between two cliffs and Hull plugged steps through sculpted wave-like snow compacted by the wind. Further on they found themselves walking on a hard base of old snow that barely marked the imprint of their feet. Somewhere in Widsiths brain a warning echo was sounded but he was too relieved to be on the col to listen to it.

Widsith waited for the others, letting Hull go on ahead. Hull gave a shout. He was standing on a downhill slope, they'd surmounted Capability Col.

It was that shout that nearly killed him.

Hulls voice resonated in the confines of the pass, reaching up and echoing broadly against the rock walls, bouncing off each for several seconds. Somewhere, high up, a layer of new snow felt the resonance and detached itself from its slippery underbase as it fell, and picked up other slabs and tumbled them into a fastly accelerating mass that hurled off the mountain wall and into the col with a fury of sound. Widsith heard the thunder, looked ahead and saw Hull standing alone on the pass and realised in a painful moment what his dulled mind had been urging upon him previously. New snow on old!

The soft powder of this snowfall would not grip on the old compacted snow which had survived the Croppen and was now little more than ice. Hulls voice had been the trigger and had unleashed a white storm upon his head. The col exploded in fine particles of snow as the avalanche impacted on the pass and spent its force against the opposite wall. Widsith watched paralysed as the snow-cloud settled and he could see a broken tumble of avalanche debris where Hull had only a moment before been standing and waving. He lurched towards the spot at a run, Tallott breathing harshly at his side. They clambered onto the debris but saw at a glance that it was hope-less. Where would they begin to look? Here, where Hull was standing or further back against the opposite wall? Would he not be pushed against that? And what were they to look with? They had no poles, no shovels, only their hands...

The others stumbled up to join them. Cean was white faced and stared aimlessly around him.

'What should we do?' he shouted at last 'dig?'

Widsith had never felt so hopeless. Where would they dig?

Is this how it would end, a corpse in a frozen wasteland? He looked helplessly at the others and slowly shook his head. To dig for Hull they would risk themselves. There was more soft snow up high. If they made more sound would they generate another avalanche? Did they have the strength anyway? And they still had a hard descent, was not this not what he was paid to do? Make the decision that saved their lives but lost him his friend...

Widsith rubbed his hands slowly and recalled his fathers often repeated words. It was like a golden rule: 'you must leave behind everything but your duty'.

Everything.

Sollo tugged at the wayfarers sleeve.

'Scuse, but if I looks I might find,  
but you've gots to keep way back behind.

It don'ts work so well with others  
for Hull is deeps in smothers.

Widsith looked at him uncomprehendingly.

'I'll sniff 'im out.

Like a dog with a snout.

The trader placed a finger to his nose as if to make the point clearer. Widsith could hardly believe this.

'You think you can Sollo?'

The trader nodded.

'Been on me own toos long.

I can smell 'em, pooh they pong.  
just like dogs and cats and mountain minks  
Men, they stinks'.

Widsith was not sure, if it took too long? Sollo read his thoughts.

'Eeed don't takes long.

But quicks, be gone'.

Widsith guided the others off the avalanche debris and they huddled in a group some distance away, watching Sollo Wramm scuttle about the snow, his cloak black in the white.

'Do you think this I'll work? Shouldn't we go. We could get killed here'.

Tallott was disbelieving. Widsith wondered, but he owed a debt to his friend. He could not leave the mountain without trying. Juud was numb, but whether from the cold or the fear she was not sure. Tysa huddled into Tallott. The Duc stared at the man acting liking a dog.

The trader went doubled over the snow and hobbled around the debris making his way further and further to the opposite side. Once there, he got down on his hands and knees and literally crawled over the snow like a clumsy dog. Suddenly he stopped, and thrust his head right into the snow, then jumped up and waved. The others ran and stumbled to him, Cean got there first.

'Ees down here, nots so deep

Certain of having a little sleep'

This was Sollos opinion. Quickly they clawed at the snow with their hands, lifting out great lumps where the snow had compacted, or shovelling it out between their legs. Cean was bent over and scraping like a madman. He screamed.

‘A hand!’

Then an arm, and it moved. They brushed the snow off the top of Hulls head and he twisted it free and grinned up at them. It still look some work to get the giant out, so firmly was he pressed in, but Hull made the last effort himself and with a huge wrench broke free of the clutching snow and jumped up beside them, his bagger still attached to his back. Tysa gave old Sollo a hug and Widsith punched Hull with his fist and then hugged him, the first emotion that Juud had ever seen him.

They stood for a while basking in the sunshine of their relief but the cold soon began to tease its way into their bones and Tallott suggested they move on. They picked up their baggers and with the comfort of Hull striding figure beside them set off downhill. Amazingly, Hull was untouched by the force of the avalanche. It had whisked him off like a flower and tucked him into a vacuum of silence where he had waited confidently for the wayfarer rescue him. He had no doubts at all of being saved.

The descent was steep and it was tempting to let yourself go and slide down but Widsith warned against it. There were bluffs on this side. He also told them to keep quiet. One avalanche was excitement enough.

As they plunged down Widsith quickly began to feel uneasy. The angle had tilted even more sharply, then he was standing on a line of rocks that marked the sudden edge of a sheer cliff. He warned the others to approach carefully. He turned right and followed along the bluff edge keeping well back from the drop. The wayfarer found this bluff disturbing. He pictured in his mind his map but he could not remember such a line of cliffs. He talked to Sollo again, but this time the trader was not of any help. The bluff continued, sometimes the line of rocks descended sometimes it scrambled up. A half-wick passed and still no way down had been discovered. Widsith began to wonder if he should have turned breeeways and followed the bluffs in the other direction. This cursed mist! If it lifted for a minute they would be able to fix their position. What wybs was it?

Widsith waited until the others caught up and checked each person in turn. Tallot was fine, the Duc tired but not cold, Juud much the same, perhaps chilled on the hands. He rubbed them vigorously. Tysa swore she was too hot! Cean was quiet, his feet were cold but his hands warm. He did not need to bother with Hull or Sollo. He knew Hulls strength and Sollo was probably indestructable. They chewed into some ryet and moved on. What skaw wind there had been had disappeared lower down. Nothing was stirring, only these seven forms blackened against the snow by the pervading whiteness, plundering the smooth surfaces with a ragged line of footprints.

Still no gap in the bluffs! If the pass was here they should have reached it by now. No, this was wrong, they had to turn back. There should have been a passage through the bluffs by now. Plainly it was in the other direction. He explained this briefly to the others. They looked at him with tired eyes and obediently retraced their steps. They had not returned very far when Widsith stopped in his tracks, so abruptly that Hull bumped into him,

‘Sollo’ he called out sharply. A thought had occurred to him, that stabbed an evil suspicion in his heart. The trader came back and peered into eyes as the wayfarer explained. The trader nodded.

'Eees, that's right wayfarer  
For wheres the stones on the trail eh?  
By stones Sollo meant cairns.

'What's going on now?' this was Tallot coming back, exasperated by yet another delay and feeling a cold numbness in his feet. He was upset by the news.

'Not the pass? Then what was it?'

One of those notches in the ridge, they crossed the wrong pass, probably missed the trail in the snow and mist. Widsith was certain he was right. This was a gloomy prospect, for it was too late to go back, and what shelter was there here in this wasteland of white?

'Sollo, your map'.

Widsith knew there was nothing of this bluff marked on his map, but there was a chance that such a bold feature might be on Sollos. With clumsy fingers the trader ferreted around in his bagger and brought out the tatty parchment. The others, anxious and cold, gathered around. Cean had lost the feeling in his toes but said nothing about it. He was getting scared, and the Duc had said nothing for a while. He was looking like death in this cold. As Sollo unfolded the map Widsith saw at a glance and with a muttered 'yes' of delight, that the cliff was indicated. The map instantly revealed their mistake. They had climbed up too soon and gone over a false pass to the breeways of Capability Col. Widsith congratulated his instinct that made him turn right. If they kept on above the line of bluffs they should reach a flatter slope that led off the true col.

'Come on. It's getting cold'.

They needed no prompting. Not far beyond the last footprints at the point they had turned around the slope did start to ease and Widsith plunged joyfully downhill taking a long diagonal that should cut him across the trail of the Ancient Way. Hull shouted mindless of any dangers and for Widsiths pleasure brushed off the top of a cairn. Good!

Once back on the Ancient Way, Widsith did not want to lose it. Patiently, with Hull and Sollo either side at a distance, they followed the wind-ing course of the track down. The snow was thicker here and it often took several bitwicks to find the cairns. For the others not occupied in this task, the descent was tedious and numbing. Tysa had lost her 'hotness' and just wanted to get below the snow, and the Duc was shivering badly, but the wayfarer would not be hurried. It was better to lose a finger than a life. With painful caution they descended the interminably blank slopes, gradually finding the snow shallower underfoot, and here and there the odd bare rock. The mist began to thin and as they dropped a further few longmans they emerged from underneath the cloud and looked down upon the dry arid plain of the Sard, burnt yellow against the grey circle of mountains.

From the snowline the track went a long way to the weneways into a small scrub-covered basin, at the back of which there was a cave used by many generations of travellers and progressively hollowed out till it could hold twenty or so people, but not in comfort. It was a dreary place, with a dripping roof and a constant wind funneling

into its dark space. By erecting the canopy across the entrance some of this wind was kept out and a passable shelter arranged. Only when this was done and Hull and Tallott had gone off to strip wood from the shrubs did Cean, who had been unusually quiet, mention that his feet had no feeling.

Hastily Widsith pulled off Ceans boots and unwrapped the foot-cloths. The colour was drained from his feet and they were dead to touch. He got Tysa and Juud to wrap dry cloths around Ceans feet and rub them briskly to get back the circulation, then once the fire was crackling, sat Cean close to it and poured hot malep into his throat. Only after a half wick did some twinge of feeling return to Ceans feet and after a full wick he was beginning to scream. Tallott gave him a leather strap to bite into and within an wick it was shredded.

They stayed three days.

Ceans feet regained their feeling, but had swollen grotesquely and he could only manage a hobble around the cave. So they stayed in their comfortless hole, keeping the fire alive, sipping the warm malep and gazing down onto the dusty plateau that was their destination. Most of the time it rained, for the cave lay at the very edge of the cloud line. Sometimes the cloud would droop over them, concealing even the sides of the basin from view at other times it lifted sufficiently for a pale sun to litter the cave entrance. Tallott stoically sat in it and called this sunbathing. For much of the day it was possible to look over the Sard and pick the events of the landscape.

As the Duc explained the prevailing winds were skawly, and being forced to cross the two great ranges there was little liquid in them for the Sard. All around the mountains stood cracked and parched in the heat, their harsh outlines stumbling down to the plateau. Only a smudge of green was visible, as a low dip on the Cif Mountains. As they watched, sometimes huge dust storms boiled over parts of the plain then dispersed as mysteriously as they had erupted. The Duc said it was the confines of the plateau, and the heat that forced these unexpected furies.

'It must be a dreadful place the Sard. A dusty desert' said the Duc.

'And we have to cross it' added Widsith humourlessly.

Tallott shook his head soulfully.

'Yer know wayafarer? I had no bloody idea of what we was getting into did I? No bloody idea at all'.

One evensun, as the sun deepened the shadows on the plateau, Juud was seated on a rock overlooking the sweep of night across the end of day. Up here the whole of their intended route was before her, like a three dimensional map. The wayfarer joined her and sat in silence for a while before speaking.

'You see those three etched lines on the plateau. Those are the canyons that carry the water from the Sard out through the Great Gorge and onto the Granry. We have to cross all three, but that should not be hard. There is not much water in them, only in Sprig after the snow-melt'.

He pointed you see the farthest mountains, that curled right around enclosing the Sard.

'Those are the Cif'.

Juud did not catch the word and repeated it.

‘Say the ‘c’ as ‘s’. We cannot see the Great Gorge, but it is that which divides the Cif from the Raggerok, and incidentally stops us from going that way.’

‘You have seen the Great Gorge?’

‘Yes. Massive, bigger than the Rume Gap. Impenetrable. You could pile three cities like Swaleton one on top of the other and the highest still would not strike above the sides of the gorge. But round from there, you see, that low point. It’s covered in cloud, and it drizzled most of the year there. It looks green, well it is. It’s a pass, the Sink it’s called, and that is the way to Noll. It’s the only other way into and out of the Sard’.

Widsith stopped speaking and stared yorn, as if to see beyond the Cif Mountains, and onto the Granry. Juud was warmed by his unexpected loquaciousness, and she wanted to encourage the conversation.

‘How long will that take, to get to Noll?’

‘From here?’ Widsith thought ‘twenty days, it depends on us, and the weather’.

‘And Ceans foot’ Juud added, staring at the pit of darkness that was now the Sard, as Breet fled to all but the highest peaks. After a long silence she asked, greatly daring.

‘What is beyond the Cif Mountains wayfarer? I mean further than even the Granry?’

He paused before replying.

‘I do not know, although, once, when I was on a peak of the Raggerok’ and Juud looked at him, then followed his eyes out over the shadowed Sard ‘I saw a swelling of other hills, broken and running in all directions, brown and green they looked, like a soiled sheet, but further than that was a flat line, right on the horizon, flat but restless, like it was alive, and it was tinged grey or even blue. Then, I did not know what it was, but an old wayfarer told me what I had seen, what very few in these kingdoms ever do. The sea’.

## A Whispering of Air

*Love is present as they cross the arid Sard and try to avoid the apocalyptic men known as the Righteous. Widsith shows much of his old cunning and everyone has a bath, except Sollo.*

As Tysa loved, and Tallott followed so the others became aware of a separating force (for love is a selfish thing) that kept the two apart from the others. Even if Tallott did not like this, the strength of Tysas love was enough for both of them, and as he tried to pull away, her love became more intense and desperate for his indifference. This became an infection, spreading from one to another, as if the very breath of a loving couple were touched with some germ that was gulped in by the people surrounding them and imbued the disease of wanting. And this sort of love can irritate, yet impell a need that was not there before. Cean felt pulled by love. With or without Tallotts companionship he might have loved anyway, he was young and burning inside, and under the disturbing spell woven by Tysas passion for another man. If Tysa had suddenly been removed Cean would have recovered his balance and got on with the happy business of enjoying this adventure, but now his soul was infected by another yearning. Panged by the memory of that women in Swaleton and his own loneliness, he moved closer to Juud for the simplest of reasons that she was the only possible objection of his affections. He could admire the wayfarer, but only love Juud.

Juud too, against her will had been hollowed out with that lonely empty feeling that it seems only love can fill. She saw her own foolishness, but reason could not ignore what the heart demanded. She noted Ceans interest, yet had not encouraged him. So far she did not understand herself to trust letting go and Cean was too young even to think he had a self that could be judged. Juud realised better than Cean that they were trying to fill the vacuum of their own hearts with the convenience of someone elses. It was not love so much, as the bandage over the wound of loneliness.

On the fourth morning Ceans foot was pronounced by Sollo Wramm to be healed sufficient to be walked upon. They shared some of his load amongst themselves (with Ceans protests) but gave it back later in the day when it was evident he was quite able to carry it himself. As a precaution Widsith went slower than usual and took more rests. According to the Ducs journal they were moving into the Sard on the thirty-eight of

Wast Time. They had been travelling almost fifty days.

The Ancient Way descended stepped terraces of broken rock and stunted bushes, but lower, even these remnants of vegetation disappeared and the parched landscape of the Sard rose to meet them. Grasses and shy herb flowers grew almost alone on the plain, though in the watercourses miserable trees indicated that not so far below the surface of gravel and dust was precious water. In their first camp Sollo demonstrated the knack of reaching this clear blood of the land. He selected a sandy hollow in a watercourse, close to a clump of bushes and dug a wide shallow pit past the light soil till he reached a layer of gravel. Here he dug a small circle into the stones about five or six thrums deep and covered the entire pit with one of the canopies.

‘If yer leaves it open to the sky,  
the airy winds blow it dry’

In not much less than an hour the little stone hole had filled with fresh water which Sollo poured into water-skins. A pit like this would only last three or four emptyings, then another had to be dug. They had only three water-skins and Widsith could foresee some thirsty throats on this dry plateau. But Sollo could sniff out water like a fly to dung. In his opinion most of the apparently dry watercourses had plentiful water underneath, it was just a matter of getting at it. He certainly had the trick. The wayfarers attempts resulted in a good many holes but little water.

Ees not alwus wheres yer think it’ll be  
Said Sollo sympathetically.

Some¬times bys a bush, sometimes bys a tree

Juud was rather surprised at the wayfarers difficulty. She had imagined that he would be able to do everything with ease and it was a shock to see him make human mistakes. The thought was aroused in her mind that without Sollos knowledge they would have difficulty in getting across the Sard.

‘I have a map with some of the water-holes on. With planning we would have got across, but Solos is more detailed, and he lived here for a time, with the Hollerwalls’.

‘But you have been here?’

‘Once, with my father, when I was young. I know the Raggerok and the Cif Mountains but here, on the plain, somehow we never came back. Always so dry, so barren’.

They were talking by the flare of their first camp fire on the Sard. The others had retired except for Sollo, who hunched close to the flames like a wizened gnome. The sky was still heavy with cloud moving cumberously skaw. A light wind sometimes roused the fire, then mischievously let it die, till it puffed in from a different direction.

‘The Hollerwalls, they live in the canyons?’

‘Yes, the third. They probably lived in others once too, but gone now, long vanished.’

Sollo rocked his body back and forth apparently in agreement with the wayfarer but not saying anything.

‘A strange place to live’.

‘In a canyon? There is water there, and shelter from the terrible wind’.

Juud remembered those storms of dust and imagined what it would be like to be met with one.

‘My father said that the ‘Sard’ is an old word for ‘wind’.

Sollo looked up and spoke.

‘Eee Miss, its a person herself, a God Sardee

The whining howling wind that never lets yer be’

His voice was pitched higher, and he was no longer talking to Juud but to the air itself.

‘Sardee, keep thus word

and never lets thys voice be heard

as yers will not be forgotten

till the crumble of mens bones and fleshy corrupts rotten

Sardee’, and here his voice went higher into a sing-song that the slight wind seemed to pick up and lift

‘Lets us cross O Sardee to yers pleasure

freed froms yer wrath and we’ll give yers measure

and praise eee till ours bodies turn to stone

O Sardee, O Sardee, promise to leave us alone’

Sollos voice carried over the plain and died, like a wind in itself. Where they were sitting the wind was still for a moment and then brushed in again almost as if it had stopped to listen to the prayer sung in its praise. Sollo hunched into himself again, his hat pulled low over his head the flames hardly lighting the black cloak pulled around him. For a moment Juud imagined him to be not of this world at all but a shadow appeared from the underworld and ready to slip away once the embers had burned themselves out.

In the morning they were greeted by a cold wind that bent the grass over and flurried dust on their faces and clothes. The dust was insidious. No matter how well the face was wrapped, the grains would always get through and rub against the eyes or enter the mouth leaving it dry and voiceless after a few wicks travel. What had been unexpected for the Duc was the coldness of the wind. It blew right off the mountains, practically from the Raggerok itself. It chilled any bare piece of skin, leaving it cracked and dry. The bite of cold was more cruel than the dust. Tysa was irritated by it.

‘It wasn’t this cold on the col and we were deep in snow!’ she said grumpily, and slapped her hands together.

‘Its Sardee Miss, wicked ol’ Sardee

Eee don’t like travellers who are tardy’

Not ‘im,

he’s grim’.

Thus was Sollos explanation.

Juud shivered as they plodded over the stony plateau, and tried to wash the dusty grime from her face. Each day brought the same weary featureless trudge, and there

was little change of scenery in the imperceptible shift of the distant mountains. They were supposed to be getting closer, but as far as Juud could tell they could equally be getting further away. The fashion of route-finding was to take a bearing of a particular mountain in the distance and aim for that. Occasionally an old cairn might be stumbled upon but there was little else to indicate the correct way. If the cloud ceiling was low and the mountains obscured then navigation was a matter of chance and experience. On more than one occasion Widsith blessed the fate that put Sollo Wramm across their way. He seemed to be able to sniff his way across the Sard.

The wind picked up in the night and blew fiercely against the canopies, until by morning each sleeper was entombed in a heavy crust of sand. On this, the third day, they came abruptly to the brink of a canyon. From what before had been a dull plain of dead grass and stones, was suddenly a huge chasm, two hundred longmans deep and a half league across. It was all the more shocking because the eye was tricked into believing that the plain was unbroken, and then a few steps later the earth fell away in a great gash cut across the plain. If you had been day-dreaming your dreams would have been ended curtly.

A small stream trickled down the canyon bed, dwarfed by the containing walls, but enticing. Lining the banks were sturdy shrubs and small trees. After the greys and brittle yellows of the plain this ribbon of green, with a living sparkle of clear water looked alluring. Their eyes feasted on the spectacle.

‘Can we get down?’ asked Tysa eagerly.

The thought of a swim and wash made her skin itch. Widsith nodded, and watched Sollo wander off some hundred longmans following the edge of the cliff. He gave a wave and the others hurried to join him. Incised into the bluff was a spiralling line of steps, each one chiselled out of the soft rock to make a cunning pathway down to the canyon. At one point the rock had slipped and a leap of a longman was required, but that accomplished, they rushed down to the canyon bed and the beckoning stream. It was the first running water they had seen since the Furrowdale Valley. The girls went off downstream to bathe whilst the men washed beside a clump of trees that had the worn beaten floor of a much used campsite. Only Sollo declined the temptations of the clean water and sat by himself singing a rime.

‘Perhaps we should throw him in?’ suggested Tallott. Widsith shook his head warningly.

‘It would take more than us to do it’ he said as he rubbed a gritty piece of skin. Cean agreed.

‘He’s a strong one. You know one day I saw him pick up a tree log and carry it to the fire place as a seat. Carry it, over his shoulder, like a stick. I think he’s as strong as you Hull’ Widsith interpreted this remark and then translated back.

‘Only his smell’.

The others laughed and splashed each other gleefully in the stream like schoolboys playing hookey.

‘I think I have become inured to Mr Wramms smell now’ commented the Duc as he dried his thin body on his shirt ‘I hardly notice it’.

‘Innured, that means used to eh Duc? Well, I suppose none of us smells much like violets these days, though this lovely stuff will make a difference’.

He scooped up a handful of water and let it fall as a trickle onto his strong chest.

‘Korruk is the name the Hollerwalls give to water. It is a God, the most sacred one in their eyes’ remarked the Duc.

Cean stuck his head under the stream, and tossed it out, water spraying from his hair.

‘A God eh’ said Tallott ‘well if I’d worship anything in this dust hole it’ll be water, eh wayfarer?’

Widsith smiled. The Duc was slightly inaccurate. There was a God more sacred than Korruk.

The women came back scrubbed and gleaming with their hair raised up, like their spirits. There was no wind here, and no continual film of dust scratching at their skin like an irritating insect.

‘A pity we can’t stay a day’ hinted Tysa to Widsith hopefully, but the wayfarer would have none of that. To encourage her though he said there were two more canyons to cross and the last had a river in it, and pools you could swim in.

‘How far is that?’

‘Five, six days off. Four if we are quick’.

Tysa felt depressed. She found the Sard a desperate place, cracked apart by sun and wind till it was as wrinkled like an old woman’s skin. A hopeless place the Duc had said, with so little life, a place not to live but to be condemned, which he said is what happened to the Righteous... but Tysa had wrapped her eyes with cloth to keep out the dust and did not hear the Duc’s words. Her head went down and she plodded, following the large footprints of her man across the desert.

At a muddy waterhole a few leagues from the first canyon, a mess of new hoofprints were found. Hull squatted low over the ground and sorted out the confusion and told in his twittering language what he found.

‘He says there were twenty-five horsemen going yorn. Very fresh. Made probably yesterday. They may have camped here last night’.

‘Horse-warriors eh wayfarer?’ said Tallott.

‘Yes’.

There was nothing they could do so they continued, following virtually in the track of the hoofprints with the only consolation being that the horses could outstrip a walking man by many leagues an hour so that they would be well ahead by now. It was gloomy enough knowing that they were about. They would stand no chance against them, and it looked as if these riders were rather disconcertingly going in exactly the same direction as themselves.

The Duc was interested and came up alongside Widsith.

‘According to Morad the Hollerwalls do not possess horses wayfarer, so who are these people?’

Widsith nodded absently. His eyes flicking around the horizon.

'It's not in Morad?'

'He does talk about a group of horsed-warriors, priests, with a strange name, the Righteous. It is said that Swivven the Strong exiled them to the Sard, though I am surprised they still exist'.

Givtheem had caught up with them.

'The Righteous? Who the Strom are they?'

The Duc was stroking his face thoughtfully.

'They are horse-warriors originally, now nomads, doomed to roam the Sard and hunt wild game, and people'.

Widsith said grimly.

'You will find the Hollwerwalls protect themselves well. It's a good thing we have Sollo here, he knows them well'.

'Those Righteous blokes must 'ave been bad boys for Swivven to get rid of them. Did he hope they'd die in the Sard?' asked Givtheem.

'Certainly Givtheem. Tradition says they had some sort of disease, a plague, or illness, or that might be a metaphor for a diseased faith. I must say the passage in Morad is brief and rather unclear. Some say they worshipped Wyrd'.

'Charming fellows, I trust we do not meet them wayfarer?'

Widsith shrugged, trust had little to do with it.

'They'd cut us to pieces' said Givtheem, chomping bluntly on a grass stalk and watching the far skittish swirls of dust.

And the Duc asked a question as much to himself as the others.

'The Sard is such an unprofitable place, fiercely hot in Croppen, bitterly cold at Wast Time. I wonder why they don't leave? What keeps them here?'

As no one answered his question he fell back.

The long wicks passed, plodding over the hot dust and stones of the desert. A few gullies made for little interest and Sollo found water at on spot, but Widsith pressed on hard after lunch.

In the late aftersun Juud walked with the wayfarer for a while and the topic of the Righteous came around, inevitably, for they were following the hoofprints again.

'I wonder why Swivven exiled them? Was he afraid?'

'Perhaps, although I fancy Swivven was afraid of very little' replied Widsith

Something had caught the wayfarers eye. He added.

'They had quite a reputation. They took their deeds from the song-stories in The Articles, and you know what some of those songs are like.'

There was a faint smudge on the horizon.

'And they were priests too? Weren't they supposed to be good?'

Juud vaguely remembered the song-stories now. They all seemed to have death and foreboding in them somewhere.

'Sometimes they're the worst' muttered the wayfarer.

Over there, ten leagues distance a gathering cloud. Was it a thunderstorm, or a company of horsemen? Juud persisted.

‘But why did they stay here?’

Widsith did not answer, his attention distracted. No, that smudge was too purposeful and local, and it was moving to a point that would intercept theirs. He looked around, and saw to their left a low hollow, perhaps an old dried up waterhole.

‘Come, quick!’ he shouted, and pushed the others into the sandy pit. Tallott and Tysa were last, as they usually trailed behind the others. Tallott could not understand why they were cowering in a hole, but supposed the wayfarer had good reason.

‘Look ye at the cloud  
that moves not so proud’

Sollo Wramm said to Tysa’s anxious question.

‘Eh Sollo?’ She screwed her eyes forward, but Tallott realised soon enough.

‘Righteous?’

Widsith shrugged. He was beginning to wonder if he had been tricked by the dust on the plain for now he could see nothing. The dust was gone. Had Hull seen it? He had better eyes than most. They waited a wick in the hollow, unpleasantly cold and thirsty. Sollo tried his usual trick of digging for water, but for once failed.

‘Are you sure it was horsemen?’ Tallott queried. He thought his eyes were sharp enough and he had seen nothing. ‘Couldn’t be one of those whirlwind things could it?’

Another half wick passed and still nothing was seen. Then Sollo gave a grunted whisper.

‘Sards horses  
over in watercourses’

There they were, quite visible now, twenty or so horsemen, the same group probably as had left the hoofprint trail. They must have stopped for a while in a hollow themselves. Sollo pulled out his map.

‘Eeee wayfarer  
there’s waters over there

‘What are they up to Sollo’ Tallott had seen them now and begun to appreciate the danger in their position. Ducks on the water could not be more exposed.

Sollo sat back in the hollow and ruminated, plucking one of his bones from his hat and sucking at it meditatively. Widsith kept watch. He knew that the Righteous tended to move in cycles of grazing, following the Sprig snowmelt and Croppen rain, but they travelled as a body, men, women, children and gaggle of beasts behind. But this was no such body. They were moving too quickly and erratically, as if they were looking for something. It could be a hunt, and promised a good feast afterwards. Then again they could be looking for them. They moved like a war party, and they only had to trot a few leagues this way. Just have the slightest intuition that they might be here, and there would be little mercy. No cover. No hope.

Widsith made himself stop thinking these thoughts. However, for once Sardee was on their side, and blew from the horsemen to them

‘Sards ar’ here  
to catch the deer  
feast and tell  
the Wast Time well’  
This was Sollos opinion.  
‘Deer?’

Tallott was sceptical of the theory. Still the old buzzard had lived here.

‘How far are we away from the canyon Sollo?’ asked the wayfarer. This encouraged another chicken bone to be drawn out from under the hat band and chewed upon.

‘Double days,  
there aways’

‘Does that mean two?’ asked Tallott

Sollo nodded and snapped a bone crisply. He must have been reading the wayfarers thoughts.

‘Nows when the clouds rumble  
darks and shades make the horse stumble’

It was steadily overcast and did not look remotely like clearing before dusk. Tallott looked at the wayfarer with a sigh.

‘I think I know what you’re thinking wayfarer.’

At darkness they left their hollow and travelled directly to the water hole where the Sards had stopped. During the aftersun they had traced the flurry of dust far to the breezeways, to Widsiths relief. The night was not dark as to be supposed, and it was quite possible to walk without too much tripping and cursing. They approached the water hole circumspectly, in case some of the horse-riders had remained behind, but all was bare except for the churned up soil and fresh horse dung. The water was fouled somewhat but they drank what they could stomach, rested and proceeded on. Wayfarer and Sollo stayed behind taking great care to erase all their footprints leading to and away from the waterhold. To leave them invited interest from the Righteous should they return.

Through the long darkness they went, Sollo Wramm steering by the direction of his instinct. Sight was limited to half a league at most and the clouds guarded the stars jealously. With masterly accuracy the trader delivered the party safe and well to an obscure water course, well-hidden from even the tall back of a horse. Here they fretted through a cool day, then repeated their overnight trick to the sheer sides of another great canyon, its gulf blackened in darkness but Tysa was sure she could hear the musical sound of water. Sollo found a staircase down, but for Tysa it must have been the wind she heard for the canyon was dry and lifeless. Sollo sniffed the air and reckoned there was water here, but no one had the patience to find it that night.

Morning came after a wicks sleep.

With it came the wind, gusting into the canyon and whirling the dust purple as it sifted up and was tinged by the dawn.

Daylight revealed a macabre sight. Only a few longmans from where they had slept were the bodies of two people. Two women Widsith judged, from their clothes and hair. The dry wind had preserved their skin well, though had shrunk it onto the bones so that the clear outlines of the skeleton pressed against the tight, glazed flesh. Tysa looked, and turned away and vomited. Sollo sniffed at the bodies cautiously.

‘Womenfolk not verst,  
in slaking thirst.’

They looked at the corpses with some pity. They had probably died looking for water, perhaps already weak?

‘Do yer think the horsemen were looking for ‘em?’ wondered Tallott aloud.

No one answered and they buried the women grimly, piling stones on top of the mounds so that Sardee would not undo their work. Widsith sent Hull and Sollo to dig a pit for water and sent Cean up one side of the scarp and Tallott up the other to keep watch over the plain.

The wind bellowed on the plain with no obstacle to retard it, great storms of dust were being raised. All through the day everyone took turns at watching always two at a time, for Widsith was taking no chances of the horse-warriors stealing up and having the luxury of studying them. Those off duty tried to sleep, but the dust would penetrate the thickest blankets and scratch against the skin. There was no escaping it. It was almost a relief to have darkness fold over them again, though the presence of the horsemen itched almost as much as the dust and it was unnerving knowing they were present but unseen.

It was futile to travel that night for dust storms had been whipped up on the plain and were scouring the ground with an extraordinary violence. The grass just accepted it and leaned away, but men would have fought and struggled and been blown back for their effort. Everyone needed a solid nights sleep and Cean had discovered a dry side-gulch that rebuffed the wind and proved more congenial. It was also better concealed and nearly everyone slept a little. That day saw the wind spend its fury and move elsewhere leaving a whispering of air behind and curious ‘holes’ in the sand where the violent contortions of the Sardee had twisted and tried to bore like a screw into the ground. Cean had mistaken these for old water pits until Sollo explained, and he was shocked that the wind could do such things. Some of the ‘holes’ were several feet deep, drilled through layers of sand and gravel.

That night was a short one, only ten leagues to a large swampy dell in the middle of a wide watercourse. Sollo called this marshy place a spring though only mud was visible, and had a breed of mosquito that snapped at them through the night. Tysa felt the attention of the mosquitoes too much and was up before dawn and so witnessed one of the beauties of the Sard, the exquisite changing colours of a clear morning.

Purples then oranges, firing the flat plain surfaces till the sun tipped over the Cif Mountains and washed the hues wene ways. The surrounding mountains were never better displayed, with bold soldierly peaks marching in circles about the plain each bearing a snowy helmet that gleamed like silver in the polished day. Five leagues further and

they stood on the edge of the vast Canyon of Tapestries, named for the coloured strata of rock that lined the canyon like so many threads layed side by side in preparedness for weaving, but never used. A veritable river glowed in the deep floored valley and a pastureland of shrubs and trees, houses, and fields could be seen — for this was the home of the Hollerwalls.

## Some Sort of Drama?

*We meet the Hollerwalls, another of the forgotten Past Peoples and learn a good deal of their customs and habitation. Thethe shows them around but the Duke is struggling to remember things that it might have been wiser for him to forget. A shortish chapter, getting darker.*

As they waited for Sollo Wramm to return they had the leisure to study the village more carefully. This canyon was the largest of the three with sides a good eighty long-mans plunging to a wide flat bottom that was covered in a patchwork of manicured fields. Small irrigation ditches fed off from the river and crept to the canyon walls feeding its allotment of the precious water. Stone fences divided the fields and people could be seen working by them. Further down the valley the carpet of tended fields ended in an abrupt line beyond which was only dusty soil and the typical straggling shrubs that occupied the other canyons. The sharpness of the contrast was caused by a high wall that spanned the width of the canyon in a formidable artificial barrier. On the far side of that the water of the river had been directed into a large ditch that acted as a moat, establishing the wall as an even more difficult obstacle.

Up valley was the village itself, hemmed into the sides of the canyon walls with a hundred black-eyed windows and doors with staircases chiselled up and down between them. On the canyon floor some substantial box-like houses had been built in the natural yellow stone of the canyon. So the impression was gained that the grander homes were at the base of the cliff with the meaner accommodation burrowed directly into the rock. This was quite mistaken as they were later to find out. The large buildings were the ceremonial halls and public meeting houses of the village, and everyone inhabited the hole dwellings where it was cooler in Croppen and warmer in Wast Time.

Between the village and the fields was a shell-like amphitheatre, hewn out of the floor of the canyon in a series of arc steps, a beautiful thing from this height. In the centre of this was a raised platform with a dark hole in it which Juud took to be a well. It looked a pleasant place, perhaps where the Hollerwalls held some sort of drama? She could imagine that a performance at dusk with the sun striking the cliffs and terraces in bold and black angles would be a drama in itself.

The entire village had a clean and tidy appearance. The specks of people moving

about purposely as individuals in a living community. A band of falling water, fifty longmans upstream of the village, poured over a jutting shelf in the rock and cascaded to a deep pool below. From here the water looked rich and turquoise and she could see people, children probably, splashing about in it. She longed to join them.

They had to wait some time for Sollos return. When he did he was accompanied by a short figure with a pleasant easy step and wearing a simple tunic that fell to his knees. There were sandals on his feet.

‘Eee, this is Thethe  
ees son of chieftee’

The youth smiled gracefully and spoke something to Sollo.

‘Says come down  
withs him to ground.

Widsith spoke directly to Thethe who grinned in surprise and broke into a voluble speech till the wayfarer motioned him to slow down. It turned out that Hollerwalls spoke a similar language to the Lowleahs, so much so, that with attention Widsith could understand most of what was said and fill in with his imagination what he could not.

Thethe led them along the cliffside to a flight of steps that careened down the flanks of the rock wall in a dizzy switchback. At one point the ledge on which they walked narrowed to a width of one man and squeezed between two pillars behind which there stood two men of the Hollerwall on guard. They carried a sharp-pointed spear in their hands and a long curving dagger at their waist. This was a natural strong point in the track as it obliged any attacker to proceed one at a time through the gap. From the sight of those spears it looked a risky undertaking. There were further strong points on the way down, a bridge of woven branches that could be removed and a series of steps that led sideways to embrasures where spears could be japped through, two men stood guard here as well, and Tallott remarked on it.

‘This is for the Righteous I take it?’

Widsith questioned Thethe as they descended.

It transpired that despite the green looking fields, this year had been a poor one for the crops and the Hollerwalls had less food than usual. Traditionally the Righteous bought some of their crop off them, but this year they did not have enough to sell and the nomads were angry, for of course it would be a lean outlook for them through Wast Time. So the Hollerwalls were taking precautions against the Righteous less they be tempted to raid the village.

By now they had arrived at the foot of the canyon and were skirting the amphitheatre. Closer up it was even more of a marvel, precisely cut out of the bedrock and fashioned so regularly that it looked more like a sculpture than a functional part of the village. In the front of the largest house stood a small group of men dressed identically to Thethe, though some of the tunics had fine embroidery upon them. One man greeted them in a slow dignified speech which seemed unaccountably long to the others, till the wayfarer explained he was recalling previous wayfarers to this place and recounting the history of some of their exploits. Tallott muttered out of the side of his mouth that ‘the Duc would get on well with the old boy’ but was shushed by Tysa. Eventually the speech

finished, and the man looked well pleased with himself and retired with his retinue into the large meeting house. Thethe stayed behind.

‘He has asked us to stay until the festival of their Gods, its one of their most important, in three days time. I accepted. We can do with the respite, and we have the freedom of the village. Thethe here will show you to your accommodation, I have an appointment with the chief.’

With that he strode off and followed the Hollerwalls into the ceremonial house.

It was cool and dark inside.

Widsith had to adjust his eyes to the gloom till he saw what was obviously the chieftain seated on a stone chair carved out of a long platform that ran round three sides of the hall. Two of the other retinue were there including the wind-bag who stood sternly behind the chieftain. The chieftain was an old man, with nothing on his clothes to mark his authority but his dignity and silence. As Widsith approached he thought he saw a gleam of recognition occur in the chieftains eye, which made him realise that perhaps his fathers face was more plainly stamped on him than he had realised.

The chieftain was direct in what he wanted to know. About the Righteous, where were they seen, going where, how many, then secondly about themselves. Widsith spoke slowly, explaining the purpose of their journey, his voice echoing slightly off the bare rock walls of the hall. This appeared to satisfy the chieftain though he was plainly puzzled by the womenfolk amongst their group, and that giant? This took more patient explanations on Widsiths part till at last the chieftain was content, and formally welcomed him to their village and bid them stay to the festival.

‘We celebrate the two Gods that rule our lives, and the third that is created by their union. It is the greatest time in our year, and the wayfarers are most welcome. You will have stories to tell and have hungry ears for what little blows this way except Sardee’.

Preparations for the festival kept the villagers busy during the next three days, and a growing excitement filled the air, so that even the children for whom these wayfarers were a splendid novelty, began to be pre-occupied by the big event. This suited Tallott well enough. He could wander around and inspect the place at his leisure without a posse of kids on his tail. He sought to keep away from Tysa. She was becoming ridiculous in her persistence, and making him look ridiculous in the process. Daily Tallott regretted his foolishness. He should have known better than to meddle with a child, but a child with a lush body and ample breasts. Twice they had loved since the Dell of Azel, both times in haste, and both times he had immediately regretted it, only his body would urge him on so. All feeling for her disappeared afterwards and he forgot the itch in his loins till the next time when he would feel her close to him, and want to run his fingers into the secret places of her body.

Tysa was sweetly ignorant of Tallotts thoughts. She doubted him, that was true, and wondered if he would be loyal to her, but love conquers all. She was completely innocent of the consequences of this love, and was oddly the stronger for this naivety. Tallott on the other hand was anxious to get the journey done, this he explained to Tysa was because it had already ‘taken so long’. But if she became pregnant, well no man could make him marry her, and no man would try. Yet he felt an unusual twinge or two of guilt about it. It annoyed him when he went soft with the girl and walked beside

her letting her chatter on, keeping his patience and trying not to wonder what things were stirring inside her belly.

He had noted that Cean was paying increasing attention to Juud and laughed scornfully to himself, for a young mans serious love is always a little ridiculous. He wondered what the wayfarer made of all this love matching. He kept himself to himself that one. Uncommunicative bastard. Still he had done his job so far and it was a bargain at seventeen gold sovereigns. With this self-congratulatory thought he strolled off to inspect the amphitheatre where he came across Cean, the Duc and his daughter doing much the same.

For once the Duc was not elaborating much, indeed he was unexpectedly quiet as if intent on some inner thought exploration of his own. The amphitheatre was easy to admire. The precision of its structure was only one facet, for closer inspection revealed a wealth of carving on the steps and particularly around the base of the raised platform, Here there were two Hollerwall women (pretty enough thought Tallott, always having at least one spare eye for that) cleaning the dust from the carvings with a thoroughness and care that showed its importance. On top surrounded by a circle of stones was a well so deep that Tallott could not discern the bottom. It must be dry for a rather strong putrid smell came from it, a dead goat or something. He sniffed and looked around then gave a shout which startled the Hollerwall women who downcast their eyes when he winked at them.

‘Really Mr Tallott’.

‘Just testing the echo, Dukey’. That was the Ducs acquired name ‘there isn’t any. Don’t you think that’s odd?’

‘No’. Now that was terse for the old bloke. He must be upset.

‘What’s with all these carvings then?’ he asked the Duc thinking to put him in a good frame of mind. The Duc did not seem to want to oblige.

‘I do not know’.

‘That’s not like you Duc. Didn’t Thomas write something about it?’

This was an unfortunate comment implying as it did that all of the Ducs knowledge came from Morad.

‘Givtheem, sometimes you are intolerable’ and the old man stalked away. Juud looked at Tallott reprovingly.

‘What’s eating him? I wasn’t even warmed up’ Tallott asked, somewhat sheepishly.

‘Perhaps you eat him’ remarked Cean coolly.

‘Clever little tongue you’ve got lover boy’.

This outraged Cean, not so much for the remark about his mouth as the epithet tagged on. But Tallott, glib as ever, got in first.

‘Is it the lover that insults you, or the boy?’

Juud walked away. She did not want to hear any more of this. Tallott infuriated her with his cruel expressions and Cean was no better with all his cloying protectiveness of late. Really she could handle herself. She climbed out of the amphitheatre and spared a backward glance at Tallott and Cean standing a longman apart and shouting at each

other to the amazement of the Hollerwall women.

The Duc had gone to seek out Sollo Wramm. He found the trader enclosed by a gaggle of children. He was playing a pipe, and getting a lively dancing jig out of it. After a while he saw the Duc and motioned the children aside, though they stayed around to see if this fascinating figure would produce any more surprises. The Duc always found himself at a loss with Sollo. It was hard to have a serious conversation with a tramp in a priests hat and a collection of bones and rhyiming replies, but he tried.

‘This festival. Does it have another name Mr Wramm?’

Sollo shook his head as if puzzled by the question. The Duc tried again.

‘In Thomas au Morad’s book he describes a festival called the Rakshass, is that the same thing?’

Sollo Wramm looked intently at the Duc, who was intrigued to note the clear green eyes of the man. Why was it that though the skin of an man might crack with age, the eyes stayed as a childs?

‘Eees thats I’s dont knows

its a festival, and thats the name I’s suppose.’

‘Oh. Thank you Sollo’ said the Duc politely.

Well if Sollo was correct there was nothing to fear. Morad was not infallible of course, reliable, but not utterly reliable, the Duc would admit that much about his literary hero. He was relieved at least that it was not the ceremony called Rakshass, for Morads account was horrid in its brutal details. It did not seem likely. These were a peaceful people.

## Sardee, Korruk, Rakshass

*Rituals of the Hollerwalls take on a menacing significance. We mention a new drink, quam, that would be very popular in the dives of Swaleton. Sollo Wramm goes mad (temporarily) as indeed does everyone, except Juud who sees clearly into the emptiness of her soul.*

Before dawn two men of the Hollerwall Tribe, long-robed in the garb of priests officiated at a silent ceremony in the amphitheatre. Only the highest ranks of the tribe were present as they followed the slow motions of the two priests on the raised platform. The highlight of the short ceremony was the handing around of a drinking vessel containing the clear cold water of a pool said to be the source of the river that flowed in the canyon and consequently one of the most sacred places of the tribe. This vessel was passed between the lips of the ranking men present as the tinge of dawn lightened the wene ways face of the canyon walls. Then as the sun itself crept into the amphitheatre the priest raised the cup high and sang a prayer of praise to the Giver of Life, Bringer of Fertility. And so the greatest day of the Hollerwall Tribe began, the festival of... but the Gods name was too sacred to be uttered yet. Only sluggishly did the travellers wake up to the activity in the village around them.

Sollo Wramm took full part in the various celebratory parts of the day. As one who had lived here before, he was respected for his curative skills and was kept busy through the day as one child fell sick and another hurt herself when she fell off a rock she had used to watch the procession. And in another part of the village an old woman lay dying and Sollo was called to attend to her. It would take more than one old womans death to halt this festival, for in fact once the dawn ceremony was completed, the march of events was precisely laid down and quite unalterable. Some of these were kept secret from the travellers but the grand procession around the fields was open to them. Usually this was an affair for the women and children with much singing and dancing as the line of people weaved in and out of the fields blessing each field with a sprinkle of the sacred water. The children were given gifts of food and toys by the owners of each field visited, and the women received garlands of flowers and herbs which they would string about their heads and those of their children till not a bare knot of hair could be seen. This year was slightly different for some of the men took part, including

one of the priests. The harvest had been so poor that unusual importance was given to the procession this year, and the men's presence acted as a constraint somewhat to the womenfolk and children, who rightly regarded this ceremony as their own. But they did not let the solemn faces of the men spoil it.

Juud and Tysa came back flushed and bedecked with flowers, their faces hot from dancing. The men of course had not deigned to go, though Cean was tempted but was disinclined to offer himself as a figure of scorn to Tallott. Since their argument yesterday they had not spoken to each other.

At noon the feasting began with the special sacrifice of four goats which were then roasted on spits in the open. As well as abundant dishes of vegetables, there were rich spiced cakes and sweetened bread sticks for the children. No matter how lean the West Time to come might be, nothing was spared for this day. For the men there was a pale beer, very strong, that was distilled from the locally grown bruten. Tallott was in his element here, though the others were not so far behind. Sollo was getting quite frisky and whirling around with his cloak sweeping the dust in circles around him. The wayfarer let Juud discreetly sip some of his beer though it was not allowed to the women. She pulled a face and left him the remainder. It was dry, bitter stuff.

As the wine and feasting had its effect groups of people shifted to the amphitheatre where a dance drama began. The actors wore vivid painted masks and moved in uneven time to a small hotch-potch orchestra of pipes and plucked instrument. The pipes gave a high squeeling sound above the more resonant strings. It was not long before Sollo found his way into the orchestra and added his own peculiar piping to the cacophony.

The drama recounted a great mythological story of how Korruk (the water god) and Sard (the female wind) had met. There were many battles and disasters of course, with tragedy and great feats of courage to be displayed. Gradually as the aftersun deepened the amphitheatre filled with the Hollerwalls, men, women, and children. There were old men who could barely walk and had to be assisted to their places and babies, one just two days old, nursed by their mothers and swung in time to the rhythm of music. Before the platform a large vessel was brought and a priest supervised the ladling of a milky substance into bowls which were passed around and sipped by the audience. When it was Tallott's turn he asked the wayfarer what it was.

'Quam. A sort of smooth wine, made from goats milk and various other ingredients. Drink it'.

Tallott did so and was not impressed, but Widsith urged him to take more.

'It is important' he told the others 'to drink this every time it comes around. It's expected and will be taken as an insult if not. It gets better after the first gulp'.

With this advice they each sipped at the liquid though Juud found it distasteful and would not take any more despite the wayfarer's urgings.

'Do try again Juud' said Tysa 'it's much nicer the second time.' She gave a giggle as if to demonstrate the intoxicating effect of the drink. Juud steadily declined.

The dancers on stage were becoming wilder and the more insistent. The crowd swayed and began to chant with the music as a particular theme grew in prominence. Evensun had now settled on the canyon and a bold orange light penetrated the sun as it crept down to the horizon.

Tallott felt an extraordinary sense of well-being and glanced around at the others who all had flushed happy faces, except Juud who looked pale. He gave her a big hug and she took it unresponsively, looking blankly into his eyes. Yet again the milky drink came around and Tallott passed it on to Cean who shouted above the noise 'this is good!' Tallott chuckled happily, their day-old enmity completely forgotten. He found his legs surprisingly unsteady as he shifted places from Juud to Tysa and leaned across and whispered in her ear. She pushed him aside, not too hard, and he cuddled up to her, one hand slipping under the waist band of her trousers and squeezing her inner thigh.

Hull had a glazed look and the Duc was discoursing to him at great length on something Morad had said about the festival of Rakshass 'it involves a sacrifice you know'. The wayfarer was as intoxicated as the others, completely lost to the wave and swell of the music and the wild gyrations of the dancers. The beat was stronger, the music shriller. Sollo Wramm was playing like a madman in the orchestra, stopping only to sip out of the unbiguous bowls of liquid that seemed to come round more and more frequently. Then for the first time the Hollerwalls started the chant of their gods, not only Sardee and Korruk, the Gods of wind and water, but the third name, the greatest god, whose name was so revered that it could be spoken only now, on this day, a God brought into existence by the wind and water acting upon each other, a God given life by the people to return it to the people, a God called Rakshass.

The Hollerwalls had broken into a full scale chant 'Sardee, Korruk, Rakshass' repeated again and again till the sound became a thing in itself and rolled out to greet the darkening sky. Many of the children had fallen asleep with the quam, but their parents were far from it, each moment acting less as individuals than as a chanting, swaying entity oblivious to all but action on the stage. At each corner of the platform a pole had been set up and a lighted torch set upon it casting shadows on the actors and seeming to flicker in time to the pulsing music. Any semblance of a coherent play had gone as the actors, ten of them now, stamped and twirled on the stage as if Wyrd had entered them, which in a fashion he had. A quiet milky demon that slipped into their blood and fired the crueller instincts that always lie in men waiting upon an escape. Out of this groaning living thing of flesh that was the collective body of people, actor had become indistinguishable from audience. There was only one lonely fragment of sanity.

Juud sat stiff with terror as the strange madness gripped those around, even those people whom she knew. Tysa, hunched back and rocking in her seat her arms entwined with Tallott who moved with her, his fingers rhythmically stroking her crotch. Cean who had half-stood his eyes fixed fanatically on the stage, and even her father, so utterly silent and lost in the dance. They were all changed, changed utterly into something else. No one was untouched for all had partaken of the sinuous liquid that flowed as fire in their veins. The wayfarer was leaning forward his face hooded in anger, his eyes staring before him and never straying from the stage. If she had the strength she would have left but her limbs were paralysed by the drumming noises in her head and she had not the courage to turn away her eyes as if she were as drugged as the rest. Once she tried to take some of the milk wine again but she was too late for it to have effect and the taste was vile. She felt sick.

The last lingering of the day had fled the scene and only the burning torches lit the spectacle of frenzied dancers, two of which had collapsed in exhaustion. As the music

beat furiously onwards the other dancers accelerated their movements the flaring light catching on this failing arm or that leg in a weirdly vibrating manner that was disturbing to watch as it was enthralling. Juud could not turn her eyes away. It was as if an invisible hand held her head and forced her to look, to see everything that the Hollerwalls and the rest of them could never see, the insanities of the dance and the terrible anger of the people focussed on the stage as Rakshass himself had entered their souls and was directing the drama for his grim pleasure.

One by one the dancers fell exhausted to the ground and slowly the stage was bare of all standing figures. Only a twitch of an arm or hand showed that the dancers were still even alive as they lay prostrate on the platform.

Then the music stopped.

And the a final terror gripped Juud.

Two priests walked into the garish light leading two people, a male and female onto the centre stage.

Juud knew in an instant of horrible clarity that this was to be the climax of the drama and that these two people were to be sacrificed. The silence was complete. If she was to leave, now was the time. Of all the people here only she would really see the sacrifice. The others would see only the drama, not as something real, but as an extension of the play before. She had no strength to leave. She was compelled to stay by the sheer overpoweringness of the event, that held her as in a vice. The horror to come was Juuds alone.

The male and female removed their clothes and embraced. From somewhere in the orchestra a single pipe began to play. The couple danced to it watched impassively by the priests. The dance quickened and the couple bent themselves to each other, pressing their bodies closer. The female was Sardee, the whining tormenting wind that shrieked her widowish complaints through the lives of the Hollerwalls, and the male was Korruk, water, vibrant life, the source of the Hollerwalls existence. Saree must yield to Korruk, wind must give to water her obsessance, the pair must be consummated if the next year was to be born anew, if the Hollerwalls were to survive another cycle of seasons. Korruk must conquer Sardee and subdue her, and Rakshass, the year of life, would be born to return life to those that gave it.

The pipe shrieked and as the couple writhed on the platform the priests moving closer intently following their maniacal dance. Then Sardee, the woman, fell to the ground and Korruk went onto her. The copulation began and a priest stepped forward and the flash of a knife was held high above his head then brought down.

Juud screamed, and screamed again, and clawed her way up the terraces past the stupified crowd to escape this madness. The priests grabbed at the male and pushed him over the lip of the well, his blood scattering on the stone, and then they took the women and threw her shrieking into the pit. The crowd collectively released its breath and bellowed 'Korruk, Sardee, Rakshass' again and again, indifferent to the maddened, sobbing, female who broke away from the amphitheatre and stumbled into the night.

## II

The cloud hung thickly over the canyon, one part lightened by an old Wene moon that could not penetrate the massed cumulus. The canyon was dark and unmoving, the amphitheatre empty and the people deserted to their homes and a sleep that would be long as the effects of the quam.

The wayfarer picked a passage up the rock path that led to the waterfall. He had looked everywhere else and only now was turning this way. The effects of the drug were still a little upon him, making him move sluggishly and with reluctance. He would rather have slept but Juud's absence from their sleeping quarters had caught his attention. He had known that the sacrifice was the culmination of the ritual. That was why he had urged her to drink the quam. It would make the ritual slaying seen only part of the preceding drama. That was the point of the drug, to inoculate the senses. He himself had taken more than he intended, it was hard to refuse the proffered bowl, and harder to remember how much was drunk. He did not want to witness the deaths, but also disliked the lack of control in that intoxicated state. Things plain became ambiguous, and what was ordinary sinister or magical. He had woken up well after midnight at a loss to remember how he had safely managed his way back to the rest house. He steadily counted heads and found Sollo and Juud missing. The trader was no doubt snoring in some hole but Juud? Then it flooded back to him that Juud had not taken the quam, and would have witnessed the bloody events on the platform. Did she run away? Where was she now? He had searched the amphitheatre first and then thought of the waterfall a favourite spot with her for the few days they had been here.

The rushing of water came to his ears as he picked his way along the stone path and stepped out beside the large pool where the waterfall entered. Jutting into the middle of the pool and directly facing the waterfall was a sloping rock that was a popular diving spot for the children of the Holler-wall. On it, framed against the shining band of water was a lonely sitting figure.

He walked closer and called out 'Juud' softly. She started and turned. He walked to her and squatted down beside her placing a hand on her shoulder to steady himself. Her face was calm and still. He could not see her eyes. For a moment he hesitated not knowing what was best to say.

'Now you know why I told you to drink the quam' he said finally.

She was silent.

Her shoulder felt bony under his hand and he gave it a squeeze as if to encourage her. There was a slight tremble at his touch then the wayfarer bent down and enclosed his arms around her. This broke down the restraint in Juud and she nuzzled up to him choking and crying, trying to pour out with her tears the evil things she had seen. Widsith kneeled more comfortably, and pressed her close, pushing her bowed head against his chest. He could smell a scent in her hair. That of herbs and flowers worn on that happier occasion only a morning gone.

After a while the trembling ceased and Juud lifted her head and her wet eyes demanded of Widsith the question. Why did you not warn me?

He brushed a strand of black hair from her face.

‘There was nothing I could do. Not to go would have been insulting to the tribe. Everyone goes as you saw, even the very sick. We could not refuse and I hoped you would have drunk the quam’ he finished lamely. Quite unconsciously he had been stroking her hair with his other hand, till he became aware of the movement and stopped.

‘For the Hollerwall this is life. That male and female that you saw were willing victims. They were honoured to be chosen, to be able to give new life to the tribe.’

This was a poor apology for the torn flesh and shrieking cries of the sacrificed people. Widsith fell silent and strengthened his clasp around her body. It seemed the only way to say that he knew of her pain and understood the cruelty of this business.

Juud spoke hesitantly.

‘Is this every year?’ The wayfarer nodded.

‘For several centuries at this time a man and woman are slain for their gods’.

Juud started to weep again and burying herself into the wayfarers creased jerkin, she spoke bitterly and convulsively, gulping out her words as if they were the inner pieces of herself.

‘This journey, so long wayfarer, so long, will it end? The killing, will it end? The running away, will it end? What I have seen. Should never have seen, it’s not fair Mikal! I did not ask for this, this journey, this roundell, oh I wanted to kill myself for what I had seen tonight, but I have not the strength. Not the strength for anything. Not like you or Hull or Sollo Wramm and his tricks, or my father, who can bury himself in the past. Can you understand? I have no future. Tallott has his passions, and energy. Cean wants to revenge his father. Where is my strength?’

Here she looked up and stopped crying and spoke more calmly as she looked out across the pool. Yet her voice seemed more terrible now, as if every layer of grief had been exposed till only the last was left.

‘Even Tysa, she has strength. The strength of her love. I do not have that. I do not love.’

## The Slow Corruption

*It is as if a sort of crisis afflicts people, and rejection is part of the moaning, miserable wind. Cean learns that his love is not requited, and in retreat from the others meets a terrible force of men. They are not a happy group and the motivations of their great escape seem forlorn and inexplicable. Widsith damns them all.*

The following afternoon they climbed out of the Canyon of Tapestries and said goodbye to Thethe. He was disappointed to see them go, but as the wayfarer explained it, the Hollerwalls did not have enough food for themselves, let alone hungry visitors. The starkness of the plateau came as an unpleasant reminder of the difficulties ahead after the green and safe haven they left behind.

Everyone looked a bit the worst for the festival celebrations. Sollo looked more than usually seedy, if that was possible, and the rest of them had tired faces and strangely blank memories.

‘What happened after the dancing stopped? Was that it?’ asked Cean.

No one seemed to know.

Juuds pale face was taken for tiredness, and she, like the rest, trudged on without having much to say. She ruthlessly chopped down her hair to a short, boyish cut, and made a poor job of it too. But did not care, either for the result or Tallotts comment that she looked ‘like a monk’. The Duc had a headache, it was after all the first alcohol he had drunk in more than ten years, and walked on in silent reflection. The fact that he could not remember last nights events bothered him particularly when he recalled the paragraph in Morad that ended the description of the rite of Rakshass.

‘That this barbaric ritual is supported by the community is in part because the drug they partake of, removes from the mind the memory of the occasion, and so enables life to continue after the festival much as normal.’

The Duc could not recall seeing any barbarism and yet that strange drink what was it called? Quam. In many respects the ritual was much the same as that described by Thomas au Morad yet missing was the gruesome climax. His head was really too painful to struggle with the problem. Perhaps he would ask the wayfarer. Why could he not remember?

For his part Widsith was glad to be walking away, and the dust and rock of this bare plateau felt cleaner than the workings of mens minds. He had not questioned the brutality of the sacrifice until he saw it through Juuds horrified eyes. He still was not too sure that he should doubt it; if it was the Hollerwalls custom and it worked? Here was the doubt. He did not believe in their Gods, and did not think that Sardee was a devilish female of malevolent intent or believe that the trickling liquid that flowed in the dry valleys was the outward expression of the great God Korruk. It was not a question of sitting down and grappling with the crucial dilemmas of existence, and whether they were better resolved by believing there was a God, he simply as a part of his natural senses could not believe in that sort of God. So the ritual was cruel because it was stupid. He looked over his shoulder at Juud walking blindly behind him. It was also stupid because it was cruel.

Widsith would not tell her, there was no need, that although the male victim would die quickly through the draining of his blood, the female would not. She had been thrown into the well still alive. If she survived the fall she would linger in life for days enclosed in a dark pit suffocated by the stench of former victims and the slow corruption of the males body. Thirst would grip her in the first day and slowly wither her flesh within until her voice would be too dry to scream out the agony and horror that filled her mind. If she lived only three days she would be lucky. Sollo had told him that sometimes the female had clung on to desperate life, her shuddering groans still being heard six or seven days after the festival. The Hollerwalls had a lid that they could afix over the top in such cases to shut out the terrible sounds. That morning passing the ampitheatre Widsith had heard a sound that placed a cold hand to his heart. A womans voice, cracked and broken and appealing up to the earth. She was not dead and the thirst was upon her. He walked away shutting himself from the voice that appealed for life when nothing but death could await her.

Tysa felt her hold on Tallott slipping. She had given herself again to Tallott, but felt like a beast on the floor. Tallott had satisfied himself then walked away. When she tried to talk about this he laughed and still walked away.

‘Givetheem. Stay here’

‘I wanted a chat with the wayfarer. I’ll be back shortly’.

‘You chat with everyone...’ but me, was what she wanted to say.

Irritably Tallott remarked.

‘We can’t talk all the time’.

‘But we can be together’. Tallott looked embarrassed.

‘There be plenty of time for that. When we’re in Noll we’re have plenty of time’.

It is a truism to say love is blind. So is anger, or jealousy or any other human emotion. Why pick on love?

These emotions are not so much blind as possessive. If someone told Tysa that Tallott was cruel and calculating, she would have agreed with her. That he was indifferent and treated her as a slightly immature whore, she would not have argued, but she still loved him, and could not help herself. He was her first love. Gripped by this need that made her breath quicken when he touched her and heart cry out with loneliness as he

ignored her. She did not know what possessed her, but it was real, as real as the wind that blew grains of sand against her cheek and bit into her skin if she did not cover it. This love hurt yet this love could not be denied.

Juud might have helped Tysa but had troubles of her own. Huddling into herself she tended to sit apart from the rest. Tallotts banter irritated her, and Tysa looked so sad in consequence that it was easier to keep away. Even her father could not break through her sudden overwhelming loneliness, and was at a loss as to how to comfort her. Once, Cean had come and joined her. After some hesitation he told her that he loved her. Juud must have known this would come, but his sudden declaration appalled her and was so disconcerting that she hardly knew how to reply. He spoke differently and tried appealing with his eyes for her understanding, but she would not meet those eyes. Finally he took her hand and squeezed it. Juud froze with uncertainty and could not bring herself to respond to his touch. It must have felt dead to Cean but still he persisted.

'I have been in love with you for months. Since the Furrowdale Valley, no before that. In the Gloreen Forest, you remember when we' and he ploughed on to describe in detail some incident that Juud hardly remembered, let alone thought of as any more than friendship. The cruel thing was that Juud was fond of him but not to the point of loving him, and his clumsy declaration only embarrassed her. She said nothing just wishing that he would leave her alone. Mostly these days she just wanted to be left alone.

'Say something Juud' appealed Cean, now desperate that this was all going wrong. In his mind he had imagined some great understanding to flow between them and that she would let him embrace her with tenderness and warmth. Instead she just stared blankly at him and let him hold her hand without moving even a finger of compassion.

'I like, I like you Cean. But this is too sudden'.

She did not want him, but how could she say that?

'I would prefer to be left, left to myself for a while. To think.' Oh this was cowardness! Why not say outright 'I cannot love you', it gave him foolish hope. He clung to that word 'think.'

'Yes do Juud. I will not rush you. I promise I'll let you be alone to decide for yourself. I love you.' He could think of nothing more to say so apologetically stood up and left her at last in peace.

It was so stupid. To put her in this position. Her thoughts went in angry, sad circles, first reprimanding his foolishness, then her own, then getting angry at her cluttered muddled thoughts that would not settle one way or the other. Think!? She could not breathe. If only he had left her in peace instead of making this pathetic plea for her love. She knew that she had lost a friend.

So Tysa went alone in her despondency and Juud kept much to herself. If they could have come together, they might have shared their troubles. But for the moment they did not, and when the two prettiest and liveliest people fell silent, a gloom was cast over the party. Perhaps not Hull, who remained as impassive as ever, but certainly the Duc who picked up his daughters unhappiness and added it to a private store of his own, Cean of course, and Tallott, whose boistrousness was never quite an effective mask for

his unease. Sollo busied himself with his rimes, and Widsith marched ahead not giving a bugger much for any of them and their stupid lives.

The whirlwind on the third day startled them out of their despondency.

It came from the yorn, twisting and ducking across the plain like it was alive. Widsith tried vainly to guess where the thing was heading but the erratic motion of the whirlwind defeated his attempt. Sollo sagely advised them to stay put.

‘When the whirlygigs blow  
is never for us to know  
but it never goes to wore  
the place yous were before’.

It seemed to work. They stayed still as it came closer, and the whirlwind took a more coherent shape around a thin roaring funnel of air with a skirt of dust trailed behind. It passed wenevise, bobbing and jostling over the plateau on some foreign business of its own.

They breathed and continued.

On the fifty-third of West Time they reached the line of sand dunes that had collected at the foot of the scarp which barred the way to the Cif mountains. The Sink, with its cloudy green facade, looked attractive against the wan rocks of the Cif Mounatins, that ran off into the smoky distance. Tallott wondered aloud why there was vegetation there and not on the rest of the Cif.

‘It’s a swamp’ was the wayfarers terse answer.

The dunes added some interest to the monotonous travel. They ran parallel to the escarpment and so a patient route had to be weaved through the dunes in order to save much unnecessary exertion clambering over the tops. Just for the fun of it Cean did so, and it was well worth the view. The prevailing wind in the Sand was breewise, which explained why the sand had over many centuries been accumulated here, trapped by the wall of the scarp and so forced into long parallel lines for twenty or more leagues around the yorn and breewise edge of the great plateau. Cean could see as far as the second canyon from the top of the highest dune, swept into a pyramid forty longmans above the plain. He was in high spirits. Juud had not told him of her decision and he fancied that every day was in his favour.

From the dunes Sollo guided a way up through the crumbling rock terraces of the scarp. At the top, on a sort of wide shelf that sloped down to the Cif Mountains was a flat salt pan, trapped into a shallow depression. They walked across it in wonder. Hard-baked, crisp under foot, nearly a league of glittering light. From a first glance Tallott had mistaken it for a real lake and was amused by his mistake.

‘Careful Tallott. It is weak in places’ Widsith warned as the big man confidently strolled around the strangely solid lake.

‘Try it Tysa’ Tallott called and she tentatively joined him. The others all tested it, the Duc scraping at the surface with his knife and tasting the result.

‘Salt. Yes, definitely salt. Most unusual’.

Around the edge of the lake were piles of animal bones which established the his-

tory of the place more cleanly than any book could ever do. The Duc was fascinated and for the first time in days came out of his shell somewhat.

‘An illusory place wayfarer, this lake has been here for centuries. It must have a river feeding it, surely’.

The wayfarer pointed breezeways.

‘From the swamp and a few dirty streams.’

‘Ahh.’

‘Can we get water here?’ Tysa was feeling thirsty. Just the sight of this place dried out her mouth.

‘On the far bank’.

It was curious to be walking on the salt lake. Whenever they stopped and looked around it always seemed as if they were surrounded by water, but when they continued there was only the dry surface, cracked in hexagonal designs creeping away to every side. On the far shore two small streams trickled in but these were still far too salty so they followed them up through scree and the beginnings of scrub to where a pool had collected in a rock. It was brackish but drinkable and there was a grass slope close by which decided Widsith to camp. From here they could look back out over the Sard, staggered to think that they had crossed it.

‘It is an achievement’ said the Duc carefully, as they all looked in silence over the huge plain. His words expressed their collective feelings. The shame of the Hollerwalls drama could be sloughed off, as well as the gritty, harsh Sard. Suddenly the future had optimism.

‘One pass to go’ said Tallott ‘and no more bloody dust’.

But although they may have conquered geography, but had not yet managed to conquer themselves.

That night Juud confessed to Cean that she did not love him. Cean hung his head and barely listened to Juud’s explanations. It only made her angry that she should feel impelled to apologise for not wanting to love him. It was so ridiculous.

‘I’m sorry Cean. I thought about it carefully but I have’ and she hesitated over saying the carefully prepared excuse ‘an obligation to my father to stay with him. Perhaps for the rest of his life. I am his only child. Besides’ (why besides?) ‘I do not think I will even be more than fond of you. We will always stay friends won’t we?’ Cean nodded and mumbled his assurance that they would indeed stay friends and fled, too shocked to think of anything. He had been so sure that she would say yes.

Juud took a walk to a rock which sat above the scrub and studied the evening landscape of the Sard melting the dusk. This was always a wonder. These colours running fierce, then pale, to the mountain walls before fading into dankness. She saw a figure walking across the salt lake and recognised Cean. Why was this so difficult? Why was it so difficult to be loved? If she allowed him to do so and waited, would she not come to love in time?

Stars gathered in the sky and the slim crescent of Wene made a nervous appearance above the peaks of the distant mountain kingdom. It would be as easy to stay as cold as the stars. Untouched and observant like a watcher on the plains of activity below.

She did not know what she wanted anymore. Someone had offered love and she had refused. Like a star to be looked at from afar she was to be wondered at, filling the remote places of mens hearts where they kept their dreams and their longings. She shook her head in sadness.

At another part of the camp her father was trying to sleep yet was kept awake by the struggling thoughts in his head. His unnatural silence of the last few days had aroused comments from the others, but only Juud suspected the reason. Her father was returning.

Ten years is a long time to be imprisoned in walls and a book, and it took the blast of foul air and earthy men to pluck it away. It was not that he doubted Monad and what he said and what he described, for he was the most accurate of authors, but it was the position he choose to stand from. He observed, and like the Duc kept back from his observations except for the occasional voyeuristic enquiry. It had been forced on the Duc after the Hollerwalls festival that he had been seeing the world not through his own eyes but Morads. This was a revelation! And Morad was not a real man, but an historical figure like the things he so painstakingly described, not flesh and not blood, but inked words and marginal comments. He was a thing black and white in a vivid coloured world. What Morad saw was true, but flatly as an ant might see the disk of the world, travelling with the recorded notes of a myriad different observations but none of them pant of the world, but observing it. The Hollerwalls had broken the Ducs detachment. The wayfarer had told him that living men and women had been butchered before their eyes, and he had watched, unknowingly, ignorant.

This was the most telling.

He watched the world as if from a star, glittering and cold, thinking of it, if he thought about it at all, separate from the words of Morad, with pity. Here he was scuffling down on earth pretending to be above it, why if he pitied the earth did he not pity himself? Was he not an object of pity? This was too much thinking. The Duc grew tired with it and slipped into an uneasy sleep. He did not hear his daughter bed down by his side nor hear her restless movements as she too struggled with herself. They may have left the Hollerwalls far behind but it seemed as if they were shouting in their ears, but with such opposite effect. The daughter wanted to shrink from the world, whereas her father wanted to rejoin it.

Cean could not understand it. He had been so sure. So sure!

He was mortified at Juuds refusal, and angry, and his anger at himself quickly turned to anger at her, and the twisting strickeness of rejection. He wandered quite blindly across the salt lake and almost without knowing what he was doing, picked his way through the sand dunes to the edge of the Sard plain. His emotions were in turmoil. He was handsome eh? And proved himself a man? What more did she want? Strom the woman!

Cean marched blindly out across the Sard as the light lingered on the last peaks and faded into the night. It is doubtful if Cean even saw the riders, he was so fulminating with retorts and snappy put downs to Juud that his eyes, although gazing outwards, apparently seeing the motion of dust moving towards him, yet looked completely inwards. Desolation overcame him and he found some tears in his eyes. He screwed his fist into

them, and they cleared. The desert seemed lonely and empty as his heart, and for some bitwicks he wallowed in self-pity.

Then he saw the riders.

They were close now and were obviously riding for him, and yet it still took Cean some precious bitwicks before it sunk in that he was in danger. He turned, looked over his shoulder, and started to run. But it was far too late. Almost immediately the riders were on him, the dust spurting from their hooves as they circled around him, six in all, evil looking men, armoured and swinging swords.

Cean knew these were Righteous. He had never seen such cold eyes, old and weary with life. White dust covered their tunics and saddlebags, rendering them almost ghost-like in the pale twilight. But they were real enough and would kill soon.

He could not move forward now, and the horses closed to him, two of the Sardsmen dismounted and pointed their swords at Cean. He started to run, managed to dodge one swinging sword, and another. The dunes were so close! Their horses would not be able to climb up the soft sand, and the heavily armored Righteous would struggle in it. If he could get there. His breath rasped as he hurled himself up the dune slope, but one rider had swiftly run him down and grabbed Ceans foot, pulling him down the soft slope. Once he struggled free, but a second rider flailed at him with a club and stunned him. Cean collapsed on the ground.

After a bitwick he woke, and revealed a circle of Righteous, standing like grotesque giants. He could smell them. See their sharp swords. But they were ignoring him, standing open mouthed as the jewell of the Charmstone glittered in the starlight.

It was an eerie scene.

They talked amongst themselves in a strange tongue, gesticulating at Cean and each in turn holding the jewell, with an attitude almost of reverence. Ceans head still throbbed from the club blow, but he managed to get on his knees and watch what was happening. He expected to die soon, but his mind was numb. The wayfarer would have thought of some way out of this, but he wasn't the wayfarer.

Why didn't they kill him now they had the Charmstone?

There was a long earnest incomprehensible discussion. then one of the Righteous, and he pulled out a tattered book and began to read from it. This brought a cascade of language from the others, and they looked at Cean with something like awe. Instead of killing him, the riders moved away, as if Cean was possessed of some special power. They were still talking fervently and pointing at Cean on the ground. He stood up. He could just make that dune, and was sure he could outrun them, but the Righteous never gave him the chance. The leader suddenly stuffed the Charmstone into its pouch and threw it to Cean who caught it mid-air. In a bitwick they mounted their horses, and were gone, leaving Cean stupified and shaking. He had seen death in the face, and waited for some time to gather himself together. He looked at the hoof-prints on the ground. They were real.

The others did not believe him either, until he showed them the hoof marks and his footprints. Widsith stared out onto the Sard and muttered something to Hull and shrugged.

'I cannot understand it wayfarer? Why would they let Cean go? And not keep the Charmstone?' the Duc asked.

Widsith shrugged again. Tallott bit his lip. He had wanted to keep the secret of the jewel, but it was out now, although the wayfarer had not seemed so surprised.

Juud felt the need for some explanation.

'We never told you about the Charmstone wayfarer. I think we should have done so' she apologised.

Widsith seemed to grin, but in the thick night as they walked back, it was hard to tell. Tallott cursed under his breath, but did it matter now? The journey was almost done.

Only Sollo Wramm seemed to understand the incident. He chanted.

Wait, in the wilderness where Bree is cruel

Wait, till the passing of the green jewell

Wait, for Boden, then its plain

Then begin your ride again

'What's that Sollo? What's he saying wayfarer?'

'I think he is quoting from 'The Articles'.

'Indeed? He knows them?'

The Duc was amazed by the rime, and it reminded him of something but he could not quite recall what, and when he pressed Sollo to repeat the song, he only got a mischievous glimpse of green eyes under the battered black hat, and the vigourous snap of a chicken bone.

## The Sink and the Song

*After the dry morbidity of the Sard it was no pleasure to escape into the Sink and the bogwood forest with its deep clotted moss and strange scented flowers. Also in this dank forest are the Twig -Tellers and their prophecies of the past, none more extraordinary than the song of the Roundrell, chanted by two incredible figures who appear to be old mates of Sollos.*

The Sard was the driest place in the kingdom, and the Sink the wettest. On this low pass in the Cif Mountains, thick clouds gathered, and drizzled miserably for a good part of the year. It was not so much rain as a cold creeping mist, so that the forest was quite literally a cloud forest, created by clouds, kept alive by clouds. A romantic place? Not if you had to go through it.

For wicks the travellers sweated and cursed their way through a labyrinth of trees and vines, tripping over roots, clinging to black vines, and squelching through a morass of moss and ooze. Small mountain streams drained into the Sink, and because they were unable to find an outlet, settled in the basin, adding to the mire and creating a massive forest swamp known appropriately as the bogwood forest. Some of the trees were huge, but crouched, sprouting three or four grotesque branches that would arch overhead to their neighbours and block the sun with their large fleshy leaves. Very little grew underneath the dark canopy except creepers and vines and in low lying places there were pools of water called 'wallows', and here and there would be an island bearing a few brave tufts of grass. The surface of the bog looked solid until you tried your weight on it. Then the travellers would sink to their knees in the sucking mud, sometimes to their necks. If the moss and mud were not to your liking, you could try and balance on the spidery root system of the bogwood trees. The trick was to hop from one slimy root to another, but a few slips and dunkings and they cursed this method of progress as unsatisfactory as the other. After a wick, foul gunge clung to every part of their bodies, and by eventual and mysterious process got glued even into their hair. It was exhausting. It was vile.

Tallott, always the first with bright ideas, suggested they walk around the bogwood swamp but Widsith shook his head. Many years ago he had tried out that idea, only to be halted by a ring of bluffs that encased the Sink. To compound their misery the sky drizzled a persistent rain on their head, for several days dripping through the leaves like

the sad tears of Stuess, and strange sticky flowers began budding on the trailing vines.

On the first day they made just a league of progress.

On the second barely half that. And still it rained, weeping like a widow refusing to be commiserated with. It was a despairing place.

Most of them longed for the hard quick surfaces of the Sard, instead of this evil swamp. It was futile to keep dry. On the small islands they camped upon there was no firewood to be obtained and so nothing to do but eat cold ryet and huddle into sodden blankets that each night grew wetter, till it was possible to wring them out. Juud was depressed by the struggle, and the Duc needed all the help of Hull and Cean to get through, his health failing under this swamp and his cough getting worse. Tallott cursed good-humouredly for a while then slipped into sullen sulkiness. Sollo just battled on, singing and muttering to himself.

The third day was the worst yet, for they were close to the middle of the Sink, and for wicks they had to wade through deep water and mud, hold<sup>ing</sup> onto branches and roots for support. They were so wet already that the swims made little obvious difference, except the Duc suffered. The wayfarer told them that people lived here, the Twig-Tellers, and that tracks were marked through the forest. For the life of him Tallott could not see these 'tracks', though obviously the wayfarer, and Sollo Wramm could, for they spent some time in selecting the correct route.

'Does it really matter wayfarer?' asked the Duc after one exhausting halt after another 'it all appears to be swamp in whatever direction you choose'.

'There's swamp and swamp. This is knee deep but some of it is well over your head. And you ask why the Righteous do not try to escape.'

The Duc tried to imagine what it would be like coaxing horses through this quagmire and decided it was impossible. The branches often scraped the tops of the moss and making one more inconvenience in a damned inconvenient place. The horses would sink deep into the mud, and it would take a season of patient navigation, and then you would probably stagger out with half the people and horses you went in with. The wayfarer would have preferred to avoid the central part of the Sink but the track and his instinct led him there. It was the unexpected way, which when considering the mysterious people who made them, was probably appropriate. The nights were cool in contrast to the day, too much so, and worried how the Ducs limbs would take to the constant shivering dampness. He took special care of him to the neglect of the others by saving back two dry blankets and tucking away a private store of malep that had been given to them so long ago in the Furrowdale Valley. Even so the Duc coughed more and more.

Tempers were drawn tight on this third day, and the difficulties encouraged a rash of obscene language from Tallott and moody mutt<sup>er</sup>ings from Cean, who in a fury one day had lashed out at a hidden root that had tripped him, kicking and pulling at it till his strength was exhausted. Sollo was less than his grinning self, his cloak caked with mud and his hat decked with the stuff. He had removed his bones for safe keeping into his tunic and brought one out from time to time, his teeth cracking them apart and spitting out the pieces. When Sollo was annoyed with the world he broke the bones instead of sucking them. Hull slogged on, and he had to bend and scrape repeatedly to get under

the drooping bogwood.

The third nights camp was particularly grim. Their island little larger than a hut, and they were perched on top of a collection of bogwood roots bunched together in an upheaval of energy into a sort of platform above the water-drenched moss. Widsith got the group to rub each others limbs during the night, which they did in listless and dispirited fashion, trying to discern the faintest lightening of the day that would enable them to move off from this wretched place.

The morning of the fourth day was a sickly grey blur of daylight, and the wayfarer climbed a tree to check on progress. He saw a rock outcrop ahead, that he knew they were on the actual saddle, and he told the others this.

‘Will we get out today?’

‘If we push hard, yes I think so Tysa’.

This was an incentive! No one could face the prospect of another bleak night in this mudhole and Widsith had promised them a dry cave on the saddle, with firewood and open grass. Not least, a days rest. The Duc badly needed it. They pushed on hard through the bogwood, and imperceptively Juud noticed a change in the swamp. There were one or two more islands than usual, and the mud had shallowed. Then she saw more of the little grass islands appear and distinct patterns of streams instead of a general wash of water. The ground was rising somewhat too. Widsith began leaping from one island to another, and was followed by the others, with varying success. Tysa missed and sank to her waist, Tallott and Cean had to stand either side and lever her out. The islands began to form a clear line through the bogwood, and Juud squeezed under one bogwood branch and saw the wayfarer up ahead standing on a large raised knoll. When she got there she found him smiling at her.

‘There is a proper track’.

Tallott gave a hoot and the Duc allowed a wry and exhausted smile.

The wayfarer pointed. Back through the line of the bog there were some remnants of a platform, supported by poles encrusted with a century of moss. And when they looked closely they could still discern the line of an old trail. The wayfarer showed them gnarled trees with old axe cuts still in them.

‘I think that explains how the Righteous got here Duc’.

‘Indeed you think so wayfarer? Why it must be almost 100 years old?’

‘Looks it too’ said Givthem, ‘so the Righteous built those platforms for their horses?’

Widsith nodded. The Duc looked at it thoughtfully.

‘I suppose with Swivven the Strong saying ‘go here or die’ to the Righteous, then that might encourage this enormous effort, but what a journey. No wonder they cannot escape, yet...? They could. It is still here wayfarer.’

The Duc was wondering about that strange prophetic verse, and might have started a verbal speculation but the wayfarer chased them on.

They continued along the tell-tale evidence of the Righteous trail, trees felled here, an old useable bridge. It was quite uncanny. The track neatly followed in and out of

the bogwood, which was starting to thin and the water was draining away down the slope. They entered a small clearing and Juud glimpsed a rock bluff standing close over their heads. The sky was still drizzling in its sad sort of way, but nothing could stop her feeling excited now they were at long last escaping the clutches of the Sink. Widsith gave instructions for them to wait as he went on ahead. It was a pleasure to sit on dry ground and they brought out some rye and munched on it as they waited. The wayfarer was back shortly and they returned with him across another small glade and into a larger clearing with grass lapping up to the base of a sharp rocky bluff. A pure pool of water sat underneath and with the overhanging of the plants from the rock bluff the setting had the contrived look of a garden.

‘It’s lovely’ breathed Tysa.

The wayfarer walked amongst some boulders between the bluff and the lake and continued on a short path that led directly to a large roomy cave sunk into the bluff itself. There was a stack of dry firewood in one corner and a layer of dried grass, as a sort of wide mattress in another. There was a fireplace at the entrance well constructed from blocks of stone. It was everything the wayfarer had promised and they took off their baggers with relief. Home for a while. Widsith sniffed at the smoke tainted air. Not so long ago it had been someone else’s home.

As if to put a seal on their escape from the Sink the sky lifted and the drizzle ceased, and in the morning the sun appeared in chinks of cloud and seemed to lever them apart till the sky was broken with blue blobs and puffy white cumulus that hung hot and heavy over the mountains. By evening it was clear.

The boulders beside the cave entrance were soon festooned by drying clothes and blankets and as the day warmed the steam rose off them, evaporating the wet memory of the Sink. It was recuperation time. For Tallott this meant sleeping in the sun, for the Duc it was a quiet read of *Morad*, and the girls it was a short walk to another peaceful lake, secluded from the cave by a screen of bogwood trees. Sollo dried his collection of bones and even went further than his normal routine of cleanliness by scraping the mud off his cloak. To do so of course he had to take it off so revealing for the first time an incredibly grubby tunic bulging with pockets each containing a dozen secretive knick-knacks the purpose of which was obscure. Cean was still mooning over his lost love for Juud and wandered away on his own. Hull cut wood and fed the fire whilst the wayfarer idly watched his partner’s energy, and lounged on the grass with his map unrolled before him. He was supposed to be studying the route ahead but had hardly glanced at it till the Duc joined him. He brought a mug of leafen with him.

‘We are here wayfarer?’ he suggested, pointing at a place on the map. Widsith nodded. ‘And we go here?’ asked the Duc, indicating Noll.

‘Correct again’ said Widsith enjoying the game.

‘How long will it take?’ the Duc asked, sipping the hot leafen carefully.

‘Seven or eight days. Possibly less’.

‘It is tracked all the way’ said the Duc as he noted a dotted line between the two places. Widsith nodded.

Apart from Sollo, no one else was near them. Tallott lay some way off, his face to the sunlit sky, his mouth open and snoring slightly. Hull was poking the fire. The air

was peaceful, only broken by an occasional bird song.

‘What does Morad say about the future?’

It was an odd way to put it and startled the Duc.

‘You mean the route to Noll? Oh, a great deal wayfarer’. Widsith was expecting some discussion on this, but since it did not come he asked another question.

‘Does he talk of the Twig-Tellers?’

‘Yes indeed. It is most interesting, particularly on their name’. The Duc fetched the book and proceeded to read.

‘The Twig-Tellers are shy inhabitants of the bogwood forest. They are reputed, like so many off the Past Peoples, to have prophetic insight into the arts and manners of man. By inscribing a number of wooden sticks, or twigs, usually nine in number, but sometimes twelve, a priest tosses these in random to the air, and interprets the fashion they take on the ground. This result they name ‘a story’ and guide their activities and decisions by it, so literally ‘living a story’. So potent are their predictions that travellers will journey long distances to hear the soothsaying of the Twig-Tellers, who have never known to be wrong’

The Duc sighed.

‘It is attractive, but how much is truth?’ The Duc sounded almost bitter when he continued. ‘Sometimes wayfarer, Morad knows without seeing.’

‘You mean the Hollerwalls?’

‘Precisely. Are you expecting to see the Twig-Tellers?’ It was the Duc who asked, making a visible effort to shake off his sudden gloom.

‘Possibly. They are normally very shy. They were here a few days past. The cave has been well used and they probably will not take too kindly to our occupation of it.’

The Duc read from Morad again.

‘Like most of the other Past Peoples, the Twig-Tellers used to have a more extensive range of habitation before the arrival of the horse-warriors. These cruel warriors destroyed much, and those of the harmless Twig-Tellers that survived escaped to their ancestral home in the Sink. The impenetrable bogwood forest has long protected them’.

The Duc asked.

‘They will not harm us?’

‘No. They keep pretty much to themselves and...’

A scream suddenly came to their ears. It was over where Tysa and Juud were bathing. Widsith was on his feet in an instant and grabbed his sword and raced over to the fringe of trees between the glade and the adjoining one. Hull was following and Tallott was struggling to his feet. The wayfarer brushed through the trees and met the two naked girls on the other side, Tysa clasping her towel to her chest whilst Juud ran with it trailing in her hand. The two opposing groups almost ran into each other.

‘Over there’ Juud said briefly ‘Twig-Tellers I think’ she pointed out across the small lake her arm still dripping from their interrupted bathe. Tysa was breathing heavily and trying to arrange her towel more effectively.

‘Yes, yes, they must have been watching for a long time. It was horrid! I screamed. They must have been watching a long time’ she repeated.

There was a running noise in the trees and Tallott came barging out. Tysa hid her shock and embarrassment on his chest. The Duc was here now.

‘My dear’ he murmured as Juud had still not bothered to cover herself. Tallott spared an admiring glance in her direction then looked out to where the others were staring.

Two tall figures stood unmoving beside the lake. They were male and dressed in a leathery-like costume of a short tunic and heavy trousers. Their heads were bare but they carried quivers across their shoulders and a bow in their hands. Their faces had a lined, creased look, very much like the clothes they wore. The two groups stared at each other.

Widsith went forward to meet them, holding up his sword then laying it on the ground the ground, as a gesture of friendly intent. The Twig-Tellers made no move towards him but let the wayfarer come to them.

‘I hope he knows what he’s doing’ muttered Tallott, keeping Tysa gripped in his arms.

‘He said they were a friendly timid people’ reminded the Duc.

‘We’ll see’ was Tallott’s reply. Juud had hastily dressed and was now watching the meeting with apprehension.

‘He always does seem to know what he’s doing’ she said to herself, to calm her nerves.

They seemed to be talking. She could hear the wayfarer’s voice saying something but it did not sound intelligible to her. He was only two longmans away from them so if they had wanted to it would have been a simple matter to kill him. But they made no movement. One of the Twig-Tellers spoke and gradually the tension eased from the situation.

It was Cean’s turn to come through the trees with a breathless ‘I heard a shout’ and it reminded Tysa of her nakedness, not readily concealed by Tallott’s arms. She dressed with a blushed face. Cean tried not to look. Tallott did not try. After a dry passage of days he felt the old desire come upon him as he looked upon her clean pink flesh.

The conversation between the Twig-Tellers and Widsith looked as if it might be a long one. Widsith had squatted on the ground and one of Twig-Tellers had followed suit. The two girls went back to the cave and the Duc and Tallott walked behind. Only Hull and Cean stayed to keep an eye on proceedings. Hull took a seat on a fallen log so Cean followed suit. The air was sweet with the scent of the sticky yellow flowers that ringed the tarn, and the sunshine had encouraged some lively birds to play amongst the bogwood. A very slight breeze ruffled the lake and made dancing patterns on the surface and a large dragonfly skittered over the water, not in any apparent pursuit of anything but just for the pleasure of it. The warmth of this glade made Cean feel sleepy and as the Twig-Tellers droned on he started to doze. Widsith woke him up with a start. He was standing over him smiling.

The Twig-Tellers were gone.

‘Some guard’.

'I fell asleep' Cean complained 'but Hull was here. Is it alright?'

'Fine. I feel hungry after all that chat'.

'What did they say?'

'They asked if we were the Righteous. Seems the Twig-Tellers are expecting them?'

Widsith shrugged. The conversation meant nothing to him, or almost nothing, for he felt a vague unease. He and Cean exchanged a glance. Could the Righteous and their horses possibly thrash their way through the Sink? Cean yawned and stood up. Hull and the wayfarer twittered away for a while but he did not understand any of it. After the excitement the day had relapsed back to peacefulness again. He gave another yawn in tremendous satisfaction.

As evening softened the mountains Widsith led Cean, Juud and Sollo up the track to the pass. Cean had wandered this way earlier in the day and had been astonished to see an old fort perched above the pass. He was called back from the temptation to explore it by Tysas scream, and the news of his discovery was overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of the Twig-Tellers. But he had persuaded Widsith to go with him to look over the old fort and surprisingly Juud agreed to come too, and he had a momentarily surge of hope that she might be changing in her feelings for him. Sollo Wramm also tramped along, though for what purpose Cean could not see. He rather wished the trader had stayed by the fire with the others.

In a few bitwicks the track reached the saddle, and here Cean struck off to the right and pressed through the bogwood trees till he came to a foot of a small cliff. The fortress stood above them. It was not a very grand building, the low outer wall that held the horses and stock had crumbled and the fort itself was nothing more elaborate than a squat tower, three stories high with a crannulated battlement around the top. The central door had fallen off and the doorway was dark in shadow. Shrubs and weeds filled most of the broken crevices where the old stonework had split, and some of these broken blocks had fallen heavily to the ground, embedding themselves into the soil where the weeds quickly covered them.

An odd sound came to their ears.

'It sounds like someone singing?' suggested Cean in puzzlement. Sollo Wramm pricked up his ears and bent his head on one side as if this were an aid to his hearing. Perhaps it was because he replied.

'It's twos  
singing booze'

After the events of the morning the discovery of occupants in the ruined fort were not encouraging.

'It can't be the Twig-Tellers can it?' asked Cean.

Widsith shook his head doubtfully.

'It might be traders, or brigands.'

It was certainly worth a look. He drew his sword and sidled cautiously up to the doorway and peered in.

Through the door the tower opened up and revealed its simplicity of design. The

entire first two stories were one room, mostly quite bare except for some straw scattered around at random. A flight of steps went up one wall to the roof, which despite the years was still intact, though slants of sunlight fell down through the chinks in the rafters and illuminated eddies of suspended dust. What was stirring the dust and making the curious singing was situated in the rooms centre, and it was the strangest sight that Widsith had seen for a long time. He waved one hand urgently as a signal for the others to come and have a look. They crowded round in the doorway, not thinking perhaps that in this way they made themselves the more obvious illuminated blackly against the still bright daylight, and also darkening the already gloomy room, but the inhabitants were to busy to notice.

There were two as Sollo correctly surmised, two old men, crouched around a pot on the floor and chanting a song which was caught up by the natural echo of the room into a third refrain. Their hair was grey and in the poor light, their wrinkled skin looked the same colour. They were dressed in haphazard clothing. One had a ragged coat on his back that stretched down to his ankles and a lurid red kerchief keeping his long flanky hair out of his eyes. The other had a cape around his shoulders, once quite a rich affair which might once have graced a merchants fat back, for it still retained scraps of fur around the collar. He had a short, squarish cap on his head and a stout stick in his hand which he beat in rhythm on the flagstoned ground. They both wore dirty tunics under their outer wear and thick leather boots on their feet which they stamped rapidly using the hollow effects of the flagstones in the empty hall as a natural drum.

Sollo Wramms eyes lit up at the spectacle. He started nodding his head as if to pick up the chant and muttered under his breath.

‘The sink and the song  
wills sing ans be gone’

The others could only watch in confused amazement.

‘Who are they?’ was Ceans question. Sollo weaved back and forth and the wayfarer could only shrug.

‘Listen’ said Juud ‘they are singing.’

As they burst into song the two weird gentlemen started to circle the pot in a slow bobbing dance. Their voices sounded surprisingly young, not at all the cracked wheezes one ought to have expected from such derelicts. They danced lightly, with agile steps of long practice and use. This was what they sang.

*As dreaming, dreaming lay the land  
where each in peaceable way went  
conceived by the four-fingered hand  
the turning, turning point that blent  
all who dwell  
in the roundrell*

*How the horse-warriors came and fought  
to subdue the earth, subdue the men  
to steal what could not be bought  
and conquer all but God in the kingdom  
to lose it all  
in the roundrell*

*In a sinister passage, greed and war  
spun a cold incantation, a twisted prayer  
that ushered in wicked and unruly law  
all the horrors that creep  
from a human skull  
are in the roundrell*

*The long black of unknowing, ignorance and fear  
and trade and profit taint the air  
with markets, small-talk, money and beer  
a king without lineage, a princess so fair  
something for all  
in the roundrell*

*Then the glitter stone will walk  
and carry travellers to find some hope  
and drums will beat and cymbals talk  
and men will greedily grope  
to be powerful  
in the roundrell*

*Nothing was learnt and nothing will bind  
the cunning of men's hearts  
but great stars will appear in time*

*as curious armies begin to march  
in journey awful  
in the roundrell*

*Then the worst and yet the best  
for weakened flesh will cleanse the land  
of all the follies with a jest  
that only simpletons will understand  
to begin anew  
in the roundrell*

*As dreaming, dreaming lay the land  
where each in peaceable way went  
conceived by the four-fingered hand  
the turning, turning point that blent  
all who dwell  
in the roundrell.*

Around and around they went, dancing in faster time as they repeated the verses. There was a scurry from amid the onlookers and Sollo Wramm leapt in amongst the dancers, and far from halting in astonishment at his entrance they simply included him in the dancing circle without missing a step, almost as if they had been waiting for his arrival. Round and round they went, singing new verses but always keeping together and in perfect time. The old mens locks flapping wildly, their coats and cloaks following like demented shadows behind, and Sollo Wramms large brimmed hat flexing like the wings of a giant black baldybird.

‘What are they singing about?’ asked Juud fascinated.

‘Something about the roundrell’ Cean commented.

Widsith was silent, astonished and vaguely disturbed by the fantastically cavorting men. He knew this song, but had never understood it. By now the dance had got truly wild. The man beating the stick on the ground got carried away and beat his partner on the head by accident, but neither seemed to notice. Sollo Wramm was meanwhile engaged in a furious solo of his own, stamping his feet and chanting at the top of his voice. Juud could hardly stop from laughing as the three old men grasped each others shoulders, and pushing their faces into each others whirled around in a dizzying circle that swept wider and wider through the room till they bumped against the stone walls, and tumbled to an abrupt stop as they ran out of breath and collapsed in a gasping heap.

It was a most ridiculous thing.

'Who are they wayfarer' she asked again.

'I fancy they are old friends of Sollo'.

They walked over to the grubby, breathless pile of bodies. One of the old men staggered to his feet and took what was meant to be a graceful bow, but he swayed rather on his feet and his speech was interrupted by deep gulps of air.

'Madam, gentlemen, Hors Follerdyke at your service, and this ere older man' he emphasised 'is Bum Grandy. Get up you useless swine Grandy and shows yer manners.' The older man only groaned.

'I'm Sollo Wramm,

I am'.

Chirped a familiar voice from the floor.

'Thanks Sollo, we know' said Cean amused by the performance, but hardly taking it seriously 'why are you dancing?' he asked.

'To celebrate life' was the grand reply, and then Hors Follerdyke crouched a little 'and death, for they are much the same'.

'I would think they were rather different' remarked Juud quietly to Widsith but the old man had overheard.

'That's 'cos you've never lived miss, or died'.

This made an extraordinary impression on Juud. Almost as if these old crooks knew the melanchony turn of her thoughts these past days. Did he mean something for her? She turned away, gulping back a feeling that felt like fear.

'Get up Grandy'.

Instead Sollo stood up looking a little dazed.

'I'm Sollo Wramm,

I am'.

'Yus, yus, ee knows that, ands how long you've been getting her? You've taken ages'.

'You weren't waiting for him?' asked Cean incredulous.

'Cause we wus. Why else wait in a scroffolous place like here else'.

By now Bum Grandy had stood up, and was brushing the dust off his coat and peering shortsightedly at them.

'Why else?' he repeated in what turned out to be a habit of his.

'What were you singing?' Juud stammered out, now quite awed by this strange trio.

'Ahhh, about the roundrell. You knows that I supposes?' as Juud nodded, he jumped up with pleasure she knows, miss knows.'

'Knows, eh?' repeated Grandy.

Juud was now completely confused. She had a feeling that she did not really know. Were these men real? She mentally pinched herself but still found the odd creatures staring at her. The sun had declined below the Cif mountains and the gloom inside

the hall was deepening. Widsith noted it, and said it was time to return or the darkness would beat them. The two old men had returned to their pot and were poking something inside it. Suddenly a flame leapt out and illuminated the dark hall with elusive shadows. Sollo Wramm joined them and the trio sat around the lighted pot muttering amongst themselves.

Juud did not want to leave, there was something strange and potent in these old men that she did not understand, but Cean had already dismissed the dancers as mad and left, and now Widsith was turning to leave.

‘Mikal are they, magicians?’ she asked Widsith quickly, anything to delay him. He did not seem too sure about what to say, but Hors Follerdyke must have overheard, for he scuttled over and saved the wayfarer the difficulty.

‘Neigh miss, not magicians, foretellers.’

‘Fortune tellers?’ Juud was not sure she heard correctly.

‘Neigh!! That is fors the gleemen and wild ‘uns. We don’t tell fortune, we are ‘em. As you looks at us, you looks at yous. The future is not unknown it is written downs, and we sings the word for them that listens, theys are foretold and we sings ‘em’.

Juud felt stunned by his words.

In the dim light with the pot-flame playing faintly on the stone walls, a vaguish echo carried Follerdykes words, and made them sound as if they seemed to speak not from the man but from the air itself, as if this very moment was foretold as well.

## A Story Untold

*With a surprising suddenness we come to the journeys end of Volume I, here the travellers reach the vast plain of the Granry, and the glitter of Noll. This history will be told soon, and people arrive and disappear. It is a time of rejoicing at the triumph of escape, so why is it that these travellers have become, eventually, after such struggles, and such experiences, strangers?*

From the the Sink a good track, in a zig-zagging descent amongst the forest, led down to the Granry. The descent took only half a day and landed them so unexpectedly upon the plain that Widsith decided to halt overnight. They were on the forest fringe, and they could look out over the sweeping vistas and fully take in the shocking implication that their journey was nearly done. No one had seen Sollo Wramm since the night before. His bundle had gone. Cean rushed up to the old fort but found only an empty vault with the dust settled in the corners as if the centuries had never disturbed it. The foretellers had vanished and taken Sollo with them. Everyone was suddenly sad that the evil-smelling trader had gone, and it seemed a harbinger of how this journey itself would soon end, and Noll, Noll, was in their thoughts. It confronted them and made this day and all the other days to that city important and eventual. Was it an ending or an unknown beginning?

The camp was a perfect place. A brook ran cold and clear beside a clipped grass flat where shading trees arched over and provided protection from the sun, or on this day, shelter from a threatening sky and a quick nipping wind that came across the plain. Once out on the plain, trees would be scarce, and huddled in clumps as though clinging to each other for support against the sheer spaciousness of the land. They had arrived so early that they could take supper casually, and amidst the conversation about the mysteries of the foretellers a silence unexpectedly fell, as if each were thinking of Sollo Wramm. Tallott ended the pause by remarking whimsically.

‘I’m going to miss his foul smell.’

There was a general nod and smile as if to agree with his sentiments. The traders smell was bad, but his absence was worse.

‘I suspect Givtheem that we have not seen the last of Mr Wramm’ suggested the

Duc. 'Do you not think he will turn up again wayfarer?'

Widsith shrugged. He was accustomed in his craft to be neither perturbed at people disappearing or be surprised when they appeared. He was not bothered by Sollos absence, that old Wyrd could look after himself and would turn up as it suited him. Tallott was secretly pleased that the old trader had scarpered. One less to worry about. He was looking forward to leaving this giant and wayfarer behind too, not that he said so.

'Be a pity to see yer go wayfarer. You've done a grand job'.

Juud murmured agreement, and the Duc added perhaps ironically.

'Thomas could not have managed the task better'.

Widsith smiled wryly. Such praise? But he was not listening much to this banter. His thoughts were mostly on Noll, and to the point where his duty would be discharged. He had not seen Mirren for two years and it was time to return. He mentioned this to Hull who was enthusiastic for it. The giant had no family to return to but he had lived many years in the Furrowdale Valley and knew many people, it was the closest thing for him that he could call home. With Widsiths assistance he had bought some land by Fromms Ferry and he was anxious to look after it.

Cean yawned elaborately, and stood up, pushing a pile of embers with his boot back into the fire. He felt like going to bed but the others did not seem inclined. A night-bird hooted and quite unexpectedly he was startled to find his thoughts back on the Rume with his father out hunting for eels one star full night. It must have been the bird sound that triggered the memory and flooding his mind all at once with warmth and rough manners of his father.

'Cean, Cean' Tysa spoke urgently 'a spark, your jerkin'.

'Dreaming lad' Tallott remarked as Cean jumped backwards and brushed the embers from him. He smiled sheepishly in the dark. He was still the 'lad' and his father was still dead. His father was dead! It struck him cold, and he went to bed abruptly feeling miserable and alone.

'Tallott, you always speak to him as if he were a boy' the Duc remonstrated, perceiving a connection between Ceans sudden withdrawal and Tallotts remark. The smuggler shrugged, but he took the hint, but not in the way the Duc intended. If he wanted Ceans support in Noll he'd better smooth the lad more than he was doing at present.

'Well, I will to bed daughter' the Duc rose, and Juud followed, glad to escape the effort of further conversation. She was disappointed with Sollos absence and felt the journey was ending uneasily and too soon. There were more dangers ahead, she knew it. She lay for a long time thinking, well after the others had crawled into their blankets and made their individual paths to the chamber of forgetfulness.

The wayfarer was thinking..

He and Hull had little to fear from Noll. It ended this commission, one of hundreds, perhaps more difficult than most but accomplished just the same. Tallott would pay those remaining sovereigns and he and Hull would turn skaw, and spend the Wast Time by the Brilliant Lakes in a village that knew them of old. Once the snows cleared from the passes they could return to the Furrowdale Valley. For Hull, there was the land to

return to, for Widsith it was Mirren and their two children. The thought of her was sweetly disturbing. He imagined her in the house mending the small cuts and bruises that damaged her children. He knew that she loved the children more than himself. In fact he doubted whether she loved him at all in the accepted way. She was a dutiful wife, affectionate, sometimes loving in her softer moods but always proudly independent, naturally free. No amount of beating would have made her submissive. She would have just run away and if dragged back, killed herself so that the foolish husband would have to kick stupidly at a corpse. She would never let her freedom be curtailed. Not for a man. But for a child

Mirren loved those two of her body, and this was the bond of the marriage. Her side of the contract was complete. She had provided him with a son, but his side could never be complete until he died. If he turned his thoughts away from her and drove her out? Where would she go? The Rise would spurn her, and where could she move to? Once or twice Widsith had sensed this doubt in her mind. The way sometimes she looked at him when she thought he was not watching as if to ask, 'Will he keep me? Does he want me to love him?' At times, in the loneliest portions of his being Widsith did want Mirren to love him but he would never ask. That was his pride, his independence, and she would never offer love, that was hers.

Widsith opened his eyes and stared at the black tracery of the tree above him. It was useless to sleep. His mind was too full. Listening carefully he could distinguish the low variations of breathing from each of the others. Tallotts snores were obvious, but Tysas was almost hidden under it, just an occasional girlish mutter. Ceon turned and shuffled around every night in a fury of energy and woke up each morning swearing he had had a deep night's sleep and was refreshed by it. The others had learnt to keep clear of the sudden kicks that would spring from his difficult dreams. Where was Juud? He could see her figure huddled close to her fathers, but the usual quick light breath was absent. Perhaps she too was awake and wondering about the future.

He would not have admitted it but there was much in Juud that attracted him. A coolness of decision, and a courage. When she broke down in his arms on that bleak night in the Hollerwall camp, he had not thought her weak, but strong. She carried herself well, proud and rather lonely. Tysa was naively brave in comparison. She acted on impulse, whereas Juud acted on decision.

A mosquito fluttered against his face and he brushed it aside. If he had regrets on this journey it was for the results of it. He had not been satisfied with himself. Matthews' death had been cruel, and what about the fate of Sojon and Kalmentier? His concern was not compassionate, it was professional. Obscurely he did not feel he had done such a good job this time around. He had made mistakes, about Gormiah Threadon for example. If they had not fought so well in that hot clearing against the baldymen so many days past, well, the journey would have been bungled there and then. All because he had trusted Gormiah, when he knew he was worthless. That was a botched judgment and the memory of it pricked him in silent humiliation. Then he thought of other things, moments of skill which redeemed himself a little in his eyes, avoiding those baldymen in the toll house (but were not they amateurs? the inside voice nagged) and the navigation over Capability Col (but you needed Sollos map) said the whining voice.

No, it was no good convincing himself otherwise, he had done poorly, if only by his

own hard standards. The inner voice whined: Hull had nearly died, you needed Sollo to get across the Sard.

And where was it leading? Widsith had felt all along that this trip was no ordinary one. He was escorting the true heir to the throne Wenner had usurped, and the Charmstone was in his pocket. This would have consequences in Noll. How would Ogen, monarch of the Granry, and younger brother of the Duc respond? Would he go to war? Had he wayfarer Widsith assisted in altering the history of the kingdom? Why were the Twig-Tellers waiting for the Righteous, and what was happening on the marsh? Solas was right, things were changing, he could sense it. He had led many journeys, many roundrells, with people on mysterious purposes secret to themselves. It was not his business to enquire, and he accepted that a wayfarers duty always resulted in a story untold, but if, just if, this was to be his last journey. Should he stay to see the consequences, or with Hull leave the consequences behind? Let the others take history with them whilst he retreated from it into the Rises? He knew what tempted him.

To go to Mirren and find in her duty some sort of love. To listen to his children chatter and mumble in their sleep as Cean did. To be amongst friends, not suspicious villagers or hostile soldiers. There were all these things to be grasped if he wished, and it would be so easy, yet... if he got there, if he took upon the responsibilities of being a Rise man, and got appointed as Speaker (as would surely happen), would not something in him cry out as it had before for the solitude of the mountains and the obscure mountain ways and secret forests that had been his accustomed home for so long? Could his soul be content even if his body were?

He turned in his cramped position and tried to still his thoughts, but it was not until the faintest morning light that at last his mind slipped under the grateful forgetfulness of sleep. Widsith woke up a wick later decided. He would return finally to the Rise. He was getting to old for this sort of nonsense, leave the adventures to those who pursued history. He smiled inwardly at his decision, and listened to a bird warbling in the new day.

Tysa and Tallott were talking..

With an enthusiasm that Tallott commented disagreeably upon, Widsith mustered the others into a walking semblance early mid morn. Only a league away from their campsite they came upon a sleepy village nuzzled close to the river. Here there were horses for sale and it would have been logical for them to buy some, it would cut two days off their journey to Noll, but Widsith was startled to find that no one was in a hurry to get to the fabulous city on the plain, not even the ever anxious Tallott. No one could give any good reason for not hiring the horses but they walked past the village without doing so, and the next and the next. It was hardly that they preferred walking but a pedestrians pace gave them time to adjust to the thought that this journey must cease. They had begun to think it did not have an end, and that the blisters and mountain ranges, deserts, deep forests, peculiar people and customs would continue forever like a sentence running on past well-spaced commas and semi-colons; but suddenly this was not so. This page in their lives was to be stopped at the exclamation mark of Noll!

Tallott and Tysa had much talking to do, at least Tysa had. Tallott wanted to decline on the conversation, he knew where it led. It was Tysa who forced the matter. They were walking behind the others as usual, a dozen longmans back, Tallott with reluctance keeping in step with her pace but not with her conversation.

‘Givtheem, we will marry when we arrive at Noll won’t we’.

This question had followed a dialogue on the weather and its unexpectedness caught Tallott by surprise. It was so out of context that he had begun to instinctively shake his head against the proposal when he realised she was watching him.

‘Of course, of course.’ Tysa was silent.

‘You shook your head?’

‘I, I was thinking of something else’.

Tysa stopped in her tracks and looked at Tallott as if for the first time in her life.

‘You always are. You never think of me?’

These were hurt angry words, and to Tallotts ears rather stupid. He had heard this nonsense before and he too became angry. Did the girl want him to love her?

‘You always want me to think of you. You’re just a girl, that preparatory school did not teach you much about the world did it?’

Tysa burst into tears and this particularly annoyed Tallott. He had seen this trick dozens of times.

‘Oh stop you’re weeping girl’.

‘If you loved me Givtheem’.

Love, love, how many times had he heard that irritating word! Every time he left a woman deserted on the road she threw out that complaint first ‘if you only love me’. It was like a badly tuned chorus in his life. The more it was sung to him the less he wanted to listen.

‘I don’t love you.’ There it was said.

Tysa was more confused than shocked.

‘But after all you’ve said, after the things we’ve done’ her voice trailed off. She thought that their sexual couplings meant something. Was that not love? Her school-girl knowledge of love was gained in late-night giggling sessions with other girls, crushes, and vows, a hurdy-gurdy mixture of myths and half-truths.

She knew little about babies, but the blood had not come, but was that a certain sign anyway? She stared at Tallott, running her eyes over his set lips and unblinking eyes. An enormous emptiness flooded her soul and she felt as if the whole universe with all its mocking Tallotts was watching, seeing how she would take this comprehension of her foolishness. She looked wildly around. The landscape seemed to be watching, laughing in the wind that swept over the plain. Still she did not cry. In one of those intuitive understandings that come upon us when we are affected deeply she saw the whole gamut of Tallotts duplicity; all the reassuring words, the humour, the affection were employed with one aim, to find satisfaction on her body. He had never once cared. That was now so obvious that she did not need to struggle with the idea.

‘Our baby Givtheem. There’s been no blood?’ it was as much a question mark

as a statement.

Tallott shrugged coldly. So? He was fertile, she was. Oh, she'd get over it, they usually did.

But Tallott was mistaken, for Tysa was not a woman, just a girl. A flurry of wind brought a cold sprinkle of rain. It was all that was needed for Tysa. She fell down on her knees and buried her face in the dusty ground wetting the stones with her tears. The rain increased and pounded on the road. Still Tysa remained on the ground oblivious of the outer world in her deep inner misery.

Tallott stood silently beside.

Something in her agony touched him, but he pushed it away and buried it. He did not care and felt no shame for himself. Mostly her tears just irritated him. Womens tricks! That's how they hold their men. Tricks and tears. Then like magic they would pull out a smile once you had given in. It was too pathetic. The rain was heavy now. Well they couldn't stay here all day. He got hold of her arm and roughly pulled her to her feet. She did not look at him but stumbled in silence along the dampening road. The rain was pouring by the time they had reached the village tavern and Tysa's hair and face were wet. No one would have thought to ask if her face was wet from tears.

The Duc was thinking..

They made camp just outside of the village beside a shallow pond. They had bought ample food from the friendly villagers, who far from being suspicious, were intrigued by their visitors.

'You can see the difference between here and Caroyal. There are no brigands here. No wandering exiles. The villagers are plainly bored. I doubt if even the old ones remember any raids or troubles. This always was a peaceful corner of the world', said Widsith as he poked a stick into the fire and rolled out a bruten baked in the ashes. He was full but could manage another one. Tallott? Here you are. He rolled out one for him. Tysa did not seem very hungry though.

'Yes wayfarer' the Duc picked up the conversation 'even Swivvens war never devastated this land as much as the Rume Plains or the Furrowdale Valley, and now they say Noll is the richest city in the kingdom'.

'These villages look fat enough' Tallott commented as he tried to extract the hot inside of the bruten without burning his lips. It was true. Ample food. Better clothed than in Caroyal, and plump looking kids and animals. It was always the children and the animals that looked lean first if times were bad.

'I wonder how much my brother had to do with it' asked the Duc addressing the fire. This flickered and did not answer. Widsith had heard one or two disquieting rumours that suggested that Ogen had very little to do with anything, but he kept this to himself. In substance they said that Ogen was under his princess's, steely thumb. Well, they would see.

The thought of Ogen had been occupying the Duc on these days. Through the next day and the next night he tried to think about his brother but could never fix his mind on anything secure. His younger brothers face remained elusive and impermanent in

his mind. He remembered the face of nearly twenty years ago. That could hardly be Ogen now. He would be how old, forty? Forty-five? It was embarrassing, for he was not really sure. Juud could not prompt his memory as she had never known her uncle. Yet that was the rub, for the Duc had never known her uncle either. He confessed this to her one poor day when they had been invited into the home of a village elder and Widsith was obliged to tell a story, the other men of the village standing or squatting around in the crowded hut, the women peering in from outside. The Duc and Juud sat at the back, sipping some fruit wine and listening to the thud of water as it rained in hard pellets against the thatched roof. He talked softly so as not to let the villagers overhear his words, as they were intent on the wayfarers story.

‘As the eldest you understand daughter I had many duties even as a child. I never was allowed too much time with childish things, and the difference in age between us meant that he was always playing with the toys I had discarded. At nineteen my father sent me to Swaleton and I arrived back on his death and was plunged immediately into the management of the estate. I had little time for Ogen and I regret that now. So when he left so abruptly on his grand adventure, why, I suddenly realised I had never known him at all. He was a stranger.’

The Duc paused and wet his lips on the wine. The rain if anything was heavier and the gloom had deepened in the smoky hut. It was already late afternoon when the elder had insisted on their company and it looked as if they would be spending the night here. That suited him. A dry roof instead of a dripping canopy was infinitely preferable.

‘So you see daughter, I look forward to meeting my brother with some trepidation. A lot depends on it’.

‘It will be all right father I am sure it will’ she reassured him ‘you left in good tempers?’

‘Oh yes, but it was such a long time ago. No it is not that that concerns me, only the strangeness of the meeting. So long apart in flesh, yet united by flesh. You understand?’

‘Yes father. You wrote no letters?’

‘No dear, why even now as you know a letter would never reach Noll from the estate. The only news I received was via wayfarers like this one of ours. That Ogen had become prince by dint of his marriage.’

Juud had always thought this a little odd, and said so.

‘Is that not unusual?’

The Duc smiled.

‘Yes, he had no right to it, but he had courage in those days, and a temper. He probably still has. And what of my part in Ogen’s future? Tallott has high hopes for me, but I do not see how I will have the will to fulfil them. Lutens Wenner killed my children, destroyed my estate, tried to imprison my soul, but do you think I can muster an anger enough to be against him daughter?’

The Duc shook his head sorrowfully.

A burst of applause announced the end of Widsith’s story. As expected the elder invited them to stay and as custom dictated, and the weather outside made convenient,

the wayfarer accepted.

Juud and Tysa were talking..

The next day was better, the clouds broken in a few places to allow some weak sunshine onto the soil. But the landscape was still as barren, with copses of trees and collections of village huts in geometrical isolation on a vast unending flat surface. They crossed a river on a hired boat, Juud dipping her hand into the water and pondering on Ogen, this mysterious relation they were on their way to meet. Once or twice that day she tried to chat to Tysa who looked pale and withdrawn but she did not respond and only looked away with lowered eyes. Juud was vaguely hurt by the girls unfriendliness but seeing that Tysa and Tallott did not walk together any more took Tysas retreat into herself as escape from Tallotts indifference. It was not until another day passed that she realised that Tysas white sickly face might be a symptom of something else. It was a horrible thought, no surely not? Yet when she looked at Tysa more carefully, she saw more clearly the deep unhappiness etched under the girls lowered eyes.

Camped on the banks of the Great River that night Juud tentatively approached Tysa as she sat forlornly looking out over the smooth rippling waters.

'Tysa' she said kindly.

The girl looked up and then away. Juud hesitated, but if she did not comfort the girl who else would?

Resolved she sat beside her and on impulse took Tysas head and put it on her chest. There was no resistance. Tysa crumpled and started to weep the pain of loneliness, and deceit, and bitter experience, into Juuds soft lap. Juud rocked her gently and held her close till the river was blacker than the night around.

The morning brought a mist from the river that distorted the ordinary sounds of the campsite and made them sinister till a red sun, burnt a bright disk through the mist and dispelled it. The day was brilliant. They had been travelling at a stop-start pace for four days. It would take two more to enter the grand archway of the main city gate. There was no hurry. That day saw them following the river for some time and Cean even had the leisure to catch a caerp which glittered golden in the sun as it hung flapping at the end of his line.

Cean was thinking..

For Cean these days should have been compounded by uncertainty. He knew no one in Noll had no relations no friends. No family alive now. This city offered little but doubt, or at least should have done. But that was not what he felt at all. The prospect excited him, a new city, some said greater than Caroyal and richer. And they were escorting the Duc de Qu'et whose brother was king and sole ruler of this great city so surely they would be welcomed. Tallott had taken him aside early on the plain and urged Ceans support for their cause.

'I know we didn't gets on at times. Well, that was my fault. I admit it plainly, but I say we should put this all behind. We have to keep together. This journey is only the start of another, and greater' said Tallott enthusiastically. In secret Tallott and Cean buried

the Charmstone in a small wooded copse. It would be foolish to carry it with them, as he reminded Cean. They were back in the world of men now and distrust was the only reasonable precaution.

The younger man should have rejected Tallott out of hand but young men are easily persuaded, and Tallotts words had fired his energies again. He had remembered his fathers death and the thought of revenging it was gratifying. And there was the adventure itself, the thrill of conversing with kings and moving in palaces, and riding in a warrior force onto the plains of Rume. Cean liked this mode of life, the travel suited his restless spirit, what else would he go back to? The boring farm and boring peasants? He was part of history now, making history, a ploy that Tallott used to advantage. The boy won over once, lost, was easily won again. As for Juud? Well, a city must be full of women, especially friends of the king.

They left the shallow valley that held the Great River and cut directly across the plain towards Noll. On the last night they camped by a ford that breasted a muddy stream half a league outside a village. Some of the local children came out to look at them but this close to Noll the people were used to travellers. You would have to be something exceptional, a merchants caravan, or a kings party of soldiers, to attract interest. Dusty walkers in weather-beaten clothes aroused no fascination.

Juud was thinking..

Tysa had told Juud everything.

She looked at Tallott with repugnance. Poor Tysa. Juud did what she could asked if Tysas blood had come yet, and when being told it had not comforted the girl. There was still a chance that she had not conceived, but privately Juud doubted this, especially when she heard that the occasion in the Dell of Azel had been duplicated by other times.

'But never as lovely. That was magical. I'm sure he loved me then. I'm sure' said Tysa pleading with Juud to agree.

The poor girl was so lonely that Juud had to assure her many times that she and the Duc would not desert her. It was a reversal of fortune for Juud to be sorry for Tysa when for some time she was envious of the girls loving innocence. But that innocence had led her into a corruption that Juuds worldliness would never have done. The security of her own judgement made Juud feel stronger in herself and not so fretful that her life was being drained into the care of her father. If that was her fate she would accept it.

Wandering in a cluster of cool trees some way from the camp Juud felt a detachment from the events surrounding her.

Noll would offer new challenges, and there would be times of emptiness and despair, times when she would see no friend, no one to listen to her. She leant against a tree and rubbed the ageing bark. A bird hovered momentarily above her head then skittered off into the evening shadows. Would she find love? But what had love done for poor Tysa, yet, yet, she was a woman and wanted what other women said they had found. It would not do to dwell on it, or him, it seemed too unlikely. Like that star out there, too far away and soon disappearing behind a scudding cloud. She sighed, half

in self-pity half in resignation. She had to be strong, simply because her father needed her to be strong.

She should get back to the campfire. There would be singing tonight and feasting. The wayfarer had bought a suckling pig from the village and was roasting it on a spit, hot gobs of fat hissing into the fire, and Tallott (it had to be Tallott) had produced a thick apple wine to complement the porker. They would get drunk. And talk too loudly, remember the worst trials with humour and exaggeration. Make it all sound easy. Make it all sound as if they were a united family of travellers bent to one common and glorious goal. Was it true? Juud pressed against the tree and wondered.

In the wine it would be true, but not in the morning, where they would walk some leagues and on the sixty-fourth day of Wast Time come in sight of Noll, with its high walls and ornate towers and frippery, bubbling up from the plain like froth upon a sparkling wine.

## Book II

*So far so good, and in faith I can state that the next two books are not so long-winded as the first. I am conscious of trying to move events along, but history, being well-told has to fill the gaps of our ignorance, but in any case we have the main characters of the tale well laid out, and what will occupy next is their interactions, and the way in which their ambitions force changes onto the kingdom, and such changes! But I must not run ahead of myself.*

*This book continues with our set of movers and shakers and carries on with their adventures as they try to make sense of the events around them. Of course in many senses they are propelling the events themselves, indeed want certain events to happen, but of course quickly lose control. As a historian I can see the folly of it all, but what can be the solution? They say, that men who do not learn from the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. So why do men not learn?*

## A Gaudy Flower

*After a preliminary exposition on the history of the Granry and its principle city, Noll, we observe the goodbyes and the frosty welcome of the Duc du Qu'et into his brothers kingdom. Things are out of sorts, it seems. Fustel is the kings chamberlain, a ridiculous character that should not be part of any recognisable history, but then history is full of ridiculous characters.*

*64-67 Wast Time 156*

For long the plain stood bare and wild, undisturbed by peoples. Fish would plop in the Great River and birds would fly loosely over the grass and catch the reckless insects. Wild deer would sometimes leave a delicate trail on a dusty bank, but never a human foot strayed onto the plain. It was not inaccessible, merely undiscovered. Eventually the Past People moved gently onto the plain which they called 'the granry', in their tongue it simply meant space, and they scraped the surface, planted, and dragged water up from the rivers and were surprised at the rich crops. Settlements began to appear, small villages, nothing larger, and some sort of farming pattern developed as these first settlers grew accustomed to the space, and then began to fill it.

Then the horse warriors came.

It cannot be possible to imagine what the sight of a thundering horse, capped by an armoured man, must have had on those who had never seen a horse, let alone ridden one. Metal to the early people was a rare ornament, and they had little to protect themselves from the sharp swords that bit into their flesh. As much as from shock as weakness, these first settlers crumbled under the galloping hooves of the horse-warriors, and became a subjected people almost immediately, with little time to react, and only time later in their slavery to produce the haunting songs that lamented their lost freedom.

A village of sorts had always stood on the site of Noll, for the village stood on the remains of an old city. It was a natural position, being a rare hill on a mostly flat landscape, and it had a spring bubbling into a lake at its foot. The first settlers had already begun to learn the skill of tapping the abundant liquid riches that lay under the plain,

but the horse warriors brought further refinements. Soon the plain was dotted with stone wells and wooden turning wheels that lifted the water to the dry topsoil. Without these wells life on the plain would be difficult. With them life was rich. For this thin layer of soil, sprinkled with artesian water and given careful attention, would yield a fat crop, and in the years following the horse-warriors conquest, the plain quickly blossomed in a patchwork of fields. Wheat, rye, barley, then later elaborate orchards, and always vast herds of cattle and sheep. As the land grew fatter so trade increased and a fair prosperity resulted, changing Noll from a cheap stockaded, village to a fine stone city girded with strong walls. By the time Swivven had gained power the city had grown outside of the walls and sprawled off the hill onto the plain.

The War of Succession affected Noll very little, and the city bustled its way out of the Dark Period earlier than any other part of the kingdom. It was also unaffected by the War of the Lords, and whilst men on the Caroyal plains butchered each other, and Driac Slorty struggled to found his empire in the Furrowdale Valley, the merchants of Noll counted their profit and expanded their enterprises. 'A Gaudy Flower' was how one poet had described Noll, and indeed with the merchants fancy for painted towers and soaring steeples, the city did look rather like a rare and unusual orchid sprung from a barren field.

The fish still plopped in the great river, the insects tossed and hummed over the plain in their perennial war with the hawking birds, and the plain wind still scoured the billowing grasslands, sometimes raking the dust for many leagues into a scintillating blue sky, all this was unchanged, but now man was here, and his landmarks now as certain on this wild land as those created by nature.

## II

The city was a shock to them.

According to the Ducs journal they had been travelling for 72 days and in that time had passed nothing larger than a village. The barrage of busy people and the clamorous streets unerved Juud and after a bitwick she wanted to escape, back to the silent mountains and the whisper of wind. This place screamed in her head. No wonder the wayfarer and Hull had declined to enter with them, and their absence was already a painful fact. It would have been reassuring to follow Widsith as he picked his knowledgeable way through the streets and found them a safe sheltered lodging place. Instead he had given them clear instructions on how to reach a particular inn, but it was a poor substitute for his presence. The leave taking had been brief and rather too efficiently done, as if both groups were embarrassed to show much emotion. Tallott paid Widsith the balance of the fee, five sovereigns and this startled Juud. She was reminded that the wayfarer was only a hired hand, a servant, obedient to their wishes, yet it had never seemed like that. He had been one of them, more than that, their leader. To lose him was like losing their head. Did he really only take all that trouble, guiding, encouraging, building fires, advising, just because he was paid to? It would seem so. Juud felt a pang

inside herself. Had not there been times when he had seemed something more? A confident, a man with compassion. That night she had been held by him, and felt his inner calm soothing her hurt. Was that his duty? Five gold sovereigns worth of pity?

After giving careful directions on how to reach the inn Widsith and Hull shouldered their baggers and stood hesitating. The wayfarer said a measured goodbye to each in turn, the Duc, Tysa, Cean, Tallott and Juud.

'You are on your own' he joked 'remember if you want us we will be at the Brilliant Lakes, at a village called Sutun. We will be there till the middle of Old West till the snow has cleared from the Raggerok'.

They nodded and looked dumbly at him. Widsith thought how suddenly helpless and stupid they looked. Juud was standing aside looking vulnerable, avoiding his eyes. Something had grown between them and now it was to be snapped off, like a pruned twig. Perhaps he should tell her of Mirren so that she might not regret?

'You have done us well wayfarer. We will not forget' said the Duc sternly to hide his emotion 'if I hear of other business I can put your way I will do so. We can hardly repay you otherwise'.

'I am not sure I would take other customers anyway' said Widsith 'each journey gets a little harder'. Juud was shocked,

'You will give up your craft?'

'I have some land on the Rise. It needs looking after'.

He did not add he had a wife also, and two children, who had not seen their father for two years. Juud looked sad.

'Well wayfarer, we've got to come back your way so we might drop in for a chat eh?' Tallott as always cheerful, looking to the future.

'Yes' said Cean, he was eager to give his thanks 'we will see you again. Our adventure has not ended. Even if your has, I'm sure we will meet again'. He felt quite confident that they would not.

Juud was saddened still further. To talk of the journey without their two ablest guides. She looked up and at last met Widsith in the eyes, showing all the helplessness she felt at their departure, but now it was his turn to look away.

He and Hull turned off on a side trail and walked quickly along it, turning back once to wave at the small group that stood rather forlornly outlined against the wide blue sky. Four of them waved. Tallott was busy tying up his bagger.

### III

Noll overwhelmed them and they quickly lost their direction in the racket of traders, haggling housewives and peasant carts abusing their way through the crush in a dozen different local dialects, and no one sparing a glance at the strangers in their midst. Tallott alone of them seemed to enjoy it. 'A bit of life' he commented, stealing an apple

from one laden stall and munching it. By working their way uphill they came upon the central square dominated by the three towered palace that held the kings court. The towers were decorative rather than useful, though they were sometimes used as look-outs and added a striking signature to the citys skyline. The inn was set square before them, in an obviously better part of town. The travellers suddenly felt like vagabonds amongst the towns smarter inhabitants, and a few peculiar looks were directed their way. The two girls were conscious of their raggedness, and the alteration of their clothes after Swaleton had been one of forced practicality, one item at a time, slippers to shoes to boots, dresses to trousers, lace bodices to heavy peasant shirts, and as such took place gradually over the journey, each change meeting the necessities of the situation. Now suddenly these clothes were out of place and they were suddenly ashamed of them, and then ashamed that they should feel that way.

The landlord of the smart inn gave them a hard look when they walked in, but he found the colour of Tallotts gold sovereigns satisfactory as they rattled across the counter and promised to send up two seamstresses to attend to the ladies needs. This was done and the girls kitted out once more in sweeping cloth that was hard to avoid tripping over. The fashion of this town was different and daring to Swaletons conservative ways, and Juud and Tysa felt unacustomedly exposed in bodices that seemed shockingly low. Only the seamstresses repeated assurances that their costumes were modest by Nolls standards convinced them to wear the outfits at all. The men threw out their journeying clothes and styled themselves on what the current gentlemen around town saw fit to flaunt. For the Duc it was a strange pleasure to be as well dressed as his position demanded.

‘You look well dear’ he said to his daughter as she swept into the room in her new garments, rather hoping she would comment the same to him. He was not disappointed.

‘So do you father. You look like a Duc’. He smiled.

‘And you a Ducs daughter

They had travelled the breadth of the kingdom to at last look themselves. They were ready for the court, and were surprised to find that apparently the court was ready for them.

Tallot had already uncovered an ominous fact, Ogen, Prince of the Plain, Lord of the Granry and Noll, was absent, gone, so he was informed to the Passage of Prayer, ‘for his health’. Tallotts informer was their landlord who had become daily more intrigued by his curious poor-rich guests. He was inclined to be confidential to them and he made no secret of his views. The Prince had apparently not been very well but who had ever heard of sending a sick man to a monastery high up in the mountains in the middle of Wast Time ‘for his health? Even more uglier to Tallotts mind, and this he did not pass onto the others, were the rumours concerning Ogens beautiful princess, Herrietta. They suggested anything but a wifes loyalty to her husband. In the landlords opinion the princess had sent her consort to the mountains ‘to kill him off’, though Tallott found this far fetched. There were simpler ways of doing it after all, poison or a riding accident? The princesses methods were ludicrously complex.

‘Ah, but she’s that sort of person’ remarked the landlord knowingly.

The landlord wanted to know more about them of course, where they had come from, what were they doing here and what was the urgent news they had for the court? From Swateton he enquired? In the middle of Wast Time? He whistled, impressed.

'This wayfarer' he admitted candidly 'knows his stuff. If the landlord isn't a prince's spy then I don't know who is'.

Juud grasped the point quickly.

'We come poor, dress rich, why they would be fools to deny us'.

Even the Duc joined in the humour.

'And remember dear, this after all is the middle of Wast Time and novelty is rare.'

They made an appointment to see the Chamberlain and three days later the five of them presented themselves at the main gate, and were taken by a soldier through two court-yards into a sumptuous waiting room. It would have held forty horses and riders and was decorated from floor to ceiling in the most elaborate and costly wood-carving. Scenes from the Gods lives, Strom finding Stuess and warding off the evil magician Wyrd, and Gadabout, the great clown, making a fool of that lean worker of the earth, Tilst. On the ceiling was a parade of merchant figures, the pioneers of the city, marching in boldly painted procession to the city square where a king and princess (obviously Herrietta and Ogen himself) greeted them in a grandiose linking of the past and the present. The Duc did not think Ogen was a very good likeness but then, as he apologised, his memory was not the best. Ranged around the room were immaculately polished tables and pompous padded chairs which made the visitor feel uncomfortable, which may have been the intention.

For some time they waited. Cean was getting fidgety but Tallott calmed him down.

'We're here aren't we? Remember Duc you have to do the talking. We keep dumb. Put on your posh airs and you'll have this chamberpot around your finger'.

'Well you certainly should not talk Tallott' was Juud's irri-tated, sharp reply 'otherwise by tonight we will be in gaol'.

The heavy dress she wore was uncomfortable on her and even this vast room was claustrophobic after the mountains. She missed them, she had to admit it. Tysa sat next to her silent and pale. She never looked at Tallott when he spoke yet always stiffened to attention when he did. Whether this was love or hate no one knew. Not even Tysa.

A courtier entered the room addressed them grandly and ushered them down a corridor to a door where two soldiers stood on guard outside. They entered, followed politely by the courtier, and found themselves in a small room with a large window looking out wene ways over the city. Juud could see the plains and even a smoky blue line beyond that of the Cif mountains. So long ago...

The room was furnished in the grand style with tapestries and brocades on the walls and rich ornaments on the higher shelves and small tables that niched against the rich wall hangings. In the centre of the room faced by five gilded chairs in an arc was a substantial table graced with a vase holding a spray of flowers. This delicate, almost feminine touch, was out of place in what was, despite all the frippery, a very male room and which was confirmed by the imposing figure behind the table. He stood and motioned with a precise richly clothed hand the seats they were to occupy. His hand was

soft and white, unblemished by manual labour. The Duc glanced at his hands, calloused from the long journey. The courtier stood patiently by the door. Something in the Chamberlains eyes caught Juuds attention, it was a look of surprise, which he masked in a false smile.

‘Ladies and gentlemen how can I help you? I am Fustel the kings personal Chamberlain with responsibility over those who desire an audience with His Majesty’.

Fustel had a grand manner, but his squeaky voice and bulging belly contrasted incongruously with his status. The Duc hesitated then spoke and something in the rich setting brought back a Duc's tone to his voice. He spoke with authority.

‘We wish to see king on private matters’.

Fustel squeaked contentedly.

‘I am afraid that is impossible without some indication of what these matters are. The king is a busy man. The Duc looked at Tallott who nodded slightly and took the plunge.

‘I am the kings brother’.

If this astonished the Chamberlain he did not show it, but a furrow collected on his forehead.

‘I was not aware that he had brothers?’

‘I am the Duc du Qu’et, his oldest brother’.

At this Fustel visibly sat up and exchanged a glance with the courtier. Ceann found it disturbing to have this man standing behind him and was trying to restrain himself from turning around.

‘Can you prove this... sir’.

The Chamberlains words gave him away. If he had seriously doubted he would not have added sir’ to his sentence.

The Duc motioned to his face.

‘This’ and he gave the chamberlain Juuds ring, it had the insignia of the Qu’ets upon it, a golden caerp. Fustel examined the king. It was true Ogen had such a ring, but could it not be forged?

‘But Ogen will recognise me I am sure. Why not give us an audience?’

The Chamberlains pretentious manner was slipping away and he looked anxiously at the courtier. Clearly the Duc's manner impressed him, as Tallott had hoped it would. Juud now understood the look of surprise on the Fustels face. He had recognised the similarity of features between the king and the Duc.

The Chamberlain was in some difficulty. To assume that this gentleman was the kings brother was taking a risk, yet to deny it would encourage the Ogen's wrath, if Ogen were here. That was the damnable point. Only the princess was here, and she ruled, but only the king could prove this mans identity, which was astounding if it were true.

‘This ring’ he did not want to say it was false ‘is interesting. How did you get here?’

‘From the city of Swaleton across the Fore Range and the Raggerok’.

'In Wast Time?' the Chamberlain was incredulous.

'In Wast Time' the Duc affirmed 'I wish to see my brother, Ogen du Qu'et' he repeated.

Really Fustel was at a loss. The princess should be informed, yet the man might be an imposter. She did not like unnecessary disturbances. The man spoke like a Duc and his manner was uncannily like Ogens, but that could be a cunning imitation. The ring could be forged though it was certainly Ogens in style. He hesitated to act.

The Duc was getting impatient.

'If you are the kings older brother why are you here?'

'That is business between him and myself. This is tiresome, can we see the Ogen or not? If you insist to know we are fleeing from King Wenner who had me imprisoned in the city of Swaleton for some ten years'.

It was this that finally convinced the Chamberlain to disturb princess. It betrayed an echo in his mind of something Herrietta said, that the Ogen had a relation imprisoned by Lutens Wenner.

'One moment if you please' he squeaked and stepped outside with the courtier joining him. They walked a little away from the soldiers and whispered closely.

'Do you think it is him?' said Fustel in a hushed excited voice.

'The Ducs brother?'

'Yes?'

'He spoke well, and looks uncannily like the king, and so did the older girl. He called her daughter'.

'If they are imposters they are cunning ones' muttered Fustel.

The courtier was enjoying the Chamberlains dilemma. If they were as they said then they should not be kept waiting, but if they were imposters the princess would be angry indeed. She had a fierce temper.

'They do not offer much proof' the Chamberlain worried at the problem and paced up and down the corridor 'things have got to be just right' he muttered to himself.

'Perhaps that is proof of their claim, imposters would take better care', the courtier suggested smoothly.

'But if they were good imposters that is how they would like us to think' objected the Chamberlain. This was a ridiculous circle.

'Perhaps we should listen. They might be talking amongst themselves' suggested the courtier. This was a sharp idea and two gilded gentlemen of the court bent their ears to a crack in the door. The guards lifted their eyebrows at each other.

Inside they were talking.

'I do not think they trust us father'

'No. What do you think Givtheem?'

Tallott shrugged.

'Let's wait Duc. We've nothing better to do'.

'How can we see the king if he is away?' queried Cean 'the landlord told us that. The

only proof the Duc has is that Ogen will recognise him. The ring didn't impress that fancy fellow'.

They were silent again. Outside the courtier and Chamberlain drew back again. Neither wanting to speak first in case their interpretation of the words was wrong. The Chamberlain was not surprised that they knew Ogen was not here, so why pretend ignorance? On the other hand...

'The other man had called the aristocratic one Duc' Would he do that normally if he were not?'

'If he thought we were not listening, perhaps?'

'Then he is Duc?'

The courtier was not to be trapped.

'Perhaps?'

'They said the only proof they had of their claim was the Duc's face. That Ogen would recognise him. Those cannot be the words of an imposter, surely?'

'They seem not?'

Fustel grunted. And he was a 'fancy fellow' was he. That decided him.

'I will see the princess. Wait here'. The courtier nodded politely. He was trained to wait.

But those inside were not and were disconcerted. As the bitwicks lengthened into wick so did their apprehensions. Tallott paced the room slowly, trying to avoid looking at Tysa. Cean yawned. Juud gazed out of the window and tried to imagine where the wayfarer was now, then patted her father's knee when he saw his worried expression.

The door opened and the courtier marched in.

'This way please?'

'What's going on?' said Tallott stiffening to resistance, and forgetful of his earlier advice.

'This way' insisted the courtier.

The Duc motioned Tallott to be obedient and they followed the courtier out into and down the corridor, with the soldiers rather ominously following. The courtier rapped on a double door embellished with the king's arms, heard an answering response from inside and pulled them aside to let them through. The room was grander than the Chamberlains, and lighter, with tall paned windows shining on the tufted rugs on the floor, and reflecting off the cream and gold walls. All was white and gleaming. Standing in the room was a woman dressed in a brilliant gown, as white as the walls and seeming as tall, sweeping, in rustled folds to a face calm and unmoved. The chamberlain stood behind her and spoke.

'Herrietta of Noll, Princess of the Granry and of the plains in trust to the Lord Strom above?'

## A Web of Authority

*A historical reprise, where we study the arrival of Ogen, brother of the Duc du Qu'et, and his meteoric rise to fame and power, and of his undoubted love for his beautiful princess, Herrietta. We learn also of how a woman may venture for power.*

In the uncomfortable heat of Noll in the year 138 Ogen du Qu'et arrived in the city after two seasons of adventures, misadventures, travels, the occasional debauchery and terror, and sometimes fear, but for all that a man, and somewhat full of himself too, and set about making himself known to those in the city who were worth knowing, i.e. the rich. He had a good name and some lively stories to tell, with an air of I-could-tell-a-good-deal-more-but-these-stories-are-strong sort of thing. His career in Noll closely paralleled Lutens Wenners ascendancy in Caroyal, but without the closed and pocketed ruthlessness of the latter. Unlike Wenner, who remained unloved most of his life, Ogen had the ladies falling over him and it was not so long before such an interesting and handsome young man was considered for marriage. He had no money, true, but he was a du Qu'et, and that was enough to guarantee a good match. Even if he had been ugly and a duffer (which he was not) he would have found a wife easily amongst the snobbish merchant classes that ruled Noll. As it was he had almost the pick of the bunch when he eventually married a Rasset, an attractive daughter of the finest family in Noll.

This family took their importance seriously and Ogen shared in their quick rise to undisputed pre-eminence in the city. They were the richest merchants in Noll and came in time through the leverage of their wealth to hold all the crucial governing positions. Half the elders on the city Council were Rassets, as was the priest of the central church. In times of prosperity it seems nobody minds how despotic is the government that they are ruled by. Only hunger brings out revolution. Feed their bellies, cover their heads and the great mass of people remain contently dumb. Indeed they might even cheer further reductions in their liberty if they have eaten well that year, and assume that those in charge are responsible for it. Of course it is often the case that those in charge are no more in control of prosperity than a field is in charge of the crops that grow on it, but the Rassets sat conveniently atop a great increase in the city's fortunes, and therefore

gained the credit. As they accumulated power, they were applauded, as they pushed the other families into the shade it only increased the sunny glory on their heads.

When Ogens father-in-law proclaimed himself 'chief elder' of the city (he had not the nerve to say 'king') the citizens drunk and gorged themselves in celebration and never thought of the consequences. A few warning words were sounded, by disgruntled merchants and the beggars in the street, but who listened to beggars? And those merchants were only jealous! Better the noble Ressetts who gave so generously of their money to the city institutions and festivals rather than those miserly merchants who hoarded their wealth in their storied buildings and grumbled into their beards. The noble Ressetts! Lets drink to them! Lets eat their meat and swallow their wine! If they want to rule, who better?

In a year or two Ogens father-in-law began calling himself a prince (he was still not prepared to risk the word 'king'), and named Ogen his heir, for he had no male children of his own. When he died (the funeral was magnificent and the burial chamber huge) Ogen sat comfortably in his father-in-laws chair, now called a 'throne' and was acclaimed the Prince of the Plain and Lord of the Granry. The first such coronation the city had known.

He soon showed something of a princely manner by discarding his first wife and taking another. Her fault? She had not produced a male heir, a necessity for a king with an uneasy claim on history. The second wife was beguilingly beautiful and also more fruitful, and produced a son quickly for the proud father. They named him Talmon in memory of Ogens long dead brother. Everything then was satisfactory, the lineage established, a court confirmed. Ogen could relax and lord it over his prosperous people in what he imagined was a kingly and kindly manner, escorted by his young and beautiful wife, Herrietta.

How is one to understand her?

Examine the motives that prompted her actions and untangle the complicated thoughts that lay hidden in her head? She had no confidants, no longtime friend who she conveyed her ambitions and desires. Her parents raised her as a lovely looking child who because she never spoke was believed to have nothing to say. Herriettas beauty saved her the need for many words, for a pretty girl does not need to say much, her looks do it for her. When she was matched with the new king she managed by way of shy smiles, knowing eyes and understanding lips to convey to Ogen her pleasure in him. He was enthralled by this silent exhibition and finding her parents in favour and Herrietta herself willing they were married in glorious style in the great church that Ogen had just completed in honour of his coronation. The people therefore had another reason to celebrate, a festival of marriage, a fertility of Nolls prosperity reflected in the nuptials, a suppliant plain, a contented prince and an innocent princess.

Or was she?

A doubt had arisen on the wedding night in Ogens mind. Of course he kept it to himself. It could hardly be likely that she was not a virgin, and she had looked so trustingly in his eyes that he had no real doubts. All the same, no, he must be wrong, not all women bled on this occasion. Perhaps it was due to his skill? Herrietta managed to suggest without saying directly so that this was indeed the case. That was her skill.

Having hurdled the first obstacle Herrietta brought forth a bouncing son that washed aside all doubts in Ogen's tears of happiness. No one could have foreseen the unhappiness that was gradually to come about in this newly royal family, no one that is except Herrietta, for she had planned it.

So we return to a consideration of her motives.

She wanted power. That was plain, but what had sprung this desire? She grew up in a rich family where leisure and pleasure were hers at a clap of her hands. She wanted for nothing except the thing that could never be hers, power, and that was always a man's possession. Perhaps as she watched her father give commands to his underlings who unhesitatingly obeyed him, she came to envy the sort of authority that only men seemed able to command. Oh, she could order servants about, sack them if they disagreed, replace them even if they did not, it was entirely her whim. She observed her mother demonstrating just this sort of power, and it was a weak hollow thing. To order a servant about! For what? To bring a tastier cake or a sweeter wine? What sort of power it was that only satisfied the stomach? Men had power over other people's minds, including their women she noted, though they managed it so poorly! Her father blundered from one error to another because he had so much power over men, but was hesitant to use it. Pulling back just at the moment when he should exercise it more thoroughly. She would not have hesitated. What was the point of having power if you did not exercise it to your own advantage? Was that not what power was for? To be esteemed. To be honoured. No one would honour a pretty face once it had wrinkled with age, but all men honoured a display of power and the more wrinkled the face the more inscrutable the expression which masked the authority it held.

Such a ruthless aim in such a young body must have had an origin and it could not have been in her fuddy-duddy father, who weaved a web of authority without ever catching a fly in it. No it was more likely that it was the responsibility of a certain young man who wooed Herrietta when she was sixteen and vulnerable. Wooed her and once alone in a private pavilion on her father's estate, seduced her brutally, and left her to cope with the explanations of her condition whilst he disappeared from the city. In cold terror Herrietta was left alone with a terrible living thing inside her body that would shame herself and the family if it became known. The man had shown his power over her twice. First by using her, then discarding her when she was of no use or threatened to become troublesome. She learnt this lesson like no other before or since.

Through the help of an old maid, she visited a harsh old woman in a dark cottage, and in a night of brutal pain expelled the shame of her seduction, but not the memory. In the long recovery (which had her parents baffled) she shaped the cruel philosophy that was to occupy her for the rest of her short life. History will judge Herrietta harshly but who can say in fairness whether she did not act out of some justice for the terrible crime that had assaulted her, and whether it was at least understandable that she should act in the way that she did. History remembers her later acts but not the deed that initiated them. Men recalled her sculptured face and condemned her even for that, as if her later cruelty was doubly cruel because it emanated from such a beautiful mask. No matter how hard she tried she could not escape the beauty of her lips and the clearness in those eyes. Indeed, she would die that way, without a crease on her lovely skin.

## II

Ogens love for her and her son made it a ridiculously easy task to dominate him. Noll had no experience of such a disconcerting turnabout, and at first ignored it. As word filtered into the towns hierarchy that Herrietta's opinion was becoming more important to the king than his advisors, they put it down to love, regrettable, but it would wear off. As the months and seasons passed however, and the prince dropped all his old advisors and appointed only those that Herrietta favoured, the leading merchants began to be alarmed. This woman was too young and of course, being a woman, unpredictable. Of course they adapted to the situation. They hardly liked dealing with the smooth-faced princess but if business was to be done it had to be with Herrietta. Occasionally someone muttered about removing this female who was getting too grand altogether, but these people very frequently got into trouble and it was slowly learnt that Herrietta had an efficient company of informers. She hand-picked her own captains of the kings body guard, and assured them of her loyalty to her, and so surrounded herself with a web of authority that some smart gossip likened to a spider in a spiders web, but then what happened to that gossip? Some of the more business minded merchants even respected Herrietta for her manipulation of the king. Once they had overcome their traditional prejudices they began to admire her sharp mind and quick judgment. She always supported their cause and worked to benefit their trade, she kept her word, acted promptly, and in many ways was certainly better than the king who had faded into weak protestations and a simple contentment with his growing son.

But what the merchants accepted in the love of profit and business was not so easily passed on to the populace. They knew that the princess was beginning to rule, and they did not like it. People as a mass are conservative, and if they did not have any particular benefit from dealing with an altered situation they hankered for the old ways. Hadn't they elected an elder once? Whence had come this prince anyway? So who was this meddlesome Herrietta? The tradition of princeliness was so briefly established it was disconcerting to see it overturned in such short time, and (such is the way the rumours turned) it was Herrietta's fault. The prince was weak, they knew that. He loved her, that was what made him weak and they could see that the princess was taking advantage of that. The people were not stupid, they knew what was going on, but as yet lacked the motivation to change it.

Herrietta's spys picked up this disgruntled chatter and passed it on to the princess who was satisfied that with the merchants in her pocket, and the captains loyal to her, the people had not the gumption to launch a rebellion against her. It was street talk and once they were used to her, they would become proud of having a princess on the throne, nay even boast about it to travellers who would wonder at the thing and be assured that she was a great lady.

She could fondly imagine this in her few idle moments, and contemplate having complete power, but there was an objection to this happening. The existence of the prince, but if he should die... an accident... or better a slow illness. No one could blame

her and might even feel sorry for her, bereaved so quickly and with a baby son too. It would have to be carefully done...

Herrietta considered the problem. Whilst she effectively ruled the kingdom she did not rule mens hearts and like true dictators wanted the both whilst not realising that such was impossible. You cannot rule mens lives without making them dis-trustful of you. Rarely it happens that they love you for it, and then usually after death. Perhaps you will be respected, but that is not the same as love. This, if there was any weakness in Herrietta, was her blind spot. She had felt the intimacy of individual mens love and had been betrayed by it. So if that was false, then possibly the collective love of a people could be won, and that would be love enough for her. A love that she craved. This could never happen with the prince alive.

She started to poison him, gently over several seasons. The apothocaries were disturbed and puzzled by the princes listlessness and weary manner. Was he dying? They recommended only certain kinds of food, and drained his blood on occasion but still he got no better. Finally in discussion with the princess they decided that Ogen might be best in a different climate. The hot summer to come would not suit his health at all so it was suggested he go to the mountains to the famous monastery on the Passage of Prayer. The king feebly protested but the princess was insistent. So a grand caravan set off from the city and wound its way ten days later to the high sharp air of the pass. The abbott was Reeter Serval, and he personally took over the ministering to the daily medicines that the princess insisted her husband take. He, weak willed man, obliged his loving wife and every day sipped just a little more of the poison that the abbott dripped into his cup.

### III

With her husband out of sight and out of mind in the mountains, and still remorsefully dying under Reeter Servals gruesome ministrations, she could take on the authority of leadership more openly. She held audiences, greeted foreign delegations, announced appointments that were traditionally Ogens duties and in general assumed the day-to-day mantle of power. No one said a word, publicly.

When the Chamberlain announced cautiously that a gentleman who claimed to call himself the Duc du Qu'et had arrived dusty on her doorstep, and wanted to see his brother, she was at first alarmed, and then curious, and finally, on careful consideration, (whilst Fustel hopped anxiously on one foot) ordered them to her presence. In the time that the Chamberlain bustled off and ushered in the travellers the princess had followed the intricacies of the situation in her mind and came out satisfied. If this person was the real Duc du Qu'et then that meant that the only living heirs of the Qu'et lineage were in her hands, effectively imprisoned on a mountain and the other in her palace. It did not need much thinking on her part to realise that the next in line after Ogen and the Duc, was her son Talmon. If both of the Qu'et brothers were to die then the inheritance of the Qu'et estate plus the claim to the throne of Caroyal would settle on her son.

So in the one person would be the heir to no less than two thrones. Two thirds of the old kingdom would be legitimately Talmons.

It was a pleasing thought.

## Chapter 34

# Wyrd

*Wyrd is the wonderfully evil God, the God of the untrustworthy, the insincere, the manipulators, the liars, and the vicious, and in many ways more powerful than Strom. As a consequence of these unfortunate traits Wyrd is seductively attractive and alive in mens minds. We learn a good deal of Wyrd in this chapter, and also about a long and unlikely wooing, and we learn that passion and deceit are brother and sister.*

*Wyrd, masterful warden of the dark.*

*Cruel, fearful, black, twister, doth thy smell corruption?*

*Sniff the black hearts of men*

*And shape them to thou own designs?*

*How should ye rule us,*

*incantation and spell? Or does thy magic mean*

*leaving men to their unplumbed selves?*

*Prologue to 'Wyrds Tale', one of four in The Articles written by Doao.*

All over the kingdom in different ways and with differing customs, the time of Mid-Wast was celebrated. These were the shortest days of the year, and the coldest, when the first snows would come drifting in, secretedly, overnight, to delight the child and discourage the adults. The deep snows came further into Old Wast, blinding Tilst and settling a silence on an empty land. The peasants would huddle around their smoky fires and eke out food that had to last till Sprig dissolved the soft white armour that encased them. In the cities the traders, stopped up in their business by deep drifts and harrowing winds, contented themselves with yarning in the cosy taverns, and discussing the prospects for next year. The craftsmen took odd jobs of repair work, and stored up their finest pieces for the great Sprig markets, counting themselves lucky not to be out on the plains with the comfortless country folk.

For the peasants it was the cruelest and most tedious time, so the festival of Mid-

Wast was eagerly awaited as a chance to bring some jollity to the gloomy wasting days. There would be meat, and hoarded ale, eaten gloriously around a huge open fire, where for once, the wood faggots were not measured out to make them last. In the cities there might be a parade of sorts, where the God of Mid-Wast was toured around the streets, and some services might be sung in the temples, and less sacred praises might echo from the taverns, amidst the gluttony of feasting, for with a little wine, even the simpletons could mock a God, even this one, the great evil wizard of Wast Time — Wyrd!

Wyrd was the great magician and mischievous weaver of mens fates, and his sinister actions were told in numerous tales throughout the kingdom, by serious men hunched by small shivering fires. Outside the days were short-tempered with a cold creaking wind everywhere that made Wyrds presence seem very real to the children who crouched at the back of the halls, listening to the old men elaborating their tales. How Wyrd would lead the Gods into their dark follies like a puppet master at the theatricals, how Wyrd, scheming felon! made Stroms locks grey and drove a desperate barren Stuess to the poor consolation of clever Gadabouts arms for a while. How the evil mandarin cheated Stuess a little more of her crop days, and Tilst out of Sprig, so the earth would stay hard, cold and unbroken a little longer each year. And the old men would bring in their youth and say categorically that this was true, and would Strom see it instead of chasing Tilsts wife Bree — the bright, ever escaping sun.

The stories went on and on, as long as Wast Time itself, the old men weaving the horror. Sometimes Wyrd would be given a wife in Wene, the silver slither of moon, and sister to Bree. But the stories could never agree with themselves, sometimes making Wene the passionate dark lover of Wyrd, as evil as himself, at other times leaving her uneasy and meditative as the distant mystic prophess of the Gods. There was an expression, 'she sees like Wene', which when applied to a woman, as it always was, could mean that either that she was possessed by second sight, or more darkly, a deep possessing sexual appetite.

There was humour in the stories as well. Macabre mocking tales of Drubbin, Wyrds dull apprenticeship, who would blunder away in his masters den, trying to create a goddess for himself, or failing that, to clumsily chase Breet. And you could laugh at these stories, for in every village there was a Drubbin or two, but soon, all too soon, the legends returned to Wyrds darker actions, and whose magic made mans time on land a bitter and prolonged journey. The young men might scoff at these tales, yet their souls absorbed them and there would be few returning on a bleak night to their homes that did not feel Wyrds presence in a twitch of wind, or a flurry of snow that obliterated their hasty steps. It was a dark time and some of the darkness rubbed off on the men who dwelt in it. There were stories of cannibalism in isolated villages when the food ran out. Wyrds fault of course. And lovers locked in a frozen embrace, driven to it by the wiles of Wyrd, and strange footsteps fresh in the snow, not of a man, or any animal that any knew, but something monstrous. Some fearful beast that waited outside their shuttered doors for the careless or the foolish. Perhaps it was the shape the wicked magician took to cast terror into their hearts, no one knew, but these things had been seen, or said they had been seen, which in any case was the same thing for a childs imagination, which needed no assistance, for even adults became children as they sat imprisoned in Wast Time. They crouched by a chill fire and listened out for the wind

and snow scurry in gasps around the outer walls, or was it the breathing off Wyrd?

These were the seasons when the old people died. The cold would chaff their scanty flesh and grip their wheezing throats till they fell dumb. The ground was too hard for them to be buried and the bodies were placed in a special hut built for the purpose called 'holdmans', where the bodies stiffened into frozen mummies and kept their features exactly preserved till Sprig softened the ground sufficient so that they could be decently buried. Often the bodies would feel Sprig before the earth did and the tang of death would hang about the wet slushy snow. It was an old joke that a trader would venture out, not when the snows had cleared, but when the holdmans were empty. Sometimes, it was told, the holdmans were already empty when the villages came to bury their dead. Wyrd? Perhaps, but people would look at the plump red cheeks of the peasants and shiver.

Matters were nore comfortable in the cities, and death visited only as often as any other time. Indeed, beggars and the like would often seek to enter a city during the Wast seasons so as to escape the harshness of the countryside. Every year cities had to round up these unfortunates and deposit them outside the walls, and there would be few that would survive till Sprig. But this was not to be the fate of one group of travellers. Of course if the princess had found them frauds, or uninteresting, they might have spent Wast Time outside the walls, all their purposes defeated, and although they would not starve, Tallotts sovereigns would see to that, it would be a dispiriting end to the long journey.

As it was the princess was welcoming, and she apologised for her husbands absence, warning the Duc sadly that his brothers health was declining, and bid them to stay till after Mid-Wast, join in the celebrations of the city, and then when the snows were easing go to Ogen in the mountain monastery where she was sure he would welcome the brother he had not seen for twenty years. No one could doubt her simple sincerity. Her young face shone with pleasure at the Ducs arrival and she insisted that they put themselves at the pleasure of her estate and servants. Every need would be attended to, and pleasure was at their fingertips, and after such a great travail they could rest, rest, rest...

Her voice was a lullaby. It warmed them to know the journey had not been in vain and that the princess was so supportive of their needs. Her generosity was embarrassing, but satisfying, and a little vanity crept into each of them as they listened to the princess welcoming speech. They were after all important people. The only grit in Herrietas warm eyes was the absence of the king. The Duc desired to know more but could only be told that the kings illness was a frightening mystery, and Herrietta looked drawn as she said this, and the Duc, genuinely moved, refused to ask further questions.

It was a delight to occupy the guest palace, with suites off lavish rooms and beves of servants in attendance. The Duc began to feel a true noble again, and Juud felt a noblemans daughter. It was strange to have her own hair groomed for her, she was so used to doing it herself. Strange, but not unpleasant she thought as the ladysmaid combed out several seasons of tangles into a silky black and advised her mistress to 'let it long, so it'll be a beauty'. Juud decided she would. There were long hot soaks in perfumed water, with a maid to massage her limbs, and pandering face creams, and such choice of dresses! She swam in the comfort of it, and she got tired of Tysas mooning and thin face. Why could she not enjoy it, the silly girl? Givtheem was a monster and

she was well rid of him. Once, she found Tysa weeping miserably in her room, and turned irritably aside. She could not help Tysa now.

The days passed in lazy progression, the chamberlain, Fustel, acted as host for the usually absent princess, and organised entertainments and elaborate meals, that would round off one day to begin another. It was entirely aimless, and suited Juud well enough right now, and so when, on the 24th day of Old Wast, it came as a shock when Fustel announced a caravan was being prepared to take them to them Passage of Prayer to see Lord Ogen. It was like waking up. Juud rudely remembered that they were guests after all, albeit honoured ones, and now they to go visiting, her first thought, she later guiltily recollected was, could they not wait till Sprig? But she thankfully did not say that for fear of offending her father, and once she had reluctantly put the coming journey into the centre of her mind, she began to think of its possibilities, and the fact that on inquiry she found their route would pass right by the Brilliant Lakes.

Cean welcomed the news. His upbringing had been spartan, and Herret Grin'kel had been firm in keeping his son away from 'fripperies' as he called them. Cean had never owned a servant, and found the plethora of them here embarrassing. The food was too rich, and the worst curse of it, there was nothing to do! As for Juud, well his old love had fallen stale, and with all these new refinements she seemed to be putting on all sorts of graces. Well she could go to Wyrd! He had found pleasure in a bawdy house but had gained a secret anxiety that was worse than the desire to prove his manhood. But he still kept returning. He talked to Tysa once or twice, wondering if she might be interested in him, but Tysa thought only of Givtheem Tallott.

She had watched her body anxiously and when the time passed twice and she bled freely she was not sure whether to laugh or cry. She was free of a child, yet free also of Givtheem. There was no bud of flesh to bring him back to her, only her poor love, and that had not been enough before so why should it be now? Cean was disgusted by her self-pity, yet it made him lonelier. Tallott was nowhere to be found, oh he was bored! He explored the city, sometimes drank in the taverns, though people were suspicious of foreigners, and he found most solace up on the battlements with the soldiers, who huddled bored around their braziers, spitting, telling coarse jokes, but all the same willing to listen to the lads travelling stories, even if they didn't believe half of them by Strom!

Snow had come to Noll, a gentle white powder on the land which thickened by sleet into an icy plaster, gripping the Granry in an iron grasp. Sometimes there were bare earth patches, yet even these were as hard as the snow, and rain would come over from the Raggerok, pounding pellets of ice on the bleak land and grey walls. The soldiers would shelter as they could, flap their arms against the cold and jest with the lad from Rume 'ow lucky 'e wur to be in sunny Noll'. Cean learnt much of the soldiers life in city, and not a little about the ruler who they shivered to protect.

Once, when he was walking late in the darkened and deserted courtyard of the guest palace, Cean saw a familiar figure through chink in a curtain. It was Tallott, talking to someone, Cean almost walked on, yet, he hadn't seen Givtheem for a few days and it was unusually late. He crept up to the beam of light and saw only a hooded figure opposite Tallott, a lady? It made him smile to himself. Some intrigue of Tallotts, typical of the man! Cean could not make out who it was, then as she moved away to the door, she turned and pushed off her hood for a moment and kissed Tallott in a lingering

embrace. Then she was gone. Cean leant back in fright.

It was Herrietta herself, the princess of the plains. What in Wyrds name was going on?

Tallott had been seen infrequently. As he put it, he had met up with an old crony and was spending time yarning and drinking with the fellow. He brought back bits of information. He had seen Sollo Wramm, selling oddments in the city still with those damn chicken bones, and green eyes? Did yer notice those eyes of his Duc?' He confirmed that the princess was unpopular. The soldiers had called her 'the scheming bitch' according to Cean, though he only told Tallott that. The others could not understand Herriettas unpopularity, for she was gracious and kindly disposed to them on the rare occasions they saw her.

'Jealously Duc' was Tallotts remark.

Cean bit his lip. He had heard much worse from the soldiers, but they might be telling stories, and he did not dare tell them to the Duc in case he was offended. It was funny Tallott had not overheard all these rumours?

'Nah, lad. Not me, I reckons those soldiers are spinning you a line'.

Cean left it at that, but he could not but wonder why a man who should need the cool of the mountains in Croppen for his health, should be required to stay there during the iron grip of Wast Time.

Then he had seen Tallott embrace the princess.

He immediately suspected some mischief on Tallotts part, the man loved intrigue like wine, but this? Of course she was beautiful and Tallott would be tempted, still the man was crazed to try it. What would the Duc say to know his brother was cuckold? And Tysa? In an envious moment Cean hoped that Tallott would get caught out, and he imagined that a beheading was the only appropriate penalty for dalliance with a princess.

### III

It had been a long wooing and a difficult one. That first time in the reception room, as Fustel ushered in the travellers, she had received a bold stare from Givtheem Tallott, and although she talked only with the Duc, her eyes flickered to Tallotts, and there was that challenging amused eye. Herrietta was annoyed, but thought no more of it. A man was a man as there were many men, but, when the Due mentioned the Charmstone (Strom! she had not believed that existed!) and Tallott was the master of it, well, of course she had to restrain an inward smile at these harmless Drubbins. She sent a discreet message to Tallott to meet her privately one evening, and he came, full of cock and sardonic grins. The servant ushered him in and left.

The room was soft with couches and tapestries, two deep chairs, and only four candles burnt, and these were dimmed by heavy shades, giving a warm, secret and intimate

atmosphere. A fragrance hung in the air, in part from a poesy of petals floating in a bowl of silky water, and part from the perfume of the princess herself, who sat modestly with her hands upon her lap on one of the low couches. It was a seduction scene, and Tallott gazed around, and approved.

‘Please sit Givtheem Tallott’.

He did so, opposite her, and watched as she poured two generous tumblers of gold liquid from an elegant decanter.

‘You drink wine?’

He nodded. He had sized up this cosy informal room in a glance, and sipped at the wine, which was rich and to his taste, much like the princess in fact, whom he studied as carefully as she did him. This was as close as he had been to her, and he admired the long creamy neck and full lips. Her bodice was cut daringly low, and displayed her breasts well. Underneath the fine gown he could sense an opulent yet disciplined body. He wanted her, and he was not afraid to show it. For her part she noted his thorough inspection, and weathered strong face. Tallott had a powerful muscular body, and confidence of movement, and he slumped in the chair as if he already owned it. It had been a long time between men, a very long time.

Neither were embarrassed by these visual inquiries. It was a way of disposing of the usual verbal formalities. They looked, and understood. Business could proceed

‘Are you an ambitious man Givtheem Tallott?’

‘As ambitious as any prince maam, or princess’.

She smiled, and murmured something softly that sounded to Tallott like ‘we understand each other well’.

He sipped at his wine and was surprised to find it mostly gone. He poured himself another glassful without asking for permission.

‘My husband Ogen, is dead’.

The taverns were alive in rumours of Ogens declining health and the difference between dying and death were not that great.

‘This troubles you maam?’

‘What do you think?’

‘Should not you be wearing black my lady?’ The title was only an ironical concession.

‘It does not suit me’. Tallott doubted that. Her fiery blue eyes would suit a fine dark cloth.

‘It would be a shame to veil that lovely face’.

She laughed at his flattery, especially at the mischievous grin that followed it. He was a simple honest rogue. She admired his tone.

‘Are you wondering why I told you?’

Tallott was enjoying this conversation. After Tysas clumsy comforts it was refreshing to converse with an adult woman. He reached for his third drink. She was only an arm away.

'I need your help, my husband' and Tallott noted that she said it rather distantly, as if Ogen was already a historic notation in her life, 'died whilst in the monastery. His death will cause a great shock to the people, who loved him'.

Tallott could not resist an interruption.

'As you did not maam?'

'I honoured him. It was enough, and produced his heir, for that he loved me. A princess can only honour, not love'.

She was a strange one. Constantly shifting the conversation so that he could hardly tell whether she was being satirical or sincere. Was she appealing for pity? The light was so dim that her eyes were not clear, and her voice had dropped softly. Remorse? Tallott had another sip, starting to drink cautiously, trying to keep his mind clear for the tricky footwork that was obviously to come.

There was a longish silence, finally Tallott took the initiative.

'How can I help maam?'

She appeared to smile in the gloom.

'What would you say if I told you I had just lied? My husband is not dead, ill yes, alive, barely, but nevertheless alive. And what would you say if I gave as my reason for deceit was to test you, to see if you were the man I wanted?'

There was a sensual tone in her words. Wanted eh? The wine had gone to his head despite his caution.

'And what is this test I have passed your ladyship?'

'I want your help'.

'You said that earlier, perhaps you could enlarge the offer?'

'To kill my husband'.

Tallott was not sure he had heard correctly, but she leaned forward a little and candlelight caught her eyes which burned into his. He hesitated, for the first time unsure of himself.

'For what?'

He knew his voice sounded hoarse.

'For money. And for me'.

'For you?'

He wondered at her meaning, but she had leant back now and turned her face slightly so that the candlelight lit up her eyes and her silken skin. Tallott understood then, or at least he thought he did, but later he wondered if he really had.

He had killed many men. In the battles on the Rume, baldymen, one or two smugglers who had cheated him and a couple of servants who had tried to stop him leaving one estate when his night activities began to be suspected by the master, but these were all in hot blood, not in cold. And kings men and smugglers were different, fair game, but this man was related to the Duc to whom Tallott supposed he owed some loyalty. It was not the killing that bothered Tallott as the lack of sufficient reason, as this king had done nothing to him. He looked at the young princess face, now shaded again. She

was a beauty and no mistake. Her scent entered his nostrils and went spinning to his head. It was a temptation, to have a princess as his fallow field, and he was ploughman enough for her. Not many men would have that offer, and not many would refuse. Yet there was still a game in this, and that was worth playing till the end.

Like most clever people Tallott was aware of his cleverness, and proud of it. He had rarely found any man a match, and never a woman, till now. It was not just the physical allure of Herrietta that excited his interest, but her intellectual prowess. He liked a battle of wits, usually of course he won, and he thought he could beat this princess and have her bedded. Like most clever people Tallott was most easily tripped up by a naive or innocent person, like Tysa, but certainly not by this cool lady who let him roam his thoughts in such long silence.

Herrietta must have taken Tallotts silence as acquiescence.

'It would not be difficult, he is a sick man. A few drops of poison and his poor weak heart...'

'Why me' he asked bluntly, dropping the maams 'you must have a dozen fancy men to do your bidding?'

'They cannot be trusted, and they are also too close to the court, and suspicion might fall on them, and then of course on me. People would hardly suspect someone in the retinue of the Duc du Qu'et, Ogens very brother, and certainly not a foreigner. What motive would they have?'

She had thought it all out plain enough was Tallotts admiring thought. It also made his involvement clear, and even attractive from her point of view. If he was caught, she could deny it all and watch his foreign head hung without a qualm. This certainly was a close Wyrd business.

'What motive do you have? Do you love another?'

'Yes. Power. The love of power. I would be virtual ruler as guardian of my son'.

Herrietta had learned that the best way to tell lies was to tell the truth.

'You have power now?' protested Tallott, leaning forward and waving his arm grandly. Her face hardened, even in the dim light Tallott could see the change.

'It is not the same, nor is it useful. There are many things I cannot do, I must defer to this chamberlain, listen to the gossiping advice of the senile proctor, be patronised by the generals. You can imagine that being a woman in a mans world is not easy Givtheem Tallott, after all, it is hard enough being a man in it'.

He laughed at this sally. She spoke with passion.

'Whilst the prince lives I will always be pushed to the side, my opinion ignored or watered down'.

That was not what Tallott had heard in the taverns, but then from her view her position might look a lot more limited.

'And' she continued 'I am not menial enough to work through another man, whether he is half alive or not, the prince must die'.

She rang true this woman, what she said and how she acted. She was clever of course, too clever, a deceiver, but in those words that sounded like the truth, as if it had

been flushed out of her, bringing colour for a while to her creamy cheeks. Tallott knew people, knew their instincts, and she rang true. That exchange of glances told him they were akin. Pick up, use, discard, and she was only doing in an extreme way what he had done to Tysa.

‘Is the prince to come back here?’

‘No, he is too ill, and he would be surrounded by people who distrust me. You will go to the Passage of Prayer of course. The Duc du Qu’et to see his brother, you in their company, what more natural? The poison will kill him and they will blame the shock of meeting a brother twenty years absent.

‘I’m to be paid?’

‘As I said.’

‘When?’

‘You agree?’

‘Not yet, I’m to be paid? When?’

‘As soon as you wish’. This roused Tallott.

‘I’d like some sovereigns of course’ he gazed at her, so close now ‘as well as you’.

She did not smile.

‘Of course. I am a better prize than sovereigns I think. You accept?’

‘I must think’.

He felt a bead of sweat on his neck and rubbed at it in irritation. Though the room was not warm yet he was tense and hot. He had the uncomfortable feeling that Herrietta was gaining the better of him in this exchange. He had never known a woman so bold. It would be sensible to withdraw and still pretend to be holding a card, even though he did not feel he possessed one. He stood up. He preferred to leave rather than be dismissed.

‘Maam’ he bowed slightly.

‘You will think, and in three days you will tell me your decisions’.

Her voice was devoid of inflection. She had the control of Wyrd! Tallott thought he would like to break that calmness with his body.

‘Certainly’.

‘You will tell no one of course’.

He shrugged as if to say that was his business.

‘In three days.’ The calm indifferent voice.

‘If I don’t agree?’

‘Nothing will happen to you, nothing at all’.

He hesitated, then walked out the door, glancing at the unobtrusive servant. His back prickled strangely as he was led away. Was he really making a decision or had it been made for him?

In three days they met again. He nodded.

‘Do you hunt Givtheem Tallott?’

‘Only certain kinds of sport’.

Now that he had decided to cheat her he felt a great deal of confidence, and laughed with pleasure at his joke.

‘I have a small hunting lodge, ten leagues from the city. There are only wolves to be found in Wast Time, so we shall see how you hunt those’.

At the lodge the other guests dissolved as these two matched their skills and deceits upon each other in a strange magnetic dance of attraction and repulsion.

You will honour your bargain in my flesh, she seemed to say.

I will take the honour and leave the bargain, he said.

I know you will tell the Duc, she taunted.

I already have, he bluffed.

Then you will die before you leave the city.

If I die you cannot destroy the prince.

The prince is already dead, she laughed.

I love to dance.

So do I.

When at last they met in her boudoir, Tallott ripped off the luscious clothes of the princess, and found more riches underneath. They loved till they ached and were sated, and then wanted more. The raw, full body of Tallotts was a revelation to the princess. She had known no other man, except the man who seduced her, and the inept fumbings of Ogen. Tallott drove deep and roused every overwhelmed sense till she was gasping and squealing in his chest. This was a man and no mistake!

This was their passionate peace, but then the strange dance started again.

You hunt well Givtheem Tallott.

It is easy prey maam.

They used weapons of subtly, she played on her youth, he with his experience. She lured him with her body, he relied with his strength. They bluffed and lied, and twisted, till such a web of mistruth was around them that it would be impossible to say who was cheating who. In circumscribed conversations, touches of gloved fingers and slow measured time upon the dancing floor, the princess and the traveller swirled and parried, withdrew and sallied from another corner, took other partners (‘the Chamberlain watches you’, ‘the Duc knows’), and continued down the fascinating corridors and dimly lit rooms where neither could be sure the other could he trusted, but then neither could they end the mutual enchantment. An observer watching the silent sparks and lingering gestures would say they were lovers, but no deadlier love ever took place than which occurred between the princess and the traveller, a haunted gyrating pair. They were loving the power each had over the other, loving and hating in a dance as macabre as Wyrds the magician, as he wove his treacherous spells over the Gods. But there was no magician for them. The spells were their own invention.

## Chapter 35

# The Renewed Fellowship

*A happy party set off towards the Passage of Prayer, and meet Mikal Widsith at the Brilliant Lakes, who agrees to join them. It is cold, but there is warmth, however a lone rider goes past in the snowy darkness.*

On a crisp Old Wast day the great skaw gate swung open and let out a wriggle of horses and carriages, which followed the outlines of the city round till it reached the old straight highway known as the Royal Road. The wind had frozen the ruts, so that the carriages lurched over them in a complaint of wood and harness. Half a day of this travel and Juud had taken enough bodily punishment to persuade Fustel to give her a horse. Out of the stuffiness of the carriage the air was sharp upon her cheek, but the cold was a slight objection to the invigorating pleasure of feeling the wind sing through her hair and the low sun touch a gentle warmth to her skin. Soon, Tysa and and Cean followed her example, revelling in the spaciousness of the Granry. The caravan proceeded in short days, for the travellers in the carriages could not stomach more than a few wicks of that sickening movement. Unfortunately one of those who suffered was the Duc. He had been taken with a bad cold but refused to put off the journey and so endured both discomforts, dolefully watching the others cantering free.

In the biggest carriage was Fustel who sat placidly amidst his cushions apparently completely undisturbed by the swaying rumbling progress of his vehicle. Somehow he has perfected the technique of keeping his body perpendicular, so even if the carriage swung wildly he would remain calmly upright contemplating the passing world with a rare and dignified indifference. At every stop he became agitated, and ran around the servants in a squeaky voice giving a dozen unnecessary contradictory commands. He was dressed in such brilliant finery of reds and golds that he resembled nothing less than a lively rainbow moving amongst the sullen squalls of his servants. Those gentlemen had long learned the knack of ignoring Fustel and his high-pitched demands, and went about their business in accustomed habit. They had done this sort of thing many times before, so had the Chamberlain, but he must see things 'just right'. This was his favourite saying. 'Things must be just right'. He plagued the sick Duc so much with

patent medicines and concern that the Duc lost his temper and told him to go to Strom. Juud had to intervene and settle the bustling, nervous man, till he had squeaked himself back into his compartment and slipped into his passive meditation.

The land was dull, even under this arch of Old West blue. The soil grey with patches of frozen snow and the trees bare and crouched against the bitter skaw winds. The villages stood exposed behind their screen of bare trees, empty and cold with just a smudge or two from a chimney indicating that there was any living person there at all. But once they entered the main street the kids would pour out at this unexpected excitement, and the old men would linger by their doors a pipe in mouth and discuss why these wealthy travellers should be out on such a season, till their wives from inside would tell them to shut the door and keep the cold out, or themselves, but make up their minds! The children would run alongside the caravan till it reached the edge of the village, then follow it wistfully with their eyes as it crept further along the highway.

The caravan stopped in villages where there were a hostelry for the princes soldiers or a good tavern. If the latter the landlord would come bustling out himself, well pleased with such fine business in such a poor season, and the guests would be ushered to rooms with burning fireplaces and hot drinks prepared.

Altogether there were twenty-three in the party, including the Duc, Juud, Tysa, Cean, Tallot, the captain of the soldiers and of course the ubiquitous Fustel. Three carriages, one each for the Duc and Fustel and a small one for the servants. The soldiers belonged to a mounted troop and looked upon the outing as a welcome escape from the dull routine in Noll. The captain was newly in command and in theory came under the overall direction of Fustel, but that gentleman so misdirected himself that the days decisions of when to leave and when to stop were generally taken between the Duc and the captain. Juud, Tysa and Cean kept together and had a fine time exercising their horses in the clear Old West days that followed their departure. In travelling again, they remembered its pleasures. Tysa for the first time in many days began even to laugh and chat with the others as of old, stopping guiltily once in a while when she remembered that she was supposed to be unhappy. When she did see Tallott a shadow automatically fell on her, but Tallott stayed well away from the caravan, riding ahead to the next inn where he would yarn and drink till they caught up. For two days they did not see him at all, and most times only at meals.

Only in spirit was Tallott travelling with them, his thoughts were elsewhere, as was his body. He had partaken of Herriettas flesh, and it was all he imagined, and more. Her eyes like summer dew, her skin creamy soft and yielding at every touch. Her passion, well, he could hardly compare it to anything else. She had given willingly and he had taken eagerly, and his senses were still bursting with the memory, and they disconcerted his previous plans. He had thought to steal the Charmstone for himself and flee into the Furrowdale Valley. It would be a neat way to cheat her, yet perhaps he was cheating himself? A week of nights was hardly enough with this woman. Could a woman who had given so richly really be intending to kill him? Could he really be intending to deceive her?

His great scheme of revenge upon Lutens Wenner still occupied him, and he began to think that in the shrewd hands of such an ally as Herrietta there might still be some future in it. He had been persuaded to think, that once he had done the nasty deed for

Herrietta, she would simply have him disposed of as an untidy encumbrance, but after that first night. She had been like a fury of desire, rousing him so that he became wild and they had rolled off the bed and consummated the match on the richly rugged floor. He still had the bruise, though he never felt a thing at the time. What a memory! He laughed. Meat for the main and a princess for dessert. He rode off whistling, and it did not occur to him once that he might have fallen in love.

On the sixth day they crossed the half-frozen Great River, and stayed on the estate of a local lord, who was determined to keep in well with the princess, and entertained them sumptuously. They ate like pigs, and the men drank too much. Tallott jossed and joked with Cean, mindful perhaps, as Givtheem Tallott always was, that the Charmstone hung around the lads waist. Cean and Tallott had rode out one dayend from the city and collected it and, as was the custom, Cean remained the carrier. Tallott had no objections. It was an effort to escape the lord, who after fattening the guests started to stuff their horses with his best oats in his stable. Only Fustel seemed unperturbed by the huge consumption, but then his rounded figure could accommodate such feasts, indeed had been shaped on them.

That day they reached the Brilliant Lakes, named for the stunning depths into which the eye could peer catching a golden whisk of a great gold caerp that fattened on the bottom. These all belonged to the king and in theory at least only reached his table, but no peasant ever died of starvation beside these lakes. Shallow hills protected the waters from the gusty Granry winds and left a basin of calm where the lakes lay undisturbed. Villages dotted their shorelines, and the stone-walled fields of the region formed intricate patterns on the slopes above the lakes. Of the five lakes only one still retained the vestige of the forest that formerly occupied this basin. The rest of the trees had gone for firewood and building or just cleared by the people for the ubiquitous cattle that was their livelihood, and even sometimes their religion. It was not so jokingly said that by the Brilliant Lakes, Strom had cattle horns bearing from his head.

Juud remembered the name of the village that the wayfarer was staying at and on inquiries found it lay only four leagues to the weneways by the smaller of the lakes. Forgoing the evening meal, she, Cean and Tysa rode off to see the wayfarer. They rode hard and happily, chasing each other over the frozen firm ground in galloping sprints, and their entry caused a flurry of interest from the village children, and they were quickly shown to the right hut, dismounting in a state of excitement and high feelings after their spirited ride.

Widsith was at the door to greet them, and they mingled around him bursting with news and questions that resurged again when Hull came in a short while later. Bubbles of words and laughter en<sup>o</sup>compassed them as they tried to talk of a hundred things. Only thirty days separated them, yet it seemed like a lifetime and it needed a multitude of words to span it. The hut was on the shoreline and it held an idyll of silence around it, dis<sup>o</sup>turbed only by the hungry calls of the fish-harrier and the plop of its prey. Juud saw it as magical and said so.

‘This is lovely wayfarer’. He smiled.

‘Much better than Noll’ Tysa judged ‘we have huge amounts of food, millions of servants and get fat’. She certainly was looking plumper than usual.

‘There’s no opportunity for that here’ said Widsith ‘but we do not do badly. Wheres Tallott?’

Tysa was embarrassed. Juud spoke quickly for her.

‘He’s back in his old habits. You cannot drag him past a tavern. We hardly see him’.

‘And the Duc is ill?’

‘He sends his regards. And Morads!’

They all burst out laughing. Even Hull smiled after Widsith had translated. It was extraordinarily pleasant to be all back together again. Widsith fed them a huge golden caerp ‘princes fish, that’s why they taste so sweet, I trust Ogen will not object’ and listened attentively to their stories and allowed himself to be drawn into reminiscing over their great journey so far back in the memory.

They saw the sun dip below the hills, burnishing the lake briefly in red, then they retreated to the cosy warmth of the hut and sat around the fire as Hull mulled a wine and passed it around.

‘You should come with us wayfarer’ said Tysa on sudden impulse. He had been telling them of their own steady routine and could not quite keep the dullness of it out of his tone.

‘See Prince Ogen. It would only for a few days’ Tysa urged again.

‘Yes you should’ Cean came in. Juud was excited too.

‘Father would be glad to see you’.

Widsith hesitated. He was strongly tempted. In truth he had been getting a little bored with this easy lifestyle, and a trip would make a change and keep his mind off Mirren.

‘It would only be a few days’ said Tysa when she saw him hesitate. He flashed a smile at her and spoke quickly to Hull.

‘Why not?’ he said ‘it’s on the way. We’ve been waiting for the snows to clear from The Passage of Prayer.’

The others cheered and drank to their coming together again, and Juud seized the idea.

‘Yes, yes, we are the roundrell that song, what is it? How does the song go?’

Cean began to chant and they all joined in, laughing and talking till well into the night, till sleep and the heavy wine drowsed their thoughts and they curled up before the fire, happy in the renewed fellowship.

That very night as they slept, and the Duc coughed in a fitful sleep, as Fustel snored and the soldier on guard shivered by a weak fire, a lone rider passed by the Brilliant Lakes. The guard stood up listening to the strange sound of the hooves under this starlit night. What foolishness or urgency would bring a rider out on this snowbound night? He felt a cold tingle on his spine. If it was a mortal rider...

The hooves receded and the guard returned to his post, and could not convince his scoffing colleagues in the morning about what he had heard.

But the rider was no ghost. It was a captain in the princes household guard travelling in secrecy with a special message for the abbot from Princess Herrietta. The letter was stamped and sealed with the princesss personal ring. A day and a half later the abbotts thin fingers would break the seal and explore the contents.

‘Reeter Serval

Abbot of Passage of Prayer

The Duc du Qu’et and his entourage are now in passage to the your abbey on the Passage of Prayer. They are in possession of the Charmstone. You may now make the arrangements as we have previously agreed, however Givtheem Tallott should not be included in these arrangements. He is still of use to us. Retain this rider and send him back when everything is satisfactorily re-solved with your full report on the business.

You can be sure that your success will be amply rewarded and your long exile released.

Herrietta

Consort Princess of Noll and Granry’.

## A Queer Feeling

*They arrive at the monastery on the Passage of Prayer a grim clausustrophic mountain prison, with Druel the wind God constantly niggling at their ease. We learn a great deal of Reeter Servals history, and the strange silent monks who obey him.*

The caravan took two more days to reach the foot of the mountains. Two bare bleak days in which a miserable and chill rain soaked into their clothes, and turned the snow into a frozen plain. Juud was tempted once or twice to join her father in the carriage but now that the wayfarer was with them, and Hull in large attendance, she suffered the dampness of her skin for the warmth of their company. She felt a zestful enthusiasm for her life that quite glowed in her face. The Duc saw it and said poignantly that it reminded him of his wife. Tysa saw it too, and recognised it for what it was, and sighed. At the foot of the pass everyone had to mount horses and start the slow winding ascent to the Passage of Prayer as the pass was called. Fustel grumbled at this. His stout figure looked plainly uncomfortable astride a horse and his calm repose in the carriage was lost as he clung desperately to the saddle. On this third day they rode to meet the blank gloomy cloud that would lift and slide along the mountains like the hem of a woman's skirt.

Despite leaving five servants and two soldiers at the foot of the pass to mind the carriages they still made a long procession up the narrow mountain trail, only allowed a single horse at a time and strung them out like coloured beads against a dark cloth in folds of grey and white. The horses had to work hard, laden with heavy baggers and sacks, and would snuffle at the air, breathing clouds of steam as they worked their strenuous way up the hill, their hooves clipping against the stones and their manes dripping with water. The mist clung to everything. Their hats and swords, shone on their boots and bejewelled all the metal pieces of the horses harness in a glitter of water droplets. It even clung to their thoughts, and discouraged much in the way of conversation. Short, staccato sentences sucked into the air and disappeared. Once Cean had shouted and got a reasonable echo back, a reminder that tall mountains were all about them. Heavy rain over the last few days had washed much of the snow away, leaving frozen remnants clinging to gullies.

Tallott had gone up in advance of the procession with the young captain and was the first to see the monastery. He had gone ahead to get away from Tysa who wore a perennial pair of sad eyes that always avoided his yet always seemed to be looking straight at him. He felt not a shred of guilt over her. She would recover, marry some fine lad, he had even hinted to Cean that she would be an apt match for him, but if he could not see the obvious, well, it was none of his business. That was the damn trouble with women! He should be thinking of what his plan was at the monastery, but instead he was plagued by the sour memory of Tysa and the lingering sweetness of the princess. He must think! At this resolution the memory of Herrietta flooded back hotly, and he allowed his mind to wallow for a moment, before returning to the drab here and now. Tallott was disgruntled with the wayfarers presence, that drove a stone into the horses hoof and no mistake. He still had no clear idea of the princesss intentions, and unless these soldiers and Fustel were cleverer than he thought, they were under no ominous orders to kill them. So the threat must come from somewhere else? Whatever, the arrival of the wayfarer and his companion would queer the princesss plans so maybe there was some advantage in their presence. Tallott was jolted from his meandering thoughts by the sudden appearance of a grey walls.

'The monastery' said the captain briefly as they followed the path around the base of the wall and reached a gated entrance. A side door was let into the wall beside the main gate. The mist was so thick that the top of the wall was hidden, so it must have been raised five or more longmans in height. A veritable fortress.

'Quite a defence' was Tallotts comment.

'I think it used to be a castle once' replied the captain as they waited for the others to catch up 'built by king Weal the Second. He ended up as a prisoner here they say'.

'Plenty of time to admire his handiwork then' guffawed Tallott.

Two hooded monks had emerged from the gate and stepped up to the waiting men startling them with their silent appearance. A brief conversation ensued and the monks retreated to their side door and on a muffled shout the main doors began to swing silently open. For no reason Tallott gave a shiver.

The rest of the caravan arrived, the Duc hunched on his horse, the soldiers clinking, Fustel chirping with delight at the site of the monastery at last, and the wayfarer alongside, Juud, Tysa and Cean escorting the bagged clumsy horses of the servants. A very normal and reassuring scene as they passed under the portal of the gate and into the great courtyard of the monastery on the Passage of Prayer. Tallott just wished that the monks would not always have their cowls up. It gave him a queer feeling.

The monastery was composed of five courtyards, with a maze of rooms and passages connecting them. The largest yard, enclosed an acre of land and was used for stabling and storage of goods and acted as a sort of unofficial meeting place and square for the monastic complex. The other four courtyards served the various functions of providing vegetables and gardens for the monks. They ate almost as much as they prayed was the abbots frequent comment. The smallest courtyard held a private garden for the sole pleasure of the abbot and his guests. This was a flowering arcadia in a grim surround of walls, with the rare scents of lilac and rose, lavender and sweet rosemary filtering into the Abbots private study.

It was King Weal the Second who had built the convent, the captain was correct in that, but in purpose it had been designed originally as a convent, not a fort. But in the early years the Passage of Prayer was plagued by bands of brigands and the king found it convenient to build impressively until these bandits were subdued. That done, the massive wooden frames and heavy masonry resumed their sacred intentions, with no doubt the similar effect of quelling troublesome and troubled spirits. This was the function of which the king was made very well aware, since he was obliged to spend the last twenty years of his life here. In those days it was entirely a convent with only a few men around as servants to manage some of the more physical tasks.

However, in Swivvens reign a few 'monks' were exiled into one small part of the convent, an unusual, and not altogether satisfactory arrangement. These 'monks' were the Righteous, men who had been forced by Swivven to recant their unorthodox beliefs or else be sent into exile. With the Righteous came a rag-bag lot of disgraced nobles, wayward priests and argumentative advisers. This habit of Swivvens of dispatching all those that disagreed with him to the convent, soon reversed the numbers of nuns and monks till the nuns were left in the minority. This convent was now a monastery, run by monks and managed by an abbot and there resulted a curious and sinister interfusion of religious zeal and military prowess, brewed on occasion to an apocalyptic boiling by a notably ambitious abbot, or the festering, lingering vision of the Righteous. Even until Ogens time it was still customarily to send wayward sons to the monastery, either for a short spell of correction, or for life, and such a fate had been Reeter Servals.

He came from a high born Noll family. High-born and with high ambitions for the oldest son, Serval was expected to follow his father and become a merchant, but when his son balked at what seemed to him an unutterably dreary prospect, his father good humouredly let him sow some wild oats on the Granry landscape. 'It'll be good to let the boy have some fun now, he won't get it later' was his fathers opinion. Substitute the word freedom for fun and you can see why Serval was little attracted to this prospect. After two years of random adventuring his father became impatient and summoned the boy home. When Serval still refused to follow the career offered, his father good-humouredly dispatched the boy to the monastery on the Passage of Prayer for a couple of years 'that'll so bore him that he'll be crawling back to me then' was the fathers confident opinion. But the exile found a liking to the religious life. It affirmed for him something beyond the meaningless aspirations of his father, whose aim was wealth and his motive greed, and there was in the military discipline of the monks a vigour that his easy ways on the plain found hard and challenging. Serval did not crawl back, indeed he became so assiduous a monk that his enthusiasm was brought to the attention of the old abbot. This cleric shrewdly saw the potential of Reeter Serval and made him his protegy. At nineteen the youth would have fallen under any influence, prince or brigand, as long as the man was worthy of admiration but, chance now made this old recluse Servals object of worship.

The family was furious at Servals refusal to return and sent a body of men to bring him back forcibly, but Serval hid in the mountains and the men returned empty handed. Whereupon his father cursed his name and forbid Serval ever to return to Noll. Serval, at that time, was not concerned. His religious passion continued unabated for many years till he reached the highest rank at the monastery, and became abbot after his old

mentor eventually died. Once at his exulted position, Serval realised that what he had mistaken for religious conviction, had been only a form of hierarchial ambition. He had nowhere left to rise to and began to ponder ways of returning back to the long remembered city ways. He tried twice for the position of high priest in the capital and was both times declined because his familys influence resisted the re¬turn of the odious prodigal.

As he ate himself up in boredom and isolation on the mountains Serval tried to fashion intricate ways of escaping this self-imposed prison. Ogen as king had the power to grant his return, above and beyond the authority of his family, so he watched the kings progress eagerly, but was disappointed when he turned out to be a weak puppet of his second wife. He had written to Herrietta once but she had spurned him, for she was busy cultivating the very family that had expelled him. So the abbott had to return in quiet despair, enforcing on the monks yet more rigid disciplines in anger at his thwarted ambitions. Then the princess, subtler and stronger now, could see a service that Reeter Serval could offer. She needed a place for the kings health to decline, unobserved by the hostile court, and what could be more isolated than the Passage of Prayer? It stood on the very edge of the kingdom, and did not that abbott, Serval his name, want to return to Noll?

Herrietta quickly wrapped the eager abbott in silken cords of duplicity. He willingly accepted the king into his care and ensured the application of the poison which would slowly destroy his master. When Herrietta wanted further favours he did not hesitate. So she wanted people killed, then they would be killed. If she wanted jewellery she would have it, though for himself he thought the princess was growing vain to demand a gemstone at this complicated hour. Perhaps she was weakening?

When it was announced to him that the Duc du Qu’et with his personal bodyguard had arrived in the courtyard, Serval nodded with quiet pleasure and sipped his own health in the fine 1iquer that was extracted from the monasterys gardens, one of the consolations of this high abode.

## II

The courtyard was bare inside. Scrag of straw and dung mixed in with sketchy patches of snow. A few thin cattle beasts watched the caravan enter. Apart from the high stone wall through which they had passed the other three sides were collonaded in ar¬cades which had a dull uniformity to them and made the atmosphere of the square oppressive. This was not helped by the custom of the monks always to wear their cas-socks with the hoods drawn over their faces so that only on close inspection could you distinguish a pair of eyes, a broken toothed smile or worn wrinkled lips. The monks went about their tasks in a slow dignified walk, which re¬minded the wayfarer of a military funeral march. Widsith looked about him sharply. During the Dark Period one of the abbotts had trained the monks in soldier style and fought some very successful battles as a consequence. The ascetic lifestyle and taut discipline of their religion

fostered a military attitude, and in glancing around Widsith could sense, more than see, that these old memories were still lingering in the monastery. Tallott was still astride his horse taking in the surroundings.

'It's more like a barracks than a church' he said ironically. Widsith nodded in agreement. He knew of the estrangement between Tysa and Tallott, yet despite all of Tallott's roguery still liked the man, and understood something of the ambition which always seemed to lead him into mucky waters.

'A pretty force for a prince, or a princess' and Tallott looked surprised.

They both dismounted and let a cowled monk take their horses. Somewhere there was a bell ringing and once Widsith thought he heard baldybird calling above the courtyard, perhaps perched on one of the four watch towers that stood at each corner of the monastery. The Duc was being greeted by some official or other with Fustel in anxious attendance. Widsith overheard the conversation in pieces 'still ill, the abbott is most anxious, special meal for your presence, king can't not move with his illness, the abbott says'

Juud came over, having passed her horse to a similarly silent monk.

'They do not talk do they? The abbott this and that. I suppose what the abbott says is obeyed here. We cannot see Ogen yet wayfarer and my father is a little annoyed. We are going to see the abbott first' she shivered 'am I cold or is it this place that makes my skin creep? Some of these monks are quite young. The man who took my horse was just a boy. I did not think they took them that young?'

'Any age' growled Tallott 'the younger the better. They know nothing else. That way they're obedient. Like children.'

Juud did not seem to be listening.

'I am cold' she complained 'that last part of the ride was chilling. Is this the pass wayfarer? This rain is horrid. There's hardly any snow'.

Quite unconsciously she had slipped back into her former role with Widsith, as had Cean and Tysa, treating him as the leader and expounder of all knowledge. He noticed it, so did Tallott, who grinned broadly as if to say 'and this time you don't get paid wayfarer!'

'Yes. It's a long plateau and the monastery sits at this end of the Passage. We saw the towers from Three Thrum Pass. Remember?'

The Duc and Cean came over just then and Cean broke in eagerly.

'Yes. Now we're here, isn't it strange. These monks don't say a word. I tried talking and all I got was a few grunts and 'we'll look after it master'. They make good servants.'

'Used to serving Strom' remarked the Duc 'a harder master than us. Come the abbott wants to see us. We should not keep him waiting.'

They moved off into one of the collonades, ushered by a monk. Widsith remembered something he had not mentioned to Juud.

'The name for wind here is Druel. That is the other thing that this Passage is famous for. Druel drives the snow in and drives it away. They build these huge walls to keep

Druel at bay. He comes best at Old Wast so we are bound to hear him.'

The Duc must have been listening for he turned around and added to Widsiths speech the observation.

'Druel is a male wind. The only male wind that I know of, so it is fit, is it not, that this convent became a monastery?'

'Yes father' Juud said and shivered again, and wondered what had happened to the nuns.

## The Tormented Creatures

*A long chapter where the close confines of the monastery, the nagging wind and the hooded monks lead the members of the party to various stages of introspection and doubt. There is menace undoubtedly, but is it real? Tallott goes on a lonely journey and Cean discovers that in the heart of male cloisters there can be a feminine touch.*

That night a licking, rushing sound insinuated into the courtyard and turned the dust and straw about in whirlpools. Widsith heard it through his sleep and woke once during the night as if to confirm it to his conscious mind. Druel had arrived, and was moaning at the corners of the monastery, anxiously inquiring into every cranny before hustling on to the next. By first light the wind was howling over the Passage of Prayer scouring yorn wybs towards the Granry where it would be dissipated by that vast, lonely void.

Widsith lay and listened to the wind. Was it something in the wind that disturbed him, or something in himself?

The window was unshuttered and the morning sky overcast. If Druel was blowing it would be wild out there. Clouds being torn by mountains and mountains suffocated in clouds, like in some great eternal duel between rival Gods. Strom would be up there moving, and perhaps Wyrđ. Once or twice Widsith had felt the evil magician amongst these walls, working down here, at least so it seemed at times, and the thought puzzled him for he was not by nature a fanciful man. He did not believe the Gods existed so if he thought evil powers were abroad then possibly it must emanate from something more certain and natural, and since nature was indifferent it must be from the tormented creature that moved amongst her — men.

He tried to pin the point of his unease down.

They were sleeping widely apart. He and Hull in one room, Tallott and Cean in another, some bitwicks off in another courtyard. Opposite Tallott and Cean's room across the courtyard was where Tysa and Juud slept, and three rooms removed from them the Duc slept alone. The soldiers and servants with the Captain and Fustel were in another part of the monastery altogether. They could not be more widely separated than if it had been designed, which perhaps it had.

Arguably the pressures of guests on the monastery had forced these strung out sleeping arrangements but Widsith could not help feel a trace of suspicion. The light had thickened and the wind was picking up, and if the wayfarer knew anything about it it would be here for several days. He shuffled restlessly amongst his blankets. Unlike a natural campsite there was no easy way to escape and no way to sense if there was anything to escape from. The stone walls were impassive, closed, imprisoning. What secrets were doing in other parts of the building it was impossible to say, even admitting that there were secrets and not his own oppressive imagination. He would not feel comfortable till he was outside of this sacred fortress and in the mountains again. No cliff face ever trapped him as much as these monastic walls did.

## II

In another part of the monastery someone else was having doubts.

Tallott spent the day wondering why the abbot had not sent for him. Herrietta had assured him that Serval would, so what was the old boy up to? Several times in the day as he wandered around he had stiffened when a hooded monk came close, expecting the long awaited summons, but the monk just shuffled by, leaving Tallott more baffled than ever. Was Herrietta making him a Tilster? Tallott was selfish and male enough to doubt it. Women were constructed for love or hate, never indifference. Everytime a woman had tried to use him it was for some deeper purpose, otherwise they loved him (misbegotten souls, he grinned at the memory) and he would dictate the rules. Their hate had been no surprise and their love was an embarrassment. He had never met indifference. She could not love him? The thought left Tallott wondering

He decided by an exhausted aftersun that it would be wise not to try and guess Herriettas motives. Tallott had usually never been at a loss to untangle the thread of a womans desires, so this admission was a tremendous concession to the princess abilities and in a backhanded sort of way, a considerable compliment. If his only purpose was to gain access to the Charmstone for the princess (and incidentally get rid of him in the process) then he had fallen into her lap nicely, but the idea seemed too unsophiscated for Herrietta. No, she was up to something the witch, yet what was it? At tea they were once again to meet the abbot. Perhaps then Serval would take him aside. It was just possible that the abbotts religious duties interferred with his ambition, though Tallott said this with a mental sneer.

## III

The abbot, Reeter Serval, sitting in his study that evening, considering the forces he had at his disposal to complete the task. The princess had said nothing of Fustel

or the soldiers. He assumed they would be exempted from the slaughter, and indeed provided witnesses to the cruel attack of the travellers upon the revered figure of Ogen. Serval pondered upon Herriettas allowance to him of such wide discretion. Was she coiling a seductive rope from which he would hang himself? But he had her letters, as of course she had his, so they must for now trust each other in this delicate matter. He wondered why she had changed her mind over Givtheem Tallott? The abbott felt the need to proceed cautiously. Otherwise the stain of too many dead men would stain his hands, and perhaps his hopes. Quite unwillingly, he found, like Tallott, that he was drawn into the princesss mischievous and deceitful games.

It was dangerously inconvenient that one man of the group should be spared. Could he not later explain that the monks got out of hand and that in their sacred fury could not be contained? The thought was at the murky bottom of his mind that Tallott was being spared for some darker task of the princesss, perhaps his own death? He had seen the man and judged him to be ruthless enough for the task, not to be lightly undertaken in the abbotts own stronghold, surrounded by followers who would die for him. That would explain the presence of the wayfarer and Hull, both dangerous men, Serval suddenly realised how dangerous his position had become and how subtly misleading Herrietta could be. She may not be physically present but her unrestrained desire for power cast a long shadow over the monastery deepening the already dark corridors. The abbott cursed her, but not in secular obscenities but in the harsher damning language of his religion. Strom would judge her, she was beyond the judgements of man or priest.

That evening he informed the Duc du Qu'et that Ogen was still deeply ill and had been annointed with the Water of Stasy a sacred ointment that had great healing properties but effectively placed the king in religious isolation until the 33rd of Old Wast, the day after tomorrow, then, the abbott promised, nothing would prevent the Duc from seeing his brother.

'Is Ogen aware that I am here?'

'Sire I do not know, he is so ill, but I do not think so. His health would not tolerate such a joyous shock and as I have been informed he lies mostly in a half-awake half-asleep dream, barely conscious at all.'

'This is most unsatisfactory' The Duc was peeved by the waiting, Fustel looked alarmed and made soothing noises. A few days.

'But if the prince is to die in the meanwhile? Am I not to see my own brother alive?' He looked sternly at the abbott, who folded his hands and looked apologetic.

'What is this ceremony that keeps us from my uncle?' asked Juud.

The abbott spoke calmly but with assuredty. On these matters he knew they would not challenge his authority, even if they objected to it. The Duc was old fashioned in this respect.

'My dear' it was a natural appellation for an abbott to make but Juud resented the condescending tone that followed 'this is a long-known and well used ceremony which attempts to heal the inner spirit of the sick man. We believe that a diseased man is a reflection of a troubled soul and that we must concentrate (as a monastic and religious institution such as ours should of course) upon the mans spiritual health. With sacred

water, a sequence of measured chants and prayers which for wicks, sometimes days, we hope to save the kings treasured soul and heal his ill body. We can only hope. The Lord Strom will answer our prayers if he wishes. It is in his hands’.

Juud pursed her lips and said nothing. The Duc too was silent. Tallotts thoughts were stirring in his mouth but he made an effort and kept quiet, taking them away with him after they were dismissed from the abbotts presence. The others talked at once but Tallott excused himself and returned to his room not without hearing Juuds exasperated voice saying ‘I will ‘my dear’ him...’

‘Hush daughter’ replied the Ducs gentle voice, feeling Juuds words echo rather too loudly in the corridor. These stone walls seemed at times to be as transparent as air. ‘We must be patient..’

Tallott did not catch Juuds reply. He lay down on his bed and watched the candle flicker on his breath. Still the abbott had made no move. How long would he wait? How long could he wait? If Juud had felt annoyance at the abbotts obstructionism then he had felt distinct unease. That speech had come too easily to the mans lips, as if it was prepared. Quite without intention (he needed to think) (he should work out a plan) he slipped into sleep with the candle still letting globules of wax drip onto its holder. Cean arrived, late after endless discussions with the others, where they decided to be patient and wait events with a degree of wariness, struck by the picture of Tallott with his mouth open and snoring, as if he did not have a care in the world, his broad face illuminated coarsely by the single flame. Cean muffed the candle and struggled to sleep, annoyed that Tallott had managed to do so so easily.

#### IV

During the night Druel increased, actively probing with fingers of wind the convents sturdy defences. There was no likelihood that Druel would ever disturb stone walls but he could have a strange effect on mens minds. It was common enough for a monk to lose his head in the shrieking wind and wander randomly around the mountains till he subsided into a soft drift of snow that enfolded him as a bed, the wind that hammered in his head now reduced to a soothing lullaby.

This time it was Hulls turn to listen to the early morning complaints of Druel and he got up at dawn to inspect the day. He had quite preferred to have left the monastery by now and like the wayfarer felt suspicious of this place. He walked out onto the courtyard keeping his back to the gritty dust that the wind stirred, and crossed over to another passage on the far side. It forked, so aimlessly he took the left one and wandered down a corridor, his steps echoing on the stoned floor. He had no particular motive for walking. It was the actions of a free animal that paces up and down in a cage.

The corridors were empty and sounded hollow to his steps. Not a monk to be seen. At the end of this passage was a door and a spiral staircase twisting up into obscurity. It was the first flight of steps he had seen in the building and he imagined they must go

up into one of the watch towers. He climbed eagerly but was immediately disappointed by a small wooden door that blocked his way after only twenty or so steps. He tried the handle and found it opened. There was a noise behind, of men chanting. Cautiously he opened the door wider and looked out and found he was on a sort of balustrade that overlooked a large inner courtyard. This verandah was in shade and he peered over into the activities of the room. There were monks, chanting, and scattered in groups attending to various occupations, so that their singing was in a manner of accompaniment to their work, and such work!

Some monks were sharpening swords, with the aid of grindstones turned by others, a small group were bent over a vat oiling the metal parts of weapons, whilst another two men were hammering wooden shafts into pikes, all the preparations for war in fact and sung in time to a sacred liturgy that murmured from the monks' lips and floated ethereally in the air. Hull watched only for a few bitwicks, then retired. And with deliberate unhurried steps went back to his room where he told the wayfarer what he had seen.

Widsith accepted it calmly, almost as if he had anticipated such a development. Were the monks girding for a battle now or was this a frequent ritual of repair? Hull could not tell but something in the urgent business-like movements of the monks had suggested to him that this was no familiar routine. Besides how often would you need to sharpen a sword that was little used? Widsith did not answer, and stared out into the courtyard. As he watched the Duc, escorted by Cean, Juud and Tysa walk into view. They must have grown sick of their courtyard. By now he knew each of their walks intimately. The Duc bent, both a hesitant and a deliberate stride, he covered the ground well enough. Cean was always in a rush, leaning too far forward as if wanting to get there before he had arrived. Tysa had a roly-poly walk, sturdy, strong, whereas Juud, there was a touch of her father's gait there, but more concentrated and calmer. She walked lightly on the earth.

When Widsith turned from the window he had reached a decision.

## V

'We have discussed this before Cean. I too am not happy, but the abbot must be correct in what he says. Why would he lie to us?' The Duc meant the question rhetorically but Tysa picked it up.

'He's got deep-set eyes' she remarked. The comment was following her train of thought from the Duc's words, to pondering why she did not trust the abbot, and so gave voice to this odd opinion.

'Perhaps he does a lot of reading' the Duc was getting impatient.

They had argued these matters all the evening before and had recommenced the tussle with the situation this morning, even before breakfast.

'There must be something else to talk about' he said in a tired voice.

Juud tried to signal to the others to shut up but neither had noticed. Cean was kick-

ing a stone across the courtyard and Tysa had waved to the wayfarer. Juud did too but he had turned from the window and did not see her.

'I'm glad the wayfarers here' said Tysa.

'Why? He can't do much. He's as helpless as the rest of us' said Cean.

Juud restrained her sharp reply. Things were tense enough as it was.

This courtyard was used to domestic purposes and already a monk was engaged in the thoroughly ordinary task of pegging up washing on the long lines that laced the yard. Cean had to duck his head a few times.

'Can't we walk in the collonade?' he complained, and they followed his advice watching the monks busy washing in tubs. Two had set up a carpenters bench and looked to be repairing chairs. They watched them for a while.

'How many monks here do you think?' asked Tysa.

'Fustel told me about four hundred my dear'.

'An army of monks.

'Quite literally I am afraid Tysa' the Duc explained 'for during the War of Succession the monks were attacked many times by brigands and were obliged to defend themselves. Morad tells the story that their expertise aroused the ambitions of the then abbot and he went out into battle on his own account. They were very successful too, though only a small band. You see they were disciplined, unlike most of the other warring groups and had few cares about dying. Their future, was, as it were, guaranteed. The abbot worked them up into a religious frenzy and they became feared throughout the Furrowdale Valley (for that is where they chose to fight) and even gained a reputation for invincibility.'

'Why did they do it?' Tysa was puzzled 'weren't they monks?'

The Duc smiled.

'Certainly, but greedy. For souls. Though it's said they stooped to riches as well'.

The Duc recalled in his mind the passage from Morad which dis-cussed this curious episode. The author had made a neat moral out of the ending.

'However these monks were not invincible and it was not their greed that killed them, but their religious fanaticism. They were persuaded by a local lord in believing that he had seen Strom in a vision, and that his men would not fight the monks, but wished in-stead to join them in prayer, the two sides together in trust, un-armed before the great God. The monks accepted this outrageous lie at face value and put aside their weapons to join the lord and his men in worship. Immediately they had done so, the lord gave a signal and swords appeared from nowhere in the hands of his men and they slaughtered the monks. An unsavoury episode, but historically true. A few monks escaped and returned to the monastery, no doubt to enquire of their souls their fate with God.'

Cean grimaced at the passage that the Duc related exactly. His father had detested priests and he had inherited the dislike.

'They deserved it. The monks I mean. Deserted their faith by killing?'

'Yes, yes, I think you are right Cean, but remember, as Morad pointed out the differ-

ence between an army and a priesthood is very slight. Only weapons. If you took the weapons away from the troops you would make a religion, if you gave those weapons to the priests, you would make an army.'

Juud found the subject depressing surrounded as they were by any numbers of cassocked strangers, but Cean raised another point.

'What happened to Morad?'

'I told you that my ancestors had some connection to him?' Cean nodded and politely refrained from adding, many times. This did not deter the Duc.

'Yes. His life is a puzzle. He came and went. Married late in life the eldest daughter of a du Qu'et. She died giving birth to his son and then Morad died quite shortly afterwards. They say he completed a second book, a prophetic book, and this great work was found on a table, quite literally under his corpse. It is said that he died after he had written the fatal words — 'The End'.

Juud found this hard to believe.

'Is that really true father?'

'What happened to his son?' asked Tysa. The Duc shrugged, an uncharacteristic inelegance from him. 'There is no mention, but so many children in those days died young?'

'Can I borrow the book?' asked Cean. The Duc hesitated. It was his only copy, but he did not like to discourage such interest so he assented.

'Here listen, that is the noon bell. This conversation has passed us through half the day. Cean take this book. Do not lose it. It is on your life' and the Duc smiled as he handed the volume over.

## VI

Widsith was absent for lunch. Hull indicated that he had gone for a walk, which was a misleading if true statement. He had not gone for exercise.

Widsith had felt a distinct reluctance on the part of the gatekeeper to let him out. Nothing was said but his hesitation betrayed his doubts plain enough. The wayfarer ignored him and pushed out into the barren rock world of the Passage of Prayer, where Druel met him with a dismal howl, flapping his jacket against his body. Widsith was relieved to see that much of the snow had gone.

He walked around the base of the monastery wall heading towards the pass itself, but once the walls were left behind he turned inland up into the mountains and began to clamber around and above the convent till it was directly below him, its defences laid out like a plan. But it was not the monastery he was interested in. Years ago he remembered that to the right of the monastery, facing down towards the plains, were huge incised rock guts descending steeply from the Passage of Prayer to the plains below. They would be several hundred longmens deep and a dangerous place to stray

to, but they might offer a different way of escape from the monastery. Widsith picked his way over slabs of rock keeping himself as concealed as possible in case a curious monk was watching, and turned the corner of a sharp spur till he was out of sight of the monastery and found himself abruptly on top of the gullies he remembered.

They looked uninviting. There were four, side by side, interrupted by thin rapier-like spurs with crumbling sides. Widsith guessed that once you were in one gutted channel you were committed to it. There was no possible way to climb out. He inspected each in turn. The first had a waterfall at the top and was useless. The second was more promising, though a kink hid its long descent so that he could not be sure there was not some obstacle at the foot of it. The third was steep, yet straight, and fell in a clean line to what looked like forest at the bottom. The fourth he could not reach to see into clearly. He retraced his steps and examined the third ravine again, and after half a wick of consideration walked away satisfied that it was a possible if risky exit. The biggest danger would be from rocks tumbling in from above, once in the gut rocks would be funnelled like avalanches, picking up any loose stone on the way in a boiling storm of rocks that would wipe the chute clean of anything living.

He returned to overlook the monastery.

As he watched a mist settled over the Passage of Prayer and gave him his chance. He scrambled quickly down and crept under the rear wall glancing up at the two corner towers, but they were both empty. The monks had little to fear from anyone at this time of year. He had noticed several archways in the back wall. Most were bricked up, but one still held a door which attracted his attention. He could not hope it would be open but if he could fix its position he might be able to find it from the other side. He tested the frayed rope handle. To his astonishment the rope pulled up a latch inside and the door swung free a small distance. Widsith pushed against it. Something was leaning against it on the other side, but with a wriggle and twist he could squeeze through the gap. He was in a small dark room, gasping with dust which the outside wind had stirred up, and full of baskets of various shapes and sizes. He looked in one that had been leaning against the door. It was full of rock.

He now understood. The baskets were used for carrying stones to repair the monastery walls with. There would be a quarry somewhere behind the convent and the door had been put in a convenience to save a tiresome walk around to the front gate. At the far end of the room Widsith made out another door as the dust settled. He tested it and it opened easily to his touch. There was a passageway on the other side, leading directly he fancied to the heart of the monastery. He shut the door carefully behind and brushed the dust back onto the handle then set off briskly down the passage, anxious not to be seen in this part of the monastery.

He saw no one and came out beside the gardened courtyard on which the Duc and the girls rooms faced. He nodded to Juud and Tysa who he could see by the window chatting their hearts out. It occurred to him that he ought to return by the way he had come or the gateman would be puzzled at his absence. He had just turned to do that when Cean marched around a corner and straight into him. He had a story to tell and in the telling the wayfarer forgot about the gateman, and by the time he remembered events had long since overtaken them.

Cean had wandered off into the monastery, and pushed open quite at random one

door and faced an elderly fluttery woman, who was startled and pleased at the sight of a young man. He wanted to leave in embarrassment but she tugged him inside and presented him to her fellow nuns. All twenty three of them. No man ever visited them, let alone a young man as they kept saying in emphasised delight. Cean was quite helpless and bewildered by the attention. The old ladies passed him around from one to the other as you would a rare jewell, touching him gently with inquisitive, wizened, eyes. They pestered him with questions and advice, fed him cakes and poured down his protesting throat the strong honey liquer that they fashioned from their bee-hives. By the time Cean had staggered out he could barely see clearly in front of him, and his cheek had been pecked so many times that he felt as if he had been ravaged by a cluster of very elderly and spritely birds. When he bumped into Widsith he greeted him with a smile and a slur and gave the astonished wayfarer a kiss on the cheek with the observation, 'ooh you're so young. I do like a young man!'

## VII

In their room Juud and Tysa had fallen silent. Only the sound of the dying wind entered their rooms and the rustle of their dresses as they altered their positions.

'How we have talked Tysa. Not like this for a long time. I think we needed it.'

Tysa agreed. For once Juud had talked a little about herself confessing her fears for the future, even if it was to be a richly gilded future. In fact Tysa should have been the one to worry more about that since her position was much less certain than Juuds, yet her words had been occupied by the past. Givtheem Tallott, Givtheem Tallott. For almost the first time she had felt indifferent to him, and Juud had encouraged her in this feeling. Not love or hate, just a distant oddness that puzzled her.

'That is good Tysa. You will never forget him but the memory will not be painful.'

Tysa thought this true and found it comforting. In her turn she consoled Juud when she admitted that she had never known anyone. 'You've never had an admirer? Not even at school?' Juud shook her head and Tysa reached across and touched her. She had had dozens of 'admirers' at school. Strange that she the younger, and in many ways the less mature person, should be able to comfort the older girl. Yet for all her first experience in love Tysa was not really the wiser. She might lose her heart as quickly to another man, and she knew this, and wondered what future agonies might await her before someone loved her truly. She confessed this to Juud.

And Juud made her confession.

'I think it is better to have an unhappy love Tysa than not to love at all. Sometimes I wonder if I can love.'

How contrary! They looked intently at each other, each desiring the others experience. For Tysa felt it would be better to be calm in judgement, than plunge into a miserable love that was not returned. Any loneliness was worth that agony. She tried to explain this to Juud who shook her head sadly. Deep inside her Juud did love but

could not admit it to Tysa. It was still secret and precious, and she was not sure she truly believed it. It would be better to wait, let it sit in the very bottom of her heart before trusting herself to examine it. She could not yet discuss this with Tysa.

But there was something else.

‘What is it like? Love, I mean.’ Tysa was clear, and her voice rang out.

‘It’s filling and overwhelming. It would leave me desolate and then would carry me over any mountain. Everything was changed Juud. Every colour bright. Every touch so intimate. Every sound... is like some sort of universal sound. And it is so cruel, so horrible, it degrades you Juud but you cannot help yourself and it does not matter anyway. For one look, the simplest touch, and love is the most wonderful thing. It fills, oh how it fills...’

And she broke down, weeping laughter and tears whilst Juud enclosed her in her arms and cried into the younger girls hair.

## VII

As the two girls comforted each other, and Cean and Widsith walked back slowly to their rooms, (Cean a little unsteadily), Tallott was trying to come to a decision.

The abbotts silence was ominous. If the king was already dead then his life would not be worth the bones it hung upon. If he was still alive? He had to know, one way or the other. Then he could act. If Ogen was still living then that at least was some reassurance, if dead, then, well he must get out. Herrietta would have his life for supper. Grab the Charmstone and get out. Tonight. He knew roughly where they kept the king. A monk stood on guard but he would not be much of an obstacle. Tonight he’ll find Ogen, then act, and stop this endless fussing and fuming whilst he waited for Herrietta to scuttle along the web he was so entwined in.

## IX

Serval had prepared the warrior monks, given them their arms and their instructions and the creed by which they would hack and hew at the flesh of their victims.

‘This is for Strom. Strom the warrior, who with his sword and armour will invest in you tonight great powers in order to rid this anxious world of these vile people. They are all scheming defeat of Strom. Working in wicked Wyrds power to usurp his throne and make menials of us all. Strom will guide your hand, Strom will praise your arms and will bless the blood poured from these villians’ flesh. They look as ordinary men and women, you have seen them, clothed and gowned, tasseled and ribboned, sweet-talking to us, calm in our midst as they plot our destruction. Destroy them!’

He shouted this, and brought an echoing shout from the monks. Serval congratulated the head monk on his preparations and instructed him to move at the beginning of old night.

‘And move swiftly. These are cunning opponents. They will fight, but take them asleep and their throats will be cut as they dream.’ the senior monk nodded ‘remember do not harm the useless Fustel and his men. Keep away from the soldiers. Just the Duc and his friends. You know their rooms?’ the monks nodded again, ‘then do not fail’ and Serval looked intently at his subordinate.

He did not think the monk would fail. The Duc and his companions were as naked as butterflies in a collectors book, pinned to their fate by the encircling walls of the convent.

## X

Tallott had set out on his most difficult journey.

Druel had ceased. Such a silence filled the dark corridors that it could almost be grasped. In the courtyard Tallott glimpsed a star through the light mist that wreathed the towers in a lovely silken cloth, but he had no eyes for beauty. Nothing stirred. Tallotts own feet sounded like hammer blows on the echoing stone, even his breathing was unnaturally loud to his ear. He felt sure anyone would hear him coming for that alone, but there was silence. The monks always retired early. Only a gateman would be about and a few dedicated monks pouring over their sacred books late in the night to the poor light of a guttering candle. He wished the wind would return then his secretive passage would be masked by its moaning. Then again, Druel could make sounds that uncannily like human voices and mask the real ones, so that nothing could be trusted or understood in any sound. Nothing stirred, nothing seemed to live in these passages except his own body and the feeble shadow that followed behind.

He passed the lighted window of the girls room. The candle was still flowing substance around the room and he saw Juud sitting by it her chin cupped in her hand and writing something with the other. She suddenly looked up and at the window. Tallott froze, but realised that she could not see him. He felt powerful, watching her whilst she went about her private thoughts unaware of his eyes. She looked abstracted at the window and then returned to her writing. Tallott moved on, and when he looked back the light was snuffed and any warmth that remained with him vanished with it. He felt alone and for one moment hesitated, then sneered at the weakness in him, and pressed on into the gloom that enveloped him.

He breathed lightly trying to keep his breath controlled. That was close.

He was surprised the monk had not heard him. He had not realised he was so close till he had turned the corner and seen the cowled back of the monk standing by the door. He had jumped back into the concealment of a pillar and took quick breaths to steady his nerves. Now what was he to do? He could walk up to the monk boldly. Even

if the monk saw him he might not do anything. A sharp blow with the wooden end of the dagger and the fellow would sleep for a pertinent while, but if the monk shouted? No, he rejected that. He would have to be lured this way. He bent down and flicked a stone across the passage from one shadow to another so the monk could not discern what had made the noise. The monk looked but saw nothing of course, and turned his back away again. Tallott bent down and flicked another stone. This time Tallott sensed the monk looked more sharply and he heard the pad of sandaled feet cross the corridor and approach the pillar. They hesitated then stepped a bit closer. Tallott lunged out and struck the monk a hard blow on the back of his skull, the monk collapsed stunned but not unconscious. Tallott hit him twice more till the cassocked figure lay still. Tallott lifted off the hood and saw quite an old man behind it. He dragged the recumbent monk into the shadow behind the pillar and approached the unguarded door. Still nothing moved. His breath was easier now. He tested the handle and found the door swing open politely at his push. There was a snoring sound inside. Tallott stepped inside and closed the door.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the deeper gloom inside the room he slowly counted three figures curled up on pallets on the floor. All robed monks. He crossed to the other door. Tested this and opened it. This room was bigger and two wide windows let in a gleam of starlight. It was empty, or so Tallott thought at first then he saw at the far end a table and on it stood an open box.

Something in its shape stirred a fear in him. He hesitated and looked over his shoulder. Nothing moved and the shapes only continued their hapless dreams. Tallott turned back, and walked quietly to the box. He knew what it was now and knew what it held. He peered over the side. A figure lay stiff and unmoving, clothed in rich costume, and even in that poor light Tallott could see it was that of an old man, and he had no doubt it was Ogen, dead and dressed in his coffin.

## A Piece of Glass

*Everything becomes unstuck and the centre gives way. What started as a caravan of hope turns to agony. History does not occur in steady progressions, but short intense periods of conflict or development, perhaps this is due to that latent human part of our nature that does not seek to immediately resolve our difficulties, but broods, and when the release of tension occurs, it is violent, and sickening*

Tallott turned from the arraigned body of the Ogen and hurried back through the doors. The guards snored on as he closed both doors softly behind him. In the passage it was still, silent and empty.

Ogen dead.

With Ogen dead Tallotts life was not worth a penny. Thanks to Herriettas trickery! Tallott saw in sudden anger and shame the skilful deceit by which Herrietta had led him to this moment. He cursed himself. Drubbin! Tilster! And made so by a woman! He cursed the baser motives of his body that were so prepared to follow a beguiling eye, oh, she would be laughing at this, but Givtheem Tallott was not a memory yet, not while he had a good sword and a hand and a will to use it. He strode down the chill corridors with hardly a glance out for anyone who might be watching. He'd cut the princess heart out a dozen ways before he reached his room that night, but when he stopped outside of the door he began to calm down and see that his planned revenge was risking more than it was worth.

Other, cooler, thoughts entered his mind.

The best revenge on Herrietta was to escape her plan. If he got away alive that would be troublesome enough for her, for live people have a habit of causing rumours and awkward speculations. To risk his own life again on hers did not seem worth the gamble, apart from the satisfaction he would get. What a fool he'd been! Despite the Old Wast night he blushed with warmth when he remembered her teasing comments and ambiguous statements. She'd made him dance like a puppet, but no more. This puppet was going to cut the strings and dance for himself.

He slipped into the room and listened to Cean breathing in light sleep.

It was clear he had to escape, and tonight, while everyone slept. The Charmstone! The princess wanted that. He looked at Ceans sleeping form.

‘Well my lad, its time to remove your burden. You’ve carried it all but the story has changed and it needs a new master now, a master rather than a mistress, eh lad?’

Tallott bent over Cean and felt under the blankets for the leather pouch strapped around Ceans waist. The youth was lying awkwardly on it and the actual buckle was hooked under his body. Tallott was puzzled for a while as to what to do then Cean gave an abrupt snort and turned over on his side exposing the buckle. Tallotts fingers worked quickly, undid the buckle and slid the belt from under Ceans sleeping body. Perhaps a stud had dug into Ceans body for suddenly he started and woke up, sitting up—right just as Tallott completely freed the pouch. Cean must have instinctively realised that it was missing even in his half-sleep and made a snatch for it but missed, and Tallott stepped back buck—ling the pouch around his own waist and patting to feel the reass—uring bulk of the gemstone through the soft leather.

‘Who’s that? Tallott?’ Cean was incredulous but now wide awake.

‘Aye lad.’

‘The pouch, give it back. You can’t have it. Give it back’ he said it stupidly, his voice thick with sleep.

‘No lad. You’ve had your turn now it’s mine’.

Ceans eyes were only just becoming adjusted to the dark as he fumbled out of bed and moved over to where Tallott was stand—ing.

‘Givtheem. Give it back. What are you doing?’

Tallott took no notice and started packing his clothing into a bagger.

‘You’re leaving? The Charmstone, it isn’t yours.’

Tallott made no reply. Cean went back to his bed and drew a dagger from the sheath that lay on the floor. Then stood up and approached Tallott.

‘Givtheem. That’s not yours. Give it back’.

Tallott answered over his shoulder.

‘It’s mine now lad’ then glanced back over his shoulder and saw Cean standing there, only a loin wrap on, his chest bare and white in the darkness, a thin bladed dagger in his right hand.

On the other side of the courtyard the wayfarer was standing alert, pricking his ears into the night for some sounds coming out of the night. He listened again. Yes, there was a noise, that time he heard it, a scuffle of steps coming from the far off side of the courtyard, from Tallotts and Ceans room. He drew his sword and padded around the collonade rather than risk being seen across the open courtyard. He was later to remember and regret that decision. It would have made the difference between life and death, but what point was there in recalling that? As he approached the room he heard a chink of metal and then a short cry, almost a sigh, then a thudding sound. He sprang for the door and stood poised at the entrance. There was Tallott with a knife in one hand standing astride a figure slumped at his feet. Widsith saw the collapsed form give

a death rattle then be still. With a shock he realised it was Cean and looked intently into Tallotts face flushed with murder.

He had not intended to kill the boy, but he was not giving up the Charmstone. Tallott had approached Cean as he stood guarding the door drawing his own knife and waved it, hoping that Cean would take the hint.

‘It’s not worth it lad. Drop yer knife. I don’t want to harm you.’

Cean did not move.

‘I’m coming lad’ and Tallott moved forward. Ceans knife sliced in the air missing Tallotts jerked back head by only a thrum.

‘Strom! You stupid fool! You want blood?’

Cean was surprised at himself. He did not want to kill, but Tallott must not leave. And he wasn’t a lad.

A very different tone came into Tallotts voice. Before it had been condescending, now it was anger.

‘Get out of the way’ but still Cean did not move.

Tallott lunged forward and grasped Ceans knife hand. They struggled madly for a moment their bodies twisted together, then Cean broke free of Tallotts grasp and pushed the bigger man back. Tallott came forward again in a mad burst of temper, there was a clash of metal as the knives crossed, then Tallott seized Ceans knife hand again. Almost unintentionally his other hand bearing the short dagger brushed against Ceans body. In a paroxysm of fear Cean felt that touch and bit back with all his strength into the fat sweating wrist that held his own knife in check. The pain bit into Tallotts nerves and his knife hand, reacted by jerking back and burying itself in Ceans chest. Cean gave a small gurgle, then a cry through the teeth that still clenched Tallotts wrist. His jaw relaxed and his body slumped to the ground with a thud. He shivered and died, the blood from Tallotts torn wrist dripping into Ceans fair hair.

Tallott stood bemused at the body at his feet, for a second his temper gone. Then he saw another figure in the doorway and recognised the wayfarer against the starlight. He breathed deeply and spoke.

‘Ogens dead.’

The wayfarer stared.

‘He tried to stop me. Ogen is dead. I’ve seen him. Our lives aren’t worth the blood in them?’

Tallotts voice was hoarse and struggling for breath. There was a crackling sound in his throat and Widsith, who had seen men mad with rage and killing before, knew that Tallott was hardly a human being now, but an animal breaking free of its cage.

If he stood in Tallotts way he would have to fight.

‘Why did you kill him?’ Widsith asked in a foolish hope that questions might restrain the urgency of Tallotts escape.

‘He tried to stop me.’

‘Where are you going?’

Tallott stepped forward.

'I didn't mean to kill him, but he tried to stop me.'

That gleam in Tallotts eyes was not of this world. Widsith tried to think of something to stop Tallott leaving. Perhaps he should let the smuggler go? Wyrð! This was a sick and sorry ending. A life extinguished like a snuffed candle on the floor whilst they argued the point over the body. The wayfarer remembered something.

'You have the Charmstone?'

Tallott did not answer but stepped nearer, his poised dagger only a dangerous long-man from Widsiths body.

'Steady Tallott. You'd better not go.'

This unintended echo of Ceans words engaged a further madness in Tallott. These people, they would not let him go! First one, then another. He was Givtheem Tallott. He would go as he pleased, as he had always gone as he willed. No boy or wayfarer would stop him.

'Get out wayfarer. You're not getting paid for this. Get out.'

He spoke dully, without inflection. Widsith knew he had no choice. Ceans death would be pointless without keeping the wretched jewel.

'No Tallott. Not without giving me the Charmstone.'

Widsith was firm now, the jewell must remain, and Tallott plainly would not leave without it. He had a sword, Tallott only a knife. Widsith tightened his grip on his sword and lifted it slightly. He was about to warn Tallott that it would not be wise to match his dagger for the wayfarers sword when Tallott jumped at him.

With a hoarse 'let me go' Tallott jabbed his knife at Widsith, who stepped backwards out of the door into the passage, as Tallott attempted to stab him stumbled after him cutting wildly at the air. Widsith swiveled aside from the crouched figure then brought his sword sharply up into Tallotts soft belly. For a bizarre moment Tallott flailed like a helpless fish on the hooked point of Widsiths sword then collapsed as the wayfarer stepped abruptly back and withdrew the sword, letting Tallotts unsupported body collapse on the floor.

The wayfarer felt sick as he watched Tallott flop about on the stone floor, trying to crawl away, mortally wounded but not dead and groaning in harsh savage whispers as the blood from his split body seeped onto the ground. Widsiths sword slashed again. This time Tallott stopped moving, but the huge reservoir of his strength was not drained. On the third time the wayfarer was more precise, and finished the job, stabbing through to the mans heart. That ended it.

Widsith was appalled and turned aside. He leant against the wall, trying not to look at the spreading stain from Tallotts body as it oiled its way across the stones. It seemed to be the symbol of his own corruption. All this blood for a piece of glass.

Then Hull was by him.

The giant had heard a noise and looked wordlessly from Tallott to the wayfarer.

'Ogens dead. So's Tallott and Cean. We must get out of here' was all Widsith could say, was all he wanted to say.

‘Get the Duc ready to leave. Bring him to the girls rooms. I’ll see to them.’

Hull nodded and disappeared and Widsith spared a grateful thought for his loyal companion. No questions, no explanations demanded. Hull went to his duty trusting the wayfarer in his. He shook himself out of his helplessness then started to move towards the girls rooms. He stopped and turned to look at Tallott again. He could not leave him there, neither could he leave that cursed jewel there either. If he had killed for it he had better give himself the poor pleasure of holding it.

A few bitwicks later he was walking towards the girls rooms, one hand bloodstained and gripping the leather pouch.

‘Wake up. Get up.’

He shook Juud awake urgently, then Tysa. They could not understand, and kept asking questions, brushing the sleep from their eyes and twisting their blankets around them. Widsith urged them on as they dressed, discomforted by his cruel, casual eyes.

‘Take the barest necessities. No fineries. We are back on the path again.’

‘Wayfarer, I can’t see’ pleaded Tysa ‘can we light a candle?’

‘No, and don’t talk.’

‘Why are we leaving?’ asked Juud bewildered, but Widsith would not reply and hurried them on with anxious gestures. He wondered what the time was. Hull returned with a muddled Duc then left to pick up his and Widsiths baggers.

‘Wayfarer, what is going on?’ said the Duc in an exasperated whisper that contained some fear in it. He had been woken up rudely, dressed quickly under Hulls silent gaze as if under some sort of arrest. His noblemans instinct was upset by this rude disturbance.

Widsiths voice softened.

‘Your brother is dead. Tallott found him.’

The Duc was shocked into silence. Everyone was still, looking at each others faces but not seeing them in the almost black room. The Duc wanted to say something, but nothing of sense would come to his lips. Juud sought out her father by touch and hugged him.

‘The abbott is deceiving us so our lives cannot be worth very much. Tallott and Cean have gone ahead. Now can we follow?’

The lie tripped easily off the wayfarers tongue. Somehow Ogens death was not a surprise. In his absence the king had never really seemed alive, but it would be cruel indeed to burden them with worse news.

Hull returned and handed Widsiths bagger to him.

‘Now quietly’ he emphasised, hissing the words ‘not a sound.’ They stuffed what they could into their baggers and befuddled by sleep the Duc and the two girls followed the wayfarer out into the passage. Hull came last.

They stealthily crossed the courtyard and began walking down the long passage that led to the basket room. Tysas shoes clipped on the stones and Widsith, ordered her to take them off. This she did obediently and held them in one hand, the other on the wall as a guide as she walked barefoot. They reached the room in safety, Widsiths

senses straining to catch the least movement ahead that might warn of a danger. But all was deathly quiet. The door opened and he hastened them in. Juud banged her shin against a basket and cried out. Widsith was furious with her and this anger he managed to convey in the one hushed word 'quiet'. Tysa slipped her shoes back on, and whilst they waited for her in the darkness a sound came to them.

A gleam of light showed under the crack in the door, and footsteps could be heard sharply walking. They froze in their positions in the room, Widsith had his hand stuck to the door handle. The light thickened, the steps grew louder till they were right upon them, then turned and faded. Widsith waited until the horizontal slit of light had gone, then picked his way across the baskets and people to the outer door.

'Were they monks?' whispered Tysa 'what were they doing at this time of night?'

No one answered. The wayfarer had managed to open the outer door and a draught of cooler air wafted into the room. The Duc threatened to sneeze on the arousal of dust but the wayfarer reached out and shut off his nose with his hand. The Duc was furious, but he had no time to expostulate.

There were footsteps, running, and a ghost of a light. The monks were coming back.

'Quick. Out through here' whispered Widsith.

He grabbed the Duc and pushed him through, then Juud, then Tysa, her bagger getting stuck momentarily in the door till Hull gave a weighty heave. There was a clatter at the door and it swung open revealing a sharp band of light from a lantern as three or four monks peered in. Hull reared up behind a basket and drove his sword into the first incautious monk with such force that he was hurled back on the others and they collapsed like a pack of cards. The lamp fell to the ground and snuffed the light. In the darkness the monks shouted and Widsith screamed to Hull to move for it. The giant did not need such advice as he was already back with the wayfarer and struggled through the door after him. With an energetic shove he burst through and landed clumsily on his knees jumping up sharply as a pain stabbed in his ankle.

One monk stupidly stuck his head out of the outer door and Widsith's sword fell with a dull slunch into the monk's fat neck. The remaining monks leapt back in fright. The wayfarer ran forward and gathered the others and set off clambering over the boulders without bothering to conceal the noise of displaced rocks.

The rocks were wet and clammy to the touch and sweat poured off them as they scrambled in the dark, their soft hands getting hurt on the sharp gritty surfaces. With expert attention to his memory Widsith led them up the rocky slopes then started to sidle towards the gullies. Once he looked back and saw three or four lanterns emerge from the blackened wall of the monastery, then start jiggling towards them. The stars had vanished behind a low cloud that was seeping over the Passage of Prayer. Tysa had knocked her shin sharp against a projecting rock but Widsith would not stop and urged them on.

'Is Tallott and Cean ahead?' gasped Tysa as she struggled on. Widsith kept his eye on those constant wiggling lights that were following them. There was not much time.

They passed the first gut, the waterfall thundering loud in the blackness, then skirted

the second. This was difficult, the rocks steep and with a disturbing sense of falling that made the girls clutch at the rocks as they blundered on. The Duc was struggling and the wayfarer was grateful for the cloud that hid them a little from their pursuers. The wayfarer knew that if it was he and Hull alone up here, they would have slipped up the mountainside in silence and be watching in amusement the confusion of the monks as they wandered every which way and that, but the Ducs tired, sleepless feet and the girls clumsy movements put paid to that chance.

The monks had caught the scent properly and their lanterns were lurching upwards at a faster rate. Tysa had dislodged a larger than usual rock and it had clattered noisily down the slope. The monks had heard it and were following eagerly, perhaps puzzled at the direction the escapers had chosen, knowing from experience that there was little escape that way and thinking that they were enclosed in a trap. Widsith had a moments confusion over the third gut, then recognised its outline. There was a sharp drop into the chasm down some slippery rock slabs. The footholds were small and loose and barely visible in the gloom. The cloud had dropped almost to meet them now. Widsith heard a distant shout and fumbled down the slabs of rock urging Juud on after him. For her it was a black, sliding horror. Several times she slipped and quivered hanging onto the rock with desperation. Slowly she came down beside him.

‘Get under that rock there’ he whispered then began climbing up again to guide the Duc down. To one side he caught a gleam of light. The monks were close now. The Duc was struggling as Juud had done before, his feet loosely clawing at the slabs. Widsith pushed the Ducs feet into footholds, till they reached the bottom of the gully. Tysa was already coming down and Hull was following. Rocks clattering to the left warned Widsith of the closeness of the armed monks. They were by the second gut throwing the light from the lanterns wildly about. There was a clang of metal as two swords banged in confusion.

Tysa was tortuous in descent, each movement hesitant and exploratory as she tried to find something substantial to cling to. Widsith scrambled up again and jammed Tysas anxious feet into a succession of cracks, literally pulling her legs down. At last she was off the slabs, trembling with the effort. The wayfarer bundled her off to the side so that Hull had space to bring down his lumbering bulk. There was a shout above, and a beam of light flashed around the top of the gut but missed them.

‘Wayfarer’ whispered Juud nervously ‘my hat, I’ve lost it’.

Widsith looked around sharply. The monks would find that in a moment. He had to decide. He grabbed hold of the others and pushed them into the gut, down and away from the searching lanterns.

Up on top one of the monks bent down and triumphantly lifted up Juuds hat with the point of his sword and waved it in the thin light of a lantern. The leader of the monks peered down into the gut. He was not keen on descending that and was pondering the consequences of it when a better idea occurred to him. He looked up, took his lantern and shone it around the loose rocks at the head of the gut. He shouted to the others who began to understand what he was wanting them to do. They scurried up like rats in their brown cassocks, their swords falling behind them like stiff tails. They leaned against one rock but that would not shift, then another. Finally a third moved a little to their efforts. They pressed against it harder, twenty monks in all and slowly, the

huge boulder tilted and slipped over cracking against other rocks.

For a moment it was suspended in intent, then with a final push from the straining monks, it slumped over, its balancing point abruptly lurched into the gut carrying with it a hail of lesser debris. As it picked up speed it bounced off the head walls of the confined chasm dislodging a hundred smaller boulders till the entire mass was gathered in a storm that exploded in the rock gut with a murderous hail of rock rain. The noise was awesome and long after the avalanche had swept furiously down the sound of it echoed across the mountainside and back up to the poised monks.

There was a long silence.

One monk went to speak but the leader hushed him and listened all the more intently. After some bitwicks passed and nothing could be heard, he relaxed and nodded as if satisfied. He picked up Juuds hat and threw it casually down into the gut, then signalled the others to follow him back to the monastery. The lanterns dipped and swayed and the night came down silent and complete.

## Our Mutual Advantage

*A short chapter entirely devoted to a letter from Lutens Wenner to Driac Slorty, displaying Lutens charm, skill and thorough-going nastiness. A remarkable man I feel.*

“To Prince of Beorht, Ruler of the Furrowdale Valley, Commander and Warrior, Driac Slorty; from Monarch of the Second Kingdom, Lutens Wenner.

“Dearest Brother” (there was no harm in calling him that even if Slorty was only half a brother) “to you my greetings, and best wishes on your health” (ridden as you are knave by scrofulous diseases!) “and happiness, which by Stroms guidance will see us both into eternity. (Lutens Wenner congratulated himself on that phrase, Strom could guide a soul to his heights or plunge it to Wyrds depths. Lutens knew where Slorty was bound).

“For some seasons I have wondered on your life in the great valley of the Furrowdale, hearing occassionally of your wise rule and warrior exploits” (and more often of your debauchery) “and thought it timely to write to you now to extend the fraternal greetings of a brother, and that of one ruler to another.

“Our noble mothers desires” (that scheming bitch) “have borne much fruition, and we jointly now rule over the most part of this kingdom. But we do not as yet rule all of it. Have you thought on this?” (Slorty thought of little else but ambition) Lutens was sure of his brothers attention now). “Beyond the Raggerock lies the prosperous kingdom of the Granry, rich, unspoilt by the Dark Period, weak in all but her natural defences, surely a fair prize for one strong enough to grasp her?”

“This I am sure brother you well observed and were considering an opportunity for making your own advances onto that wealthy, vulnerable” (no harm in emphasising it for Slortys dull mind) “land. Perhaps on your own account you did not see enough strength to approach the task, engaged as you are in your subduction of the troublesome tribes of the lower Furrowdale Valley, but would you pause here and consider a partnership of interests between two bonded by blood,” (but not of intellect of course) “to master the Plain of the Granry to our mutual advantage.

“Consider this matter carefully. Little effort on our part could result in great profit, and no time could be more willing to our cause than now. My army is trained and bored, yours is fit and battle-hardened. Once the Sprig has begun and the last snows gone from the passes, my army could enter the Furrowdale Valley and we could sustain

a two-pronged assault onto the Granry, one force turning the end of the Raggerok, the second via the Passage of Prayer.

“What resistance would there be? I have heard, that Ogen, the Prince of the Plain (what sort of silly title was that?) “is much enfeebled, indeed he is in such poor health he has retired to the monastery on the Passage of Prayer to recover. What a quick prize our armies could gain! The king himself, as chattel in our baggage before the march barely started. Those fat merchants of Noll would be begging before us, so mindful of their properties and wealth, that the march would become a triumphal procession.”

(Indeed, it did look very easy. Lutens even wondered if he needed Slorty at all. It was a thought... Well, back to rekindling Slortys greed).

“Other reasons can be advanced in advantage of taking this scheme into quick purpose. Herrietta, Princess of Granry and wife to Ogen, is much increased in power so I have heard. Her influence is wider now than her poor husbands, and she seems an energetic member of her sex, consolidating her power with a force and charm that only an able woman can bring to bear.” (Lutens knew Slorty hated women, so he was sure this flattering description would rouse him to action if nothing would). “If Herrietta gains full power her defence may be more vigorous than Ogens. The sooner we make our endeavour, the sooner her own ambition is thwarted.

“Also, it is drawn to my attention that the Duc du Quet was freed from his Swaleton prison and is fleeing to the repose of Ogen, his brother. The Duc may also possess the Charmstone, that fabulous gemstone that it is claimed legitimates the monarch of the kingdom. This old fable has little truth to it brother, but Herrietta may be inspired by the Ducs presence and that of the Charmstone to foster her own claim on our kingdom. We should do well to nip this ambition in its bud and consign the lovely Herrietta to the clumsy attentions of Drubbin.

“Think carefully and fully on these matters. There is great potential profit for us both here if we move with speed and assurance. Our mutual armies can swamp any antagonism, and the rewards so outweigh the risk that we would be foolish to let the matter idle. Think of the Granry” (yours at least for a little while Slorty) “and the Charmstone ” (not that you’ll see it my dearest brother) “and you will see the glory of the enterprise I am proposing.

“To my fond Brother, wishes on your health and success

“Lutens Wenner”.

(That should work, Driac was never that bright)

## Straight and Unending

*After the terrible epiphany at the monastery, the travellers are retreating, both literally and metaphorically. Juud has to assume a huge symbolic burden, and fears she will find the task too heavy as this cruel roundrell continues.*

Through barren bitter days they fled, escaping the senseless hateful world that surrounded them. Lies, treachery, death, killing and running, would there ever be an end to it, and would that end be in their deaths? On and on, with cut flesh, and sore, bleeding, blisters, stumbling over boulders and rotting forest full of thorns with trees that grabbed at them, as if the very natural world were opposed to their existence. They travelled by night and slept by day, so that it seemed the natural order of things had become disorientated. Juud slept miserably, her muscles often squeezed in cramp, like a torturers rack till she wanted to scream out her pain. Once, in her sleep, she did, and woke herself up, frightened and small, feeling like a lonely, hunted, animal. The days dissolved, each lost in the bewildering repetitious pattern of walking, resting, sleeping, eating, walking repeated and repeated like a dance led and ordered by a cruel dancing master — the wayfarer. More than anything she wanted to sleep, to rest from this wearying pursuit of distances. She dreaded Widsiths sharp commands at the dayend to pack, to lift the bagger to your shoulders, to step into the rain that drizzled like a distraught widow, to walk and stumble along aimless tracks and sneak by snug lit villages, perversely avoiding the very warmth they needed. Her limbs were bruised by the constant flight. Every day she thought she could walk no further but every day they did, till there was nothing left on her mind but the rhythm of her sore legs beating the distance away from the Passage of Prayers.

She wished it would stop, suddenly it did.

The Ducs journal recorded this,

‘Thirty-eighth of Old Wast, 157. Another harsh night of nipping winds and rain. Tysa and Juud are exhausted. I myself do not feel I can walk much further without some rest but the wayfarer is implacable. We must keep moving. There are times in my heart when I curse his remorselessness. Does he never need sleep? Or rest? Yet, without him we would have died in our beds at the monastery, and died many times

since. He drives us on, and Hull follows. These two are really our legs. We are walking on them.

‘Thirty-ninth of Old Wast, 157. No one mentions Givtheem Tallott or Cean Grin’kel. They might not have lived, so quickly have we expunged the memory or rather so quickly has this desperate flight expunged it for us. Tysa, when sometimes I see her eyes, they look hollowed and stark, but whether from weariness or from the deaths around us, I cannot say. She keeps inward to herself as we all do. The time for affection will come when we cease this end-less journey. I had not thought it would be so long.

‘Fortieth of Old Wast, 157. We have stopped. And will rest.’

It was a shepherds hut, large and dry with clean straw and stout stone walls to repel the fierce wind that scoured the plain. There was a fireplace, with a seat around it and a few utensils. It stood in a small wooded copse, slightly hidden from the plain in a gully. There was dry wood around and a partly frozen stream trickled beside the hut. It looked friendly and comforting and here Widsith gave the order that they would rest. As if to celebrate the rain stopped and even a pale shadow of Bree emerged in the aftersun till the heavy skaw clouds swallowed it again by evening. The rain seemed to be half-frozen when it landed and froze completely when it had, so that their feet made a constant crackling sound as they broke the icy rime that gripped the grass and earth in stone-like stiffness.

Rest. Rest. These words fell like a balm upon them and they curled into the straw for long wicks of sleep, at first troubled by their lack of success in achieving that simple aim (so long had they to manage on so little) but then the body reasserted its rhythms and they slept into the deepness of their dreams. They woke unrefreshed, then slept again till they had evened up the losses of the previous fretful days and could for almost the first time think about their position.

The wayfarer was no less tired than the others. Without Hull they would not have made half the distance. Whereas the girls and the Duc could slip into a strange somnabulist other world of obeying orders, he had to keep sharply awake, judge how far they could travel that night, scout the villages, make up camp, put down camp, steal food from the villages, and keep moving, walking, walking at all cost. There must be days put between them and the monastery. He did not think the monks would follow but Herrietta would be more thorough. Even in dead Old Wast she would send out a party to inspect the foot of the gut to find a body or scrap of cloth to confirm the killings. So Widsith had left just such a sign, a portion of his shirt, covered with Tallotts dried blood.

Juud shrank when he finished wiping the strips of cloth on the bloodied pouch, then handed the pouch to her.

‘Is that Ceans blood?’

‘No’ he answered truthfully and she had doubtfully accepted the burden of the Charmstone, loosening her skirt to buckle the leather pouch close around her waist next to her skin. She thought there must be something symbolic in the action but was too tired to know what it was. Later she took out the gemstone looking at it sadly, a fragile carrier of such a burden. A girl to do a duty where men had failed.

Widsith had had precious little sleep himself. Not since that first nightmare descent

of the rock gut, where they had pressed themselves under an overhang away from the turmoil of biting, flicking stones that passed over them, and they had scrambled blindly down, feeling with their hands the sliding rocks in the blackness of Wyrds den. They had continued till dawn, rested then carried on, descending to the forest line where a new struggle commenced, this time against lashing branches and twigs. The mad flight continued, the girls stricken with shock at the news of Tallotts and Ceans deaths blundered wildly on through, thrusting through the forest till their dresses and bodices were torn in a dozen places, and their little strength exhausted. The Duc seemed calmer than them. He bore his brothers death with dignified grief and was more puzzled than shocked by Cean and Tallotts absence. He could not understand the motives of Tallott, and Widsith had not the patience to explain. The one deep regret the Duc felt was for his volume of Thomas au Morad, still sitting unopened in Ceans room. He missed it like he missed a limb.

They had taken two days to descend to the plain and then five further days winding in and about the foothills following the line of mountains breeways towards the great Marsh, dodging the villages and painfully cutting across the grain of rivers and streams that tumbled wildly from the mountain heights of the Raggerok. They never saw Bree once in that time, hidden behind cloud and constant sleetly drizzle, that clung to them like a miserable coat. Their clothes were ragged and dirty, and ate sparingly what little food they had. Hull caught and skinned some rabbits on the fourth day but what should have been a feast was merely an exercise in moving the jaws.

The wayfarer tried a joke.

‘Sollo Wramm would have enjoyed these bones’ but it fell unnoticed. They were too tired to more than eat mechanically and walk to orders. If had ordered them to laugh, they would have laughed.

He had hardly given a thought to their direction. Instinctively he had turned bree-ways, away from Noll and all the threats it contained. He had not discussed this with the Duc and the Duc did not notice. The wayfarers decision was that of a man seeking his home, heading towards the soft haven of the Furrowdale Valley.

Juud had woken up late that morning and had sat up rubbed her fists into her eyes and asked Widsith.

‘Wayfarer? Where are we going?’

He looked at her, shrugged and smiled.

‘Where do you want to go?’ he asked.

‘Home?’

‘Where’s that?’ Juud gaped.

Until he had asked she had assumed she knew. Now she realised that she did not. ‘Home’ was not Swaleton, though she had lived there for many years. She had never felt at home in her guardians fine house and they could hardly return after the scandal of their escape.

‘I think I mean our estate.’

This was the first time she had sat and thought about it. Did they still have an estate? The wayfarer interpreted this puzzle in her eyes correctly, and shrugged again as if to

say that whether it was theirs or not there was nowhere else to go.

The fire crackled largely on the grate and seemed to be smiling at her. She wrapped her blanket around her closer and hobbled to its welcoming grin. The Duc and Tysa still slept soundly.

‘Where is Hull?’ she asked looking around.

‘Gone to get breakfast.’ Widsith poked at the fire then hooked off a bubbling pot of water.

‘Hot water?’

She looked glum.

‘We have no leafen?’

He shook his head

‘We’ve some malep here?’

‘Alright’.

It did not taste too badly. Hot sweetened water. It was the first hot drink since the monastery and it flowed into her like a stream of warm blood. She drank greedily, then filled it up again, generously pouring in the malep to make it sickly sweet.

‘Has Hull gone to the village?’ Widsith nodded.

‘Is it safe?’

‘We need food’.

‘But he cannot speak to them can he?’ the thought had suddenly struck her.

‘They speak a funny sort of language here. Hull manages to get himself understood. Besides, we have gold sovereigns’. That had a habit of making peasants amenable.

Juud gulped down her drink and they sat in silence for a while listening to the fire hiss as water from the steaming pot bubbled over. There were movements from behind. The Duc was awake now, looking stern and thoughtful as the last bindings of sleep loosened from his lined face.

‘So we are going to the estate wayfarer?’

‘You should have been asleep father.’

‘I was dear, but I heard your words somehow. The conversation must have come to me in my sleep.’

Widsith pondered this whilst the Duc scratched himself in a vague dignified sort of way and sat close to the fire brushing the straw from his clothes.

‘It seems the only place we can go. I thought we could cross the Furrowdale Valley and travel via Tol Pass to the Qu’et estate. Do you have a welcome there?’

This excited Juud. Suddenly she knew that this was home, as nothing else was. The Duc was less moved.

‘Well. Yes. I have some friends there, I think. Old servants. Donan Shallbody may still be alive. I do not know whether they would welcome me. I would bring danger to them.’

This cooled Juud’s excitement. She had forgotten they were outcasts, fleeing King

Wenner from the supposed safe abode of the Granry. Ogen, the Ducs brother, was now a corpse in a cold monastic room. Now they were fleeing his wife. They were on the run from her kingdom now, and at this rate there would be nowhere left to run to. She said this out loud, not thinking it was funny, but grinned wryly. The Duc meanwhile had been following his own thoughts.

‘And, my dear this great roundrell of ours, and Tallotts great ambition, is that all ended?’

Widsith did not reply. He had not thought about it till then but knew immediately that it had. They had been carried along the crest of Tallotts ambition and that had ended in a bloody inhuman mess on a monastic floor,

The Duc too was silent till at last he sighed.

‘For myself I was never convinced of it. So if it is done then that is as well.’

He pulled at his graying beard.

‘Even if Ogen had lived I do not think we would have succeeded. It was too desperate a scheme. In fact’ and his voice took on a wondering tone ‘I cannot say really why it was that we embarked on it. Why was it daughter? Can you remember?’

Juud could not, except for some vague memory of Givtheem Tallott persuading her in some far off time that her life and the life of her father was in danger. When she considered the hazards they had encountered, and the risks they had placed themselves in, it appeared they had threatened their lives far more than if they had never left Swaleton. Why did they leave?

Juud was prevented from answering as Hull emerged tall and black against the open doorway bearing a load of foodstuffs. In no time bacon was sizzling on the fire and fresh leafen was being swilled about inside their stomachs. Tysa woke up ate some bacon then curled into sleep again, her face drawn and creased like an old womans.

‘There’s sunlight outside’ said Juud feeling cheered up by the third cup of leafen and the tang of bacon in her mouth.

Widsith reported Hulls gossip from the village.

‘It seems a friendly enough place. There have been no visitors and they certainly are not in love with Princess Herrietta so I think we are reasonably safe here. We should be able to stay a few days.’

This pleased everyone.

‘Do you think they will sell clothes there?’

She was anxious to escape the nuisance of her dress again, which in any case was scarcely worth repairing. Widsith seemed to think they might. Or rather Hull did, for it was translated through him.

‘How is our money wayfarer?’

‘There is still the money that Tallott paid me. We have almost got too much. Gold sovereigns in places like this arouse far too much interest’.

Another thought occurred to the Duc.

‘You are staying with us?’ Juud had assumed that the wayfarer would stay and was stabbed with fear.

‘We should pay you’.

‘Tallott has already done so’ he smiled ‘I am not that mercenary. Hull and I are going to the Furrowdale Valley anyway so it will be a small diversion to Tol Pass. Then we will leave you, but you should be safe then’.

He did not add that negotiating the Furrowdale Valley, stirred up so inconveniently by Driac Slorty would be no easy task, but he would face them with that difficulty later. One problem at a time. Juud was looking at him in a peculiar, shining way.

‘There is so much we have to thank you for wayfarer. Our lives again and again have been in your hands. We cannot repay you. I wish there was a way we could.’ She hesitated, embarrassed by the vigour of her speech. ‘These last few days, I do not really remember them. How could we have survived without you, or Hull?’

She felt her words inadequate but her father nodded in time with them as if to emphasise agreement. Widsith was a little embarrassed. His concern was not always altruistic. There had been times when he would have been heartily glad to have been rid of the lot of them. He was happy to leave them in Noll, and yet, and this was puzzling, pleased again to see them at the Brilliant Lakes. Quite by accident his life seemed woven into the lives of these people now and he could no more have left them than he could have left behind his arm or leg.

‘If wayfarer, I regain my estate you can be sure of a welcome on it, and Hull.’ Widsith translated and the big man nodded. ‘That is not a payment of kind’ the Duc continued ‘for we could never do that, just a small sum towards the debt we have fallen into.’

An awkward silence fell on them till Tysa broke it by sitting up and yawning. Juud turned and sat beside her.

‘Tysa! How you slept! We can stay here for days. The wayfarer said so. There’s food in plenty here. We have eaten our breakfast and you’ve missed yours. Look, there is sun outside. It is almost time for lunch and there is a friendly village nearby where we can get some clothes’.

Juud flooded Tysa with words. It was such a relief that Widsith would be with them, that she had sprung over to Tysa like a girl again, as if she had been flattered at her first dance by an admiring young man.

They stayed three days in the hut. Slept, ate, the girls made rough trousers from cloth they bought in the village, the wayfarer attended to his map and the Duc lamented the loss of Morad and tried to recall significant passages and write them down in his journal. On the whole they were cheerful. The weather stayed overcast but at least it did not rain and they even had the opportunity to wash and dry their clothes in the shivering little stream behind the hut. Hull had to patiently construct a dam across the stream so that a fuller pool of water could build up that would accomodate his bulk. The only sad spot was Tysa, who despite her regained energy and quick light movements had shrunken into herself and wore a distant, lost expression. Twice Juud had seen her with tears in her eyes and tried to comfort her but Tysa did not really know why or to what she was crying.

‘For Tallott’ prompted Juud one day when they were alone in the hut. The Duc had gone with Hull to the village and Widsith chopped wood behind the hut, the occasional thud or curse emanating through the stone walls.

‘Yes, yes, but no, I don’t understand. I loved him’ and Tysa stopped ‘could he have been so cruel?’ she could not understand why a man she had loved could have been so wicked as to kill one of their kind and cheat the rest of them. ‘Was the wayfarer right?’ She did not blame the wayfarer for killing Tallott, but she wanted that dead man before to explain and justify his treachery. It was almost a treachery to her as well. She had heard the Duc and the wayfarer talking low one night and overheard Widsith say ‘Cean had told me that he had seen Tallott with the princess, embracing her.’ The Duc was shocked, and whispered in a horrified voice ‘surely not wayfarer?’ That means he had been deceiving us since Noll?’

‘Yes, I think he was. I do not think he knew that Ogen was dead however, so he in turn may have been deceived by Herrietta. I heard some ugly rumours about her.’

‘You think my brother was dead before we arrived at the monastery?’

‘I’m certain of it, listen’ but Tysa did not hear the rest in her misery at the revelation of the depths of Tallotts deceit.

Underneath herself she felt lonely. For home, for her fussy, bossy parents, her innocent schoolfriends, her undisturbed life, and for all the things that made her ordinary and plain. She tried to explain this to Juud, but the older girl did not really understand, though she pretended to. Juuds life was unusual anyway thought Tysa, her father imprisoned and her little better than that, so Tysa thought, but this she could not articulate. Juud was a comfort, but only eased her pain and did not take it away. Besides, wasn’t Juuds heart going to someone now?

She missed Givtheem. Even as he was cruel, or indifferent, even if he had never spoke to her, she missed him, and he would certainly never speak to her again. How could she still go on loving a dead man? Perhaps it was that for the first time in her short life someone who had mattered to her, more than her parents, more than those other deaths, had died when she had not wished it. Tallott would never come back. His flesh had stopped breathing, indeed the very skin she had stroked was now in a vile corruption, his eyes were jellied, his mouth set in grimace that no love of hers could remove. He was utterly beyond her, beyond her love.

Juud confessed her fears for Tysas health to the wayfarer.

‘Once we start to move again, she might recover he suggested. I thought she had got over him?’

Juud shook her head, and they all took care not to mention Tallotts name before Tysa from then on.

Juud took the Charmstone out of its pouch more than once, and looked at it, the cause of so much misery. Occasionally she was tempted to throw it away but never did; ‘All dwell in the Roundrell’. Was there a message in that inscription for her? She remembered the magic of the Dell of Azel but still did not understand it. She slipped the jewell back into its leathery home and tried not to think of it again.

It was on the Forty Fourth day of Old Wast that they quietly left the shepherds hut. There was a softer warmth in the air, like an early day of Sprig, but Widsith said it was unlikely, though soon he added, soon. The night before they had discussed their intended route. The wayfarer suggested that it might be sensible, rather than to risk the embattled Furrowdale Valley, to buy a boat when they reached the marsh and travel that

way along the edge of it till they passed the narrow throat of the Furrowdale Valley. They would be safer from the degradations of Driac Slorty, and it might make a change from walking. They would have to hire guides somewhere since he had never ventured into the marsh.

‘Would not that be dangerous wayfarer?’

‘No less so than meeting Slorty and his villains. Remember I am not intending to go into the marsh only follow along the side of it, so we will be in fairly close contact with the mainland most of the time. After all we only have to turn weneways and we must reach the shore’.

He remembered the warnings Solas Sharp had given him about those mysterious incidents in the villages, but he dismissed them. The Duc must have been thinking on similar line for he asked.

‘Are there any Marsh kings left wayfarer? I wish I had Morad here’ he added inconsequently.

‘They have not been heard of for two hundred years. They are probably a legend. Our concern will be with mortal men I fancy’.

They travelled quickly, moving through the bleak deserted countryside without incident. The villages were locked up and only once in the next five days did they see anyone at all, a lonely figure plodding over a field. The plain grew flatter as they approached the marsh and the Great River wound itself into sinuous coils and eventually a giant loop almost breaching into the marsh before turning and running alongside for several leagues to merge with the marsh in a swampy delta at the very tip of the Raggerok.

Widsith directed them towards the land inside the loop. Here he felt it would be safer, well away from the effects of Slortys men and therefore with less suspicion towards foreigners. As he knew from hard experience the villagers themselves were often the biggest threat, for this was a superstitious time and strangers were often unwelcome, until they had proved their harmlessness. Sometimes the villagers did not give strangers that chance.

Before the loop they had to cross the Royal Road, the old highway to the Furrowdale Valley and onto the Swaleton Plains. It was a disappointment. A bare muddy track with not a soul to be seen on it and little sign it had been used. There were few trees in this landscape now. Mostly grasses with a typical plains shrub that often grew to two long-mans in height but was still a shrub for all that. Its trunk was smothered in branches and thick fleshy leaves that retained the water and kept out the drying wind. Always there was some sort of wind, sifting through the grasses like an unseen hand running its fingers in waves over the rolling slopes, and it carried with it as it blew from breeways, a tang of something unfamiliar, the smell of the marsh. A scented bitter smell, not at all unpleasant

‘I thought marshes were muddy, smelly places’ remarked Juud.

‘This is not a place of wetter land. It’s a place without land. It’s not a marsh so much as a sea with grass growing through it’ replied Widsith.

‘That’s very poetic for you wayfarer?’ she teased him.

Juud pictured it in her head, a romantic vision, (she had never seen the sea) of billowing rushes and waves of swaying trees with birds like fishes darting in amongst the moving carpet of plants, but of course it was nothing like that.

They arrived at the top of a low hill and saw all around them the great gleaming curve of the Great River that swung in a vast half circle from yorn to skaw, and beyond that a grey flat line of mist with a hint of green below, monotonous dull and uniform, as straight and unending as a line in geometry — the marsh.

## The Headmans Story

*We learn something of the mystery of the marshes and that great wayfarer Beon Derdane, and we learn also of the great God of the marsh, the water-snake Vorst. Tysa makes a decision. Wisdom Shorrock gives fair warning.*

‘Be careful Tysa. The banks are steep and slippery and the water is deep’.

‘I’ll be careful Juud’ and she went out from the hut and down to the river side. The tedious negotiations for the sale of a boat had exhausted her patience. She would rather sit in the mist and watch the river oil past the bending rushes, its smooth surface undisturbed except for a cluster of nervous ducks, aware that Old Wast was a dangerous season for water-fowl. Men grew hungrier at this time and set delicate snares in the tall wayside grasses, and would place crudely painted decoys on the river close to the bank ever hopeful that a real duck might fancy the imitation company. A few did, but most kept to the middle of the river and watchfully eyed any craft that took an interest in them.

The sale of the boat had aroused wide interest in the village. Dulled by inactivity and boredom, once the villagers had got over their initial suspicion they welcomed the rare travellers and followed the proceedings of the sale closely, commenting on the value of so-and-sos boat over his neighbours, recommending this size or that, and wondering generally why these strangers would wish to venture into the marsh at this time of year. The old men shook their heads ‘the fog is the worst this time, wait till Sprig’, but the young men scorned this, sensing the adventure behind these travellers.

‘They want the fog, you old fools. In Sprig they be seen for leagues.’

They of course would not go out themselves. In Old Wast they knew how deceptive were its ways.

Hull was patient. As he spoke the best of this language the brunt of the negotiations fell on him, with constant translation between Widsith, and the owners of the boats. The wayfarer knew better than to hurry things along but grew impatient with the deliberations. It was not that they did not want to sell, Widsiths price was generous, but rather they enjoyed this interruption and were inclined to spin it out for what it was

worth. It would give them conversations through to Sprig. Eventually the bargain was made on one mans boat and the money exchanged. In Sprig the happy owner would build a new boat for a fraction of the price paid and come off considerably wealthier as a consequence. Who said Wast Time was the leanest of times? He and his cronies went off to celebrate whilst the wayfarer leaned back and sighed. That was one chore done, but the second looked to remain unachieved, they could not get a guide. He went to the headman for advice, and he explained.

His name was Wisdom Shorrock and he was as old and grizzled as anyone could expect, yet with shrewd eyes and quick alert thoughts that sometimes stumbled on a slow tongue. He received Widsith in his hut, larger than any other in the village, with a smoky peat fire smouldering in the hearth in the middle of the room. Wisdom sat there most days, receiving visitors and food, and all the tittle-tattle of the village passed through his motionless ears as the river did between banks. The visitors had come to see him first and it was through his accomodating friendliness that they managed to buy the boat. Without the headmans support no one would have had the temerity to sell. They had already tried three villages before this one, and whilst they were not exactly unfriendly, they were definitely on guard against strangers.

Driac Slortys men had passed through in their murderous way the season before and the villagers had not forgotten, sizing up strangers with care. This village had remained unvisited by Slortys warriors, which helped somewhat in arranging the sale, but it was the headman himself who made the business at all possible and took it upon himself to recommend the three or so boats that would be suitable. He stood in no financial gain from the transaction and Widsith was puzzled by the markedly friendly air with which the headman had first greeted them, and then encouraged them in their business. So with the boat bought, but the issue of a guide unresolved, Widsith visited the headman again. Wisdom spoke an excellent Noll tongue, so Hull busied himself bringing the boat out of its Old Wast retirement, and answering the chattering curiosity of the village folk.

The Duc and Juud stayed behind, resting, and Tysa went for a walk on the fog-shrouded riverbank. The headman started indirectly speaking in a slow, gritty voice that the wayfarer to strain to hear at times.

‘It is curious to see travellers here, especially with young girls wearing mens clothes. Well, we are a questioning people and love to know where these travellers come from, who they are, are they travelling to something or fleeing from something worse? We love to know these things but we do not ask. We look?’

Wisdom, as if to emphasise the point opened his eyes wide and stared at the wayfarer, then the eyelids creased, and closed down narrowly upon the pupils as before and he resumed his slow explanatory speech.

‘We see five people, with good money, eager to buy a boat to go into the marshes, whom we, people who live here all our lives, do not venture to go. We think these people brave, or fool-hardy. Some of our men have gone into the marshes, and never re-turned. We still have widows people weeping for them and children growing hungry because their father did not bring fish for their plates. Well, we see these things and wonder. We hear sounds in the marshes, some say the noises of beasts, or demons or Gods, some say they are worse sounds than that, men talking and the clang of armour.

So we keep away from the marshes except on the finest days when one or two young men will brave a few leagues into them for a show of their courage, and come quickly out. The marsh whispers even on the finest days’.

The old man paused as if remembering some youthful folly of his when he had wanted to prove his worth. He continued.

‘I say this as a way of explanation, not apology, for the reluctance of our men to guide you there. They are not cowards, but they fear an unknown, they fear a void where men go and do not return. You can try another village but I do not think you will find anyone to help you. If you still must go’ he paused ‘you must do so alone.’

He pulled lovingly on his pipe.

‘So we see these people who go where we do not care to go, and wonder at them, at their strength, at their courage, for they had need of plenty of it. We see a leader. A quietly spoken man. Confident and sure, as if he was well travelled of this world and knew some of its secrets. We see a giant of a man, who is strong in arm and seems to understand our tongue as if he once lived here. That also is strange. There is a distinguished gentleman and his lovely daughter. Mannered and calm, yet with a weariness on them, and then we see a quiet, lonely girl who sits by the river and wears a shroud over her face as if one bereaved. And so seeing these people we wonder if they can match the marsh, if they are as strong as they believe, for we have seen strong men, skilled and experienced in the marsh fail it’.

He looked at Widsith. He had given his warnings. Were they still to go on?

His stare interrogated the wayfarer as no words could ever have done. The wayfarer held the gaze and the old man looked away, not in defeat of the others eyes but because he knew that Widsith still intended to enter the marsh. A silence hung between them. When Wisdom Shorrock spoke again it was in a different tone, a reminiscing way almost, of himself as a young man, eager and skilled as a fisher and boatman, wanting to try his talents on this mysterious thing that nurtured and frightened them.

‘So you are determined. When I was young I was determined too and entered the marsh and I luckily, or by Stroms hand, emerged from it. But my companion was not so fortunate. He was a wayfarer too’.

Widsith started at this. He had not told the headman of his profession, it was usually better not to for it often aroused resentment in villagers who had been tricked by some of his less worthier compatriots. Another had been before?

‘Ah, yes wayfarer, we see, we see. So many years ago I took this man into the marsh, oh he was young and so was I. Foolish for adventure we both were and I was not to be persuaded from my decision to guide this fellow in. My wifes tears I ignored, her belly shaking with child, I ignored that too, for I was young and wanted adventure. And this wayfarer, he was so like you. He spoke firmly and precisely wanting a guide, and prepared to pay a stiff price for a boat, like you, for the villagers did not believe they would ever see their craft again. But he came alone, so strong-willed. He had seen a city in the marsh he said. Seen it from the mountains and painted its picture so well in my head that I was fired up to go with him to see this fabulous place. My friends laughed. He had seen no city, but a trick of the eye. Marsh forms, we call them, ‘phantoms’, tricks of the mist that have deceived even the best of men. Villagers have come in from

the marsh half-mad swearing they saw armies of giant men and wheeled carts floating above the reeds. But I was not to be persuaded. I wanted to go. And I did.

‘With this wayfarer we followed the subtle currents inland, through the rustling reeds and into the very deepest of mists. All manner of strange shapes we saw but dismissed them as our imagination, mere fear expressed in the silent and shifting mists. The reeds grew tall and we came upon islands of land floating amongst the waters with the stumps of old buildings on them and still we pressed on keeping our eye on the sun for that fixed our only position’.

The headman stopped talking and Widsith realised how intently he had been listening. He could hear his own heart beat and somewhere a lonely bird called. There was a child's voice outside. All things suspended, holding, waiting for the headman to complete his story. The power of this voyage still came through some thirty or more years after it had been engaged on. The headman sighed.

‘And then, we became lost. We had been warned. Sometimes the fog closes so tightly you cannot make out Bree. We could not believe this and yet I have known it then, and since. We should have stayed in the one place but we grew frightened and tried to turn and became hopelessly confused by the currents that pulled us around. Three times we circled the same island, but we did not give up, but rowed on gripped by a madness that comes on those surrounded by such a unintelligible wall of nothingness. It was Vorst! He was in our minds now. What young fools! We went on, possessed, like Wyrds till we were exhausted. The wayfarer was scared beyond normal reason, as I was, for we were beyond normal reason. We saw ghosts rearing up, phantoms threatening us, sprites behind every flax bush and spirits of evil intent over our heads. We were mad, of course, for a while.’

Wisdom fiddled with his pipe, and the wayfarer waiting, knowing that the pause was the necessary part of a great story-telling.

‘Then myself and the wayfarer got into an argument. It was extraordinary that we had not fought before, but now we did. Like madmen possessed by Vorst, that snake, that serpent he had coiled his way into our hearts, the demon spirit of the marsh. We fought in the boat, the wayfarer knocked me senseless and when I awoke...’ the headman for the first time smiled, a lean quizzical grin as if the joke were on him ‘I was alone.’

After a silence he continued.

‘I returned to the village, and this is the curious thing, I was quite close to it, yet we had rowed for days into the marsh. I returned, confused, fevered. I told the villagers of our madness, of Vorst, and they nodded and said I was a foolish and also a lucky man. I had learnt a lesson they said. And so I did, but not the lesson they thought’.

It was getting dark inside the hut. The peat fire was glowing as a slight wind, rare in these parts, puffed around the corners of doors and windows. The headman noticed it.

‘There is always a little wind in the evening. They say it is Vorst coming out from the marsh to see who he can entice into it.’

Widsith had to ask.

‘What was the lesson the headman had learnt?’

‘I will show you.’

Wisdom clapped his hands and muttered quickly to a young boy who came running to his command. He darted off and returned shyly with a package, then ran away again. The headman lovingly unwrapped the cloth and revealed a small wooden carving, that of a water-snake, coiled in a charming humourous manner around a flax shrub. Its eyes were two red jewels, and they glittered in the firelight. The headman passed it to Widsith who admired it, but was puzzled by its relationship to the headmans story.

‘I found it’ the old man whispered ‘in my boat when I woke up. It had been put there by someone’.

‘By the wayfarer?’

The headman shook his head.

‘That is what my friends said, but I do not think so. Vorst, our evil spirit, takes his favourite shape as a water-snake. No it was put there by someone else. As a warning, and as a joke’.

Widsith could not understand what the old headman meant, but he saw in Wisdoms eyes a twinkle almost as mischievous as that in the carving. Was this too a joke?

He asked what was the wayfarers name? Wisdom leant forward, wrapped up the carving in its woollen cloth and closed his eyes.

‘Beon Derdane’ he said.

Widsith was barely able to sleep that night, shifting his position a dozen times till he was thoroughly entangled in his blanket and he had to wake up properly to straighten it out. The headmans story kept taking different forms in his head. At once thinking it was an elaborate joke or else seeing it as completely true in all its mysterious details. If it was a joke where had the headman got Beon Derdanes name from? His father had mentioned that wayfarer by name several times, considering him amongst the most daring of travellers. Now surely an obscure headman in a poor fishing village would not have remembered a wayfarer with such a name unless he had met him? Though of course, he might have met him, but not in those circumstances. But what about the carving? There was deeper meaning in this. The old man obviously treasured it. If it came from the marsh, who had made it and put it there ‘as a joke’?

‘The Marshmen? Why even his father had not believed in them. Well then phantoms...?’ But Widsith had never seen a God nor a ghost, even though all those around him saw them. In his experience the most ruthless of men never believed in such nonsense but frequently manipulated people who did. He tossed in his sleeping position fretfully. He could not concentrate on the matter, his mind wandering in backways. And what else did the headman say, something about carts...? It was hopeless to sleep.

He quietly dressed and stepped over the others into the moist mist night. There was always a mist here it seemed, even in Croppen he had been warned there were sudden clouds of mist that billowed like smoke from the marsh. In Wast Time it was worse. Vorst, the water-snake.

Widsith leaned against the side of the hut and lit his pipe, puffing quick clouds of smoke into the air as the hotherb caught. He smoked contentedly. It was peaceful out of the stale, snoring air of the hut.

If he recalled his father correctly, Beon Derdane had disappeared some thirty or forty years past. The headman was certainly old enough to have known the wayfarer. And had not his father said that Derdane had got lost on the Raggerok? Lost, or last seen? He could have come down here and made his last journey into the marsh and the madness of Vorst. A city? The wayfarer followed the thought as it curled upwards in harmony with the smoke from his pipe. For a wild moment Widsith chased a fantastic idea of following Beon Derdane's trail and seeking out this far-off place, but he had other tasks. Besides all he knew came from an old mans story, and a vague memory of what his father had said about Beon Dedane and the marsh kings. His father had been certain on that point. They did not exist. Once they might have done, but not for generations, not even at the time of the first horse warriors had Marshmen been seen. They were lost in myth and legend.

He felt a shiver up his back as the cold from the hut crept into his spine. He knocked out his pipe on the door and was about to go in when he noticed a movement by the river. A figure was sitting by the bank wrapped in a blanket. It looked like Tysa, her long hair sprayed over the back of the blanket in a damp fan. He walked over to her taking care to make some noise so as to warn her of his approach. She glanced over her shoulder.

'Tysa' he said and squatted beside her. She nodded but resumed watching the river as if his presence was a disturbance.

For a while they watched in silence the slow black flowing river as it sucked and rippled against its banks.

Widsith felt he ought to say something but nothing particularly came to mind. He unfortunately recalled the headmans words 'like someone bereaved' and then remembered the cruelty of Tallott. It was fair to be sympathetic to Tysa at first, but all this gloomy moping was not helpful to the journey. This next stage in the marsh looked the most difficult yet and there would be few opportunities to escape each others tempers. He glanced sideways at her, her pale face hypnotised by the moving water. The mist was clinging to his back.

'Tysa, you are feeling well?' He honestly could not think of a better question even though it sounded foolish in his ears.

'Yes, yes.' Tysa still faced away from him. Widsith sighed. She was impatient for him to leave, so he stood up and turned to go.

'We leave tomorrow'. She nodded and he walked away.

The door of the hut shut quietly and she was alone again once more.

Leaving already. She did not want to. This river gripped her in a spell, she could watch it for wicks. Its surface, sullen brown in the day and oily black at night seemed impenetrable and mysterious, like a dark soul. No one could know a rivers soul, or a humans. Always leaving, had she spent her life just to leave things? For once she wanted to stay, desperately to something settled, to reach a point where they did not have to rise up and run away like surly vagabonds in the night. A place to call home, whatever it was. A damp forest, a monastery, a fisherfolk village. How sweet to call a place home! This village with all its life of people and purpose, wildlife on the water, fish and skimming insects, shy flights of ducks and the hacking call of the water-rat, and above all the river,

changeless and the same, flowing on and on and on. She wished she never had to leave it, become one with the river, to find a home in its depths, to cling and swim with it and then to die, only that would not be death, only a returning. And not a leaving..

She cried for herself. Quick sobbing breaths that shook her shoulders gently. A few tears ran down her cheeks. She mopped them up with the moistened fingers. Even if I did not cry the mist would do it for me she said to herself. What was wrong with her? Torturing herself and the others with a gloomy face and silent demeanour. Was she really lonely? Was her heart as empty as she imagined or was this just some trick of her inner nature to gain pity? But she did not want that. She had dismissed Widsith just as he made ready to comfort her. She did not want that. She did not know what she wanted. So she stared at the river and tried to ask the river what it wanted and if it would give up the secret of its existence to her. Later she turned towards the hut, her cheeks still wet, though that may have been the mist.

In the morning the sun had burnt red through the mist and scattered it, though further over the marsh itself it still clung, wraithlike and insubstantial. Widsith slowly gathered together what equipment they would need. The village children watched excitedly, stamping their feet to keep warm and blowing great smoky breaths in the cold morning air.

It was a big boat, open and would seat six comfortably. It had three sets of oars and a small retractable mast, an unusual feature for the wind rarely got up enough for it and the scraggy sail to be any use. The boat was large enough for comfort but not too awkward to row, an important point, for only two of them could be considered strong rowers.

The Duc and Juud wrapped their goods in a local cloth of exceptionally close weave which kept out the water. Tysa had disappeared somewhere.

‘What can we do about her father?’ asked Juud desperately. The Duc was not sure.

‘She will recover in time daughter, I am sure.’ Juud had no patience with these platitudes but swallowed a sharp response. Of late she was losing patience with him.

‘She mopes and mopes. I have caught her crying dozens of times. Will she ever stop?’

She did not expect an answer. The Duc shook his head again in sadness.

‘Are you looking forward to this trip daughter?’ he asked unexpectedly.

‘On the boat, why yes, I think I am.’

The Duc certainly did not think that. He would have preferred to hire horses and make a spirited dash for it. Get this endless journey to its end, The boat was lifted up by several willing hands and put in the river which sucked at it greedily. The wayfarer stepped in, and nodded appreciably at the tidy collection of baggage ready to be placed on the boat.

‘Where is Tysa?’

‘I think she is down by the river, where the stream runs in’ said Juud shall I fetch her?’ He nodded.

Juud jogged along the river bank happy that the sun was shining and the river bright with ripples. A duck flew high above her head and was swallowed in the mist on the

marsh. Where the stream came into the river it formed a small backwater where the river eddied in. It was cleaner than the main current and the bigger of the fisherfolk children used it as a diving spot. There were said to be big caerp at the bottom of the pool, the children had felt them brush against them as they swam screaming with fear and delight when it happened. Sometimes they said it was a water-snake but no one believed that, except the smaller children.

Juud arrived at the spot and was disappointed. Tysa was not there. She looked up and down the long grass banks to make certain, but there was no one there. Not even a fresh imprint in the grass of a sitting person. Then her eye was caught by something floating in the back water, rocking gently as the stream tried to push it out but the stronger eddy of the river kept it in. Something instantly familiar and shocking. She gasped, and momentarily closed her eyes, then stared again. The thing rocked back and forth like a white log. Juud turned and stumbled, running and walking back to the village. By the time she burst into their hut her face was a web of interlaced tear tracks. She leant back against the door and spoke barely in an audible voice to the startled wayfarer and her father.

‘It’s Tysa. She’s drowned. In the river. Drowned.’

## The One that was Destroyed

*After a doleful ceremony the travellers set out to nothingness. Widsith becomes anxious and realises his mistake, whilst the Duc begins to philosophise and we learn more than we ever have about the roundell.*

Now they were four.

They buried Tysa in the small cemetery at the back of the village. It stood on a low knoll that was dignified with the name of hill. It looked over the roofs of the village, but did not see any further than them. The perennial mist still dwelt on the marsh and a low rolling hummock obscured the Granry from the village. Tysa had plainly gone for a swim, her clothes were bunched on the bank nearby, beside a low slab of rock that functioned as a diving platform. There was a deep pool below the rock but it was quite easy to get out of as a series of mud steps had been cut out of the bank and back up to the diving rock. So why had not Tysa used them?

The question was avoided. It was understood that she had accidentally drowned, perhaps weakened by the chill of the river till she no longer had the strength to pull herself out, and too far away from the village to call out for help. Juud was distressed to realise that while they had calmly packed up their belongings Tysa had been fighting futilely for her life only a quarter league away. They buried her in silence. Her young face more reposed in death than it had ever been in life. Juud remembered the changing display of expression on Tysa's lively face, and turned away. Tysa had always seemed the least touched by mortality. The spades spread dirt tidily over the grave and a pole with a name chiselled into the wood was set by it. Obesiance was made to Strom and Vorst, and two of the women fisherfolk cast some pink and white water-lilies over the dirt mound. The villagers retired giving the them a decent space with which to express their grief, but it was too sudden for this.

The others walked back slowly to the village not voicing aloud their thoughts. If they did not speak their doubts about Tysa's death now it would never be spoken of again. Juud juggled with the words in her head to express something publicly, some reassurance that Tysa had not chosen to die, but had been tricked into death.

'She was so alive. She would not have killed herself' she finally said and looked around at the others who said not a word.

The Duc reached out and embraced his daughter who clung to him and openly sobbed that it was not true, simply not true.

They left the next day, very early in the morning as the mist still hung over the thick syrupy river. The boat was rowed out into the stream and was taken by it swiftly downwards. In a bitwick the village that had been their life for a few dramatic days was gone, never to return. No one saw them off though Widsith was sure that in his house Wisdom Shorrock was awake and listening to the river and was following them with his internal eye. He had given the wayfarer one piece of advice.

‘Do not struggle with the marsh. It makes it easier for Vorst. Flow with it. Let the marsh absorb you’ then he had chuckled ‘give Beon Dardane my welcome’.

That gave Widsith a chill.

The river carried the boat with easy and surprising speed. If the gloom of leaving and Tysas death had not been upon them they would have been charmed by the novelty of such travel. The mist had now thinned and the early sun broken through on one side of the river dallying amongst the still obscured far bank in angles of fluttering light. Another village appeared around a long bend, still mostly shadowed by the grudgingly rising sun and looking peacefully devoid of people. In a wick or so the children would be out in its sole street exploring the day, but the biggest adventure had passed them whilst they slept and would be out in the marsh by the time they woke. One adult waved at the boat but it was too far away to tell if he was surprised by the occupants. The friendly gesture warmed Juud and she began to look around a little more inquisitively.

The mist on the marsh was now plainly in retreat and clung in feeble wraiths to an occasional large shrub, as if that would protect it. Water gurgled at the boat's side and she draped a hand in it, quickly lifting it at its chill touch. Despite herself, and her self-imposed mourning for Tysa, she was feeling happy. On such a lovely morning it was hard not to.

Widsith steered without effort, the long narrow boat acting responsively to the tiller. Hull sat in the prow, partly to keep an eye for any obstacles and also because his weight helped to hold the boat down. In front it was almost possible to believe that there was no boat at all and he was gliding midstream down this huge river as if on some magic airy wave above the licking water. The Duc and Juud sat with various bundles, baggers and packages stored in amongst their legs. Though it was possible to sit two abreast it was really more comfortable to have a thwart to yourself and lounge across it grandly and admire the scenery as it rolled past.

A dozen villages went by. They passed at a distance one boat upon the water and disturbed flocks of ducks as they beat against the water with their wings. The sun grew hot on the great bends of the water, the river swelling in size in leisured loops as it travelled skaw. Some of the force of the current had slackened and with the rising sun had made the day lazier. The banks widened and the little boat looked lost on the broad river, as it turned under the rising blue foothills of the Raggerok, climbing in a steady line against the sky to the distant twinkling peaks. It was a magnificent day, with more than a touch of Sprig.

The wayfarer studied the crest of the mountains with a traveller's eye, pondering

upon the long-ago journey of Beon Dardane. Up there in fine weather the marsh would be set out like a plan, and any of its supposed secrets plainly revealed. Further back on the range the ridge line looked broken with sharp and slotted defiles. If the old wayfarer had travelled that way, he deserved some honour for the journey for it would have been no easy task especially alone. Widsith turned back to the river, keeping his hand lightly on the tiller. This far at least the boat managed to steer itself. He saw Juuds face turned over her shoulder, smiling, as she said some thing to her father who leaned forward to catch her words, some of which floated to the wayfarer 'like a washed day'.

The river had now curved sharply breeways and islands of flax tugged at the main stream diverging it differing ways. Quite quickly these islands dotted the rivers surface and Widsith, found himself making decisions as to which one to take, favouring the landward mountain side of the river where he could, but already finding it was not always possible to do so. A far village slid by then some larger islands humped out of the water with flax and shrubs and thick matted grass. Imperceptively the river disappeared and the marsh began. As the islands clustered more thickly it became necessary to weave between them and the current that had pushed them so quickly to here was diminished and became uncertain of its direction. Clumps of rushes stuck through the water, telling that the surface was shallow under their craft. The boat had been designed for this, long in shape to squeeze through tangled clumps of reeds but flat bottomed, so as to slip over the shallowest of parts, with the delicate grace of a water-insect balancing on the skin of the water. The mist wall was looming ahead and the sudden decline of the bright sunshine brought a chill on the company. Juud put back on her jerkin and shivered, as much from genuine cold as the clammy prospect before them.

In spite of his steering Widsith could not help but be pulled directly into the marsh. He fancied that once the currents had slackened they could row closer to the mountains, and he shouted this as encouragement to the Duc who had pointed to the fast approach ing fog. Then the sun was swallowed and the world became all changed. The enveloping mist left the sun discernable only as a dull yellow blotch, which that gave no warmth. The water sucked at the boat and the rushes brushed against its lipped sides with a whispering. The wayfarer felt a moment of panic, almost a wanting to turn around and make for the stable land again, but he suppressed the thought and prepared to tackle the new complexities in this unfamiliar place, keeping one eye glued on the vague sun. That was their only guide.

Hull had taken a pole and prodded it forward off clumps of the peculiar floating shrubs called wenderweeds that threatened to engage them. The current was pulling turgidly and with little interest. Several times Widsith thought about using oars but each time they entered another channel and the current picked up strength and made the oars unnecessary. For half a day they went this way at a steady but slackening pace. Widsith, still trying to keep towards where he imagined the mountains to be. Sometimes the current favoured him sometimes not. At midsun he halted the boat by an island and they sat on the grass knoll and discussed the route.

They all agreed it was time to bring the oars to work and press skawwards instead of persistently into the marsh, but this was easier said than done.

The remnants of the Great River still tugged them away from the Raggerok and was a nuisance to their efforts. The clumps of flax and rushes tended to grow in the line

of the current so as they rowed they were obliged to go against the natural inclination of the country, fending off the wenderweeds with long poles and curses. The wenderweeds were covered in little pink flowers which gave off a sweet, almost sickly, scent when they were prodded. Even the grassy islands tended to be ranged against them, forcing them ever remorselessly breeways. As they struggled two boat lengths skaw they were carried a boatload breeways. It was frustrating work.

The wayfarer called a halt late in the day by a large island where a sward of grass sat invitingly as a campsite. They hauled the boat up onto the island and sat around gloomily. The mist seemed thicker and the sun only a pale orb behind it. After a struggle Hull produced a fire from the dead shrubbery on the island and they cheered up with warm leafen and fresh caught fish. A bird chirped brightly from a bush and flashed a little colour in the grey-green evening and it fluttered about the branches. Widsith watched it, then addressed the others.

‘This current is still carrying us breeways. Its difficult to battle against but I do not think we have any choice. Eventually we should be able to reach the land as long as we face the sun.’ Widsith translated these thoughts to Hull. Between them they had already spent some time arguing the merits of alternate routes so that by the time Widsith spoke to the Duc and Juud, in a real sense the decision was already made.

‘It is tiring work wayfarer. I wonder if we are wise.’

For most of the afternoon the Duc had been manipulating a pole, either to push the boat away from the islands or assist the boats passage through the water. The long pole was awkward to use and mud and water would drip along its length onto the users clothes. At the end of the day everyone was sodden.

‘I do not see what else we can do, except to turn back, and with the current of the Great River against us that would be difficult. No, we have to go sideways to the current, escape it, then turn to  $\neg$ wards the shore again.’

Words such as shore’ and ‘land’ became confusing in a myriad world of islands and floating vegetation. Widsith meant the land at the foot of the Raggerok but who was to say that there was not ‘shore’ on the other side of the marsh. It could not continue for ever surely? Perhaps the sea was beyond?

‘I think we have to go on father, we are making progress’ Juud added hopefully.

‘I think we are. But we have days of hard work ahead so we had better be prepared for it.’ Widsith made his voice as reassuring as possible.

The fire crackled and sizzled in the mist and the silence enclosed them, the mist sifting in and around them like a fifth presence.

‘It is uncanny, this mist’ Juud said nervously ‘sometimes I see shapes in it, or think a shrub is moving when really its only us or the mist’.

Widsiths river of thought was carried to Beon Derdane and that ‘city’ he had seen. Obviously the others must have been thinking on similar lines.

‘It would hardly be possible to live here, surely wayfarer?’ questioned the Duc. Widsith frowned.

‘You are thinking of the Marshmen?’ The Duc inclined his head.

‘You would hardly think it’ the wayfarer continued, and picking up on an earlier

thread of thought suggested 'but I fancy that there must be another side to the marsh and that supposing people lived there, they journeyed over to the Granry or the Furrowdale Valley and started off the legends about the Marshmen.' He was not entirely sure whether he believed this but it sounded plausible.

'They must have been Past Peoples too' considered the Duc.

'You mean like the Lowleahs and Hollerwalls father?'

'Yes dear. All these Past Peoples the Lowleahs, the Hollerwalls, the Marshmen, even the Highland tribes themselves, were thought by Morad to be one people, scattered most certainly, but one people.'

The wayfarer poked at the fire gloomily.

'I've heard stories that the Highland people occupied all the ranges down to the marsh' he said.

Widsith refilled his cup with leafen, conscious of the puzzled face of Juud. Something was eluding her.

'These Past Peoples, when we talk of them, they are all those tribes we have travelled through? So they are all one?'

This was a revelation to Juud. In her lessons at the preparatory school history had begun with the wave of horse-warriors moving in from the skaw onto the Swaleton Plain, and Swivvens great march from the Furrowdale Valley. The peoples that her ancestors had displaced were known to be crude, primitive tribes, barely reaching a civilised state. That was why they had succumbed to the horse-warriors advance. Why, the notion that these peoples had fashioned their own kingdom before any migrants had arrived was disturbing.

'So we, our ancestors, are almost intruders? But surely these people weren't civilised?'

'In a fashion yes,' the wayfarer replied 'but not with horses or weapons, or stone buildings. That's why there is no trace of them. There was a civilisation of ideas, but remember there is no certain evidence for this great kingdom. Perhaps it existed, perhaps not. Morad would be quite capable of inventing it if it suited his temperament, but still, some of the Past Peoples philosophical concepts seem to have remained, as has a lot of their language, which is expressive of their beliefs'.

'How do you mean?' Juud was still puzzled. Widsith continued reluctantly. He had not wanted to be drawn out this way.

'The words for the seasons, Wast Time, Sprig, Croppen, are all from the language of the Past Peoples. Words for wheat, corn, many of the weather terms are all derived from that tongue. Nearly anything which has a circular, or seasonal rhythm, derives its sense from the old'.

'So the roundrell was the Past Peoples God?'

'No, they did not have one. Only a set of practical beliefs which they termed the roundrell'.

This was very confusing to Juud. Widsith yawned, and stretched elaborately. He wanted to go to bed, but Juud wanted him off that easily.

‘But wayfarer I do not understand. I thought it was primitive to have Gods, why today, half of my class do not really believe in Strom. He was just a figure to have holidays for, to dance and eat. Nothing more than that, yet you say the Past Peoples did not have a God. But they are more primitive than us surely?’

A terrible thought came to her.

‘If that is not true, then we are more primitive. We have not gone forwards, but backwards. I cannot believe it.’

‘And still going backwards wayfarer I think’ the Ducs voice flat and hopeless.

The wayfarer shrugged, and Juuds mind was flooded with a violent vision, totally contrary to her upbringing, of her crude ancestors of marching triumphantly into a virgin land, hacking and killing the peaceful inhabitants. The Duc looked sadly at his daughter.

‘Do you wonder then daughter why it was that I buried myself in Morad. This world seemed a poor alternative for the one that was destroyed’.

The next day was the same turgid struggle. The mist was heavy, the currents still persuading the boat breeways, and they still struggled to keep it skaw, always chasing the obscured sun. A few shy birds darting in amongst the flax leaves were almost their sole company. That and a water-snake wriggling hastily from a patch of rushes that Hull had disturbed with his pole. They tried not to think of it as an evil omen but the mist did indeed thicken around the middle of the after-sun. For the first time Widsith was unsure of the direction of the sun. The mist glowed around them making it impossible to distinguish any particular point of origin of the the light. It was generally suffused through the air with a texture that would have been beautiful and unearthly if they had had the patience to admire it. Instead it meant a confusion to their hopes. There was no point in proceeding.

They camped a night and the next morning the sun was visible again but after only a few wicks that eerie glow crept across the day.

So this was the danger that the headman had warned about. From this mist would come Vorst, seeping into their minds unease, and eventually anger turning to madness. It was plain to see how it would go. They would have to wait thought Widsith, to go on was madness, yet they might invite it by lingering. The Duc was concerned.

‘This misty light is devilish wayfarer. What can we do in it?’

Widsith did not know. He supposed if the worst happened they could always trace the current back upstream. In this upset world the steady flow of current appeared to be the only persistent and reliable thing, and it still flowed breeways! He had expected it to be long dissipated by now and so they could travel with ease sideways to the mountains, but no, it slid breeways, always breeways.

They camped on a large island. Hull went off later to explore it and see whether from its low top there might be able to discern Breets image. He came back with tales of a discovery, not of the elusive sun, but of a ruined building standing on the highest point of the island. They all went to look and poked among the standing stumps of timber and pieces of metal.

‘Look here’s some broken pots’ said Juud excitedly ‘and a wooden spoon. She held

up the rotten item, curiously reassured by this familiar object. There was the shattered remains of a fire grate and two rusting horse-shoes, a puzzling item. The island must be larger than it looked to keep a horse on it. In this mist it would be dangerous to try and find out even though in theory it should be possible to follow the shoreline around all the way and back to the campsite.

'It is odd to think people lived here' remarked Juud later that night 'the Marshmen again?' she suggested whimsically.

The wayfarer had formerly thought that these old reports of buildings was nonsense, but the headman had been right there. Was he right in other ways too?

The next day the sun was discernible and at the earliest moment they pushed off and rowed and paddled towards the skaw, making easier progress it seemed. Then the mist abruptly thickened and Widsith cursed it systematically. Juud looked worriedly at him. She had never seen him in such a temper.

'It's not very good is it?' she said 'if only the mist would lift.

Widsith shook his head, that had not been the reason for his outburst of bad language.

'Here' he said sharply, snatching a handful of grass and throwing it on the water 'watch it'.

Juud was startled by the action, but obediently watched the floating grass. It did not move. She looked up at him. He did not say a word, waiting for her to understand. She looked back at the grass. It still had not moved. Then she realised.

They were banked against an island the boat not moving, so the grass should be, but it stayed beside the boat. There was no current to shift it. They had lost the last tenuous hold on their bearings. Somewhere back there in the thickets of rushes and flax the current had ceased and they lured on by Vorst, had not noticed.

Now the current was irrecoverable. It was as if the marsh had tempted them into a trap, and they as innocents had fallen blindly into it.

## A Sort of Structure

*Out of despair came hope. They discover something that should not exist and begs large questions about itself. History is in the very making, even I am excited, this is new research at the cutting edge of our knowledge and we have a debt of gratitude for the Duc's careful journal, for we would never have believed... but I am ahead of myself again. Of course, that's the point.*

The pearly light moved and swam about them, saturating their clothes and bedecking their hair in fine jewels of water. It was impossible to think that the mist could mean any harm, but it trapped them like a stone wall. The headman's words rang in Widsith's mind, and he could scarcely believe that in a bare half-wick they could become so utterly without bearings. The sun was unlocatable. When the mist lightened it was day, when it dimmed, night. The time was fixed only by the pattern of hunger in their stomachs. For three days it had been like this. Waiting for Vorst to weaken his grip, though the old swamp-snake gave no sure sign of doing so. An occasional thinning of the fog would raise their hopes only to clog them with despair again when it thickened. How long could they wait? As the days ebbed and flowed past them their patience grew thin and the silences between speech longer. How easy it would be to take a gamble and row blindly to escape the mist, but Widsith remembered that chilling part of the headman's story too well, and he had to push the temptation away from him. It was Vorst talking to him, trying to tease him out of common sense.

Yet to stay or fly seemed an equal folly. Out of helplessness came anger, and then despair. Widsith could be ironical, the Duc scholarly, Juud might try a few girlish hums, Hull would just stand watchfully. None of this would free them, and it was not clear what it would be that could enable them to escape. Once the sun made a vague appearance for a brief moment and it was turned green by the water drops in the mist so that it resembled a ghastly green eye.

The baleful stare of Vorst.

Juud spent the days beside the fire, the only point of warmth in the day. She huddled by it, pulling her clothes tighter and lacing up her outer jerkin almost to her chin, a scarf swaddling her head. The fire was meagrely lit, Widsith insisted on it, as it took a consid-

erable amount of his and Hulls time gathering it from the sodden land. Once or twice Widsith thought it might be better not to keep the fire continuous, but then that would leave them nothing to do but wrap themselves in blankets under the dripping canopy. He saw how Juud comforted herself by the fire, and went off for more wood.

He and Hull were slowly learning about this land that Vorst had chosen for them. At first they had assumed it was a small island, but as they went cautiously about their wood-collecting they found the land rising in a series of scrubby hummocks to an unknown height. They kept a careful mental record of the patterns of hillocks and glades so as not to misplace their way, as the mist was no less deceiving on land than water. Both privately wondered if there was any use to this exploration but a wicks worth of the Ducs anxious fussing and Juuds tetchiness soon saw them threading back through the saturated woodlands that soaked through every protection of cloth.

And little thanks they got for the wood brought back.

Juud sat miserably by the fire, offering no help into her father who kept the meagre fire bolstered with small additions of wood, or to Widsith or Hull, who came back sweating with armfuls of kindling. She barely touched the meals or the constant pot of leafen that the Duc tirelessly kept hot for the return of the others. She hardly spoke, except in complaint, of the cold, or the damp wood, and found the rustling fidgety presence of her father so irritating that twice she burst out in anger at him. The Duc was startled and remonstrated with her, but seeing how she was realised that an argument was of no use. He did not tell the wayfarer of Juuds outbursts, but her sulky, silent condition was obvious to all. She was not herself, but then none of them were. Who could be with Vorst coiling a blanket of subtle insinuating thoughts into their heads. At least the others kept busy in a random uneasy fashion, but Juud had let go.

Vorst was in her mind, that serpent of doubt that waits upon the despairing seeds already present and pulls them to the surface.

Vorst told her that this was futile, that Tysa, her pale body stark upon the water, had died for nothing. That Tallott had bled his senseless greed onto the monastery floor, and robbed Ceans life of its promise, for what? And the others, so many cruel, stupid deaths. What was there in this that made death so often their partner? So many gone, people whom she hardly knew, Herret Grin'kel and Mattew Culler, the slain on the pass, the baldymen, hot-blooded and killed on that Harvess day. A sad litany of killing and insaneness, and stupidly they carried on, into blank darkness and fretting difficult journeys. And what was it that began it all. A gemstone? Or was it the compulsive greed in mens souls that led them to destroy for the short petty use of power? And she? Didn't want this death, and yet it was on her hands and seemed to be in the preoccupation of her mind as they went down in a spiral of horror that could only lead to the dirty Wyrds den. Oh Wene! What a folly this journey had been, and what a foolish girl had been contaminated.

'Juud' a hand shook her shoulder.

It was the wayfarer, looking concerned and excited.

'Juud. We've seen something. A sort of structure, out on the marsh'.

Juud looked at him dumbly. The Duc was anxiously studying his daughter, and Hull stood by, massive with arms akimbo.

'A platform you say wayfarer?' asked the Duc. Widsith nodded.

'We must look at it' and after a pause added 'now'.

Immediately Juud felt a reluctance to move, and drew her jerkin closer to her.

'You go wayfarer, and tell us how it is. It might only be a ruin, hardly worth us all going'.

The wayfarer looked at her gravely, and then at the Duc who began to say...

'Wayfarer you should go, and ehm... we could stay... I suppose...?'

The Duc heard himself and woke to his words, and a sudden short series of glances were exchanged between him and Widsith and at Juud.

'Get your baggers ready. We're going'.

The Duc saw the sense in it and acquiesced, but Juud got stubborn and refused to shift, till Widsith started bundling her goods anyhow into the boat, she snatched them furiously from his hands and told him to 'get away'. Which he did, dousing the fire and kicking its embers into the wet surrounding grass.

Perhaps Juud woke up then, startled by her own harsh voice and got in meekly beside the others, shivering till her father wrapped a spare cloak around her shoulders. Hull pushed off with a pole and they turned and began to creep along the edge of the land.

'They must be so careful!

Widsith was following his instinct. He was not a man to sit still and do nothing, and he believed that the only way to learn about a landscape was to explore. This strange dank place was no different and he and Hull had methodically explored the island, looking for what? A way out? An escape? A clue? Information perhaps, that would make them understand where they were. Perhaps he was born with restless feet, but it was a useful defect. More than once he had discovered that wandering around had saved him time, gave him credibility, even a career, and more than once saved his life. Widsith could not understand people who did not want to explore. It was fatal lack of curiosity.

As the boat slied along the islands edge Vorst was playing diabolical tricks to the eye, and shapes more often than not they vanished as shadows when approached. The land seemed solid, and slowly they rowed past the reedy shore and around a low woody headland. By rights they should be able to see the structure from here, but nothing was visible. Widsith peered into the murk. He did not want to leave the land, and as he strained his eyes he began to wonder if he and Hull had imagined the thing. No! Hull gave a shout. There it was! The tall piles that supported the platform were plain now. As they approached they were surprised to see the platform stretch in length and elongate itself into the mist with ten or twelve huge timber supports visible, paralleled by supports on the other side. The boat glided up to the structure, and slipped underneath. The platform was stood easily two longmans above the marsh, and was the same in width. The support poles were as thick as a mans body, and there was an elaborate bracework of timber underneath.

The majesty and mystery of the structure hushed their tongues and they whispered to each other.

'Is it a sort of fortress?' asked Juud, her bad temper gone in a trice.

Hull muttered something to Widsith about it being 'built to last'.

'Is it a path wayfarer?' was the Duc's murmured contribution, and it sparked an extraordinary idea in Widsith's mind. Surely it could not be that?

They tied up underneath, and whilst Hull steadied the boat Widsith swung himself up onto the bracework and crawled up a diagonal pole that was fastened to the main support. He got two good hands on the platform itself and hauled up onto it. The others followed, Hull pushing and Widsith heaving. The platform stretched endlessly into the mist at both ends, stared one way, then the next.

'I do believe it is a road' expostulated the Duc in amazement 'in the middle of the marsh, look, is that not a wheel mark?'

Widsith now remembered the remark of the headman about 'carts floating on air', so this was it. He told them what Wisdom Shorrock had said and they gazed around them in awe.

'But if the villagers say that in their stories then it must not have happened very long past. It might still be in use' said Juud.

'You still do not believe in the Marshmen, eh wayfarer?' Widsith shook his head ruefully.

'It rather looks as if I must unless it is some trick of Vorst'.

'No I pinched myself. It hurt so I must still be awake' said Juud gleeful. It was extraordinary how her temper had changed. This was something tangible that Vorst could not trick out of her.

Widsith walked up and down a few steps.

'I know what this is, though I can hardly believe it. My father did not believe it. It is the marsh highway.'

His words hung in the atmosphere, each person savouring the meaning of it. Widsith translated his opinion for Hull's benefit, who looked suitably impressed.

He clambered back to the boat and returned with his map which he unrolled on the planked road. On the marsh, thinly marked that it could barely be seen, was a crooked line, dissecting the part of the marsh that was visible, quite cleanly in two. At the half-way point, the line turned inward slightly and a large dot was inscribed. Here, whilst one line continued skaw, another went due breeeways and straight off the map. Unlike many of the other markings on the map, these had not been overdrawn, but left to fade into parchment.

'I did not really believe them' said Widsith shamefaced.

'Look how far we have travelled across the marsh! Those lines are the highway wayfarer?' Juud asked. Widsith nodded. He had still been fond of the notion that they were close to the shoreline, but if the map was accurate they had gone twenty or more leagues into the marsh. Those currents had been fiercer than he could have guessed, and he now realised that as they tried desperately to battle skaw they were probably being persuaded breeeways, into the deepest part of the marsh. Was that good luck, or misfortune. He looked around.

Would a highway mean people? Did that dot signify a city?

Something caught his eye, a plank, lighter and newer in colour, was set in the road. He bent over and inspected it. There were marks and weathering on the plank, yet it was still plainly new. Someone was keeping the roadway in good repair. The Marshmen? Brigands? Slorty and his army? Hull stared similarly at the plank and made his judgement 'not good, not bad'. Widsith understood by this elliptical remark that it was 'good' that people were on the highway, but 'bad' because there was no way of knowing whether they were friendly or not.

Hull wandered down the highway whilst Widsith drew attention of the new plank to the others. The mist was still clammy around them. It was getting darkened, and the problem of where to stay the night now became important. The discovery of the plank sobered them somewhat. The excitement of escaping Vorst had taken a perspective alongside the new anxieties of facing the highways builders, and Juud stared out over the marsh.

'I wonder if the mist ever goes away' was her comment.

'It is a more effective barrier than any river or mountain my dear. No wonder that no one believed in this highway, why who would have seen it! Do you know I do not suppose anyone from the kingdom has seen what we are seeing now' the Duc was plainly satisfied with this novelty 'is not that so wayfarer?'

Juud turned around quickly at a sound, then relaxed, it was only Hull returning, his heavy tread had echoed ominously on the planking. He spoke urgently to Widsith, who looked interested and both glanced back along the highway into the mist. Juud stared too, but could not see anything.

'He says there is a tower up ahead, with dry rooms, a fireplace and all'.

'Nobody there?'

'No. Can you and Hull bring the boat further along whilst me and the Duc have a look. This might be our sleeping quarters'.

Juud nodded and let Hull lower her down gently into the boat as she heard the wayfarers and her fathers footsteps thump above her head.

After a bitwicks walk the tower thickened out of the mist. It stood separate from the highway, supported on its own pillars. The gap was crossed by way of a short bridge that looked as if it could be withdrawn quickly if needed, thus isolating the tower in a sort of redoubt. Widsith and the Duc crossed the bridge and entered the ground storey room. It was empty. At one end was a fireplace with a neatly stacked pile of peat and wood beside it a pot swung over the cold hearth. On the other walls were wide benches with horsehair mattresses upon them. The light came from slits high up on the walls, that were windowless and might well have served some other purpose thought the Duc. Apart from the main door there was a small door opposite. He cautiously opened this and found a jutting verandah of wood with a hole suitably placed in the middle.

A flight of steps ran steeply up on one wall above the benches and up to a hatchway. Widsith scrambled up the steps and lifted the hatch aside to find what he expected, a platform above the room, which acted as a sort of lookout post over the highway. He went back down to where the Duc was brushing the mattress with his hand, and showed the clean result to the wayfarer.

‘This place has been in use wayfarer, and look, made from horse-hairs too’.

‘The Marshmen’.

‘You think so? Not brigands?’

‘I have never known brigands to be so tidy’.

‘True, true’.

There was a clunk below them and Juud’s voice as the boat was tied up underneath the tower. They heard her climb up on the platform, and she walked briskly in, looking eagerly around.

‘We stay the night? It will be nice and dry’ she added hopefully.

‘Indeed it will’.

The Duc was cheered up by the prospect of a roaring fire and a night’s comfort on a mattress instead of the chill wet ground. He added optimistically.

‘Whoever owns this place we can trust that they do not turn up tonight eh?’

Widsith smiled feebly. If not tonight, then soon for sure, but a night’s rest would be useful. They ferried gear into the room, and whilst Widsith set a fire going in the hearth the others arranged themselves comfortably on the mattresses. The fire was quickly surrounded by steaming blankets and clothes.

Water came from a tub on the roof and Hull made a round of hot drinks for them. They chewed on hard dry bread, stale and only made moderately palatable by dipping it into the leaven. Hull slid over the bridge just on darkness and isolated themselves for the night from the roadway. A comfortable feeling, but Widsith had no illusions, and insisted on guard duty as well.

‘Is that necessary wayfarer?’

‘I don’t want to be taken by surprise. I think we should pick up the habit’. They had not stood guard turns for many days, not since leaving the Cif mountains. ‘We have to meet the inhabitants sometime and I would rather do it on our terms, not that we have much to bargain with’.

Juud patted her damp blanket and rearranged it so that the wetter portions got their share of heat.

‘They must be Marshmen’.

‘Yes’.

‘Will they be friendly?’ Widsith shrugged ‘

‘As friendly as anything in this place’.

‘That was not meant to be reassuring I hope wayfarer?’.

Widsith was tempted to remind them that many villagers had disappeared over the years into the marsh and never returned. And there was that nagging story of Solas Sharp about those villages destroyed. If the Marshmen were as unfriendly as their reputation they might never leave this place alive.

‘Are we going to walk along the highway or take the boat’.

The Duc was tucking himself into his blankets, which were still damp but deliciously warm.

‘We are constrained by the highway in effect dear, for to leave it is to become lost. I would rather stay and chance the hospitality of the Marshmen’.

It was a dilemma, and made them all thoughtful.

‘We can decide in the morning’ suggested Widsith.

‘Yes, yes, sleep is beneficial to the thought processes’.

The Duc was enthusiastic for this idea and immediately began to put it into effect. Juud smiled at him, and Widsith realised that neither of them had any inkling of the real dangers that they might be facing. It was almost as if they felt anyone with the sophistication to build such a road would surely show a civilised respect for visitors. Like children who so calmly accept a stranger proffered home.

‘Good night wayfarer’ then Juud guttered her candle, watching the glowing tip till it was properly out then settled into sleep. Then she raised herself on one arm and spoke quietly. The wayfarer was sitting close to her.

‘I’m sorry for how I was, today I mean, well, I did not realise Vorst was real’.

Widsith nodded and saw her expression change from ruefulness to sorrow.

‘It was silly. I was ill, not myself, I cannot explain it, but you understand?’

She appealed to the wayfarer with a faint smile and a brief movement of her hand against her hair, pushing it out of the way so that her skin shone momentarily gold in the candlelight. Widsith nodded and smiled, and he reached out and brushed her dark hair gently. She smiled and leaned back.

‘At least only one of us went mad. Good night Mikal’.

She settled back into her blankets, and within a bitwick her breathing was soft and even. It was the first time she had used his name. Widsith watched her sleep, then sighed. Hull was hunched by the fire, and looked at him. Widsith spoke in their private language.

‘They are near aren’t they?’

Hull nodded.

## A Companionable Silence

*Widsith, the silent one, talks more than he has done throughout this story and Juud receives a shock. All about them there are shadows, both without and within. An interlude in fact, where nothing happens very much, but one senses that it will happen soon.*

Sleep is not simply unconsciousness. Something in there ticks, and does not even require winding up, unless it is the worry of the decision to be made that maintains the mind in tension. Widsith stared at the trickle of morning light and pondered the implications of a brain active whilst its body was effectively out of existence. Last night he had a problem, but this morning his brain had decided for him. They would walk. The highway was too much of a temptation for a hot-bloodied wayfarer to resist. He got up noiselessly, dressed, then slipped up onto the viewing platform. The mist was as thick and soundless as ever. Perhaps there was a bird call somewhere and he could hear the odd gurgle of water against the pillars, but nothing else. He lit his pipe and took a rare pleasure in smelling the hotherb that curled up from the glowing bowl. The others would not be up for wicks yet, so he had some decent leisure to enjoy a contemplative solitude.

The decision to walk having been made, he fancied he would not have to make to many more, the Marshmen would soon make themselves known. This road was a marvel, perhaps one of the greatest constructions in any kingdom, but for all that it had been built by men, not demons or spirit peoples, or Vorst, but real flesh and blood men, and he had never been frightened by men. He puffed quietly, and wondered what the Marshmen would be like. He supposed that they would have to leave the boat here. They might always pick it up later, and he looked down to where the prow of the boat should be visible. It was gone.

So the Marshmen had visited.

This was a proper invitation and no mistake, and one they could hardly refuse. Hull was right, but then he usually was. Perhaps they were watching him now, leaning casually over the railing for all the kingdom a gentleman of leisure. He was putting on a good show he thought, and knocked his pipe out sharply and went downstairs in an excellent humour.

They left a wick later, Juud and the Duc still ignorant of the boats disappearance,

though quite happy to the idea of walking on the highway, especially if the wayfarer thought the risks acceptable. Widsith told Hull of course, who smiled grimly and said 'soon we will see these Marshmen'. At that the wayfarer could not help but glance around at the blank enveloping mist, as if hoping to see a pair of eyes, or a glint of movement. Their footsteps echoed off the planking, causing a multitude of echoes and back-sounds that swirled around them and made their lonely quartet sound like an army approaching. They did not talk much. Widsith kept his mind busy counting the paces between the watch-towers that emerged at regular intervals along the way and the Marshmen were clearly a methodical people, for the distances between the towers was quite exact. After eight towers had been passed, a much larger structure loomed ahead of them. They approached it unhesitatingly.

This tower was three stories high, the lower floor consisted of two side rooms either side of the roadway, and steps led up to the second storey room which spanned the highway in a broad arch. There was a third room above this, and the familiar lookout topped the edifice. Imposingly built with stone fireplaces and proper bunkroom accommodation, all invitingly open, and empty. There was even some food in a large walk-in pantry. A bruten-like root vegetable, and lean slices of dried meat that had a pleasant aromatic flavour.

'It almost looks as if they know we are coming' suggested Juud jokingly.

The wayfarer winced, still, it was encouraging that the tower was left so trustingly empty, and food of sorts provided. It did not look as if the Marshmen meant harm.

'This is probably a keep for soldiers on the highway I think wayfarer' said the Duc. It was again clean and tidy inside. They had lunch there and ambled on at a steady and comfortable pace.

'With food wayfarer there must be soldiers quite close' said Juud as she stepped in time to Widsith's pace. He nodded agreeably.

'Do you find it exciting?' she asked with a teasing grin 'I feel we are all true explorers now. Even you have not been here before'.

The Duc perked up.

'And neither had Morad dear. Apart from a few of his tales of course. It will be interesting to read that scoundrels lies'. Juud gasped.

'Father...'

'Really Duc, is this you' Widsith teased.

The Duc grimaced.

'Yes I know, laugh. I have learnt a great deal wayfarer, you may laugh. From this journey, and the country we have been through. Why I think I could write truer stories than that mischievous scholar, and truer too. Why, I could write my own book.

The idea appealed to Juud.

'You would be as famous as Morad father. I think you should.'

'We have to be included of course' said Widsith.

'Certainly wayfarer. You would be a source'.

The Duc was being perfectly serious now. He realised that in his journal he had the

information for such an history, plus his own memories, and that of his daughter and the wayfarer. It would be a fair story to, and he could imagine already the heavy bound volume, thick vellum and brass studded.

‘The next tower will be a keep’ said Widsith assuredly.

And so it was, the broad face of the tower becoming visible shortly after the wayfarers announcement.

‘It is easy. There are ten watch towers to each keep’.

‘These invisible people are logical’ observed the Duc ‘and splendid builders! Do we stay here on press on wayfarer?’

‘What do you wish?’

‘With another ten watch towers before the next keep I suggest that we stay. Do you agree daughter?’

They stayed. There was food and a large heap of firewood by the hearth, and they ate hungrily and well, toasting their bodies on the licking flames. It was hard not to feel an extraordinary well-being, and they went to bed unmindful either of the creeping marsh mist, Vorst, or the unknown Marshmen. It was Juuds turn first on watch.

The scent of the wenderweeds hung in the mist, above and over the smell of rotten dampness, yet never dominated it. Subtly pervading the marsh till it touched you like a vague and pleasurable memory. Juud smelt it, and breathed it in, savouring the garden-like recollections it brought to her of her fathers private courtyard and its rich flowering of shrubs and trailing plants.

That was long gone she supposed. The excluding walls crumbled, and intruded upon by wandering cattle, the shrubs withered in a tangle of weeds. she remembered the long and patient instructions her father gave to the gardener, Old Tull, who was considerably deaf and decidedly deafer when it suited him. How they wrangled those two, back and forth over the garden like Gods, arguing more for the pleasure of it than the point. Tull, though a most menial servant, exercised rights of discussion quite on equal with his master and the debate would usually get heated, with the mild Duc storming in a temper at that stubborn old cuss and vowing to sack him tomorrow. But he never did, and next day harmony would reign pleasantly over the flowers as the incompatible gardeners came to some agreement. Then Juud would return with her book and be disturbed only by the buzz of insects, till raised voices in the corner warned her of the coming furore, and that it was time to retreat again or else she would be dragged hopelessly into the fray.

She started from her childhood dream as Widsiths head appeared out of the hatchway.

‘I came for a look and a pipe’ he said, stepping out onto the platform and waving his pipe to demonstrate his purpose.

‘Are you next anyway?’

‘Yes’.

He rapped out the old hotherb from the pipe and produced a small leather pouch, from which he plucked a small quid of fresh and pressed it carefully into the pipes bowl. He busied his hand in another pocket of his jerkin and brought out a tinder box. In

the marsh air it was a troublesome business to strike a light, but he managed it at the third flick and caught it quickly on the hotherb. A few vigorous puffs and the pipe was burning, and an aromatic woody smell began to linger on the air. He returned the various packages to his pockets and leant against the balcony facing out onto the highway. Juud had watched him affectionately, knowing the ritual of pipe lighting so perfectly that she could have safely predicted every act of it if she wished. She enjoyed the waft of hotherb and again, like the wenderweed it ambiguously reminded her of home. She thought ruefully that so many things these days reminded her of that lost home.

There was a companionable silence between them. These two people who had seen so much of each other, had for a while nothing to say, and no need to fill out the silence with unnecessary small chat. Occasionally there was a scuffle on the surface of the water. A fish maybe, or an eel.

‘The others are asleep’ Widsith said breaking the spell.

‘Even Hull?’ He nodded. Juud had got used to the fact that the giant slept far less than they, and had at times an almost uncanny alertness.

‘I think tomorrow will see something happen’ the wayfarer said, after a long pause.

‘The Marshmen?’ Juud looked at him alertly ‘I would like to see them, they have kept themselves to themselves so far’.

‘Not quite’.

‘How do you mean?’

Widsith drew a deeper puff on the pipe and watched the smoke get caught on the sifting water drops.

‘They took the boat’. Juud was startled.

‘So we had no choice but to walk. Wayfarer, why didn’t you tell us?’

‘I did not want to alarm you, especially the Duc’.

Juud was dissatisfied with this and said so.

‘You should be able to trust us now wayfarer’ she said reprovingly. Widsith nodded but was not in haste to reply. He sucked upon the pipe and stared blindly into the mist. Finally he sighed.

‘The wayfarers have a code that states that a client must know only what is suitable for his peace of mind. I suppose I still think of you and your father as clients. I am sorry. It is hard to change a long habit. To be frank some of my clients were rather unsavoury and safer kept in ignorance. Well, anyway, this will be the last time to mistake duty with honour’.

‘What do you mean?’

Juud’s voice was quiet, her peevish tone evaporated as she listened to his sadness. He was long in replying, and when at last he did so, he breathed the words out in soft whispers.

‘The time for wayfarers has passed. It passed years ago really, but habit is not easily overcome. There are not many of us left to pursue the craft. You saw one, Solas Sharp, and there is a handful of others, well, hardly that really, who keep the tradition going. We hardly can boast of keeping it alive, and after us? This will be my last trip. It has

been a pleasure to do it, even an honour, but it is a wearying, constant sort of pastime, and I think my son deserves better’.

‘Your son?’

This was shattering news to Juud. He had a son! And a wife perhaps, somewhere, then she knew how she felt towards him and shamed by the shock in her voice turned her face away so he did not see her confusion. After all, what did it matter if he had a son?

‘Yes. I thought you knew? And a daughter’.

Widsith mused at the memory of his little girl which he had seen only once, crawling happily on the stone flagged floor of the cottage. She would be three now, and his son five, and Mirren would be watching over them, quiet and firm.

‘I have not seen the children or my wife for nearly two years’.

‘You must miss them’ said Juud softly.

‘Yes, lately I have. But you know how a wayfarer marries?’ he did not let Juud reply ‘it is an arranged match, to yield a son, to continue the wayfaring tradition’.

Juud was touched by the wistfulness in his voice, and greatly daring asked.

‘Do you love her?’

Widsith gave a wry smile and turned to look at her, tapping his finished pipe absently against the railing. That word ‘love’. No, he did not love her.

‘I honour her, and we share the children. As I said it is an arranged match. Love is hardly a requirement. It would almost be an intrusion’.

These were revelations to Juud who found it difficult to assimilate in one conversation. She half wanted to go away and think about the things he said, and then again was tempted to urge the conversation further to reveal more of this unrevealed man.

‘What will you do when you finish wayfaring?’

‘Oh I’m not badly off you know. I have land to manage, and as likely or not I’ll be made a Speaker or something, appointed to the council on the Rise. I’ll certainly be occupied’.

‘And have your dreams for the wayfaring?’

He laughed pleasantly and tucked his pipe into his pocket.

‘Yes, I will not forget the kingdoms, or the peoples and all their goodnesses and greeds. I have dreams enough for many years, and stories too, like the headman in the village’.

There was a lapse in their conversation, and an awareness of the silence around them. Juud was reminded of the Marshmen again. It seemed tactful to turn to another subject.

‘If they took our boat they must be following us, watching us?’ He nodded.

‘I thought I saw a solid shadow a while back’.

‘Their watching us now?’

It gave Juud a queer feeling, and she peered out into the black fog.

‘If they wanted to harm us they would have done so by now. They are as curious as

we are no doubt’.

They both stared over at the wet wooden planking of the highway trying to imagine the Marshmen watching, waiting.

‘You are right. I think I preferred not to know. I do not think I will sleep much’.

‘Well you should. They will not harm us’.

‘How are you so sure?’

‘Wayfarers instinct’ and it was said with such wry tiredness that Juud turned and looked at him fully.

‘Do you think you can stop, and be a farmer?’

‘I tried once, but that was different. I had no children, no wife. As for being a farmer, no, I should not think so, but it is worth a try. If only for the rest’.

Then he turned to her.

‘And you, after this journey has finished?’

She shook her head slowly.

‘I do not know that it will wayfarer. It goes on and on, this journey. At least you have a future. Mine? What is my future? It looks, at the best, uncertain’.

Widsith did not reply for he knew that this was true. Something occurred to her.

‘Are you so confident this journey will end?’

‘What is the end of a journey? One ends and another begins. One roundrell ends and another begins, as the saying goes ‘All dwell in the roundrell’. We will survive the Marshmen, and you will reach your estate. I promise you. Of course what is left of your estate, that is where the next journey begins’.

‘Oh wayfarer, wayfarer’ Juud looked agonised ‘I still do not understand, this roundrell. What is it? Another word for living, is that it?’

‘No. It is more than that’.

‘Then the roundrell is more than a journey?’

‘It is a puzzle of language really. I think the Past People understood the word as an affirmation of correct living, an encompassing idea. We’ve given it a specific meaning, like a journey, or a cycle of seasons, well it is these things but something more. All those things are circles. That temple in the Dell of Azel was another circle, and that is the persistent image of the roundrell. All things return and begin again, and it is the full understanding of that truth that is the roundrell. It is intuitive and discreet from our ordinary actions’ he added ‘I think we have lost it’.

The conviction of his speech embarrassed Widsith into silence. He had not meant to speak so long, or fully. Juud looked at him softly.

‘You should tell my father this. He would be surprised, and I think he would understand’.

Widsith shook his head doubtfully.

‘No it is not a thing to be read or thought about in the usual way. It is a sort of belief that is lived rather than thought about’.

‘Do you believe it?’

'I'm not sure'.

He leaned back on the railing, and after some thought began to speak. Juud intuitively understood that this moment would be repeated in her memory for many years to come, and that the knowledge that he spoke so searchingly of would be a comfort when all seemed cheerless and cold.

'The roundrell is not something to be touched or grasped, or you can keep for yourself. It is something so deep and powerful and obvious that men never see it. It is not a god, like Strom or flighty Breet, or terrible Wyr, its neither good or evil, corrupt or charitable — it just is. It's like the flow of life itself. We snatch at it like when awoken from a dream, forgetting, half-remembering, misunderstanding that there is nothing to understand except ourselves alive and changing at this moment. In the Dell of Azel there was magic in that night, but in the explanations that we sought afterwards, but in the very wonder of ourselves'.

He stopped abruptly, looking doubtfully at Juud, and seemed reassured by her waiting open-eyed expression. The perfume of the wenderweeds was strong and sweet.

'This is not a comfortable doctrine, for we prefer our Gods to be manipulated to our tastes and fears. That we may be Gods imperfect, but part of a larger perfect world hardly suits our mind. We stray from the responsibility and blame the tyrants we have invented. We do not have the courage to reform ourselves to a world that is only waiting for our rightful place in it, but look for a God, stupidly, when there is only us. The roundrell wants us, it is us, we are the roundrell — if we only knew it'.

## The Earth Breathes

*A revelatory chapter, especially for the Duc who loses his sense of fear in amidst the wonder of the marshes, and Hull, who at last understands himself. We meet a man who should be dead.*

They did not have to walk very far the next day before Widsiths prophecy was fulfilled.

Juud was conscious of some tension as they walked, which she could not be sure was either something in herself (after the wayfarers warning last night), or something genuinely out there, watching, waiting. The thick mist gave substance to her fears and she hastened forward at one point to talk to the wayfarer and confide in him her doubts. He seemed to agree. Once, very slightly he had heard a sound behind and told Juud of this. He was sure they were being followed quite closely, which gave Juud an apprehensive shiver to her shoulders. She was getting annoyed with the Marshmens reticence. The wayfarer suggested patience 'I do not think we will have to wait much longer'.

These fateful words were hardly out of his mouth when his walking faltered, and he held out a hand to stop Juud. She looked up startled, and for a moment saw nothing. Then the mist weakened and three figures could be discerned, standing separately across the highway only a few longmans ahead of them. Their faces and clothes were still gloomily concealed by the mist but their size amazed her. They were as tall as Hull, and she glanced back hastily to him for comparison. The Duc and the giant caught up and stood behind watching the silent watchers.

Widsith then knew then the answer to one of the oldest puzzles of his life. With sharp clarity Wisdom Shorrocks words, the words he had tried to remember before but failed to do so, rang in his mind 'villagers have come in from the marsh half-mad, swearing they saw armies of giant men.' Giant men! Of course. The figures stood unmoving. Widsith looked back at Hull whose eyes were riveted on the Marshmen.

'Keep your weapons at your side' Widsith counselled the others. He looked behind and gave a motion to Juud who also turned her head and saw more tall forms standing passively at their rear.

'Captured I fancy' he said dryly 'follow me, we will walk forward slowly'.

In a small group they moved towards the three figures ahead. They clarified into details. Three men, soldiers with pointed helmets and long swords dangling in the scabbards. They wore a long tunic which fell to their knees and crude rope sandals on their feet. They stood easily a longman and half tall, with great long-jawed faces and straggly hair, wet from the mist, that fell to their necks. One was clean shaven but the other two possessed impressive drooping moustaches each side of which held a dangling drip of water. The shape of their heads, their carriage and size were startlingly alike to Hulls. If this was not his tribe then it deserved to be. The clean-shaven one looked surprised, and said something quickly over his shoulder to one of the men behind who made some comment. All three of them were staring at Hull with suspicious wonder in their gaze. Then the sets of eyes looked at Widsith, the old Duc leaning on his stick, and the slim girl at his side. The wayfarer could imagine their puzzlement, they were not normal fisher-folk.

They were only a longman from the Marshmen now, so close that Widsith imagined he could smell their breathing. The clean-shaven one spoke, a tongue oddly familiar. Hull opened his eyes and said something in reply which sounded like 'we will follow'. It was not completely the language that Widsith and Hull had adopted for conversation, but something similar and more developed. The wayfarer understood it a little, but for Hull it was a revelation. He translated for the others benefit.

'We must follow them' Hull said.

'Are they your tribe Hull?' asked Juud.

Widsith translated. He nodded and smiled.

'They are waiting for us wayfarer' the Duc said anxiously.

The three Marshmen had turned as if to leave but were standing shoulder-on, waiting patiently for them to follow. They did. After a while Widsith found that the soldiers would match their speed, not set one of their own, which was just as well for only Hull would have a chance of equalling their long strides.

'Go easy. We have a long way to go'.

That day they passed three large keeps and spent the night in the fourth, left alone and undisturbed except for the soldiers curious eyes. They were fascinated by Hull and obviously talked about him. Sometimes they would stop their chatter in the dayend and all stare at them in a disconcerting fashion. Juud was made apprehensive by this intense scrutiny and went to bed dressed, being no opportunity to undress with discretion. The soldiers that led them, and those that followed as rearguard were all much the same in appearance, with the clean-shaven fellow clearly the leader. He spoke little, and that tersely, which Hull translated as best he could, not always understanding it, but the actions the leader wanted the travellers to follow were plain enough. Walk, eat, sleep, get up, a pattern that was repeated for three days and would have become monotonous but for the changing scenes about them.

At last they had begun to leave the mist.

Widsith worked out from the position of the sun that the highway had turned full breeways and at every step the embracing mist had begun to relinquish its loving hold on the marsh. They had been for so long in a world of half-seen images that it was a delight to see things vividly, a plant a gash of blue sky, and even feel the bitter Wast Time

warmth of a pale sun. The mist weakened and shredded, formed patches of obscurity only to be defeated by an unexpected wind that had taken up from the skaw quarter, clearing large tracts of the marsh to the eye, so the full green and blue matrix of water and islands was plain. Widsith suspected that they had walked into the wind rather than the other way round, and that here, in the middle reaches of the marsh, it blew the boiling mist back onto the main land like a great wall of cloud.

The highway with its regular patterns of towers and keeps led doggedly ahead of them, meeting the islands rather than avoiding them. Some of the islands were decorated with a patchwork of tidy fields with wheat and barley growing in them, and small houses tucked into the joints of stone fences. Other islands had been devoted completely to cattle who cropped their patient way over the grassed humped slopes. On some islands there began to appear villages, quite as normal as those in the kingdom except for the general great size of the inhabitants, though Juud noticed that many of the womenfolk were not that much taller than her, and some short of her height.

Small raised pathways would connect these islands to the main highway so that a latticework of bridges and boardwalks sprang into view as they moved into the central part of the kingdom. Boats plied between the islands, and the sickly rush-strewn marsh became clean and expansive. Indeed it was not a marsh anymore but a lake dotted with numerous islands and islets. As they were escorted further into the kingdom they ceased to have the highway to themselves. Marsh people busy on their own affairs, carrying goods between villages, or a band of children on their way to school, or a shepherd herding a flock of sheep all tied together in a tight woolly bundle that resembled nothing less than a moving carpet and done (Juud supposed) to prevent the silly things wandering of the edge. The planked road became broad, and the travellers welcomed this bustle after the almost haunting emptiness of the last few days.

Despite the curious stares they felt less like prisoners than honoured guests. They were never harmed in any way, the soldiers let them keep their weapons, and they chose their own pace of walk, the soldiers halting when they stopped for a rest or some lunch. Widsith would have loved to have explored some of the villages they passed but that would be difficult to explain to the soldiers, so he was content to wander along and study the new surroundings.

Juud remarked once.

‘They are a happy people’ and that was the simple truth.

The wayfarer could only recall the Rise folk having the same air of contentment, for probably the same reason, that the great wars that had scoured the rest of the kingdoms had largely passed them by, leaving them to live mostly untroubled lives. It looked as if the marsh kingdom had also been undisturbed. It was a pleasure to be here and it reminded Widsith of the way things must have been in the past before it was destroyed by the ravaging horse-warriors. Had the wars passed the Marshmen unharmed? Had they always lived this way? The Duc commented on it.

‘You would not think that only twenty leagues weneways a great kingdom arose and then fell covering itself with blood, maiming most of the inhabitants and ruining the earth. Here, it is as if the earth breathes, and has always done so. It is another world wayfarer, we are privileged to witness it’.

They followed their guard eagerly, at each turn wondering at the new vistas, now large spans of blue shining water, and yet larger islands forested from shore to crown with smoke wreathed huts snuggling at the foot. And ahead, on the third day, according to the Ducs journal, the 64th of Old Wast, towered the highest island of all, crowded with the buttresses, steps, and houses of a great city, topped by the towers of a massive palace with a great golden roof, the legendary place — Mirrimage.

It was the great marsh city that the soldiers called Mirrimage or the ‘floating city’, because the houses swept so closely and densely over the island that the land supporting the city seem to disappear. On many mornings a flat carpet of mist would creep up to the city walls, hiding the great arterial highways so that the city seemed to float above the connecting earth like some great aethereal sailing ship. But the inside was real enough. The people shouted and shoved, bargained, made noisy complaints, and dragged the most incredible burdens on their backs as they staggered from market to merchant, boat to highway. The streets were wide, clean and composed entirely of staircases ‘the city of steps’ Juud immediately called it. Carriers, hired by the load to shift all the multitudinous produce that flowed in and out of the city, bellowed out, regarding themselves as kings of the flighted roads, bustling everyone out of the way who baulked their progress. Archways and stone bridges crossed over the streets breaking the brilliant light into white and black patterns, and people could be seen moving on other walkways above their heads so that the city functioned on several bewildering levels.

The soldiers had quickened their pace to the bustling style of the city, and they fairly marched them up several broad step-roads until they came to a wide unexpected square. They crossed this to an imposing building at the far end which Widsith guessed was the palace. They must have climbed to the top of the island city, but the houses blocked any view that might be available. They passed guards by a large doorway and entered a cloistered courtyard which they quickly crossed into the gloom of a massive corridor. At a prominent door the guard stopped and the leader rapped on

It was opened within and the soldiers stood back to allow the travellers to walk pass. The door shut behind. Now they had a chance to catch their breaths.

The room was small, a sort of ante-chamber with seats and tables ranged decorously around the walls. Light came from a large panioned window that looked onto a grass courtyard. Two men, servants obviously, stood patiently at a door whilst two new soldiers stood guard by the door they had entered.

‘I am surprised they have not taken our weapons’ remarked the Duc. Juud flopped down on a couch and said emphatically that she was ‘hungry’. The Duc peered out of the window.

‘What a marvellous place. I am glad to have lived to see it’ he said.

Her fathers expression alarmed Juud.

‘Do you think they will let us live?’

No one answered. They had not felt threatened on the march, their eyes too busy on all the strange sights to ponder about their fates, but now, inside the walls of the palace, guarded and watched, it was time to think of such things. Widsith asked Hull who spoke of the care the soldiers had taken of them. No he did not think they would be killed. Why should they?

The giant had walked the last league as if in a dream. Old memories flooding back. He kept looking for the large building of his childhood with its soaring buttresses. He knew it was here. He knew this was home.

The wayfarer publicly agreed with Hull.

‘They have not harmed us, but we might not be able to leave either. They will want their secret protected’.

‘What secret?’

‘That they exist’ he replied simply.

‘Yes yes, I see. Well, we seem to have no estate daughter, we could do worse than here. They seem a happy people’.

‘I keep thinking of Tysa’ said Juud sadly ‘how she would have loved to have been here’.

‘I wonder if the headman knew about this place’ mused Widsith after a pause.

‘How could he without seeing it?’

‘He was a shrewd Wyrd, and knew more than he said’.

‘He helped us wayfarer’

Widsith agreed. He looked at Hull, impassive as always but with a gleam in his eye.

‘If Hull came from here, if he is a marshman, that might save our skins. Notice how the soldiers stared at him? They could not make him out’.

‘Or us’ said Juud. She had often felt those inquisitive stares.

‘Yes, yes, if Hull is one of them, we could pretend we were bringing him to his home’ suggested the Duc. That struck Widsith as a sensible idea and he discussed it with Hull. The giant nodded. It might be a useful ploy, and they agreed to mutually keep to this story. It would save complicated explanations about the Charmstone and might gain their freedom from the Marshmen, although at the moment no one could see why they should need that.

The outer door opened and a rather resplendent figure in a long embroidered coat entered. He spoke to the servants. Then he spoke to the travellers, and signalled with his hand to the soldiers. Hull managed to translate but it was plain enough what was wanted.

‘He wants our weapons. I thought they would need these sooner or later’.

Widsith unbuckled his sword and removed his dagger placing both on a low table. The others followed. Juud unstrapped her quiver and longbow with relief. The soldiers marched forward, collected the weapons and left, as did the gorgeously garbed figure. Only the two servants remained, and presently they left, to return with trays of food and drink.

‘I knew I was hungry’ said Juud chewing enthusiastically on a slice of soft meat. It was delicious.

‘They must mean well wayfarer to feed us’. The wayfarer’s mouth was full but he nodded his head.

‘Do you think we are on the edge of a big lake? I saw lots of water beyond this city’.

The Duc had observed it too.

‘Yes what do you think wayfarer?’

Widsiths mouth was again full and he swallowed in haste and regretfully. He rather wished they would let him eat in peace.

‘Did you see those green squares on the water?’ he asked.

‘I thought they might be artificial islands made up of the wenderweeds we had seen earlier’ Juud butted in.

‘I think so to, look at this’. Widsith pointed to a green leathery type of leaf on a plate. ‘I think this is the wenderweed. It’s sweet tasting. I think those islands were a sort of farm’.

Juud was delighted with this notion.

‘Floating farms, what an idea!’

They talked as they ate, comparing the sights seen. Only Hull remained silent, eating slowly as if with great concentration. Even the food had some long familiar taste of his childhood.

They waited a long time and it was drawing dark before the resplendant figure returned and beckoned them to follow him. They followed him obediently and were followed in turn by the soldiers. They passed briefly through two more rooms, similarly furnished, and then into a long corridor which led to a broad cascade of steps going down. And down a long way they descended, leaving the natural light behind and guided by a procession of torches suspended from the walls by hooks.

‘We are going down’ muttered Juud in an aside to her father ‘into the island itself’.

The steps stopped abruptly by a vast double door. The figure knocked loudly on it and they swung open grandly revealing the cavern of an enormous hall with great stone arches sprawling upwards into impossibly dark shadows. It was the vision of Hulls childhood, the place of his long-clung memory as he held on tightly to his parent staring skywards as he did now in awe and wonderment.

They were all speechless and walked humbly into the great hall.

There were several groups of Marshmen standing about in the hall, looking curiously at the visitors. They stood in small clusters separated in time and space by the vast width of the hall. At the far end was a larger group of men with here and there the glitter of ribbons and medals and the traces of gold on sleeves. To this patient group the richly-robed figure guided them across at a stately controlled walk. It took some bit-wicks to reach the far side, an unnerving experience, with every eye upon them and the black vault frowning down. Great torches illuminated the scene, and dramatised it.

Closer the group took individual shape. One old figure was slumped in a chair and two other men of similar age stood beside him. There were attendants around them, and soldiers further back. Servants were busy amongst the figures, tidying up after a meal. In a chair off to one side was a plainly garbed old man, who Widsith looked at curiously as they approached, but who appeared to go unnoticed by the more important figures. The resplendent guide having accomplished his task to his evident satisfaction retired with a low deep bow.

They were left alone under the intense scrutiny of the various members of the court. The old man slumped in the chair had a finely embroidered mantle around his shoulders which Widsith took to be the symbol of kingly authority. This then was the marsh king, the great, almost legendary figure that according to the people of the First Kingdom did not exist and had not existed for two hundred years.

A younger man beside the king eventually spoke breaking a long intent silence. Widsith looked at Hull, who tried to speak but was obviously having difficulty understanding. The young man frankly stared at Hull, and it appeared conversation was at a standstill and they would have no recourse but to continue staring at each other. Juud was discomfited. There were no other women present and she felt the appraising interrogation of the courts eyes. The court began to talk amongst themselves, with the young man clearly having some authority judging by the deference given to him. The old king did not speak, and Widsith guessed the young man was his son.

The stalemate might have continued indefinitely had not another voice intruded.

‘May I offer my services’.

It was the old man sitting in a chair by the corner, half in shade. Widsith started and looked hard at the man. He said something in marsh tongue to the kings son who nodded.

‘His Majesty wishes me to interpret for you, though I find speaking in this tongue comes strangely to me. I have not spoken it for many years’.

Widsith was no longer in doubt. He had guessed from the moment that the old man had spoken, and at first disbelieved himself, but no longer. It was an extraordinary chance of fortune that it should happen.

The old man spoke carefully, as if enunciating words with great caution, lest they explode.

‘Let me introduce myself first. My name is...’ and the wayfarer interrupted.

‘Beon Derdane’.

The old man smiled, Juud gasped, and the Duc shook his head in bewilderment.

## The Odd Parade of Human Fate

*They hear an ancient story from an old story story-teller that makes them ponder the future. There is a parting and the Duc conceives the idea to write his memoirs.*

‘This is my story’ he spoke slowly and with great patience ‘I knew your father, a wild man, and a wilder son perhaps’ he looked appraisingly ‘but that is no matter. I remember your birth, how proud he was when he heard. He left me beside the Great River and hastened back to see his first-born son. I do not think you knew wayfarer Widsith, he had a second son which died stillborn and killed your mother for her trouble. Her death was hardly worthy of the sad result. That was the very last time I saw him, your father, so what an astonishment thirty years later in this great vault to see the same manner of walking, that smile and lift of the head, return as if death had been cheated, but death does not cheat, but duplicates itself. I will not live long enough to see the son of the son, but it was worthwhile to see one generation further, like a stab into the future’.

The old man paused for a moment, to allow his preliminary comments take effect and float out into the vast underground night that surrounded them. They were alone in the hall. Beon Derdane, the wayfarer, Juud and the Duc, their faces lit only by the rich colourations of a huge fire that burnt in the grate and cast a pall of warmth a few longmans before it, but was soon defeated by the great cold space. Two torches flickered at the far end, akimbo the arched doorway which led to the flight of steps rising to the natural dark beyond. Here was an earthy forgotten darkness, known by moles or prisoners, or old wayfarers who could no longer stand the brilliance of Breet and preferred the tapestries of light in their heads.

‘My eyes hurt in the day, yet I still see. In these flames I see everything. The great and petty things in men, and their changing fortunes under an altering heaven. Sometimes I look up at the roof and see stars, once, I saw the thin crescent moon rising’.

Involuntarily Widsith glanced up and saw a myriad points of light against the black

roof. Glowworms, or were they really stars? He was startled to realise that the huge pillars that stood in grave parallel across the spaces were only an illusion of support, for high above were not elaborate works of jointed stone, but dark hanging chunks of rock, broken in uneven shadows. This hall was a vast cave, with chiseled touches of men sustaining the deception that it was their work. The pillars were natural columns of rock, smoothed, carved and decorated in ancient scenes, what a triumph of skill over space!

‘For I see the future and past equally, they are the same in fact. The life is only turning to the beginning again. To see you young Widsith walking down this great hall is to see the pattern of your father fulfilled and that of an adventurous youth, who had a dream, saw a city, and went towards it. You followed my steps, into this marsh, but you are young and may leave it. I never shall.

‘I came as an old man then, with forty years of travelling behind me, yet still with a dream. As a child I had dreamt vividly of a great city laid out as a hub in the centre of a great wheel of roads, and I had looked for it everywhere. On the plains, in the vallies, up on the high lands, everywhere, or so I thought, yet I never found it. For I thought my magical city was on land, as all cities are, the dream was so sharp, as clear as any I have had and I was so convinced it existed that I wasted my life searching for it, and became by its urgent possession, a wayfarer. Your father scoffed at my dream. I described my city to him, but he said it was nonsense. After forty years I began to despair that he was right, that my dream was foolish and I was becoming an old man because of an idle piece of imagination. For who follows their dreams?’

Beons voice was scornful of himself. Then it lowered, as if the crisis of the story had passed and the climax was about to begin, like a clever piece of music that starts soft and ends on a triumphant high note.

‘Then I travelled the Raggerok, along and alone, past the crumbling peaks with their mad ridges and Strom shrieking in my ear. Why did I venture there? Because there was nowhere else to go. If I failed on these mountains no one would witness my failure and my dream would die a decent death on the highest place of the kingdom I could reach. I think I was mad. But, I looked down, and there was my dream, appearing through clouds like a miraculous mirage, laid out plain as I had always imagined it, a great city at the centre of spokes of a wheel, but not on land — on water! I laughed madly at my Drubbins folly! On water. I should have known that there was a trick in it, but what a moment! I had seen the marsh city, that no man had ever seen and I danced upon a rock on that mountain ridge quite delirious with joy, hopping and skipping like a child. Sometimes weeping, as Stuess does with the passion of love.’

Beon Derdane stopped, his eyes glittered at the memory, then weakened as he recalled the rest of the story. The others were spellbound, hardly taking a breath. The fire had died with only a small flame licking drowsily along a crumpled log.

‘I went down and found a man as mad as me.’

‘We found him, he is headman of a village and told us a strange story of an old wayfarer who inspired him into a great and foolish adventure’.

Beon seemed unsurprised that Wisdom Shorrock was alive. He giggled.

‘Yes, a boy and an old man, both quite possessed, but not by Vorst, but by that hunger for something else that cannot be eased by food, the search for magic. In the marsh’

and Beons voice dropped into a whispered almost inconsequential tone ‘we became quickly lost and fought each other like the furious fools we were. I laid him out with a blow and would, I think, have killed him if two Marshmen had not crept up anxious to know what the fuss was about. I had seen them so they could not permit me to return, but Wisdom was unconscious, so they took the boat back close to the village and left a pretty charm in the boat, as a joke. Ha! But they took me. I begged them too, but they would have done so anyway, and carried me to this great hall as you have been carried. Here I remain. I was kept by the king, first as a sort of pet, then later as a friend. I could have left, but after a while here I could see no good reason to leave. It became home. You saw the king there, getting old and withered. I will outlive him yet, heh, heh’, and his chuckle carried into the hall and echoed off the spaces with an ancient sound, as if the walls were sharing in the joke. They had become one, cave and man, sharing the silence and echo, always remembering and recalling the odd parade of human fate.

Juud shifted her cramped position and rested her head sleepily on her fathers shoulder. So much adventure in that story. She thought, he was the grand old man of way-faring as Widsith was the younger rising star, only, she remembered quickly, Widsith was not going to continue anymore. This meeting might not be repeated when the wayfarer was old and nearly blind, for their would be no youthful face to listen to his wise words, gleaned from a lifetime of journeying.

Beon Derdanes words drifted into her mind ‘I see the future and past equally, they are the same’. That reminded her of another two crazy men, long ago in a ruined fort.

‘You have told us the past’ it was Widsith speaking, quiet and hushed as suited this sacred place ‘but what of the future?’

‘Your future, or any future’ Beon rapped back.

‘Both. Are they the same?’

‘Yes’.

The old man fell utterly silent at this.

The silence stretched into long minutes. The wayfarer looked at Juud, who fumbled at the pouch around her waist and passed something over to Widsith. He took the wad of linen cloth and unwrapped what it contained, handing it out as an offering to the old man. The Duc watched sharply.

Beon Derdane stretched out a claw of a hand and took the dully gleaming jewell.

‘Ahhh, a pretty thing. How this has cursed and charmed us. Heh, heh, but it is worth nothing. What not have people done for this, killed, murdered, hated, just for a bauble, when, heh, heh, all around’ and his voice went higher and louder ‘is the thing itself’ and then in an extraordinary highcracked voice he broke into a song that echoed along the drear cold space like a ghostly chant.

Juud started. She had heard this dreadful song before, from the lips of other old and wild men.

As dreaming, dreaming lay the land  
where each in peaceable way went  
conceived by the four-fingered hand

the turning, turning point that blent  
all who dwell  
in the roundrell

## II

Their time in Mirrimage passed episodic and fragmentary.

The Old Wast weather stayed hard and brilliant, with a brisk cool wind to blow the mist away. At times, the warmth of the sun made Juud wonder if it really was the coldest season. She had placed her back against a sun warmed courtyard wall and lazily watched the gardeners clipping and fussing over an immaculate lawn. The clue to the season came from the long shadows that lay in the courtyard, always darkening half of the green square, as if the sun had not enough strength to illuminate all of the grass at one time. As it got to dayend Juud would follow Breet as she slipped up the walls and towers of the city. She would climb round the spiralling staircase of a tower and catch the sunset from a dizzying height, marvelling the miasmas of pinks and golds that swam along the horizon. From the tower she could see well over the marshes, but never as far as she wished. For after a few leagues a kind of softness in the atmosphere would smear the view, it was not exactly mist, although that always lay heavy to the weneways, but a kind of vapour that rose off the water and blocked a clear line of sight. Several times she saw the peaks of the Raggerok blurred and blue in the distance and once beyond them the long curling finger of the Low Range with the Hollering Hills at the end. Beyond them was her home.

Her father found the ascent to the towers platform tiring and only visited once, but Widsith came up regularly. She welcomed his appearances for he seemed somewhat at a loss without Hull.

‘He has become a favourite’ Widsith explained as they watched one softly obscuring dusk, the lantern lights from the city below pricking the mist like fairy lights.

‘The young man at our first audience, do you remember? Prince Ryall, the kings son. Well he has taken a great liking to Hull and sent out messagers around the marsh to try and track down Hulls origins. There were some children lost many years ago on the coast. Thats our ‘mainland’, but they call it coast, so Hull might be one of them. We shall see. He is jabbering away in marsh tongue like one born to it’.

‘Wayfarer he was!’ and they both laughed together, and then Widsith looked thoughtful.

The marsh king had not given any formal instructions to them, whether they could stay or leave, though they had been well looked after. Allowed to roam the city at will and given this complete suite of rooms and courtyard to themselves, and even a private tower.

‘I want one now for the estate’ insisted Juud ‘then I can watch over the sky and earth

like Strom' she declaimed grandly.

'Rather an expensive item. Would not a piece of jewellery be more practical?'

She shook her head firmly.

'My own tower. I'll watch the sun set every day, just like this'.

Yellow light had changed to gold then subtly to orange and dark blue till it was lost in the creeping sward of black.

'You will have to find a rich husband to build such a tower'.

'Husband? I'll build it myself'.

Widsith turned from the weneways and looked vaguely breeways.

'I wonder what is over there?'

'Water? The sea?'

'More land probably, with more people on towers looking this way wondering what is over here'.

'Men are always curious my father says. That it their greatness, and their folly'.

Widsith was already thinking of something else.

'Hull might want to stay here, you know. This is his home'.

'How long have you been together?'

'Oh, many years. Too many probably. Well I said this was to be my last journey. I did not think of Hull. It looks as if his journey will end here'.

Juud immediately thought of her own future.

'How long can we stay here?'

'As long as they wish. Let us hope they decide favourably. This is pleasant, too pleasant, and it is not home'.

He seemed quite downcast and Juud was concerned to cheer him up.

'Your wife will want you back soon, it has been so long'.

Widsith let the soft comment pass. Yes, Mirren would be there. He brought himself back from the brink of self-pity.

'I feel sorry for you. Your estate may be ruined, or occupied. Your return may be more terrible than any of these travels'.

The darkness was almost complete, with the mist rolling away as it often did at night revealing the liquid black surface of the water. A night fishing boat with lanterns at its prow edged into the blackness.

'If' he hesitated 'if there is no future for you on the estate, then come to the Rise. You and your father, you will always be welcome there'. Juud felt thankfulness and sadness mingle in her mind.

'Thank you'. She could not trust herself to say more.

There was an awkward silence as each inspected their futures. Juud spoke first.

'If we have to leave it would be better to be gone quickly, before we get too fond of this place. I want to know how the estate is. The unknowing is painful, then we can decide. Why, we might be able to return here.'

It seemed a silly hopeful thought. Would the Marshmen let them go? Widsith could not say.

‘It is not their custom, but with Hull and Beon Derdane supporting us, they might’.

It had been pointed out to them, people like themselves who had strayed into the marsh, in this case fisherfolk who had not been allowed to return. They seemed content with their fate and many had even married marsh women.

‘I think they want to keep their existence secret, but something is changing, moving. Hull talked about it. The Marshmen have been raiding the Furrowdale Valley, and fighting Slortys men and hostile villages. It is like they are flexing their muscles in preparation to using them’.

‘Why would they war on the mainland?’

‘Land possibly. They look crowded here. Though there’s a thought’ Widsith was thinking aloud ‘if they are looking for land weneways that might mean there is no land breeways’.

‘There’s always a softness over there, as if the landscape just runs out ‘ Juud said dreamily

They both looked that way, an inky blackness disturbed only by clusters of lights that revealed the island villages. Juud leaned over the stone ballustrade and peered downwards, trying to imagine herself flying through the thick night air.

‘Up here it is like a dream, not real at all. One day I will wake up’.

‘That will be the day you arrive at your estate’ said Widsith with unnecessary cruelty.

Juud frowned, and the wayfarer took her arm and led her down the winding stairs, her skin smooth on his roughly creased hands.

### III

The next day they had a formal audience with the marsh king’s son, or as the chamberlain proudly declaimed Prince Ryall, son to His Majesty, Counsellor of Mirrimage, Heir Apparent to the throne of the Marsh Kingdom. The prince’s slight figure seemed at odds with the heavy titles, and the meeting chamber a quiet, almost informal room. Hull acted as interpreter and repeated the titles as the Prince settled himself into the gilded chair. He explained that much other business detained his father ‘for this is a demanding time for the kingdom’, then turned to the matter that had brought them to the audience chamber.

‘If you wish to leave you may leave at any time’.

Hull translated this, and after a hasty whispered consultation with the Duc and his daughter suggested that they would leave the day after tomorrow, the 69th of Old West. Hull stumbled over the date as the marsh calendar was not yet familiar to him. The son replied formally.

‘The day after tomorrow the, you will be escorted by some of our soldiers, and a boat will be provided for you to reach the coast after the highway ends’.

‘That is kind’ Widsith inclined his head in a short bow ‘we have enjoyed our short stay here, appreciating the kindness of the marsh people and the graciousness of the king in allowing us to proceed in our journey’.

Now it was the Princes turn to bow, a considerable feat sitting in a chair, but he managed it gracefully. Then he smiled and said directly.

‘I would much like to see the Charmstone’.

Widsith looked at Juud who opened the leather pouch and unwrapped the jewel from its dirty linen covering, handing it to the Chamberlain who presented it with a flourish to the Prince, who turned it over several times, studying the patterns and intricate designs.

At last, finished with it, he handed it back to the chamberlain who ushered it back to Juud.

‘Even in our watery world we have heard something of this jewel’ and a gleam of a concealed adventurous spirit came into his eyes ‘and Hull has told me much about your exploits wayfarer Widsith and how this jewel has come to be in this young girls hands. How it must have travelled!’ He looked at Juud and at the Duc ‘and with able guardians of it I think. Long have I listened to Beons stories of his tumultuous kingdom, so broken and fragile, yet’ and he looked briefly sad as he said this ‘exciting for some one as untravelled as myself. The burdens of my position come early and suddenly for one of royal blood. There was a time when I dreamed of travelling to far off lands, and I well know the spell of mountains and vistas that can enchant the soul. We call those mountains to the weneways the ‘Yearning Peaks’ because I fancy they hold themselves so aloof from our aspirations. Many years, many years, I have looked at them, but it was not to be’ then the sadness was replaced by a broad smile ‘so I came to travel to these places in the words and stories of Bean Derdane, and now Hull’.

Hull had to struggle to match this sudden outpouring of words from the prince. Widsith could now understand that the friendliness of Prince Ryall towards them stemmed for the most part from his childish rearing at the feet of the old wayfarer, listening agog to tales of wonder that were beyond a boys imagination to invent. Hull had caught up and the prince continued.

‘We are breaking our custom in letting you continue with your journey. Some of my fathers advisers were not in favour, but I persuaded the matter otherwise. Your burden and journey seem to me to be unusually significant in these unstable times, and more important than the reservation of our secrets, secrets which I am sure in any case will soon become commonplace mysteries in your land’.

Widsith wished he knew what the young prince was getting at. That earlier remark of the time being ‘demanding’ for the marsh kingdom was teasing, as was the notion that the prince thought they were undertaking a significant’ journey. What did he mean? Had not Solas Sharp said that the marsh people were on the move, but Widsiths thoughts were distracted by the whispered exchange between the prince and Hull. He knew what was to come.

The giant turned to his companion. He was staying, but would travel with them to

the edge of the marsh.

Hull spoke haltingly, in a manner that brought emotion to Widsiths eyes. He spoke of his home, of his discovery that he had a people, and possibly parents still alive, but he would not forget Mikal Widsith, that stranger who gave him kindness so many seasons past. Why, he would still be a horse without the wayfarer...

‘A dead horse’ Widsith interjected.

The giant laughed, and the prince smiled faintly, understanding only a little of this parting. Hull said he would see them safe to the marshes end, Widsith protested, but Hull was not to be persuaded from this last act. At that the wayfarer and giant embraced, and then Juud rushed across her eyes streaming and gave Hull a big hug which embarrassed and pleased him enormously. She had to turn aside and dab her eyes quickly with a sleeve whilst the Duc spoke of their fondness and gratefulness for his massive helping presence, and grasped Hulls huge hand.

‘We would have died my friend without you, eh wayfarer?’

Prince Ryall stood up and the chamberlain tapped his standard lightly on the floor to remind the travellers of the royal departure.

‘May your journey be safe wayfarer Widsith, Duc du Qu’et and Juud du Qu’et. I would like to think and promise that we might meet again, but these are not going to be times when such promises can be kept I fear. Go safely’. He withdrew, escorted discreetly by two guards.

#### IV

The Duc had been charmed by Mirrimage, even Thomas au Morad had not come here. How that scholar would have revelled in metaphor and description if he had, the Duc could well picture it, and the exaggerations, quaint anecdotes and irrelevant dubious opinions of the fellow. Why, he Duc du Qu’et, farmer first and scholar second, could do a better job! With this resolution, the Duc began to fill his journal with descriptions of the sights and music of the marsh land, and also to probe his memory back into their previous journies, putting down what he could recall of peoples and customs they had encountered. When his memory failed him he badgered his daughter and the wayfarer for accounts, and put down everything, trivial or large, and written in a meticulous script ready for the leisure when the whole could be drawn into one panoramic account titled (as the Duc aptly thought) ‘A History of Kingdoms’.

‘But without the salacious parts my dear’ the Duc counselled Juud.

‘Would anyone read it’ murmured Widsith, but to soft for the Ducs old ears, though Juud heard and winked at the wayfarer behind her fathers earnest back. She was pleased he had found such an interest to follow, and one that might very likely become an engrossing passion. Yet the Duc had lot let the journal take complete precedence over his every thought. His curiosity and concern for their estate still occurred in their conversations.

‘How is it, eh daughter? Ruined? Neglected? Dissipated? Were any of the retainers still there? Donan, that remarkable fellow, was he still there? Tull was surely dead, but what of our indomitable cook, Maggen? A tough lady eh, which would take an army to overcome’.

He could not imagine Maggen to be dead, but perhaps they had all been driven off by some unsympathetic lackey of Wengers?

‘We are in the grasp of our return dear. A few careful days over the Hollering Hills and we will know how things are’.

He privately doubted that things would be well, but then had he not doubted the existence of this fabulous marsh kingdom, so who could judge the future?

## V

Widsith paid his final courtesies to Beon Derdane. The old wayfarer was disgruntled, with the tetchy forgetfulness of old age, rambling into his past and forgetting the point of Widsiths visit. He reminsced for some time about the old wayfaring skills, then seemed to remember something and looked hard at the young wayfarer.

‘Not so now eh? Those days are gone and I’m not so sorry that I can watch them pass in my’ and he waved his hand upwards ‘splendid hole! My eyes too poor for anything but darkness. Well, you will have to make do with this new world. If you have the strength of your father you’ll do well. Rume men always survive they say, but the roundrell will manage our fates as it pleases’ but Widsith was not listening now. Something disturbed him.

‘Did my father come from the Rume?’

He had always supposed his father to be Rise born and bred.

Beon Derdane stopped his conversation and looked cunningly at Widsith.

‘Yes, the Rume. He did not tell you that I suppose?’

Widsith shook his head, the old wayfarer dropped his gaze and muttered.

‘A high craft for a high birth?’

Widsith could make no sense of this.

‘Who were my fathers parents then?’

The old wayfarer looked at him then looked away as if suddenly exasperated and exhausted by the business of explanations. He seemed to make his mind up.

‘I will tell you this. Your grandmother was a legitimate spinster and your grandfather was an illegitimate bachelor. Ha!’

Widsith was puzzled, and nothing that he could do could cajole the old wayfarer into explaining these crude remarks, or even getting him to speak at all.

He left eventually, regretfully and in silence aware that the old man had deliberately left him with a riddle. He glanced back once at Beon Derdane, knotted with age and

staring into the darkness, the oldest man in the kingdom, but not much longer likely to remain so.

## The Tempting Landscape of Home

*At last they are free from the marshes, but the thoughts of home are interrupted by smoke from a village. Matters, it seems, are never to be easy for them.*

They left in the semi-dark morning when the streets were bare of all but the fog that funneled between the houses like a milky sea. The towers gleamed in sunlight, but the travellers were not to see the proper day till they were six leagues out from Mirrimage, when at last the ground fog dispersed and the marsh shone bold to the eye. They walked steadily, not in haste, but not dawdling, for now the decision to leave was taken they all wanted it quickly done. Dimly ahead was a blue soft line of the rolling Hollering Hills Hills, the tempting landscape of home.

The Duc was eager now.

‘Just to see it dear, even for the last time will be worth the journey. I have seen so much already that I would not regret seeing no more, as long as I can see the estate. It is as if my senses were all filled up. If the estate is wasted, well then it is so, if the house is in ruins, let that be so also, but you cannot tear up a landscape or break the spirit of the streams that flow in it, or carry away the rocks and soil. It will still be home, for all any of Wenners work has done’.

Widsith counted off the watchtowers and keeps one by one as they gained steadily over the highway, heading weneways on a straight diagonal which could have taken them, if they wished to pursue it, directly to the Rume Gap. But long before then, the highway swerved sharply skaw, and went back into the reedy shallows by the mainland. It took two full days to reach that kink in the highway, and they crossed an indistinguishable boundary between when the journey seemed unending, and when the journey suddenly seemed to have an end. Quite clearly now, their travels had a finish. And as if to emphasise the point unkindly, they walked from clear blue skies into the sullen cool mist. It was as if they had left their careless happiness behind in the sunshine and took

upon the disconsolate cloak of their own embittered kingdom.

Their mood was hardly helped by the occasional ruins and derelict villages they passed. Hull explained that these were settler villages established when the marsh kingdom needed more land, but they had never been a success. The miserable climate, poor relations with the fisher-folk, and general isolation, had forced the abandonment of most of these pioneer settlements. And the terrible disease of course.

'Disease Hull?' Juud asked, what was that?' She had to wait till Widsith translated.

It was a wasting disease. It attacked the healthy and sick indiscriminately and crippled them with exhaustion, so that eventually the heart did not have the strength in its muscle tissue to beat. It had arrived from nowhere and dissipated without trace. Some thought it was a judgement from Vorst, punishing the Marshmen from invading his territory and being too greedy. Anyway it killed many many marsh people, and his parents.

'Oh, I'm sorry Hull. Were they living in one of these villages?'

Widsith translated for the giant who nodded slowly. The Duc spoke slowly.

'It is odd my dear, that the Marshmen, overpopulated and forced out into the poor hinterland had inflicted upon them a disease, which although terrible, actually solved, their population crisis. One could see why people would think it a judgement' though he added hastily 'do not say any of this to Hull'.

'Father! that is horrible'.

The Duc looked unrepentant.

'History is often horrible dear'.

The last dayend they were gathered by the fire in a keep. The Duc remembered that morning of a glimpse they had of the Hollering Hills, sloped decorously in their Old West dress of pale white.

'Well wayfarer, so near now. A few days over those hills, did you know my grandfather named those hills, yet I have never been on them' he mused.

'About time sir' replied Widsith crouched by the fire and trying to catch the hotherb in his pipe with an ember glowing at the end of a twig. Juud watched him, his head outlined against the fire. The soldiers had retreated to another room by another fire, and there was a low murmuring through the open door. They were trying to make this night special as it was their last, but words got strangely tangled in the throat and often trailed into silence.

'What will you do wayfarer, once we have crossed the Hollering Hills?' asked Juud, her voice husky, mostly from a cold she had caught the day before. She was surprised to think that despite all the soakings, cold snow, winds and hard ground that this was the first time she had felt remotely ill.

'I will not go down with you to the estate, but travel along the hills and into the mountains that way'.

'Alone?'

'Yes it will be Sprig then, with the snows melting'.

'And you will go to the Rise?'

Juud felt a pang, of how nice it would be to go to the mountains with the new flowers bursting from their hidden crevices, and the world changed into green after dark Wast Time.

‘Yes’ he had succeeded in lighting his pipe ‘I do not like to leave you there, but really, there is little I could do’.

‘Oh no no wayfarer. We understand. We must take our chances, there is much you have done already, beyond simple duty. Why you should have given us up years ago’ the Duc remonstrated cheerfully.

Juud cupped her face in her hands and felt a momentary desperate miserableness. They truly were alone, her father and I.

And Widsith? It was a stupid despair, and she sat up angrily that she had ever let it fill her emotions. She could not expect life to end prettily.

A soldier came in and briefly whispered to Hull. Hull spoke to Widsith.

‘There is a boat ready for tomorrow. Hull will then return to Mirrimage’.

A silence resumed, the fire cracking and the muffled soldiers voices being the only sounds. Juud had not wanted it to end like this. She wanted to be happy, even a false jolliness was better than this declining sadness. There were still the Hollering Hills to negotiate, and still a few precious days to go before the final separation. The Vorst memory assailed her, of people fallen away, one by one, human by human, but again she placed a mental foot upon the hopeless thought, and forced herself to be bright and to be talkative and such is the power of a girls talk and laugh, just because it is a girls laugh, that the sombreness of the evening wore off their souls and they all started to chat and laugh, remembering the extraordinary events of their past with a lighter heart. Even Juud laughed without constraint.

The morning came, misty and cold, and in the bundle of goods into the boat, good-byes were largely forgotten. The soldiers bustled around, generally getting in the way and enjoying the excitement of a rare break in routine. The Duc formally shook hands with Hull and Juud hugged him again, and got him to promise to visit them over that ‘one little hill’. They clambered into the boat and saw the wayfarer clasp the giant in an embrace, then hop nimbly into the boat, and the two soldiers pushed off and rowed out into the marsh, the mist swallowing the watched and watchers with Hulls long arm waving a slow goodbye.

It was startling to be down amongst the wenderweeds and guggling water again. Touching the water with her hand Juud made sure that it was as cold as she remembered. She saw a bird flap wildly from the reeds as the oars dipped and pulled. She glanced over her shoulder at her father, who was looking apprehensively at the scene.

‘I hope we do not get lost dear’ he muttered apologetically.

The two oarsmen pull confidentially and quickly, the rushes and tangled wenderweeds slipping past. Widsith saw that they navigated by following a line of buoys, with different colours to indicate junctions. They pulled with such assurance that the wayfarer guessed they came this way frequently to inspect the mainland and fend off curious visitors. Even if the fisher-folk found these buoys they would mean nothing to them.

The soldiers occasionally muttered instructions to each other, but otherwise the heavy mist blanketed out sound. The channels had grown more distinct and the reed islands thicker. The soldiers slipped the oars in and brought out paddles from under their seats, handing them round to everyone. There was a slight current but the five paddlers made light work of it. Widsith had not seen a buoy for some time and supposed they were close to the 'coast'. He strained his eyes to get a first glimpse of any sign of it. The mist began to thin and rag out, and the wayfarer felt a slight breeze on his cheek. The channel was now confined and no one spoke above a whisper, realising they were close to landing. The channel twisted round a corner and came to an abrupt end by a small derelict landing stage. As the soldiers steadied the boat the passengers climbed out. Their baggers were handed up to them and with a terse nod, the soldiers pushed the boat quickly back down the channel, and in a bitwick were absorbed into the mist again leaving them alone.

The Duc whispered.

'We must follow that path I think' pointing out an overgrown trail leading away from the derelict jetty. Widsith hardly glanced at it. He was still looking back into the marsh with something like regret. Finally he shrugged and shouldered on his bagger, adjusting the sword at his waist. Juud lifted up her bundle and slung the bow and quiver over that. They missed Hulls great strength and useful arms immediately, and they must have been reminded of it for the Duc said,

'I suppose I really will have to carry my share nowadays wayfarer, without Hull to assist. It is not far at any point. One hill'.

'And then home' finished Juud.

Widsith turned onto the track which he studied critically as he walked. He was pleased it was overgrown and obviously out of use. After half a league the track began to climb noticeably and the mist thinned out, revealing a grey dull sky overhead. Juud sniffed the air.

'Something burning?' she enquired of no one in particular. The Duc had smelt it to.

'I hope that does not mean people' he said anxiously. It would indeed look suspicious to villagers if they saw three strangers emerge from the marsh. Though Hull had assured them that they were being guided to a place well away from a village, Widsith began to wonder.

The burning smell was stronger. It smelt of wheat or corn. The slope flattened out and the mist dribbled away behind them revealing vague fields and trees around them. A tatty fence, broken in places straddled the track. A copse of trees, then another field, the burning smell pervaded the still air.

'Look!' whispered Juud urgently 'there's smoke in this mist, in fact it's mostly smoke'.

It hung wisply above the fields, not yet giving away the source of its origin. Then a breeze scattered the remnants of mist and rolled up the smoke clearing the air till they could see several leagues around, and the situation was dramatically plain.

They were in a pastoral landscape, of fields neatly divided by hedges and occasional

stone walls. Clumps of trees broke up the man-made patterns and far beyond these foreground images rose the grey flanks of the Hollering Hills. But to their right, a league off, wicked tongues of flame were sprouting from a field of wheat, rolling out thick swathes of smoke that spread in an ugly fashion towards the marsh, and beyond the burning fields were the rooftops of a village, blackened and smoking, with still bright gashes of flame that added a rare colour to a grey and dismal scene.

There was no one around. The fires burnt unattended, and Widsith could guess why this was so. It was a serious beginning to their last journey but he could not resist a dry humorous aside.

‘Out of the marsh and into the fire. Our timing, is, as usual, impeccable’.

## 'Our Women Are Taken'

*They are in the thick of brigandry and the out of control genius of Driac Slorty, oh yes, he has returned to our story. Juud learns how to kill, and the villagers pour out their anxieties, but who cares for peasants? At night they are attacked and they lose one member of the party and gain another.*

They skirted the flaming village and stumbled upon a terrified peasant family crouching in a ditch. The husband rose and shakily stepped forward, waving a wild pike in the wayfarers face, who casually knocked the implement down and roughly told the fellow to stop this nonsense. The poor peasant collapsed in front of Widsith, grovelling in a high pitched whine for the life of himself and his family. Widsith had to shake him by the shoulders to make him stop, and gradually managed to get himself understood that they were not bandits and were also trying to escape. At this the man brightened up and urged his fat wife and three incredibly grubby children to their feet with loud abuse. Widsith handed back the pike, and this satisfied the peasant that the strange trio were indeed friendly and he there upon launched into a long harangue about the evils of the kingdom generally and in particular of Driac Slorty. He spoke in a heavy local dialect that Widsith had to strain to comprehend.

'So this is his doing' murmured Widsith to Juud 'I thought we might have slipped past his influence.'

She looked around nervously at the disturbed landscape with the smoke hanging ominously over the empty fields. It seemed a heedless, senseless destruction.

'The brigands are still here?' she asked. Widsith looked sour.

'They will not be far away'.

'Why does Slorty do it?' asked Juud of no one in particular.

The peasant stopped jabbering for a moment and seemed intrigued by Juuds high-sounding accent and speech. He must have understood that one word 'Slorty' for an increased torrent of abuse stormed out at a great volume. Widsith listened indifferently.

'He says Slorty is mad. Well we know that. Tries to gather crops by way of burning

them, get soldiers for his army by killing his peasants. Something about taxes. I knew there would be money in this somewhere. When a peasant complains it is usually that he is always too poor’.

Widsith was not especially sympathetic to the peasants misfortunes because he knew from long experience how avaricious they could be when it was their turn. The Duc was disturbed though.

‘They have lost everything?’

In another situation they could be his tenants.

The peasant was talking again, this time shepherding his family into a manageable walking group. The children were silent and observed the situation sullenly. The wife clasped a bundle close to her arms and kept looking fearfully towards the drift of smoke.

‘He says he is going to stay with his brother in another village’ Widsith spoke quickly to the peasant who nodded happily ‘I have said we will accompany them’.

‘Is that wise wayfarer? They will be slower than us surely?’

The Duc was as well aware of the dangers as Widsith.

‘Yes, but we should gain the safety of a village tonight.. If we wander round here on our own no one will trust us, and we’ll be hunted by brigand and peasant alike’.

The Duc acquiesced, seeing the point of it.

‘Well dear’ he said taking his daughters arm as they followed the peasant family along the dried-up ditch ‘our troubles are not yet done’.

Where the ditch ended the family climbed out and picked up a footpath that ran beside a low hedge. Smoke still billowed from the burning village, but they were gradually travelling away from it now. They crossed a field of early wheat, once burying themselves amongst the new stalks when they disturbed a group of panic-stricken cattle they had mistaken for raiders. They all stood up sheepishly as the cattle blundered away. Juud would have liked to remain in the gold grass, hidden and secret, and thought this daytime venturing was dangerous and said so to Widsith who gave an infuriating shrug of his shoulders without saying one word of agreement.

The wayfarer was in an uncharacteristic bad temper. It should have been a simple matter to have reached the Hollering Hills, but here they were getting entangled in Slortys bloody ministrations and following a bunch of semi-hysterical peasants. If they were not sharp or quick they would have to spend wasteful days negotiating their way through this Drubbins mess! Widsith swore very disagreeably, and stormed across the fields quite oblivious to the dangers around him and spoiling for a fight with any Wyrds son that got in the way. Juud was quite bewildered by the wayfarers angry march across the fields and both she and the Duc had to break into a trot to keep up, while the peasant man flapped anxiously at Widsiths heel and his family straggled behind.

They picked up another path across a field sprinkled with nervous sheep. The burning stench of the village had diminished letting the more countryfied smells of silage and manure take precedence. At the corner of two fields there was a noise of hooves and two horsemen suddenly trotted out in front of them. Both groups were surprised. Widsith stopped dead and the peasant bumped into his back and peered around in

fright at the horsemen who had emerged from behind a high hedge. With a shout the horsemen turned and rode upon the foot travellers who were stranded like fish upon the low bare tide of grass.

The sheep scattered in fear. Juud struggled to get her bow off her shoulder and Widsith unloosened his sword and wrenched the pike from the fearful peasants hands. The lead horseman thundered up and swung low over the saddle, swiping with his sword that skimmed the top of the terrified peasants head who collapsed in a faint. Widsith dodged this rider and levered up the pike at the second horseman who was hard on the heels of the first. The pike caught the rider crudely in the chest, ripping it open and dumping the helpless rider to the ground. The force made the wayfarer stumble over, helpless for a bitwick, half twisting round to find the first rider towering over him with his sword raised and his face frozen in a bizarre grimace of effort. The sword swayed there, upright, as if being held by some invisible hand from heaven, then the body wobbled in the saddle and toppled to the ground one foot hanging in the stirrup, the horse standing upright quivering and still.

Widsith stood up shaken. There was an arrow bedded firmly in the riders back, and Widsith looked at Juud who stood motionless in the position she had fired the arrow. His anger had gone, and he said matter of factly 'good shot', and Juud nodded and looked down curiously at the man she had slain. She giggled.

'It wasn't it?'

The Duc looked at her sharply.

They saw no more raiders for the rest of the day, and kept carefully to hedgerows away from the open fields. They passed two deserted villages, deserted that is of all bar a few mournful dogs still tied to their posts and forgotten by the panicking owners. Then a third village was arrived at, that was heavily stockaded and looked occupied and threateningly silent. As they passed Widsith thought he glimpsed a pair of cautious heads from the top of the stockade. They at least were prepared to make a fight of it, or so it seemed, but the peasant spat as he passed the village and swore

'They make bargains with Slorty and his bandits to save their own skins, Drubbins! paying the new taxes we didn't pay, but they'll pay in the end, Slorty will make sure of them I hope' and he spat contemptuously. They hurried on.

The next village was friendlier, though cautious. One of the villagers recognised the peasant family and soon there was an anxious cluster of men and aproned women around them as the peasant dramatically explained their flight. There were gestures of approval as the peasant told of Widsiths unseating of the raider, and flutters of voiced approval and surprise as they heard of her slaying of the second rider. After the news had been given, they moved on into the late aftersun, with the sky still suspicious, as if it knew of the gloomy events below.

Before it got fully dark they hurried to the village where the peasants relations lived, and were greeted warmly by them immediately on arrival. There was the same hustle and bustle of questions, and watchful looks of awe and surprise were thrown at the wayfarer and Juud and the Duc as they sat aside waiting for the villages to organise some accommodation. All three were very tired. Juud now felt sick when she remembered the man she had killed.

The local headman came up and after some consultation with the peasant who assured him that they were 'alright' and not filthy Slortys men, he invited them to the hospitality of the village for the night. The villagers were too excited and apprehensive to ask any probing questions about where the strangers came from, and with the children running back and forth in mad excitement, the whole village was in a state of incoherent uproar. Juud was taken aside by some village women, and humbly accepted their gifts of food and forgetful sleep. The Duc and wayfarer were accommodated with the headman. The Duc quickly dozed off but Widsith lay awake for some time pondering the pitiful plight of the villagers.

These were their homes, they could not flee them, but neither could they defend them for the scattered hotch-potch of huts and stalls made an easy target for the horse-raid and their fire-torches. The villagers had few weapons and less skill with which to use them. Their best and only hope lay in the wish that Slortys men might go elsewhere. Chose some other unfortunate village, burn their cousins house, rape their cousins daughter, a poor thing to wish on a neighbour, but such was the hopelessness of their position. As Widsith drifted into sleep he half-dreamt the headmans growling voice pointing out that the next village was fat in cattle and had had a better harvest than them, and wasn't Yudders daughter a beauty?, and surely Slortys men would pass their poor village by, surely?

The wayfarer woke with a start.

There was a high scream, running feet, voices shouting, then a rough clanging of the alarm bell till it stopped abruptly. A flicker of flame spurted above his head and then the roof burst into fire. Widsith grabbed his sword, kicked the Duc awake and remembered to drag their baggers outside as he hurried into the yard, crouching low and keeping to the shadow. A sudden thunder in his ear warned him to dive to one side and a horseman dashed by, the blade of the sword swishing in the air. He dragged the Duc back to an unburning hut. More horses appeared, with three riders waving firebrands, and two terrified peasants scattering from them. A body lay on the ground garishly lit by the inferno of huts. Yet apart from the first scream and the roar of flames in the thatch the scene was oddly silent. The raid and its defence (such as it was) were conducted in a very deadly silence of human grunts, horses galloping unexpectedly in and out of the night, and the scuffle of bodies. Widsith tensed his grip around the sword. He had to find Juud. Which hut was she in? Why had he not insisted they stay together? Wyr! Was that her hut there, burning like a torch? He ran up the street bumping into a peasant woman flurrying in panic the other way. She was dragging a child after her and even in the poor light Widsith could see she was almost paralysed with fear.

As he turned the corner he saw that one group of villagers were putting up a fight, and with long pikes were bunched back to back holding several circling horsemen at bay. Widsith sprang from the shadow to one horses side and wrenched the rider off. The other riders broke away startled and the peasants rushed forward with glee burying their pikes into the writhing body of the fallen rider. Widsith bellowed at them that the riders were returning but too late, he had to leap back as the villagers dropped their pikes and fled between the huts. The wayfarer cursed them and ran back meeting a riderless horse stricken by the fires surrounding it. Widsith coaxed the horse away and launched himself into the saddle, fighting to control the mare as it shied wildly. Widsiths stir-

rups won a marginal control over the animal as it tore back down the street past the bewildered Duc.

There was a squabble of horses at the other end of the village, milling around a small cattle pen. Here some more villagers were determiningly managing to stave off the raiders who could not quite decide what to do. As they settled on leaving their horses and tackling the stubborn peasants by foot so Widsith came hurtling down, and with his sword slashed one raider on one side and another on the other, the blood spurting out followed by an agonised scream. Widsith was yelling at the top of his voice in his mad fury, but he did not think it was his scream. Galloping past he heard a cheer from the villagers and he heard the headmans growling controlling voice. Widsith disappeared into the shadow of a hut, and forcibly wrenched the horse around again which cantered back to meet the two raiders who had set off in pursuit of him. He caught one a terrific blow across the chest but the other dodged aside. He galloped back to the pen where some of the raiders were on foot, suddenly finding themselves caught between a mysterious enemy at the rear and the prickling pikes of the peasants, scrambled back into their saddles. Villagers poured out of the stall, one seizing hold of a rider and dragging him down where a half-dozen knives plunged in. Out of the confusing black and flaring whiteness two more riders emerged and began screaming at the villagers who quickly scuttled back to the shelter of the pen. Now there were at least five riders, four in front and one somewhere behind and Widsith sandwiched between, and more raiders out of sight. He had better fly. He glanced over his shoulder preparing to turn the wild mare sideways, or jump off altogether, when his eyes fell in wonderment upon a very familiar figure riding heavily towards him.

He raised his sword in salute and got the same reply, so with a shout of exultation he wheeled his horse around back to the riders and the two of them fell upon the soldiers with an anger and fury that scattered the soldiers. Driac Slortys men had been used to dealing with pathetic peasants, cutting through them like soft curds of butter, but when faced with two powerful and trained warriors, it brought on complete panic. Three fell, and got skewered into the dirt by the vengeful pikes of the villagers as they ran out, jubilant at this turn of events. The other two were swallowed by the darkness and Widsith was suddenly too tired to chase them. He gazed at Hull, and rubbed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his sword arm. Then he remembered Juud and looked around for her amongst the fire-lit villagers.

He felt a sticky wetness on his fingers and hoped it was not his blood. He sheathed his sword and slid off the saddle, a peasant scabbled to hold the jibbing horse. Hull eased off his horse and joined the wayfarer.

‘Hull’ Widsith gripped, the giants shoulder. Hull grinned as they walked slowly back to the pen. Widsith had forgotten entirely about the Duc till he saw him emerge out of the darkness. The headman came forward amazed at the giant, yet gave a clap of approval on Widsiths shoulder.

‘Strangers you did well! Seven of the Wyrds have paid for their humour tonight’ his voice bloody and triumphant. Widsith was not listening.

‘Have you seen Juud Duc?’

The Duc was staring speechless at Hull and could not reply. It was the headman

who answered, his voice still oddly triumphant.

‘She’s been taken. Several of our women are taken’.

‘Taken?’ Widsith spoke thickly, not understanding.

‘Some of Slortys men took some women. Your friend was amongst them’ the head-man explained, and added inconsequentially, ‘it’s the usual way’.

Widsith looked dully at the Duc whose face was stiff and pale. The roof of a hut suddenly collapsed inwards bringing the walls down in a great tangle of flames and sparks that leapt up into the sky higher and higher, till they appeared like dancing fire-spirits.

The wayfarer followed them with his eyes and was shocked to see the cloud gone and the sky full of stars.

## Chapter 49

# To Ride This Fast

*A desperate night ride, all honour and pride at stake, and a frail human life. There is a ghastly ritual at a camp fire and Widsith and Hull learn to climb roofs. It is still not yet dawn as the chapter ends.*

The stars were keen, the horses fresh, and a glow breeways heralded the rise of Wene, which would ease one small hazard of the journey. In all other ways things were against them. The night dark with uncertain roads, and with only two to combat the strength of many, and no very sure hope that this night ride would end in anything but failure. For all that, they rode with determination, and no little skill, picking a route through a web of unfamiliar tracks which had been mudied by recent rain and confused by a maze of hoofmarks. Only an intenser blackness on the ground warned them of a hollow or a tree-stump where a horse might stumble. Breetways there was a flicker of light on the horizon where another village burnt itself out. They were mad, quite mad to ride this fast on such a night, yet the darkness gave them concealment and surprise, the only real weapons that they had. Slortys men would not expect any visitors after the days marauding, and would be flushed with stories and grog, so that was the hope and not much of one to sustain their purpose.

From what the headman told them Slortys camp lay dead yorn in a wooded enclosure, some fifteen leagues or so off.

‘That is what he has used before. There is an old palace there, once owned by some grandee’ the headman explained ‘it’ll be swarming with soldiers of course, but with all the women there I don’t suppose they’ll notice you much’ the headman looked sourly at the night.

‘They often do this? Take the women?’ asked Widsith.

‘Of course. Seems to happen more often now. We get them back most times’.

The headman seemed to despair of altering the situation. He plainly thought Widsith and Hull were mad to try and get Juud back. His was the patience of a peasant used to reasonless suffering.

‘But this’ he indicated the burning huts ‘is a new trick. They have never done this before. That is why we fought. We were angry. Usually they take some crops, a few

cattle, we don't get the crops and cattle back of course' he spat 'Wurds! But this is stupid madness.'

The headman shook his head sorrowfully, already anxious as to the consequences of the villagers defence. They had buried and hidden the soldiers bodies, fearful that if they were discovered, Slortys men would show no mercy, but he seemed gloomy about their prospects anyway.

'They will come back. Seven of their men dead, oh yes we can expect them back. They will want to know why' he sighed.

He was glad these strangers were leaving, but did not think it would make much difference in the end. The village was doomed. He had seen the sort of justice Slorty enjoyed. Already some families were working in the night, loading up their belongings into carts in preparation for flight, what else could they do?

With the headmans assistance Widsith found a guide for the Duc and two horses to take him to a small village at the base of the Hollering Hills pass. There the Duc would wait. Three days, no more, then he would have to find another guide to take him over the hills to his own land. He immediately protested that he would wait longer than that, but Widsith warned him not to. If they failed and were captured Slortys men would quickly go out to search for the Duc du Qu'et, a valuable prize indeed.

'As long as they do not realise Juuds identity' the wayfarer said thoughtfully 'we might have some of Gadabouts luck, we could do with it'.

'What will they do to her?' asked the Duc anxiously as Widsith saddled up a horse for the Ducs departure 'kill her?'

Widsith was happy to answer that.

'No, you heard the headman say they do not'.

The Duc looked away and did not ask what was both in their minds. The soldiers would certainly take some pleasure first. Widsith also remembered the Charmstone and he hoped Juud had the good sense to throw the accursed thing away. The Duc and the guides horses were ready. Widsith watched them mount.

'Be careful wayfarer. If you bring my daughter back you can have half my estate'. The Duc spoke deliberately, as if to make certain of his words, for he might not get the chance to repeat.

'You can have her hand if you wish, with my blessing'.

'I fancy Juud will have something to say about that offer' Widsith smiled thinly in the dark 'besides I am already married, you remember?'

'Oh yes I forgot' the Duc mumbled absently 'be careful anyway' he wanted to say more but Widsith took hold of the bridle and pointed the horse to the street, patting it gently on the rump. The horses broke into a trot and quickly vanished into the night, the Duc looking firmly ahead.

Widsith and Hull saddled, and once they rode out of the village and left the last cheering villager behind, the wayfarer could ask why the giant had returned.

Hull had talked to a captain of the highway guard and was told quite casually of recent disturbances along the coast. Hull was furious. Why had not the been warned?

The captain shrugged, and justified himself by saying that there were always disturbances on the coast of one form or another and anyway the travellers hadn't asked, what happened to them was not his business, he only had to ensure they got to the coast safely, after that, well, that was their lookout! So they had walked blithely into the midst of Slortys annual tours of law and order.

Hull was appalled and on the spur of the moment resolved to follow the wayfarer. He took the same boat back to the jetty, the captain grumbling all the time that it wasn't part of orders, but let him go anyway. Then Hull had found a horse and ridden it hard from village to village encountering hostility from everyone. He had seen a band of horsemen at a distance but managed to avoid them. Only by the point of a sword had he extracted from one peasant that a trio of strangers had gone to such and such village earlier in the day. This way, losing a lot of time, he had followed their tracks and arrived at night at the village at a fortuitous time indeed. He laughed at it, recalling the shock of the horse-soldiers as they scattered to his huge blows.

The story took some time in the telling. They were seldom able to ride side by side and could talk only in short gasping breaths. Both were beginning to feel the effects of the night battle and tiredness was all too tempting. Fortunately Wene rose and made their progress steadier and friendlier. They stopped by a ford and picked up the tracks of more horses and a two-wheeled cart.

'That'll be for the women' said Hull. Widsith nodded.

The night was cool, and getting cooler. There was no wind, and there would be a frost tonight. For a moment it was strangely serene, one thin cloud interrupting Wenes glowing face like a gentle veil. A night-bird hooted off somewhere and the horses slurped loudly as they drank the river water. It was ironically peaceful considering the bloody deaths already that night and more horrors before them. They remounted, crossed the river and after a league discovered the naked body of a woman.

Widsiths heart stopped but on examination it turned out not to be Juud. This womans throat was cut and her breasts mutilated. She could not have been more than sixteen or seventeen years old, and only dead a wick.

'Wyrds sons!' and they rode on, in a black and vile mood, all tiredness gone.

The chance of a mistake, to take the wrong turn or follow a false trail occurred at every junction, but slowly they traced their way yorn, the tell-tale cart tracks settling into a clear direction. There were no guards apparent on any of the roads. The soldiers must have felt such elementary precautions irrelevant when they were the only significant force about, but it was sloppy nevertheless, and reflected Slortys indifference. This was all to the advantage of Hull and Widsith who rode fifteen leagues that night with not so much as a sniff at an enemy till they approached the main camp, and here the soldiers were well occupied. They saw a distant glow of campfires outlining the dark fuzzy shapes of trees, and here they dismounted and led their horses carefully around the perimeter of the wooded copse with the roof of an impressive house gleaming lightly in the moonlight above the trees. There were still no guards, indeed they felt they could have shouted as much as they liked and no one would have listened. There was obviously a party in progress and the occasional cheer filtered through the darkness and snatches of song. Widsith stiffened when he thought he heard a womans scream,

but he listened again and heard nothing. They tied the horses in the shadowed trees and penetrated the wood enclosure to the clearing. They were at the back of the mansion. There were some campfires at the front but here was in darkness. They watched the back of the mansion for some bit-wicks but saw no hidden waiting guard, no trap ready to be sprung on them. But how to find Juud in this building? It sprawled over a wide area and there would be twenty or thirty rooms at least. The wayfarer had an uneasy feeling that some of the women would be by the campfire, so they stole around the edge of the trees for a look.

There were three campfires, burning hugely, with clusters of men around each and a few more sitting on a sort of front porch. The fires formed a triangle with an open clearing in the middle, and here two men were struggling together in a wrestling match, their bodies bare to the waist and sweating in the firelight. One threw the other down and a cheer went up. The fallen man stood up and they grappled again and this time it was the other mans turn to fall. Another louder cheer and tankards were raised. On the third time the first man won after a long tussle that excited the spectators to all sorts of shouts and jeers. Triumphant the victor walked around the perimeter and went over to a small sitting group of people outside of the firelight. The victor hesitated then pulled one person out of the group. It was a woman Widsith recognised from the peasant village. The victor went inside the house with his prize and another match resumed in the triangle of fire. Widsith tried to see whether Juud was present amongst the huddle of women but it was too dark. As they watched, all the women were taken in prizes and dragged inside the house. None of them were Juud. Meanwhile the party began to break up, the drink taking its toll. Some went inside, some lolled on the grass before the fire inconsequentially singing a few war songs in ragged harmonies.

Hull spoke to Widsith. He nodded. Clearly they needed more information about the house. Time was pressing. Only a wick before Breet made her appearance.

They circled the trees to the back of the house. There was a soldier urinating in the trees at the edge. Widsith lightly and quickly muffled the soldiers mouth with one hand and buried his fist in the mans stomach with the other. Hull helped him drag the hapless soldier into a deeper screen of trees, and then lay his sword across the mans exposed throat.

Questions were asked.

The soldier was terrified, looking death in its face.

How many women were taken? Ten roughly. Were they all given to the soldiers? Yes, these were officers though. Is Slorty here? Yes. Which room? It is in the middle, but it has a glass roof. Did he have women? Oh yes, he did not deny himself. Hulls sword deepened into the flesh. Two or three? Describe them!

One sounded like Juud.

What was his rank? Captain eh, a good catch!

They left him under the trees. A good catch indeed, but even a fish flaps harder in its death throes than that captain.

Silent as moths they flitted over the waste ground between the house and the woods. A low cornice of the house offered itself temptingly. Widsith got onto Hulls shoulders and wriggled up onto it. Hull was a harder proposition, but after a few bitwicks of pull-

ing so that Widsith felt his arms must come out of his sockets, the giant too was on the roof. Wooden slats hung precariously. Twice Widsith dislodged a slate and twice Hull caught it as it began to slip down the roof.

The roof was pitched low and was easy to traverse. The glass roof was easy to find, for there was a faint glow coming up through it. Hull and Widsith peered in.

They were looking into a large well-furnished room, with brocades glimpsed on one wall and rich rugs scattered on the floor. Directly below them was a large bed and on it, lit by two candles either side of the bed on footstools, was a figure half curled into some sheets. It was a man, naked, examining something in his hand, turning it around and around. It gave off a slight flash of green. With a shock Widsith realised it was the Charmstone. Then he noticed another figure on the floor, naked, curled into a tight ball, with long hair sprayed out on the rug. It was too dark to see clearly but Widsith knew who that was, and therefore could be sure that the fatty fellow on the bed was the tyrant of the lower Furrowdale Valley, Driac Slorty.

## This Cruel Nights Progress

*A recapitulation, and we learn of the chaos of Slortys methods. Men are slain, a women is taken and Juud du Qu'et is alarmed at her immediate future. Driac Slorty has been waiting for something to happen for a long time.*

That night Juud had a vivid dream of being princess in a palace that looked remarkably like her childhood home. The palace was besieged by enemy soldiers and only a few loyal retainers had stayed with her to defend it, but it was hopeless, fire was burning the outer walls, and the enemy soldiers had burst through the flimsy defences and were almost upon the central keep. It was either to die by her own hand or be captured. As her hand reached for the poison vial she had some vague idea that she was atoning for some terrible past misdeed, some act of cruelty which she knew about but could not precisely remember... Then she was shaken awake. It was one of the peasant girls, her face screaming 'the soldiers! the soldiers!'. For a baffled moment Juud wondered whether she had woken up into her own dream, dreaming in fact of being in a dream, then the shouts and piercing screams of the other women woke her up thoroughly and she remembered that she was lying on the floor of a peasant hut.

Flames licked through the thatch and smoke gushed choking fumes over her. Juud felt someones arm fumble hers and tug her towards the door. She had no time to grab her shoes and ran outside barefoot, feeling pricks of heat on her soles from embers of the thatch as they fell to the ground. A horseman reared in front of her. She ran against its side, tried to pull away and found herself caught by a burly arm that lifted her roughly up and across the saddle till her body flopped helplessly over the mares back. Shouts and noise filled her head. She caught a glimpse of another girl dragged onto a horse and saw a sword swing disembodied through the air towards an elderly peasant womans back. She closed her eyes and began to retch. The horse suddenly swung about and rode clumsily away from the confusion, her body thumping against the horses back painfully as it broke into a jolting trot. She could smell the soldiers male sweat, and a piece of his armour jabbed into her side. It was difficult to look up from her position but she could hear other horses pounding close by. The pain and shock of capture gave her no time to think of the consequences. Events were still happening too fast, and in

a bewildered way she still half imagined that this might be a dream and in a bitwick she would awake.

The horses stopped and unceremoniously she was tipped off the horse to the ground landing heavily and crying out in pain. With no time to gain breath she was half dragged and carried into a cart and dumped on its floor. Other women were similarly treated and squashed into the confined space. Someone bent over Juud and whispered something in her ear, about it being all right, and they were taken by Slortys men, and are you hurt? Juud began to gather her wits and shook her head, though at the same time felt a sticky dampness on her legs and looked to see ribbons of dark liquid against the skin. She was not sure if it was her blood or someone else's. Shakily she stood up, helped by the two girls beside her, and gazed dumbly around like a herded cattle beast.

The cart was crowded with eight or ten women huddled in various stages of undress. One girl was naked. Soldiers were moving around on foot doing something to the cart and swearing freely. Two or three other horsemen watched warily back down the road. She heard one soldier grumble 'they got Deger'. She was glad the peasants had some revenge. Another soldier spoke, 'and Foh, and Servill I saw him dead. They had some warrior fighting for them or something. Proper little Wyrd he was!'

Juud immediately realised they were talking about Widsith and was relieved he was alright. He was sure to have given a good account of himself. Where were they going? The other women were silent when she asked. The naked girl of sixteen was sobbing convulsively and no one comforted her.

'To Slortys camp' a girl replied shivering. The night air was cold and most were wearing only what they had slept in.

'And what happens there?'

No one answered, which was answer enough. Juud wrapped her tunic closer and wondered if Mikal would follow.

Two more soldiers rode up hastily, shouting and cursing.

'Wyrds! They got Servill and Makker!'

'Makker too?'

'What about Geper?' one rider asked 'and Thom? Anyone seen them?'

'Strom it was I swear fighting for them!' One soldier swore obscenely.

'Don't be a Drubbin! Strom isn't real' and a dozen voices started shouting at once.

'That Wyrd was real. Massive he was, and there were others'.

'Let's go! They might follow' and this generally brought agreement. Juud was amazed that Widsith should have caused so much fear. She was proud of him, he had given a bold account of himself.

The soldiers had successfully hitched up a horse to the shafts of the cart and the vehicle jolted into movement, throwing the women against each other. They lurched over a river and travelled a little way before a company of horsemen overtook them and they stopped again. There was some dispute between the two groups of soldiers.

'We've got a right. We won them'.

'Slorty won't like it'.

‘That drunken bastard!’

Two torches flared, casting a lurid light over the scene. Most of the horsemen had dismounted though a couple stayed on their mounts and leaned wearily over their saddles watching the course of the argument.

‘Alright one’, ‘One? Two! We’re men not peasants!’

This sally raised a laugh, but the opposing soldier stood his ground. One he insisted. Perhaps he had a higher rank for the other gave way with bad grace. The torch flared close to the cart and some soldiers peered in saying ‘that one’, ‘she’s too fat’, ‘the fat one!’ The girls in the cart tried to shrink back but there was no where to go to. Juud was right by the cart latch and her long hair caught one soldier’s attention. He grabbed it and jerked her head towards his so that she let out a short gasp of pain.

‘This ones alright’.

‘Too thin.’

‘No shes not’.

Juud was gripped by fear.

The hatch was let down and one soldier was about to pull Juud off the cart, his arm on her waist, when the commander of the other soldiers shouted.

‘Leave her! She’s too good. Slorty will want her’.

‘You want her yourself! After Slortys had it!’

‘So? Leave her. Take the naked bitch. It’ll save you trouble’.

There was a hesitation on the soldier who had grabbed Juud, then he pushed her back and pulled the girl off, who moaned desperately when she understood. Another soldier hit her and told her to shut up. The girl collapsed on the muddy ground silent and quivering. The latch was slotted into place again and the cart jerked into movement. Juud numbed by the incident fixed her eyes on the terrified girl who remained on the ground and the soldiers huddled around her, bending closer till their faces were illuminated red by the torches. She watched hypnotised till the night enveloped the scene. Then there was a blood-stopping scream, silenced abruptly like a slammed door.

The nightmare continued.

For wicks they lurched over rutted tracks. Mud spun up from the wheels onto their faces, and the keen air chilled their bodies. A young girl began sobbing again until an older woman comforted her. It was impossible to sit, and the wearying journey seemed unending. Then there was a brush of trees against the cart and the uncertain lights of campfires as they stooped before the vague outline of a hug building. The women were hustled off and left alone in the darkness for some bit-wicks till two candleabras festoned with lighted candles and supported by two old women came in. They chuckled ‘big catch tonight, lets see. No he won’t fancy you dear, how about this one? Bit lean? Alright’ and Juud was pulled out of the room into another. Two more girls were made to join her. Nothing was said but they exchanged frightened glances. Juud was almost too tired by this cruel night’s progress to much care about her fate. One of the old women came back in carrying a bowl of water and some rags.

‘Here wash yourselves dearies. Can’t have you smelly with mud now eh?’

They dutifully did so as the old woman watched like a baldybird to make sure they rubbed every dirty spot, then left the room, taking away the bowl and grubby rags.

Nothing happened for a long time.

‘Have they forgotten us?’ one girl asked anxiously. The other shook her head. She knew more about these matters. A cousin had been stolen in a similar raid last Crop-pen.

‘They’ll remember?’

‘They wont kill us?’

‘No’ replied the other tiredly ‘they won’t kill us’.

More time passed, slowly.

‘It will be daylight soon’ Juud remarked hopefully. Somehow the notion of daylight seemed to be a comfort. She had tried to sleep but could only remember that white body on the ground and the circle of red peering faces.

The door swung open.

‘Alright dearie, you first’.

The old woman sharply took hold of Juud and hustled her along a dimly lit corridor, then pushed her into a room, slarrming the door behind. A key turned in a lock.

The room was large, with a big quilted bed in the centre and many smaller pieces of furniture scattered around. She felt deep rugs on her feet and the air was sickly with a burning scent. Candles flickered either side of the bed illuminating the tapestries that dangled down each wall. She looked up startled to see stars on the ceiling through what she now guessed was a glass roof. A movement caught the outer edge of her eye. A man was standing by another door watching her. He was rather short and fat, with a silly drooping moustache and bored eyes.

So this was to be the outcome of her roundrell.

The Charmstone!

Quite involuntary she touched her waist. Still there, tucked in the leather pouch was the gemstone. She had forgotten completely about it. If she had had the sense she would have thrown it away from the cart, now it was far, far too late.

## The Centre Gone

*We see inside the mind of a cruel man, and Juud is made to realise that her virginity is less attractive than the Charmstone, and more disposable. Slorty is subject to melancholia and doubt as to his place in history. One person is definitely destroyed, another nearly.*

Driac Slorty looked at the girl standing nervously by the bed. Once he had understood himself. He had shouted orders and his men had responded with ‘sir’, though they rarely did that now. He was once certain about his ambitions, and pursued a consistent policy of action to further them. He burnt and killed with discrimination three seasons ago, but now? His mind was incoherent. Had it been that difficult to achieve his aims? And in any case what were his aims? He had shambled around the Furrowdale Valley with his marauding army becoming increasingly vague about what he was supposed to achieve. Only the carping tongue of his mother Karee nagged him to a purpose, and when that she-bitch was dead, the distant patronising letters of his half-brother had occasionally given him some food for thought. He had quite fancied being a king like Lutens. It had seemed grand for a while, those first days, and he gave himself over to a lot of grandiose reminiscences before his officers, reminiscences that frequently became maudlin and self-justifying. Strom he had tried!? But Lutens had had it easy, and Karee? That bitch had not understood the difficulties. He hadn’t failed of course, he’d got rid of the brigands, and the peasants loved him, he could become their king yet, but, the miserable Drubbins didn’t deserve the honour of it. Slorty got angry at the memory. Drubbins! They fought him at every turn. Hid their cattle, and their women, Slorty looked up cunningly at the girl. Here’s another Slorty for the future, heh, there must be a small army of himselfs out there now. That would show the Tilsters!

He drunk deeply from the tankard and threw it aside. His officers hated him, he knew it. But whilst he was still alive and the money from the Beorht traders kept coming in they’d keep to his heels. They knew he was ten times a better leader than them. Hah! But Slorty grimaced as he followed this thought. He brooded on their unfaithfulness. He was sure there were sniggers behind his back, and the officers had told him that some men had deserted. ‘String ‘em up’ roared Slorty, but the officers looked uncomfortably at each other. They knew things had gone too far. Everyone was saving their own skins now. Men were drifting off every day. By Sprig they would be lucky to have fifty men to command, and some of the officers had deserted to, but they couldn’t

tell Slorty that.

The army had all but collapsed. The centre gone completely and only a bloody inflated bag of wind remained.

Slorty burped.

Juud stared at him, this man whose name was a household word for terror. In the midst of her own fear she even felt a contemptuous pity him. Should not great men be great? Not this shambling, drunken, lout, who moved around the room indifferently, little noticing her.

Slorty sat down on the bed and spoke for the first time in the clearly accented tones of a high born man of Beorht.

‘Take your clothes off’.

Juud hesitated, even vaguely thought of some sort of escape, but one door was locked behind and Slorty stood between her and the other. He became angry at her hesitation and repeated his order, and there was something in his temper of the old Driac Slorty.

Juud did not have many clothes to remove. She remembered the Charmstone at her waist, and quickly, in case this mans temper grew worse, undid the pouch belt under concealment of her tunic, and pulled the two off together. She was embarrassed and angered by his stares and loosened her breast band reluctantly, hesitating to remove her loin wrap. Slorty came closer, and slowly inspected her body as a sharp dealer might look over some cattle he had his eye on. Juud shrank away, crossing her arms across her chest in a defensive movement and shivering slightly.

Abruptly Slorty reached out one hand and grasped one of her breasts and pulled it, like a child impulsively at a rattle. It hurt and she cried out, stumbling forward. His other large hand knocked her off her feet with a big sideways sweep, and she fell awkwardly to the floor. Then he was upon her, she felt his beery breath on her face and clumsy hands pawing over her.

His face peered at hers. She tried to turn her face away and felt him wrenching at her loin wrap, trying to tear it off. She wriggled at the pain of his jabbing fingers and he hit her, deliberately, twice and hard across the cheek, drawing blood. Juud lay shock still, and Slorty lowered his body onto hers and there was a cruel pain inwards as he flopped like a fat bull, snorting when he had finished. Juuds eyes closed and her mind fled in a deep spiral of sorrow and terrible grief.

Slorty sat up on his haunches disappointed with the effort.

She’d taken it like a patient cow. He wanted more life than that. Something was jabbing into his buttocks. He sat up and scratched around for it. He was standing on the girls tunic, and underneath, revealed when he had pushed the article aside in his blunt copulation, was a brown leather pouch. He picked it up curiously and carried it back to his bed where he lay down tiredly, not even glancing at the woman who had curled into a whimpering ball. The mattress was luxurious and soft. He just lay there for a while thinking of nothing in particular, till he remembered the pouch. He unpopped it, and pulled the wads of linen cloth out, unwrapping to his amazement a large carved gemstone.

What a wonderful thing! What was it? And covered in pretty patterns and designs. He twisted it around in the candlelight studying the green reflections that sprang from the gem.

Something entered his turgid memory. What was that thing called? That jewel that Lutens had fussed about? The Charmstone, that was it, and didn't Lutens say it was stolen or something? He had written some time back complaining of it (and everything else the Drubbin!) but he did not have time or interest in his brothers pique. How had the girl got it if it really was the Charmstone? A lovely thing. A chain attached here and it would fit nicely around his neck. He must find that letter of Lutens, and question the girl. She had not given him much pleasure before so perhaps she would sing prettily to a bit of persuading. Slorty was just about to roll over and prod the girl when a figure dropped from the sky upon his head.

Actually it was more his stomach.

One of the glass panes in the ornate ceiling had been broken and repaired by the simple expedient of a piece of wood lain on the outside. Widsith had looked down and seen Slorty and Juud. Quietly he lifted the wood, handed it to Hull, unsheathed his sword and took a calculated jump into the small square space. He had to launch himself about half a longman across other glass panes and fit through a gap not more than seven thrums square. If he judged it right he would land directly on the bed. He judged it perfectly, and dropped like a stone unto Slortys unsuspecting form, practically squeezing the generals lungs out of his stomach as Widsiths legs rammed home onto Slortys chest.

Widsith stumbled and fell off the bed, but he was up like lightning ready to hurl himself on the general should he yell out, his sword at hand. But Slorty was in a stifled apolexic of pain, his face blue with lack of air and his knees curled up to his chest as he tried to breathe. Extraordinarily the bed withstood the impact and there was only the sound of Widsiths tumble to alert any guards that something untoward was happening. But there were no guards, and even if there had been, knocks and thumps at this time of the night coming from Slortys room were not unusual.

Widsith picked up Slorty's sword. He had stepped on Juuds foot as he had hurled himself back at Slorty, and she stood up stupified, not quite realising at first who the night visitor was until Widsith (with a sword pricking into Slortys throat) turned and gave a wicked grin at her. He was enjoying himself, well pleased with the descent. Driac Slorty was terrified.

Juud gasped 'Mikal!'

'Hush! Hulls up top!'

She looked up and saw the giant leaning perilously over the glass roof. She was wildly relieved and began swaying almost in a collapse of happiness.

'Don't faint!' hissed the wayfarer 'we have got to leave'.

Juud pulled herself from the tempting unconsciousness and hurriedly began dressing. All the while Widsiths sword beckoned at Slortys fat throat. He had already decided to kill the man but wanted to get Juud out safe.

'Try that door, carefully' Widsith indicated 'where does it go?'

Juud opened the door and looked into a long dark room that seemed empty of furniture. At the far end was a window with moonlight shining through it.

'Have a look, it might go to the back of the house' Widsith whispered once Juud had told him of the window.

She nodded and with an anxious glance at Widsith peered into the dark room again, and padded across to the window with bare feet. There was no glass in the window and she could only see blackened trees. She rushed back and told Widsith it was at the back of the house.

'Good. Blow out the candles and wait outside. Hull?' but the giant had already heard the whispering below, nodded and was gone.

Juud hesitated.

'Go!' and she went.

Widsith watched her snuff the candles then heard her bare feet walking lightly across the room, and scrabbling sounds as she clambered out through the window.

Then he turned to Driac Slorty.

The general was staring at him his eyes blank and surprisingly sober.

'I have met your brother Driac so you can imagine my pleasure at meeting you. Pity I cannot linger for a chat but you understand I am sure. You have run out of luck I fancy, Lutens would never have got into this position?'

Slortys eyes returned anger.

'Stand up!'

Sluggishly Slorty did so. The wayfarer knew what he was going to do. He felt no anger at the man for despoiling the lower Furrowdale, for killing half a population, and begging with vice and treachery those that remained. Not even anger for his rape of Juud. A killing had to be done and should be done coolly. He herded the naked man back against the wall prodding him with both swords. There was a slight protest from Slorty which Widsith stifled using Slorty's own sword pointed more deeply into the generals wobbling belly.

Suddenly Widsith stood back two paces from Slorty the sword poised. There was a moments fearful silence. Slorty did not breath. Then Widsith drove the sword in through Slortys heart and in his ferocity buried it a thrum in the woodwork behind.

Perhaps he had been angry after all?

Slorty sagged like a pricked balloon, making no sound but for a feeble gasp. The blood gushed out, and drained remorsefully from the wound as it was to do all night, till the late morning when the old women would shuffle in and find Driac Slorty still pinned to the wall, his body white and crumpled, half emptied of his blood that lay pooled in a sticky mass at his feet.

## Chapter 52

# Lilla

*Juud du Qu'et accepts the numbness of nothing and in desperation they take her to see the witch-woman who promises that she can promise very little. It takes strength and stubbornness to see these people through, but they are getting tired, the journey has been so long, will it never end?*

We have a confidence about ourselves, about the day-to-day person we hear in our ears and see in the mirror. We trust the personality we have grown up with. Occasionally we can see some faults, point to the odd quirk of temperament, but say blithely and coolly to people around us, that is me, take me as I am, I cannot change. We believe us, for the thing that is you is surely fixed and reliable, but what if that is not the case? What if each of us is a vast cumulation of memory and habit which we have become accustomed to, and, we like and admire, but we can come to doubt? It would take an extraordinary situation for us to doubt ourselves, but if this happened? It is a loss of faith, a profound loss of hope. This being, which we sometimes called self, sometimes called soul, is a composition of all the most urgent longings for friendship, happiness, success, love, an end to loneliness that makes us the human beings we are and the monsters we sometimes become. We cannot be human without it, yet it often so difficult to live humanly with it. Our anxieties come from this secretive inner being, and our hopes, and our fears, and it is a whirling pool of differing ideas and emotions, which by the time they rise to the surface of our consciousness, have the appearance of solidity and reliableness. We let it reassure us when the world is hostile and comfort us when the world is cruel. We trust it, this being, as we have never trusted anything so much in our lives and so it is a horror when it shifts and unfixes our very centre. A love brought from this well-spring of humanness could heal the kingdom, but a violence upon it can kill the being as surely as if its heart had been torn out.

Juud was inwardly crippled.

Her shame was in the skein of her eyes, her grief in the follicles of her hair. A touch, a word, a cool single raindrop, even the brush of a leaf could hurt, and bleed the hurt beyond numbness. This world had come into her being quickly and cruel, and she had no defences against the poisonous insinuations of her own mind. The shine was gone from her eyes and her life was ebbing dry.

She was hurt, and could not heal herself.

## II

They collected the horses from under the trees, saddled up quickly and rode a league skaw before the first light of morning cleared the darkness. Juud clung to Widsith on his horse as they picked their way over the rough dark ground. They stopped briefly, and Juud drank a little water from a stream. The Charmstone was belted around the wayfarers waist, ruefully, for he had been tempted to leave the evil thing behind once and for all, yet it held a strange almost fatal attraction. Perhaps it was blessed by Wyrđ!

They rode steadily, not hard, for Hull and Widsith were tired, and Juud was exhausted and could barely manage to hold onto Widsith. They slipped past two deserted villages and an overturned cart, using the Hollering Hills as a guide to their direction and keeping the distant low dip of the pass always in their sights. The hills were still dark, but a clear sky promised to burn them with colour and assist the great snow melt of Sprig.

The wayfarer was not concerned about pursuit. They had come and gone silently, and it would be a while before anyone would dare penetrate Driac Slortys sanctum to uncover the reason for his quiet morning, and then what would they do? Every track out of the camp was smothered in hoofprints, it would as hopeless to find two tracks amongst them as to find sense in Drubbins head. Widsith doubted if they would bother, and he fancied from what the headman had told them of Slortys officers that they would sit around trying to avoid putting the blame on themselves. He could imagine that a scapegoat would be found, a villager, or one of those women, and be blamed publicly for the commanders death, executed, and an explanation sent to Beorht. Widsith felt sure that the merchants would be pleased with the news, and even the officers might be relieved. The peasants of the Furrowdale Valley would give a cheer, why, there would be hardly anyone who would be grieving the unfortunate demise of Driac Slorty — not even his brother.

They carefully avoided all the villages, crossing fields where necessary, taking pains to avoid being seen. Some of the villages were bound to be in Slortys pay and would certainly remember two hustling horses with three riders going yorn, but they saw no one. All that day they rode, Widsith allowing only the briefest of stops for Juud to rest. Her face was wan with fatigue but the wayfarer was not at all tempted to linger on this open pastoral land, and urged her on with much gentleness. She hardly spoke at all, just occasional whispered requests for 'water', though her eyes were begging rest. Two wooded hills ahead of them gave some promise of concealment and a safe nights accommodation. After riding fifteen leagues they were all desperately tired, and not straight leagues either, but crooked, cunning diversions through copses of trees, along dry ditches, and wading side-streams, hard cruel travel for riders and ridden, but it was worth it. They had not seen a soul all day.

Leading the horses up through the trees the wayfarer came to low saddle between the two hills. An old stone hut stood unoccupied there, and a small dirty pond beside it.

Widsith smelt the musty air and decided that the place not been used for some time and should be safe for tonight. There was straw here, smelly, but dry enough and the wayfarer settled Juud into it, wrapping a blanket around her. He was moved by her quiet, unspoken suffering, and sat by her awhile as she slept brushing his hand lightly over her hair. Then with Hull on guard he strolled to the top of one of the wooded hills and climbed a tree, looking out for some time till darkness made his watch unnecessary. He and Hull shared a meagre slice of rye, and bedded down beside Juud in the straw, one on either side, as if in their sleep they could protect her.

### III

A low mist was covering the land in the morning. Hull nodded approval.

‘We should reach Feld today’ he said, meaning the village where the Duc was waiting ‘and not be seen’. He inclined his head towards the little house where Juud still rested ‘she is poorly’.

The wayfarer agreed. Juud had said hardly a word through the day yet her sleep was stricken with sounds and cries. Juud came out as they were getting the horses ready. She looked apprehensively about and meekly accepted the last piece of rye they had saved for her. She chewed it without relish and asked in a whisper.

‘There is more riding today?’

‘Most of the day Juud. We are going to a village at the foot of the Hollering Hills pass. Your father should be there’.

She did not even smile at that.

‘Will you be alright?’ He was at last beginning to realise the deeper disturbance in her being.

She nodded, and tears sprang almost from her eyes.

‘I could sleep, so so much more...’

‘At Feld we should be able to do lots of sleeping’ and Widsith smiled encouragement at her.

Juud nodded but did not seem to understand. She threw away the rye half-eaten. Widsith caught Hulls eye and grimaced.

They saddled up and threaded down through the trees, following the wood around its margin then breaking directly across the farmland, trusting to the mist to keep them concealed. Now the farmland was more rolling, and as the mist dissolved in the sunlight, and they put more leagues behind them, the wayfarer kept more to the main tracks. He skirted a few villages, but clearly Slorty had not interfered here for the peasants out in the fields stopped and greeted them as they passed. Feeling bold, they stopped at one village and bought some bread and ale. They ate as they rode, Widsith finding the ale trickling down the sides of his mouth as he tried to pour it from the leather cask. Hull ate hugely, so much so, that they had to stop at another village to buy more food. Juud

ate sparingly, pecking at her bread like a bird, and then only at the wayfarers insistence. She would always nod and obey, but never smile and never speak. That entire day she hardly said two words, until on the evening they entered and she folded into her fathers arms sobbing and whimpering that 'he hurt, he hurt'.

The Duc patted her looking between Hull and the wayfarer with shocked, questioning eyes.

Feld was a pretty place, tucked into a low valley that led into the Hollering Hills. A stream, fed from the cold mountains, made its busy brisk way right down the main street of the village and was the centre of village life. Arched stone bridges linked the two halves of the village together, plus a multitude of contrived planks and stepping stones that provided short cuts for the bustling village women or playthings for the roaming broods of children. The Duc had arrived only that day, tired from two days travel. Even riding slowly he found the exertion made him short of breath and irritable, but he forgot all his complaints upon seeing Juuds stricken face and devoted himself in the next few days to caring for her.

'It is not an outer sickness that possesses her but an inner one' he confided in Widsith one dayend. Juud was again resting. The others were around the fireplace in a small guest hut supplied by the village for travellers. They were discussing what to do about Juud, so they kept their voices low in case she should overhear.

'She feels, I think, for she does not say, that she has been contaminated, almost diseased from within by Driac Slorty. In her sleep she cries out his name as if she is trying to rid herself of his possessing spirit. I remember' the Duc continued softly 'on my own estate many years ago, one of my maids was similarly reduced to this condition after she had been assaulted by a local man. She lay for days unmoving and in the end the only cure for her came from an old witch woman, who in some way exorcised her both inwardly and physically, if you see what I mean'.

The fire responded to a few prods from Hulls stick. Some water bubbled in the pot ready to be made into leafen, but it went unheeded.

'Perhaps we could find such a woman here?' the Duc suggested 'why, there might be such a woman-curer in this place. If we ask the headman, Juud is so ill' his voice became fearful and old 'without such, well, I think she is losing her will to live, I do not believe she can recover' he could not bring himself to say the word die. Juud had always seemed so strong, so competent.

'What did this witch-woman do for the maid?'

'I did not see the ceremony, but I was told that she gave the maid some powerful potion of some sort and strong chanting was heard from the room it took place in. It took a whole day'.

'The maid was cured? She had no child?'

'Completely wayfarer. There was no child and the maid recovered her mental spirits as well, but...' the Duc hesitated and Widsith watched him carefully.

'There was another case. I heard of this, later. Another women in a similar problem to the maid was visited by this healer, but she died. Yes, she died. I am told that this business is dangerous, that the potions involved are powerful. The first maid I spoke

of, the one that was cured, screamed horribly at one point. Even I heard that, and I was far on the other side of the palace’.

What sort of ‘cure’ was it that could raise a human voice to such pain?

Hull grimaced when Widsith had translated, and the wayfarer stared hard into the fire, but then turned and looked away as if dissatisfied with what he had seen. He looked at Juud lying there, curled in a ball like a child. The Duc would not make the decision and looked anxiously as Widsith rubbed his beard.

‘I will ask the headman tomorrow’.

Widsith had almost hoped that nothing would come of the question, but he was to be disappointed.

‘Lilla’ the headman said promptly, and he went on to tell Widsith about Lilla. She was an old, old woman (nobody knew how old) who lived high above the village in a small mountain cottage. She had performed just such a ‘cure’ on a village maiden recently but had sworn the maid to secrecy lest she tell the secrets of her art. She had all kinds of magic at her fingertips. The villagers were in awe of her, and sometimes hostile. They would not allow her to stay in the village for fear Strom would disapprove of her art, but at the same time they sent up food to her in West Time when drifts of snow made it impossible for her to come down. Oh yes, she was a powerful one. The headman had seen the travelling girl and knew she was troubled inwardly. He had been on the point of suggesting Lilla when Widsith had come today.

Be careful, the headman’s voice lowered, terrible things had been seen up there. Strange half–animal, half–human figures in the mist, and dreadful sounds filled the high basin where she lived. One girl went there to be rid of a child, a bold brazen girl, but Lilla would not do it, and cursed the girl who came back so distraught that she went to bed ill and never rose from it again. The father of the girl was enraged and went up the mountain to kill Lilla, but he too came scuttling back, white and shaking with stories of cackling laughter from the rocks and ghostly forms moving about the hillsides. Some said Lilla was no other than Wene, Wyrds wife, which would explain the witch–woman’s awesome powers. She has power and does not come from these parts, and they say can talk in every tongue ever known. Her eyes are deep and extraordinary, and the headman warned Widsith not to look into them. Lilla used chants and strange herbal medicines to effect her cures. So powerful were these that they sometimes destroyed what they tried to cure, but everyone knew this risk. Two sick girls had wild, vivid, nightmares for days after seeing Lilla, yet, and this is the mystery, they were cured, the disease gone.

The wayfarer was impressed by the headman’s warnings though not by the superstitions that hedged them.

‘Will Lilla see our girl?’

‘Lilla denies no one!’ the headman responded grandly. After all, it was a matter of pride to have such a terrible witch–woman in his village. ‘But’ he added in suspenseful tones’ Lilla judges the seeker. If the seeker is wicked then no cure will come, indeed Lilla will damn them instead. She peeps into your soul like Wene on a dark night and exposes it before your eyes. The wicked cannot withstand the sight of their own ugliness, and shrivel up. If this girl is good, goodness will be done to her’.

The headman gave careful instructions on how to reach the witch–woman and Wid-

sith thanked him and carried his news back to the others.

They discussed it for wicks.

Finally, after getting fretful in their arguments, and getting no closer to making a decision, they decided to ask Juud herself. Widsith half hoped that the rest in the village might heal Juud's mind without recourse to some mad woman on a mountain, but only to look at her was to realise that Juud would never cure her own self without help.

She sat on a stool in the Old West sun, looking blankly around at the village scene. She seemed to take nothing in. Her face was strained with lines of tension and unhappiness, and her hands were clutched together. Her eyes held a strange unblinkness that looked always inward, even though appearing to stare out. The local children kept a cautious distance from this funny woman but could not resist staring at her. The Duc had kept shooing them away, until he realised that Juud did not even see them. As it was, she only dimly recognised her father, accepting his instructions to eat or sleep with quiet obedience.

Widsith sat in front of her, forcing her attention on him. Her face was shockingly pale.

'Juud can you hear me? I have been talking to the village headman. He knows a healer, an old woman, whom he thinks can remove this' what was the best word? 'stain from your body, and your mind'.

Was she listening? He pressed on.

'This woman Lilla lives up the mountain somewhere. We could take you to her. Would you want that?'

She was struggling to say something, as if a word had touched some memory. The wayfarer was encouraged to talk louder, in the hope that sounds would penetrate where no words seemed able to reach.

'Yes, Lilla they call her. But it might be dangerous. You could be harmed. Do you understand?'

There was some light in her eye. Widsith leaned closer to her.

'Lilla'.

That was all she said, then that light that had spoken from her eyes dimmed again, and despite the wayfarer's prodding would not come back. He asked the Duc, did Juud know of a Lilla from her childhood on the estate? The Duc looked doubtful. He had never heard of such. Of course there were many of these witch-women around, but many were false. Juud had spoken her name? Yes? Well, that was enough. The following morning they took the old mountain track that led up the hillside to the rock and tussock basin to where Lilla dwelt.

Once they had climbed above the terraced pastureland, stepped in a grey-stone staircase up the hill flanks, the morning mist lifted, but only as far as the grey cloud line that hung about the hilltops merging at times indistinguishably with the dirty Old West snow. Beside the track were brown slushy blobs of snow that were fast melting into the spiky tussocks. As the mountain trail zig-zagged upwards a cool wind came over the hills and pleasantly cooled their exertion. Widsith scooped a handful of cleaner snow and pressed it to his lips. Sprig was not far off now, and came early to these mountains,

why, they had turned almost half a year in this journey.

Hull walked on ahead, the wayfarer more lazily behind, keeping an eye on a pale-looking Juud, who was nevertheless managing the climb without difficulty. The Duc hovered behind her in case she slipped. The headman had said the trail was steep almost to the edge of the basin, where it softened and wound around two large tarns that would be iced this time of year. On the far side was a stone hut. That was Lillas house.

Everything was as the headman said. Widsith skimmed a stone across one of the tarns but when he tried his weight it creaked ominously. A curl of smoke from the hut indicated that Lilla was at home. There were patches of snow all about the basin and up to the walls of the little house, though a clear path led to the door. Widsith found to his surprise that he was nervous as he approached. He wondered what this old woman would be like. Living up here alone she must be a little mad he thought, and he had almost decided that this errand was foolishness and it was better to turn back, when the door opened from within and a short troussered figure came out to meet them.

'I saw you approach. You're the first visitors I've 'ad for a while. Come in, come in, and she bustled in ahead of them.'

She was utterly different from Widsiths expectations. For a start she was short and rather tubby, old certainly, but her face was a mass of genial creases with a red button nose that perpetually dripped. Her hair was silver grey, but instead of gloomy blacks and browns that Widsith supposed a witch-woman would have for colours of her garments, she had on a bright red embroidered tunic and a vivid yellow scarf of dyed wool. She looked like a mischievous Bree. Her kitchen-cum-parlour was bulging with every manner of furniture, so much so that as they entered they had to take care not to dislodge some item from the crowded chairs and shelves. A cat sat on one shelf, a complacent ginger tom, as chubby as its mistress. Hull had to crouch considerably to get under the lintel and Lilla looked at him appreciatively.

'You're the biggest man I've 'ad in this 'ouse'.

The room was warm and comfortable with the smell of herbs, and a sweet tang of wine. There was a cask of it on the mantelpiece overlooking the low fire.

'Yes, I likes a drop I does. Specially at Wast Time. Keeps the ghosts away' and she gave a trill of laughter. This alarmed Widsith who decided that this must be the wrong place.

'You are Lilla?' She looked kindly at him.

'Yes. I'm Lilla. You've come from the village, though I can see you aren't local'. Whilst she busied with heating up water over the fire Widsith explained their mission.

'Ah, the girl' she said 'come here luv, let's look at you'.

Juud stepped a little closer to the woman.

'Ere sit down. You're much to big for me to look at straight'. Juud was obedient to this request and Lilla looked at her. It was a direct look, straight into Juuds eyes, so plain, that it was as if an invisible bridge was formed over which all. Juuds sorrow and hurt could pour into the old womans calm smiling eyes.

The kettle started to whistle and Lilla turned away.

'Ah me, such a sad girl, so much troubled' she sprinkled some herb onto the boiling water and set the pot on the table 'here's some herbal broth. Mend yer muscles a bit after the hill'.

The others sipped at the drink surprised to find it tasted like hot sweet wine. The wayfarer glanced between them. This old woman and her bustling cheerful manners had given him a confidence that if there was a cure for Juuds trouble it was here, with Lilla. The Duc must have been sharing these thoughts for he said aloud inconsequentially 'yes, I think so'.

'Can you help her?' the Duc asked at length.

Lilla paused her arms akimbo her stout waist.

'I'll do what I can, that's what I always say. Them's that want help must help themselves a bit, but I'll do what I can'. A shadow dulled her face. 'She's in such pain the lass. I don't know that I can wake her out of it'.

The Duc felt a fear.

'You think nothing can be done?'

'No I didn't say that, but she's sick I tell you that. She does not want to live. Somethings shocked her. You were a bit vague on that. Was she taken by a man against her will?'

They nodded.

'Ah, thought so, but it's more than that I fancy, buried deep until now it sits ugly on the surface, and that's the real evil, oh I can stop the child if that's what you're fussing 'bout, though that'll exhaust her, but the other' she shook her head sadly.

'It might be revulsion' suggested the wayfarer.

'Yes it's that, but something more. She's a strong lass, no, it's something more besides. We'll see.'

'She cannot understand us?'

The Duc was feeling awkward about discussing Jucid publicly before her face.

'Bless you! Do you think she can?' was her forthright reply 'course she can't. She's dead as good as. And I've got to wake her up. Well I can do that, but the shock of it, you know. The cure could be worse than the cause'.

The cat stretched, and cast a bored glance over the visitors, then curled into a new position on the shelf. Widsith sipped at his drink. Outside a low gust of wind moaned around the corner. He looked at the Duc. In the end it was his decision. The Duc realised this, but could not think clearly.

'What will you do to effect the cure?'

The old woman shrugged.

'Well, it's not right easy to say. Everyone's different, and it depends on the case you see. I've got a few songs and charms that I uses when appropriate. It can't be rushed, oh no'.

'You think she has an evil spirit?' asked Widsith testingly.

Lilla looked sharply at him.

‘Now if you were a villager I’d say yes. For they believe in spirits and good luck to ‘em. Come up half terrified. See a bit of mist and they run screaming its a monster. Hear a sound and it’s a demon. They fill their stupid heads with so many demons and Wyrds theres no room for commonsense. But I looks at you, a wayfarer, ‘o yes I can tell a man of the world, and I don’t think you believe such things and I won’t tell you that’s what I do, cause I don’t, it’ll be a lie. Still, I do change ‘em, and I get rid of the baby, but that’s easy. How do I change ‘em? Well that’s hard. You have to look, look right into a person, and get them to look into themselves, look’ and she paused dramatically ‘and then forget! It’s memory that ruins a mind. Take the rotten past away and it’s right as Strom. Your girl here remembers, well, I’ve got to stop her. In her mind right now she’s going over and over and over, stirring like a real witches broth. Does she have bad dreams? There!’ She said triumphantly as the Duc vigorously nodded.

‘You will take that memory away?’ Widsith thought the idea very clever. Lilla was a shrewd woman.

She took a good healthy draft of her own brew, though her muscles had not been exerted.

‘Not entire so, but I face her it. And that’s the risk’.

‘She cannot stand it’ interrupted the Duc ‘yes, yes, I can see that’, with an effort he made his decision ‘but I want you to go ahead’.

She smiled happily.

‘Come back in three days’.

‘What? We cannot stay here?’

This was unexpected.

‘No’.

The witch-woman was quite firm and although the Duc tried to get her to change her mind she was insistent. Widsith finally had to agree with Lilla, and he could see she was getting impatient with the Duc’s objections. Reluctantly the Duc let himself be persuaded. Three days seemed a long time, but, well this woman seemed to know best?

‘I think she does. We are only getting in the way by staying’.

‘What if Juud protests?’

‘She won’t luv’ Lilla was confident, and indeed she was right. As they said their goodbyes and squeezed out of the stone house Juud did not move. Her eyes seemed fixed on the witch-woman.

Even as they crossed the basin, now gloomier still with drifts of rain the Duc kept turning around, half-expecting to see Juud running after them, but she did not. They slipped below the mountain basin leaving it to the wind and the two women. A loose rock clattered downwards.

### III

They were the three longest days of Juuds life. She was in two states, one, the numbed outside where all emotion was drained and void, the second, her inward mind, that was still prescient, still there, and on guard and cherishing the small spark of herself that kept her alive. Over those three days these two parts of her came together, after a titanic struggle that seemed orchestrated by Lilla, who shed her genial old woman fussiness and became the healer, the witch-woman, the magician that the village awed and feared.

First there was a potion, a charm she called it, which burned fire in Juuds bowels and made her weak with an insatiable thirst. She started to bleed and Lilla wiped her down. She screamed with pain and Lilla comforted her, and the small spark of life within her struggled against the numb temptingness of death. Then Lillas work really began, and in the end only the old woman knew what charms and spells she used to break into Juuds spirit and grasp that living spot and bring it to the surface. She chanted ancient songs and words, hypnotising the tortured girl by them and by this way entered into Juud herself to understand the agony inside. This was Lillas trick, this was her charm and art. Juud gabbled out her fears and conceits, her loves, hopes and pain, till they boiled red in her mind. Only Lillas experience resisted her own temptation to plunge into this whirlpool of memory and take it for real. She ignored all the other fears for just the one elusive, most secretive fear.

It was a terrible journey for both. For Juud because she was facing her own inner nature. For Lilla because she was growing old and the strain of these confessions wearied her and threatened to overpower her. On and on they went. Through shadowed days and darker nights, Lilla constantly bringing Juud to the surface of her being, and Juuds buried fears pulling her away again. It was like a deadly tug-of-war conducted in a world of imagination and dreams. An outsider would see only a pale-faced girl lying and sometimes moaning on a plain bed with an old woman hovering beside, her creased eyes lit from within with a white fire and her arthritic hands slowly, slowly, stroking the temple of the girl, and all the time whispering words and rhymes. It might have been mistaken for magic, and sometimes it was. This was why Lilla never allowed people to witness the ceremonies. They would have been a distraction, but worse, they would not have understood. The villagers believed in every manner of outward Gods, yet had no comprehension of the inner ones. If the spirit was tortured it was an outer God that had entered from within and should be teased (or hammered) out, but Lilla knew this was folly. It was inside the victim lay the evil spirit, and it was created entirely by itself out of the conflicts and fears of the mind.

On the third day Juud began to break. The strain was intense upon Lilla. This was the moment for which she had aimed for, yet, contrarily, was also the most dangerous time. For very close to the surface now was the cause of Juuds withdrawal. To face it was to cure it, but it was also to risk killing her. What was it? That darkness in Juud? Lilla thought she knew now, for it was a common disease, yet no less terrible for that. In Juud there were two revulsions, one for the past of course, the agony of Slortys wrong upon her body, and the other for the future, yes, the future!

One could recover from the past, but the future? For it has not come, and its very unknowingness was its terror. How can one prepare?

Juud tossed on her bed, her voice harsher and strangled as her hypnotised words jerked out, as if it were a soul broken into words and being spat from the mouth. Each word like a globule of blood. Her body shuddered, and Lilla held her down as if there really was some evil spirit trying to escape. The old woman chanted louder, and the words of her rhymic song and Juuds harsh struggles of sound filled the humble cottage. The cat stiffened on the shelf, its hair raised and its green eyes wide in anticipation. Finally the thing was to the surface of Juuds tongue.

'Oh, I do not, do not, want away, from it there's nothing, nothing forward... I have, I have none, of love, of love, the future is going like, the past is.. oh, oh, let me be, me be, oh oh' and Juuds back arched in a curve of terror then collapsed sobbing and moaning.

Lilla holding her in a maniacal grip till the girl was still, and the only sound was Lillas voice chanting, chanting, chanting.

#### IV

They were the three longest days of the Ducs life, and on the third day, another gloomy aftersun, the Duc, wayfarer and Hull came over the lip of rock and entered the basin as before. The familiar curl of smoke was there, looking ordinary and commonplace, even reassuring, though Widsith felt an anxious stab as they walked towards it. In a bit-wick they would know, one way or the other. He rapped on the door. The Duc hovered nervously at his shoulder avoiding the wayfarers eye. Hull stared blankly ahead, prepared for whatever must come.

Lilla opened the door.

'Ar good, you've come, 'ere she is' and she bustled in ahead of them and Widsith followed, not caring to hope till he saw Juud lying quiet on the bed, her figure unmoving but her face holding a wan smile.

It had been three of Widsiths worst days too.

He bent over her and felt suddenly shy. The Duc had no such inhibition and hugged her gently saying softly 'my daughter, my daughter'. Widsith stroked her hair and Hull stood grinning from ear to ear.

'Don't crowd her' was Lillas sharp reprimand as she pushed them away 'she's still poorly and needs air. Still there's a bit of colour there now isn't there?'

Juuds cheeks had a reddish hue, and she smiled strongly at Lilla.

'And spirit inside too' Juud said softly looking at the witch-woman.

Lilla was rather proud of herself. This girl had been difficult. So much inside her. Like an oyster with a pearl. Well, she had reached that jewel of life through hard layers of fear and hopelessness, revulsion for the acts committed on her and the acts that were to be committed. That was Juuds terror. That these evils in life could only be repeated as she lived, so why live? Her life was some terrible roundrell of nothing to hope for,

and evil to be repeated. Lilla had reached these questions, these deep doubts, forced it out of her, then taken it away, erased it from her mind as one would wipe a stain from a table. And Lilla put inside Juuds head the hope for the future, that it would enrich as well as enfeeble. Perhaps she was wrong to do this, sometimes Lilla wondered herself about whether this playing with a human mind was not doing Stroms work for him, but then maybe Strom worked in her to do these things. She could not judge, Strom would manage that.

As for Juud, she felt nothing but a blank.

She felt exhausted, weak, but in good spirits. She knew some great struggle had taken place in her soul (Lilla had told her that) but of what exactly she was vague. Lillas final act had been to take that memory away also. So Juud lay amongst this circle of attentive people, her father, her great travelling friends, this white-haired motherly woman, and smiled up at them, comforted by their presence. She could sleep content, and did so.

On Juuds fourth day at the house of Lillas they left and walked slowly down to the village. She had embraced the old woman tearfully before they said goodbye and the wayfarer paid her generously in gold coins (Tallott was still paying for their journey if he but knew it), which she accepted calmly and with satisfaction. As they came to the lip of the mountain basin for the last time they looked back and saw Lilla busy hanging washing on the line. They waved and she waved back, then carried her washing basket inside, a small distant figure closing the door after her.

In the village there was some excitement at Juuds return and the headman gave a pompous speech about their great witch-woman Lilla and how she cured all ailing souls. Juud was embarrassed.

Later she asked the wayfarer.

‘I know I was ill Mikal, but I am not sure how. Lilla said I was troubled in spirit. Is that how you saw me?’

‘Yes. You did not speak for days, and never smiled’.

Juud looked at him thoughtfully.

‘When I was taken from the village, I suppose, yet, I can think of them and not feel hurt. How can that be?’

‘Lilla did not tell you what she did?’

‘Not really, and I do not remember’. She was puzzled by this.

He smiled.

‘She gave you life. I do not know how but I am glad of it’.

‘You mean that?’ she asked.

Widsith blushed as he was surprised to find that he did mean it. He nodded, and she touched him on the arm lightly then turned away.

## Chapter 53

# Tilst

*After such a long journey, and it was a long journey, after the trials and tribulations that broke upon them, it finally seems that the Duc and his fair daughter will return to their estate, whatever condition it remains in, and wayfarer and his companion will go away to the mountains. Tilst is the spring God and in his patience he brings out the new seed, and the actors of history are but flesh, and flesh will always have its way.*

Behind the village was a low valley, narrow in parts where a mountain trail skirted the tumbling stream as it probed onto the upper slopes of the Hollering Hills. It was another grey day, unexpectedly humid, for this was still Old Wast, but as Widsith reminded himself this side of the hills received the warm Sprig winds early. There was a sniff of rain in the air and by late afternoon a drizzle had obscured the hill slopes in mystery. Perhaps catching the waft of Sprig the land was alive with animals. Rabbits, voles, harrying hawks and busy little hedge birds darting about for a mate. The air bloomed with bird song and this lifted their hearts in a fashion that no gloomy cloud could marr. They passed one villager optimistically herding a band of bleating goats up to higher pastures to take advantage of the first Sprig growth. The old fellow was in no hurry, and waved them up cheerfully as they passed. The air sung to itself.

They did not hurry, for Juud was still weak, and the Duc coughed suspiciously at times.

‘The damp air wayfarer. I remember that from the estate days. We must be getting home’ he joked. Juud made sure his scarf was adjusted closely at his throat and walked side by side on the trail where it allowed.

For once they had ample time. No snows to beat, no brigands to dodge, or soldiers to outrun. They could walk as they pleased, with no fear, except the fear of arriving. Their only hunger was for food and their only thirst could be quenched by the mountain water. It was an extraordinary pleasant and happy time, perhaps the most joyous that they had ever shared together, and old hagged memories slipped away as they ambled along. They chatted of this incident, remembered a slip or fall, or a quip, they recalled the glorious views, the triumphs of arrival and the cunning success of eluding all their pursuers. They had travelled across four kingdoms, and three mountain ranges. They had seen peoples that no-one believed existed. They had not forgotten the tragedies,

but placed beside the extraordinary success of survival on their great journey, which had taken them so far, the tragedies seemed less in vain.

They passed pastoral land at first as the valley wriggled up between narrowing folds of hills. Old stone fences and patches of cobbled pathway were all that remained of an earlier people that used to work and live up here before the shallowness of the land drove them off. The headman had told them of a ruined village, a half day up the mountain track, where one of the houses had been kept in repair by the shepherds and was a hospitable place to stay overnight. In casual easy stages they reached the old village by aftersun. The Duc had definitely developed a cold, and Hull quickly lit a fire in the house to heat up the stone walls which had and the whole of West Time to chill.

There was little left of the village except the house, a few crumbling walls and a riot of vines trailing over the stones. The drizzle was steady, but Widsith could see on a fine day this village was well placed, as it stood on a rock shelf looking down onto the valley. A waterfall fell over this shelf in a graceful curve and there was a deep pool at the foot which in happier times would have been churned to a fury with childers and dogs.

The rain hardened, and Widsith went back inside, the walls lit up with the blaze of fire.

‘This is cheerful’

Hull had pulled off his boots and was toasting his tremendous feet in front of the flames. The Duc was lying down, coughing sporadically. Juud was slicing up dried meat and vegetables into the pot.

‘I thought we would eat early. I’m hungry’.

‘We have enough food for two meals a night if we want’ said Widsith, who translated his remark to Hull who grinned at the idea. As the room warmed a gentle drowsiness came up on them and by dusk all four had curled up on the hard wooden benches. Long after the fire had been reduced to embers a frisky parade of mice scuttled about the floor and made a feast on the remnants of the meal carelessly left about by the tired travellers. Juud remarked on the results in the morning.

‘Saved us the moping up’.

From the village the trail sidled out of the valley into the great rolling upper slopes of the Hollering Hills, and lazily went through screens of forest trees where hanging fringes of moss dangled from the branches. The hills got their curious name from the shepherds habits of shouting out greetings to each other from long distances, a feat they were able to perform because of the numerous cup-like basins that occupied the top of the hills. They gave a resonance to the human voice, and projected it further than what was normally possible. A whole language of words and phrases had sprung between the shepherds so as they could communicate, but now mostly all gone. The times were too hard to graze these slopes much now.

Instead of heading directly up the hill the track ran along the hillside amongst patches of forest for almost a league before taking courage and breaking through the final scrub belt onto the open tussock. They were full in the cloud now, and the fine views there should have been of the sweep of the marshlands were obliterated by this persistent dripping mist. A tidy shepherds hut tempted them inside that day, and that temptation settled into a comfortable ensconcement for the night.

Widsith lay awake for some time, listening to the wind breathing shallow breaths against the hut. He shuffled onto his side and could hear also the rough, uneven breathing of the Duc close by. It made him think. He had heard that note of breath before in older men and knew the consumptive signs it foretold. The Duc had kept up wonderfully during the great journey, but any body would feel the cumulative strain after a while, and an older body doubly so. If he died Juud would be alone, with the whole of her life before her, yes, he would be frightened too. At only twenty so much uncertainty.

He would miss her. The admission startled him, what would she do now? Live on the ruined estate, and work it after her father had died? He allowed his mind to travel luxuriously over the hundreds of incidents and warm touches that had passed between them. All these would be a memory in a few days, would she come back with him if he asked? And the Duc? After he died perhaps. The wayfarer resolved to repeat his earlier assurance, that she could always find a home on the Rise if she wished. He was pleased with this resolution, and buried deep in himself any idea that it held more than an altruistic desire. It would not do, and therefore must not be, she was young and would marry easily.

## II

The morning brought the first of Tilst, the five day celebratory time before Sprig. This festival ended the long Old Wast and, as it were, woke up the land and the peasants, getting them ready for the great effort in planting that was soon to begin. It was one of the most joyous of festivals, especially for the children and women, for it celebrated the beginning of fertility for the land and its inhabitants. It was also Juuds birthday. For her it was a double day of events, with presents and treats for her, and the great events of Tilst going on around, with the two festivals overwhelming her with a happy confusion. On the estate there would be flower processions and a ritual sowing of seeds and a great baking of cakes and fancy breads from the last of the wheat hoarded through dark Wast Time. There were all sorts of entertainments, clowns and jugglers would visit the estate especially guaranteed of a welcome and an income. Gleemen would perform in the great hall and recite Sprig verses before the older folk. The young ones would dance to lively jigs played from an ad hoc peasant orchestra in the big barn, and Juud would dance along till she collapsed in sleep and her father or the huge cook Maggen would carry her home.

In the towns it was not the same. The dancing, processions, clowns were all there, but amidst the grey streets this very country festival seemed out of place. You could not smell Sprig in the city, or see for yourself the early flowers. The townsmen were assured by the peasants that Sprig was here but never knew it personally. Tilst was a festival for the countryfolk and the old traditional ways of the land.

Tilst! It meant the 'time of life' and it was represented by Tilst himself, the patient ploughman doing his honest duty. A poor, plodding figure, with a flighty wife in Breet,

sometimes a stupid figure and one to poke fun at, especially when Breet made eyes at Strom, but for all that an essential personification of the land, the timeless persistent farmer. In the Rume valley the Tilst festival also had the old symbol of the yiggen tree, because it brought out its leaves early. These trees were garlanded by strands of coloured nut-shells and bark, bound together during the long Wast Time by the village children, who would, once the yiggen tree was decorated, sing dance and sing songs to the Tilst around the freshly budding tree. In town of course they did not have to use a tree so they used a pole instead. A poor substitute!

Once Juud asked her father what it meant and he had told her this.

'It is the tree of life, the oldest thing in the world, and it never dies but goes to sleep in Wast Time. That is why that time is so bad. It is an old forgetful tree, muddled in its thoughts, and so we have to wake it up thoroughly so Sprig can begin. That is why the children dance around the tree. To wake it up. Children can wake anything up' he said dryly. Juud had delighted with the idea of waking up this fussy old tree, but today her father told her a different story.

'Yiggen is a very old word. Past Peoples language of course, but it does not mean a tree. It was the last people, the horse-warriors, who took it to mean that. Their scholars were told yiggen was like a tree, not the same thing at all, because what it really implied was a river. Imagine a river from a great height with all the creeks and little streams coming into it? Well it looks like a tree does it not? And that is what the Past People thought, but the horse-warriors got muddled and thought it actually was a tree. Water in the Past Peoples mythology was always connected with blood, for both are life. You cannot drain either, from the land or the body without killing either and that is why the Past People choose the tree because...'

'Its trunk is red!' interrupted Juud with glee.

'Yes dear, and it was just a happy coincidence that the yiggen tree flourished in the early part of Sprig. Water returns of course, so this is accommodated by the notion of the roundrell, but blood? I remember Morad saying somewhere that the Past People had some notion that blood always returned. I am puzzled by this for we cannot gain blood once we lose it, yet it always seems to remain no matter how much we spill. Perhaps that is what they meant. Yiggen was important to them for sometimes you see a design, a stem with three branches. Well that is yiggen, the river, the river of life'.

This was all before breakfast.

Each had contrived some small present for Juud, having been well warned by the Duc. Hull gave her a tiny carved wooden animal, a sort of rabbit that was smooth and shiny with his polishing. The Duc gave her an embroidered scarf, haggled from a village woman at great cost, and Widsith had wandered the slopes for a wick already in the pre-dawn and managed to collect a posy of shy alpine flowers. She was delighted with these gifts and hugged each giver warmly in turn. After a heavy meal of oatmeal they returned to the mountain trail which softened in incline as it bent around tarns and gullies.

The day was dull again. By now they were in the upper basins of the Hollering Hills, with great scoops of land that most of the year were bare of all bar the waving tussocks and startled hares. Hull tried out a shout, and it was true, the hills did carry

sound, for his voice swelled around the basin and came back to him. Both an echo and a reprise. At the height of Croppen a few villagers herded their goats up here, but it was a poor pasture, and the goats frequently got trapped in the numerous bogs. The grasses were blown by winds that came from the great remote plains of the Verd, yet the hills axis spared them the very worst weather, and as Juud explained to the wayfarer, the days here could be as pleasant (and as hot!) as any on the plain. Juud could recount the times an old shepherd would take her up to the Hollering Hills pass from the estate and they would stay for several days so she got to know well the wild and bleak ways of these hills. She had stayed at the very stone cottage that they were trudging towards as a child of seven and had fond memories of the place. For her at least these hills were already a home.

Widsith disturbed a deer, its muscled back disappearing quickly over the wet tussocks and into the mist. It was gone before the others had caught up.

‘Not too much further I think’ said Juud, who recognised something in the shape of the hills that struck a memory. Hardly were these words out of her mouth when they reached the pass, marked by a huge cairn of stones. Juud stood on it grandly. Seven years ago she had stood here. The weather was better then, but it always was when you were young. They walked down a gentle league and reached the stone hut. Juud burst in excitedly, delighted by the old familiar things still in place, the pots still gleaming under their dust above the fireplace, the array of old horse shoes displayed as decoration on the wall, still the sheepskin on the chair (still a bit smelly) and the same tidy piles of coal and peat in the outhouse. Widsith was surprised at the coal.

‘There’s a seam just down the track’ explained Juud ‘it used to be mined properly once, I’ll show it to you wayfarer’.

‘Not now’ protested Widsith. Her enthusiasm was hard to contain. She was angry with the weather.

‘The view is superb Mikal. Overawes everything. Stretches and stretches’ and Juud seemed to elongate as she said this, standing on tip toe as if to demonstrate the great vista that was so inconveniently hidden. She was like a little girl. The Duc was perky too, despite his cough.

‘I’m glad we ended it here wayfarer. This feels like home’.

Hull was busy preparing the peat with a few sticks of wood. It was an art to watch, but Juud was too restless. She ferreted under the long platform that was the communal bed and dragged out two great wooden boxes. Both held food, dried herbs and musty ryet, with stone pots of excellent honey. Widsith dipped a finger in.

‘Wayfarer!’ Juud hit his hand. He grinned.

‘It’s still good’.

‘There will not be much left if you carry on like that.’

‘Look at this!’

In a third wooden box she pulled out a doll with one arm missing.

‘I carried her up here, and forgot it. Look it’s still intact’. She cradled the doll affectionately, then thought aloud.

‘I called it something, ‘Patina’ I think, is that right father? Can you remember?’

The Duc smiled and sighed. Oh yes, he could remember.

‘It was Panna. I gave you that name for your doll. It was your mothers pet name, Panna?’

Juud looked lovingly at her father, hugged the doll and put it back in its box. Panna went to sleep for another few years, till a younger child would visit.

They talked long into the night, poised as they were on the edge of things, quite literally in fact, for the descent off into the Caroyal side was steep and a sense of that could be felt as you stood outside the hut and could see the mist wafting up from below.

Being here at Tilst was apt, the beginning of things again, so much had been done, so much to say and remember, and forget added Widsith. He suggested they delayed their separation till at least the view was clear.

‘But it could stay like this for weeks!’ exclaimed Juud pleased.

‘Well then we shall stay’ affirmed the Duc. He had never seen the view after all.

‘So close I know wayfarer. But I had an estate to manage, and was not much interested in views then. Now Juud was different. Always a special one even as a child’. Juud blushed and told him to stop it. ‘But you were dear. Always collecting flowers, and burying dead mice. You would gaze for hours at the mountains, and you had a huge collection of stones, do you remember?’

Widsith was incredulous.

‘Stones?’ Juud had to admit it was true.

‘I was a very young girl. I thought the world was wonderful’.

Then she added after a pause.

‘I still do’.

‘Tomorrow Mikal I will show you my magic circle’ she waited for him to be puzzled, which he duly was.

‘What is that?’

‘It is up above the pass somewhere, an old circle of stones around a hollow, and there’s a spring in the middle’.

‘On top of a hill?’

‘Yes. Isn’t that strange? I used to go there every day and make a wish or spell’.

‘Did they work?’

‘I do not remember. I certainly hope that the spells did not work. Some of them were very wicked for a twelve year old girl. You must come. It is magical, and I always feel safe when I am there.’

After a moments thought.

‘It will be good if you can see it. You might understand it. I do not know who built it, or why, but it is very old’.

‘How do you know this?’ asked Widsith with his customary scepticism.

Juud tossed this about in her mind then decided.

‘It feels it’ and laughed ‘I cannot do better than that. I do not suppose it will be

magical anymore. 'The magic goes as you grow up'.

Widsith teased her.

'You old woman of twenty'.

She grinned defensively.

'It is true. The magic goes'.

'There may not have been any magic there in the first place' was the wayfarers pragmatic opinion but the Duc disagreed.

'Oh yes wayfarer, there is magic. Morad believes it and so do I. There is child magic and adult magic. The magic merely changes that is all'. Widsith found this rather religious.

'What is magic anyway?' he asked, hoping to trip the Ducs surety, but Juud had the answer for him.

'Oh Mikal you doubter! Magic is things that make you wonder'.

'What?'

'Yes. Stars, grass, love...' her voice rang, unfinished but triumphant.

### III

Immediately on waking Widsith felt a sharp chill on his skin. There was a faint dawn through the leaded window. He struggled up, pulled on his breeches and jerkin and opened the door.

Outside it was a wonder. The mist had fled and left behind a serene billowing sea of cloud that stretched below the pass like a rump1ed linen sheet. The hook of the Keeb Mountains stood dark and plain above the cloud swathe, and still waiting to be lit by the new sun was the long tempting finger of the Fore Range humped in coils and crests like some sea monster out of the ocean. Far, far, back there was a glint of peak and scarp which sheltered the mountain kingdom. Here a sun gleam sharpened one peak from its darker brothers, and soon all would be afire with the rising of Breet. Widsith drank in the morning as if it were the first he had ever seen.

Such silence! And loveliness beyond words. He turned quickly into the hut and nudged Juud awake.

'Come outside'.

He tugged her out of her blankets, she sleepily following to the hut door where her dream-filled eyes widened at the glorious dawning. She walked outside, her bare feet pricking on the sharp cold stones, her legs goose-pimpling.

Hull came to the door rubbing his giant hand through his mussed-up hair and the wayfarer re-entered the hut, this time emerging with a sleepy Duc, who protested till he saw the wonder of the morning. Juud hunched up on a grass patch wrapping her arms tightly about her legs to keep warm and watched the panoply off colours enrich

the mountains. Deep reds, then oranges, then paler pinks and sweeter yellows as the sun rose. Suddenly Breet was sheering bright in their eyes, but still cold, like a dazzling gemstone. Almost immediately the frost-stiffened grass begin to steam and unbend as their surfaces ran with melted water.

The full light was on the Keeb Mountains now, trapping in the smoky-grey Forest of the Gloreen like a vast thumb. Hull smoothed out his moustache. The Duc shivered, but bore the cold. Juud felt exhalted, the whole kingdom below her, like a map of the last year of her life, and as the last remnants of shade faded she felt as if the new day had arrived in herse1f.

Throughout the morning the clouds dispersed and the sun bore down hotly on the pass. The Duc dodged the aftersun heat by resting in the cool gloom of the stone hut, whilst Hull stretched out his full figure on the grass and dozed off in the warmth. The hot light slated down, stifling the plants and raising from them rare alpine scents that not a breath of wind dispelled. The only sounds were the flitter of two birds in an elaborate courtship and Hulls generous snores.

Juud found the wayfarer drying out ryet on stones, methodically cutting the wet ryet thinly and laying down the pieces.

‘Mikal. I promised to show you the round dell, remember? Come on, we must go now’.

She grabbed Widsith by the hand pulling him away from his task. He let himself be led up the slope, Juud running upwards, stumbling but never quite falling as she rushed up the grassy bank dragging a panting wayfarer willy-nilly behind her. She burst out laughing when he fell and sprinted away when he tried to push her over. Widsith followed slowly as she danced ahead to the top of a low waving brow of grass.

‘Oh you are slow today wayfarer. Like an old man’.

‘Thanks’.

They were a good way above the hut. A curl of smoke evidenced from the chimney and Hull lay like a great plank on the front grass.

‘He will get sunburnt’.

‘Come on!’

She caught his hand again and hurried him up the next slope. He protested that they had all day but Juud was not to be ignored. They reached a plateau of grass, almost peculiarly flat, as if it had been tampered with by men, or Gods. Juud ran on ahead and paused in the middle looking down. A startled bird flew out at her feet and skittered madly skywards. She waved at him and pointed as Widsith joined her. They were standing on the edge of a saucer-shaped hollow, perhaps ten longmans round and two longmans deep, and around the edge was a broken ring of head¬size rocks, smothered in lichen and moss but still obvious amongst the tall alpine grasses that sprouted vigorously around them. In the centre of the hollow was a tarn, edged with rocks and a cascade of water sprang from it, and into a small tunnel-like hole.

‘Isn’t it lovely? You must admit it. My magic circle. See the spring! There’s a tunnel where the water goes through and comes out down the hillside. I’ve found the other entrance’.

She stood poised on the lip of the hollow then leant into it, running down to the tarn. Widsith looked around curiously. It had an old feel to it this place. Who had built it, and for what purpose? Something struck him as familiar but for the moment he could not think what it was.

He walked down to the tarn where Juud was dabbling her feet in the water.

'It's cold' and she splashed some water at him. Widsith took off his boots and sat by her paddling his feet in the spring.

'It's quite deep, almost to my chest anyway. Do you like it?'

The wayfarer admitted that he did.

'I wonder who built it?' Juud did not seem much interested.

'Shepherds perhaps. Or people from the estate. My ancestors'. This idea pleased her and she leaned back on her arms and kicked the water high, watching the drops catch the sun in sudden rainbows.

'Does it matter? Really Mikal you always look for explanations'. The wayfarer smiled. 'All I know is that I feel safe here. Safe and secure. Nothing can harm me, no hurt done to me. Don't you feel something?' she demanded.

'Yes, there is something. It's old...'

'Timeless'.

The sun poured down filling the little hollow with warmth. Juud lay back and watched the rare puffs of cloud, trying to fashion them into shapes. She made animals and birds, a hare out of one, and a silly stupa out of another. She got Widsith involved till he lay back on the grass and closed his eyes.

He shivered.

'What is wrong?' Juud asked softly through shut eyes, sensing his movement.

'Oh nothing' he reassured her 'just a ghost running away'.

'This little dell chases ghosts away. It's good like that'.

'What ghosts are you scaring off?'

Juud paused and opened her eyes to the sky, shielding them with her hand.

'Slorty' she said simply.

'So you remembered?'

'Yes. Not completely, but yes, I remembered.'

Widsith sat up again and looked down fondly at her. Her hair was fanned out on the grass making her face seem pale in contrast. One stray hair had fallen over her face and Widsith brushed it off lightly. Juud looked directly at his eyes and a smile came all over her face, as if the answer to some puzzle she had been wrestling with was now understood.

'Mikal, love me'.

The air was silent. The day poised, hovering over them as if it was they who could decide whether it should be fair or foul. The scent of the alpine flowers was strong.

'Completely Mikal. I am not afraid. This dell will not harm me.'

The wayfarer held his eyes on her and loved the glow that was returned. He hesitated, then pulled her gently to him.

'I love you' she said, then added 'and after all it is almost Sprig..'

In the fairy dell the crude entanglements of cloth and leather were discarded and the soft entanglements of limbs began. Lips searching out the comfort of each other, arms stroking and tight, two bodies belonging to each other. It was a sudden intensity of desire that both had, in their unspoken silences, been desiring for a long, long time. It was both relief and fulfilment.

Many small moments and bit-wicks passed. A hawk flapped by overhead, and swung in a small inspecting circle for a loop or two, its attention caught by the two resting figures on the green sward below. Juud watched it content and joyful.

She had given what Slorty had taken. A gift of love, as free in expression of herself as that hawk which lived in its flight. She gently hugged the long body of the wayfarer as he drowsed buried in her arms. It was sweeter than she could have hoped, and all the long years of girlish doubts, inquisitiveness, and long private yearnings had come to this sunny moment. Whether it was love? She called it that, knowing no other feelings like this. She quietly separated her limbs from his, stood up, and stepped into the pool, shivering at the sudden cold and washing her bare skin carefully. Widsith sat up and watched her. She was just loveliness and he could not believe it. Her skin was shining with the splashed water and she was laughing at the cold sting of it. She smiled back at him, and played with her dark hair.

'You will go away?' she asked. He nodded, and they both understood 'you to your home and me to mine'.

'If your father dies, and you have nowhere to go you can always come to the Rise. There will be a place for you'.

She sprinkled water down her back.

'I know'.

Juud stepped out of the pool and dressed, and Widsith pulled on his clothes. She lay beside him again and they embraced, each searching out the line of skin or curl of hair that could be nurtured in the memory, when sweet memory was all they would have. They both knew that this time in the dell would be their last together, and both tried to unravel each others secret ways in that extraordinary journey that lovers make into each others souls.

After a long wick of silence Juud asked.

'Do I keep the Charmstone?'

Widsith grimaced. That jewell had been a terrible burden. Several times he had wanted to throw the damn thing into a river, but of course it had a demon life of its own and could emerge even from rivers. Perhaps he should have tossed it into the marsh, were there any caerp there? Then he had an inspired idea.

'Why not bury it here?'

Juud stared at him.

'It must have come from the Past People, let's leave it in their company again'.

She was delighted with the idea.

‘Yes, of course, one last look’.

She unstrapped the pouch from around her waist and pulled out the linen wrap gem. Her fingers touched upon a hard edge, and she felt a puzzlement as she unwrapped the jewel from the cloth and gasped when she saw what lay in her hand.

She showed it silently to the wayfarer.

The Charmstone, the indestructable, that fabulous gem, that rare mark of craftsmanship, was split precisely in two. The break was perfectly clean, with no splinters. When Juud put the two pieces together they matched perfectly with only the slightest disagreement of surfaces to indicate that it was broken.

‘Oh Wyrd! Did I do that? I must have stood on it, or something?’ Juud looked shocked. Widsith doubted it.

‘Gemstones do not break that easily. It might be cracked by a sword, perhaps...’

‘Do you think when Slorty, I mean, not when he violated me, but when I was taken by the horse-warriors?’

The wayfarer nodded gravely, turning the two pieces side over side.

‘That must be it...’ he said, though he could not believe it himself.

‘What will we do now? Still bury it I suppose? Oh, I hate the thing! Always trouble and suffering. Let us bury it anyway’. She appealed to Widsith. He had an idea, a curiously romantic idea, that he hesitated to broach.

‘We could keep a half each?’ he suggested.

‘Wayfarer!’ Juud was shocked and amused. Then her face became anxious. ‘No I will not, but you could bury my half here. Do you really want half of it?’

‘It would be a token... of love’.

‘Men are always the romantic ones’ she teased, pleased and hugging him ‘for me, I only remember Tysa when I see the thing, but you keep your half, and let us bury mine here’.

One rock was looser than the others, and with a little of levering it could be tilted. Widsith dug out a small hole under the rock and placed the leather pouch containing Juuds half-jewel in the small scoop. The stone was carefully set back in place so as to look undisturbed.

‘I hate thinking of it as my half, will it ever be found again?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It is just’ and she brushed a dark hair out of her face ‘that I spent a year of my life following the greed of people who did believe it mattered’.

She cast a strained look backward.

‘I do not think it has let go of me yet.’

Widsith held her and after a while they walked down the hill towards the warm hut, shivering slightly, for a fresh wind had started and it was cool. Widsith threw away a handful of scooped earth and slapped his hand against his breeches as he walked.

‘Stars and grass’ said Juud, as Widsith took her hand and walked her down the hill .

## IV

Hull was fixing tea and the Duc was helping, after his fussy manner, sparing the wayfarer and Juud a curious glance as they came in. He saw his daughters glowing face and looked away. They ate their meal outside, entertained by the dissolving battle of colours till only the black and faint glow breeways, where the moon was due to rise, was left.

‘Shall we leave tomorrow dear’ the Duc asked circumspectly ‘curiosity is beginning to overcome fear.’

Juud thought it too soon but did not say so.

‘Yes, I think so father’. They would have to leave one day. She turned to the wayfarer.

‘Do you think so Mikal?’

Widsith nodded.

‘If you wish it’.

The snows would still be melting from the heights and there would be some heavy work ahead for himself and Hull, plugging through the stuff, but then they were not likely to meet anyone, friend or foe. He asked Hull who was agreeable.

Juud cleared the dishes and went inside. The Duc coughed.

‘It seems this really is the end wayfarer’ then paused as he tried to frame his question delicately but precisely. Widsith nodded vaguely and saw a shooting star, wondering if it was significant. The Duc coughed again, and knew he had better hurry up before Juud came out again.

‘Arrrrm, my daughter is very fond of you wayfarer’.

He honestly could not think of a better way to say it. Widsith stared at him.

‘I have seen it, though she has not said’ added the Duc hastily.

‘Yes. I am fond of her’.

‘There is, as I have said before no objection... if you wish, that is...’

Widsith leaned forward with a smile and tapped the old man on the knee.

‘I know what you mean, but it is all right. We have decided. I have to return to my home, I have a family you know’ reminding the forgetful Duc, who tutted as he remembered ‘and Juud will return with you to your estate’.

The Duc nodded and said ‘pity’ softly, just as Juud came back from the hut. It was almost completely dark so neither could see each others expressions. The Duc turned and Juud rubbed her hand through his thin hair.

‘It is a pity father’ she said ‘but it must be. I will not leave you’.

‘No daughter, I know, but I am getting on...’

‘I will not leave you’ she repeated ‘and the wayfarer is right, my home is on the plains,

his in the mountains'.

They discussed it no further, and sat in silence, quietly till the thin crescent of Wene chanced up behind the blackened distant mountains.

## 'Spirite Alas au Veersaad'

*Another parting at the end of Volume II in this complete history of the kingdom. What will become of these people? History cannot leave us at this juncture without explanation? Oh but he can, my friends, for I must too regain my historical breath to finish the story. I am ahead of my research, but soon, I will start again, soon indeed as the next turning page.*

'As dreaming, dreaming lay the land...' Widsith thought as he gazed down on the swells of cloud lapping the mountain sides.

Things may separate, but then they may rejoin, it can only be hoped, not willed. This life will complete itself amongst the tides of so many other lives, neither less or more so than any other life but what makes this grand sweep of existence, this history move so in its steady way? Did it strive for completion, or is that another wicked illusion? The wayfarer shifted his position on the rock and sighed. Perhaps the answer would come in another time, for his part, here and now, sitting on this outcrop as it leaned over the new day, he felt that the Past People had celebrated the act of change, the roundell, so that there was no completion but only the joyous activity of moment. He suddenly said aloud to himself.

'That's a philosophy for a travelling man if ever I heard it. Do we fashion what we need...?'

A door scraped open behind him and Juud stepped out, her bagger adjusted on her back.

The Duc came outside squinting into the harsh early sun. Hull stood patiently behind. Widsith clambered off his perch and came down to join them.

'A good day for the descent' he said. He had to try to be cheerful.

'A good day to climb wayfarer!' Juud smiled weakly and faced down the hill. There were still too many things to say that would never be said.

'Well daughter, are you ready? And you Hull, and wayfarer, you will leave today too?' Widsith nodded.

'Yes, yes, it is a splendid day for travelling. Come to our estate some day wayfarer. There will be a place for you there'. Widsith thanked him. The Duc had a speech pre-

pared.

'I wish you well Mikal Widsith' for the first time the Duc used the wayfarers full names. 'There is an old expression of the old, you know of the Past Peoples. Morad quoted it a few times. People say it as a farewell 'spirite alas au veersaad', it means 'travel with my heart'. You travel with ours wayfarer'.

'And you with mine'.

'Mikal, keep well. I will remember...' Juud could not say any more.

It was time to leave.

The Duc and his daughter turned towards the rocky track that angled downwards from the hut, and walked steadily not looking back. They disappeared around a corner then reappeared briefly a bit-wick later further down, two shrinking dots. The Duc turned and waved but Juud continued, walking till the last corner took her from sight. Widsith knew she walked blindly, her face covered with tears.

A wind ruffled the oasis.

'Time to leave short legs' joked Widsith to Hull, who grinned and slapped the wayfarer a hearty shove on the back. Hull jossed in reply.

'Time to leave old legs'.

'You don't want to go back to the marsh?'

'Sometime' and Widsith nodded.

They tidied the hut, shut the door firmly and began to climb upwards from the pass. Some early mist clung feebly to the tussocks bending them with moisture. They paused by the round dell, then carried on, stooping into the hills with their heavy baggers, and following the delicate curves and folds of the Hollering Hills as it began its slow rise to the crooked heights of the Fore Range. Mist obscured them a moment, then as quickly cleared, but in that moment the two figures had gone over a crest and the hillside they left behind was bare, so that it seemed, as if by a trick, the mist had spirited them away.

## Book III

*It is not a nice place, the kingdom in this third volume, and the consequences of this surge of sudden ferocity are profound and lasting. We have the collisions, where greed and jealousy, anger and envy break into warfare and sudden death. Armies start to move and are defeated. There are defeated heroes and tired villains.*

*The chapters move quickly back and forth across the kingdom as I try to keep track of the rapid events that have overtaken the inhabitants. Events come to several crisis points, move on and then reach a crest again, like a series of waves, that I am told is one of the marvels of that great leveller, the sea.*

*It may seem strange to use an analogy for an object I have not seen, nor entirely, if the truth is known, I can ever completely believe in, but as a metaphor for the surging events that will soon engulf us, it seems pertinent. The future looks unknown, and restless, oh you can see the point before I labour it — we are all drowning.*

## The Watchman

*We start with the Highland kingdom, if such a large word can describe such a scrappy disorganised collection of hill tribes. Like family, they fight and bicker amongst themselves most of the time, until there is an outside threat, then they unite with a surprising passion. They have a prophet called the Watchman, who inhabited that convoluted piece of topography called the Hollowstone. It is Sprig.*

*Fellowman come as we call*

*Fellowman, come to us now*

*Fellowman, hear our praise*

*Fellowman, show us your marvelling ways*

*Folksong of the Highland tribes.*

There was a ripple off rumour, an undercurrent of doubt and then wonderment, that carried itself like a cool air through the slotted passages and steaming sombre pools of the Hollowstone. The Watchman had been seen! The Watchman was present! The servants told the guards, the guards the clerics, and these worthies transmitted the foreboding news to the elders, who paused in their deliberations to ponder on what this might mean. How long had it been since he had last come? Could anyone remember? Old Vin Tyer reminded them from his long past, for there had been the occasion of the usurper Logol, who had tried by his cunning means ‘to wrest power from the Hollowstone for himself, till the Watchmans presence cast a fatal shadow on Logols ambitions and he was driven to exile and a whining, unremorseful death’. That was the last time said Tyer, and he had never expected to see another time, but there were troubles, and here he paused, but when were there not troubles? What made this time so difficult that the Watchman should travel down from his eeyrie and pace the corridors of the Hollowstone?

By now the rumours had fled to all parts of the highlands, and in taverns and meeting houses there were fierce discussions as to what the Watchmans arrival could mean. Arguments would be lubricated by ale, and casual disputes became bitter wrangles that lead to blows as personal temperaments insisted that their conclusions were the only sound ones. Wiser, and clearer heads would keep away from these taproom tempers

and realise that the Watchmen's presence indicated a trouble that ran far deeper than any obvious thought could find.

They reminded the hotheads that the Watchman was not interested in the day to day upsets or land squabbles that infect any close community, but in events that may threaten the existence of the community itself — whether from without or within. He was a foreteller, a warning mechanism against the complacency that the mountain walls sometimes cupped in their laps, as a mother shields its child from anxieties.

Who was the Watchman? What special sight was his that belonged to no other man? Some said he was a magician, others that he was a god, possibly the folk-hero Fellowman in human form. Others thought of him as the supreme scholar, possessing in his secluded mind the great prophetic texts that writ the fates of everyone who was to come, and who had been. Others, mockingly, just called him an old man, withered by tradition and holding no special secrets except the fallowness of his silence. But these people kept their views discreetly, for the reverence and awe that was attached to the Watchman was still considerable. There was a trust in him, a belief that he did have knowledge beyond the ordinary senses, and there was an instinctive consciousness that the Watchman's existence mitigated against the power of the elders, or the threat that a single man would make himself king over all others. As even the unlearned knew, they had been many kings before; the good, the despotic, the greedy and the generous, who had dominated for better or worse the lives of the mountain people, but in one resentful popular movement the Highland tribes threw off this servitude and made for themselves an elected council of ten men, the elders and one other, the eleventh, the man appointed for life with general consensus at the great yearly Meet — the Watchman.

The man chosen would have already shown himself to possess unusual abilities, of foresight, of judgement, of great learning, and he would be encouraged to see the extraordinary patterns of the future that was denied ordinary men. He lived like a king without a court, or a high priest without a church, and dwelt in isolation, aloneness and silence. The cynical wondered how the Watchman could 'see' anything in such solitude. Wise words were often exchanged in gentle derision of the 'holy man on the hill', especially as he took their hard-earned tax money, and for what? So it is for all men that they want their value for money, and quibble when their yearly tribute of gold only bought a silence.

Yet the Watchman was informed, it was only the peasants who were misinformed. The tax-money bought the services of clerics who delivered the formal papers about the various committees and endless elders meetings, and they also brought the tittle-tattle of the Hollowstone and the villages from as far away as the Rises. They brought the reports of wayfarers (these were most useful) who had visited the downland kingdoms, and all these multifarious pieces of information came to the Watchman and were fitted together in his thoughts like the warp and woof of a tapestry, each colour given its weight, each thread its place and, as often as not, silence would be the result...

The heavy safe silence of great thought that was bought very cheaply by the Highland tribes, if only they realised it.

The Watchman had one great privilege. The power to warn, the power to make men listen with gravity to his private forebodings, and when he foresaw a changed temper of events that threaten the well-being of the mountain people he would gather his meagre

belongings in a bundle and walk down from his mountain abode to the Hollowstone. In this sacred labyrinth of rock he would pace up and down, sometimes on the battlements where the waster wind would furrow his beard and twist his hair, or beside the steaming hot pools underground, where the luminous mosses glowed an unearthly colour. Or in the great hall itself, carved out of convoluted limestone, with its galaxies of glowworms and whistling vent holes that gave a strange chimed music to the air. Here was the Watchmans seat, bare and unadorned. It had not been touched for almost a generation, not since the time in fact he had placed himself upon its cold stone and by this act summoned the Highland peoples to listen to his warnings concerning elder Logol. So long ago.

He paused several times before the seat as he traced and retraced his footsteps through the intricacies off the Hollowstone, but he did not sit there yet. Not yet.

## The Lord Was Returned

*Now we must turn back in fact almost to the beginning of Book I, and meet a type of loyal retainer who can please and infuriate at the same time. Donan Shallbody was not liked, but he did his job, and is easily compared to the plodding surly dutiful God of the earth — Tilst. We also meet a dissipated youth of no use to anyone (who neverthe less has his uses), and catch Lutens Wenner in an act of ferocious gluttony.*

*1 Sprig 157 to Old Wast 158*

When the last of the flames had been doused, the embers thoroughly quenched and the last little smoke curling weakly to a dull sky, Donan Shallbody could count the cost. The baldymen were not as efficient as their reputation, and a good three-quarters of the house still stood intact. What was lost was the Ducs quarters and his treasured library, the parchments maliciously used by the baldymen to initiate the fire, but these rooms were later additions to the main house and Donans energetic command over the servants had seen that the fire did not spread. It was a botched job and no mistake, and in Donans book that was about as worse as you could be. A botcher he would mutter in disgust at some mistake by a maid or landworker. ‘Botchers!’ he spat out in disgust at the baldymens overhasty handy work, and gave out the orders to clean out the charnelled wood and get the house cleaned up for the Ducs imminent return. This he was expecting immediately and he knew the Duc would be outraged if he came back to this mess. The Duc was a stickler, thats why he worked for (and admired) him. Not a botcher, he spat again, the spit steaming on a charcoaled book, not like those baldy Wyrds!

The house was cleaned up and the estate sorted out. Cattle and sheep returned to their paddocks and fences repaired. Fortunately the angry thrust of Mial Hests army did not quite carry to the Duc du Qu’ets estate, so that within a Boden time things were straighened out to Donans satisfaction. The only slight difficulty was posed by the drabs of homeless peasants who would wander in from down the Rune carrying a burden of personal goods and sorrows. Donan was not keen on these people but knew that the Duc would have wanted him to look after them, so he gave them shelter and a bit of food, but no work, for then he would never be rid of them. He was anxious to see that some of these refugees were quite mighty people once, managers like himself, but now destitute and baffled by the events that had overtaken them. Their masters?

‘Chopped down in the yard, and before his own childers eyes’, ‘beaten, and dragged off in a cart’, ‘the baldy bastards took the whole family, childers an’ all’, ‘they came like Stroms, left like Wyrds.’

Donan, who had previously been confident of his masters return, was now not so sure. When he heard of the butchery of the Ducs other daughters he shivered, and spent some sleepless nights wondering what might become of the master and what of the masters servant? Would he soon be walking amongst that shattered Rume army of the dispossessed? As if to apologise to Strom for these selfish night time thoughts he drove the men hard during the day, and the harvest was the richest in memory, the manager sparing no effort to gather it all in, as if he were trying to accumulate merit in the storehouse instead of grain.

At last word came of the Duc, imprisoned and exiled, but alive.

None of the servants could imagine why Donan Shallbody cheered up, their manager was not known to have much sense of humour. Perhaps, they whispered, it was that with the Duc out of sight Shallbody could be his own master now, but they misjudged the nature of the man completely if they thought that. For Donan it meant he had a clear duty, to maintain the estate in excellent health in the Ducs absence, however long that might be. The Duc would never forgive him if the estate was neglected, it would be in Donans strict terms, a botched job, and if their is one thing that Donan Shallbody did not care for, was a botch.

And so it was that this loyal humourless retainer managed the estate as if the Duc were still giving silent invisible orders, and even began to rebuild the parts of the house destroyed by the baldymens vicious fire. What he did not take account of (or could not have anticipated) was the unannounced arrival of a new ‘owner’, but what could have been a disaster for the estate generally, and Donan Shallbody in particular, turned out to be of benefit to all.

## II

In that rare dispenacious time after the War of the Lords and his own glittering coronation, Lutens Wenner could afford to be generous. Not only was he a new king, but also a new owner of vast amounts of land forcibly removed from lords who had contested him. Indeed such riches of land were almost embarrassment (though a king can withstand a great deal of this sort of embarrassment), so that even after he had allocated himself vast personal estates and given generously to his closest retainers and cronies their share in his success, there was still a plentitude of valuable property to be disposed off.

Nothing Wenner ever did was done without thinking of what advantage it could be to himself, and he spent some interesting wicks toying with various schemes of who should benefit from his largesse, and therefore remain permanently in the kings debt. Much of the land remaining was the most distant from the capital, not so eagerly sought

after by the flatterers who hang around the throne, a country retreat should after all should be convenient to the capital, and to the gossip. Wenner favoured the rule that the most influential men should be granted estates that were close under his own eye, so that where possible, he cast around for weakly men who through some chance of marriage or birth could be relied on to keep their loyalty to the king, even at a distance.

When at last he came to consider the Duc du Qu'ets estate Wenner found a shortage of applicants. It was a wealthy prize, and since he had not discarded the notion of taking it for himself at a later date, he searched around for a tenant who could later be easily disposed off. Of course he'd take the estate now and be done with, except that the Duc was still alive, and had blood connections to some influential merchants who had financially backed his army, yes, even a king may have to be circumspect, for a while. Now one applicant did come to mind.

Jokim Bonniface had no concept of a 'days work', he had never done one. He was a courtier, a sometime poet, occasional singer on the lute, and a desperately inadequate lover who disappointed even those who had not expected the earth to move, so imagine the disappointment to those who had hoped that it would. But he was also a fortunate lad, possessed of parents who through their ancestry seemed to be connected to every person of wealth and privilege in the new kingdom. He was a cousin to Mial Hest, a great nephew to the merchant Yussaf, a nuisance to his parents, a bore to his friends, and an exceptionally good dice player, which in this instance 'good' meaning 'lucky'. This unexpected skill, coupled with his undoubted good looks was enough for him to hold a minor place in the jostling, scraping hierarchy of the court. Whilst he never had much success with the higher court ladies, there was always a supply of pert maids of honour who little cared for the title. Once they had realised his ineptness at love, they fumed at having given so much for so little.

However Jokims skill at dice was undeniable, and baffling, since all the court were attracted to it, and suffered for it. They shook their heads as they walked away a purse lighter wondering how the gods could have inserted such an ability in a body so manifestly unable to accomplish anything else. 'Drubbins work' they'd grumble, and jest that Wyrd had given the luck of dice to Jokim Bonniface because he could not bear the thought of having another dullard in the kingdom like his apprentice.

So when Wenner came to consider who he should grant the Qu'et estate to, it was not long before his thoughts rested on Bonniface. Summoned before the king, Jokim was pleased to get such a prize and fancied that after all he was making a place for himself in the kings special favours. He boasted about it, and as with all boasts in this court it eventually found its way to the kings ears, who far from being offended as the tell-taler had hoped, merely burst out laughing and thought the whole thing a very good joke. Jokims parents, puzzled but pleased by their sons success, saw the lad off on his long trek down the Rume, and so it was that in the year 151, in the Croppen season, Jokim Bonniface with two companions entered the estate of the imprisoned Duc du Qu'et and proclaimed himself owner of it.

It all went grandly at first.

Jokim quickly brought the servants to heel and won their unstinting loyalty by generous gifts of sovereigns to each family. He had the busybody manager easily under his thumb, and it was gratifying to see all the Ducs former servants scurrying back and

forth as the orders were issued. There seemed nothing to this farming thing at all, indeed after a few days of hunts and pursuits, revelry in the hall (the old Duc had a marvellous stock of wine), and wooing in the orchards, the farming life began to dull. His two companions were getting bored. There was no court gossip, no rivalry. The country maids were unattractive and not very free with favours. They found the men surly and the local hunting poor. They began to chaff at Jokim to head back to Caroyal before West Time set in. The manager was quite capable of looking after everything, after all it was only a farm, and no great skill in that, and worst of all, no money to be won here, from the jumping clicking dice.

So after only ten days of his stay, and giving careful instructions to the manager to manage whatever he had to manage and to send regular accounts (and profits) to Caroyal, the young men set off on their homeward journey, already exaggerating the size of the stags and the willingness of the country wenches.

Donan Shallbody watched them pass out of sight and muttered to no one in particular 'good riddance to the Drubbins!'

It had been a hard, bitter job, biding his patience with these courtly fops, listening to their airs, watching them slosh the Ducs cheap wine (the best was hidden), and finding something to amuse their quickly bored appetites. He had been worried lest the servants would be corrupted by the gold they bandied so freely, but he was reassured that the servants were become disgusted with the aimlessness of these city courtiers. In the country work was the measure of men. One girl sobbed at their retreating backs, her flirting had been taken for flowering and she was left with what a girl is usually left with. Donan had small sympathy for her, but managed to find an older man who was willing to marry her and take on the child, so a wedding was hastily arranged.

Every year, sometimes not even every year, Jokim and his friends would make their arrival and stay for a while boasting of the well-kept look of his estate and the efficiency of his manager, drink too much, pester the women, till boredom overtook him and he fled back to the courtly intrigues. Every year, and Donan watched his tongue, and made the servants watch theirs, as they acted out a charade of obedience. And years past, seasons rich and poor, bountiful and cruel, and still the Duc remained in exile, and still Donan maintained his duty and ran the estate as if the Duc would be coughing politely at the door tomorrow. Indeed, sometimes Donan wondered if in reality the estate was his, when, with a hawk's shocking descent a wayfarer brought the news that the Duc du Qu'et and his daughter had escaped from Swaleton.

Donan did not spare himself or the staff, as the house was plunged into a mad exciting preparation for the Ducs imminent return, but the thick snows of West Time closed around the estate and still the Duc had not come. Donan dispatched riders to see if outlying villages had heard or seen the Ducs party, which must surely be coming, but nothing was seen, and word on the Duc was as silent as Wenes smile. West Time passed with Donan baffled by the Ducs absence, but still hopeful that he might return shortly. Mid West was celebrated, and Wyrd seemed more present in the uncertainty of the Ducs absence. The snows of Old West melted and swelled Lake Dia with dark discoloured water. The rains came just on the festival of Tilst making early plowing impossible, and a heavy sullenness of mist and moisture fell close to the ground.

On the first of Sprig 157 it was prophetically bright and clear, and Donan was con-

scious of a new freshness in the air as he made his daily unspection of the estate. The maids had thrown open the windows to dry out the house after so many wet days and a fine keen breeze blew from the Hollering Hills, a breeze that felt as if it were blowing the seed into life. At highsun, where Donan customarily sat in the back parlour with his usual leafen and hard dark slices of bread, he made the curious, uncomfortable decision to ride out towards the Hollering Hills that aftersun. The idea puzzled him, but he saw no need to change it and so saddled up his mare and rode up towards the track that led into the Hollering Hills, and he was never more surprised or astonished than to see two people coming towards him, one with a distinctive upright manner, who greeted him with a familiarity that no servant would have dared.

The lord was returned.

### III

It was the time of Tilst when the Duc and his daughter returned to their home, the first days of Sprig, where the earth softened under the warmth of sun and trembled as men dug their ploughs back and forth, cracking up its icy Old West skin. The land was yielding. The trees would bud in popping erupting bursts and then suddenly fill the dense branches with a dense blossom, as if a cloud had been caught there. The time of warm rains and heavy work, and fields of mud that plastered the boots of the great peasant ploughman who plodded over his fields with care and love.

Tilst was laughed at by town-folk, who considered him as dull as a country peasant, and jeer at someone with expressions like 'Tilstman' or 'you Tilster!' as someone who worked hard for little gain, but the country people felt a great and deeper affection for their hard-working and humourless God, and few would neglect to hang a token or two on the wild hedgerows that divided their fields. Something to honour the ploughmans name and hope he'd grant them healthy crops for the year. He was as they said 'in earth', one of them, unlettered, uncultured perhaps, but buried in the timeless rhythms of the soil.

Of course they would laugh at him too, at his boorish ways and surly temper, at the jokes that his tricky attractive wife Breet would play on him so as to keep him deceived whilst she flirted with the other gods. Once, convincing her dull husband that the oxen had died, she shackled Tilst to the plough and watched him trundle up and down the long furrows all the day long, whilst she invited the other gods to peep over the Hollering Hills and laugh at Tilsts gullability. These sort of stories were told by the women as they washed their menfolks breeches or carried the water in for his wash, lamenting the Tilst of a husband they'd married. Any young girl who had a bright and mischievous way with her might be called a Breet, though it was a dangerous remark to give to an older woman, and never to a married one. But no one saw much harm in comparing a little girl with the sun.

Many times Donan Shallbody was called a Tilst, but carefully, out of earshot, for the jest had too many grains of truth in it to be used lightly. Even Juud, in her angri-

est moments, might only mutter the insult in a low inaudible tongue. Undoubtedly her manager infuriated her, but with so much to be learnt she had to bide her patience as the ox to the millstone, and slowly, circlingly, grind down Shallbodys silent opposition.

Their arrival had so astonished the household and peasant workers that throughout that long, wonderful day, every single man, women and child on the estate had come before them in a humble and praising way. Maggen, the great indefatigable ageless cook, cried all day into the soups and cakes and sweetmeals she made endlessly. Donan was completely at a loss and failed to give any comprehensible orders at all, leaving the estate to languish as the Ducs servants prepared a formal triumph of welcome. A cleverer man might have taken the time to reflect with a mite of bitterness that the power that was once absolutely his was now gone, and the master had become a servant. But envy was not in his character, and where he had patiently given orders, now he would take them, but this? This was too much, to take orders from a girl?

Yes, from the girl, who was not a girl, but a grown woman, alert, efficient, tough within and without herself, a woman who had travelled the length and length again of the kingdoms, who had seen men die, who had killed men, and who had loved, a woman who in her calm bearing and firm manner showed that du Qu'et authority that had so clearly been her fathers before. 'Eeeee, mistress, how ye' ye grown' exclaimed Maggen on seeing Juud after so long, but Juud did not think she had grown a thrum more than when she had left. It was her confidence that made her grow, and established in the servants eyes a new respect.

Her father was puzzled that the house even existed. When he had last looked back from the baldymens horse, it had looked all ablaze. He was quite dazed by Donans explanations and it was left to Juud to thank the manager properly, and grant him the gifts of property that still seemed quite inadequate for his diligent service, a service so extraordinary that whenever Juud got angry with her manager and made sharp biting remarks that Donan had neither the skill or temerity to reply to, she was ashamed of herself afterwards.

Yet there was something infuriatingly dense and loyal about the fellow! Could he not see the obvious?

From the first day of their arrival the Duc appeared to lose that resilience of spirit that had brought him through so many troubles. It was as if now he was home, he could forget the fight and struggle to get here and fall into the swamp of nostalgia and recollection. Indeed old age, once so helpless against his upright springy figure, now bent its way into the old mans spine and pulled out his hair in large tufts. The Duc rode once around the estate, viewing its condition, congratulated Donan warmly for his work, and then retired into his rebuilt study, where he began reading the fragmented notes and jottings of his journal. On the tenth day after their arrival on the estate the Duc expressed to Juud the desire to finish the journals account of their travels and possibly to start writing a more unified text based upon their route through the kingdom. Something like Morad he shyly suggested, but more factual of course, with history and folk-lore of the places that they had seen and 'none of this Gadabouts intervention of anecdote that that gentleman so favours'.

He hesitated and looked at his lovely daughter.

'I think I will call it the 'A History of Kingdoms'. What do you think dear?' and looked at Juud for encouragement.

Juud knew then that her father was lost to her.

She helped him in the best way she could, by making him comfortable in his study, by arranging a downstairs bedroom to be made available and to directing the servants to note that the Duc was commencing a great writing project and needed special attention during the progress of it. When the head maid boldly asked how long the project was to take, Juud replied sadly.

'It will never be completed'.

She plunged herself into the work on the estate, learning for the first time the details of her inheritance and the enormity of it. She knew nothing of farming, or husbandry, or orchard care, or markets, or, the list was endless. She had two advantages, a clear brain and a driving determination not to fail either her father, or herself. The servants were quickly bewildered by her command, whispering loudly that such a thing was not heard of, and at first they were reluctant to do anything that was not first referred to Donan or to the Duc himself. But they gradually learnt that the Duc acquiesced in any decision taken by daughter, and so slowly came to accept this young woman as their mistress. At first they said 'the lord is not himself, yet', then they said 'she works yer hard and fair', then they said 'if the mistress says, it'll be done'. But there were awkward reluctant days between those different expressions, and expressions when Juud would close the door on her servants and weep in frustration at their stubbornness to change.

But as Sprig passed and Croppen grew fat in its promise, Harvess celebrated and Wast Time begun again, Juud could feel the pride her servants had in her. Only Donan, stubborn, fussy, dour Donan kept his obstinancy turned to her, but now that the other menfolk accepted her directions she could as often as not pass his unsmiling advice unheeded. What he thought or felt, she no longer cared. In Wast Time the farm work largely ceased and Juud had some leisure of her own, to sit with her father as he scratched his past into the dry parchment, or out riding beside the snow-blown fields beside the Rume River, black and crinkled with early ice. Often she would simply sit in her room, thinking of the past as if it were a stranger to her.

A whole year had nearly gone.

Yes, she did think of wayfarer Widsith. There were many times in late Sprig when she would feel her body carefully and wonder if there were not his child in her. When the blood flowed she was not sure whether she was relieved or sad. Later, even in the frantic haste of Croppen and Harvess, her mind would suddenly reach into some forgotten chamber and pull out a remark of his, or an expression. Once, in the great hall watching the farm workers dance a jig, she caught an aromatic waft of hotherb that had her blinking back tears of sudden sharp memory. She had to excuse herself and say it was the smoke. It was hard even to imagine his face sometimes, and when she felt herself forgetting she would seek out her father and they would talk longingly into the night, for the Duc because the past lived, for Juud because it brought closer the man in her heart. Sometimes she would find herself imagining Widsith at his mountain home beside his wife, but always put this cruel thought aside. She had no right to him, none at all.

This long waiting season may have been unkind to her if it were not for one bright opening to the future. Such was the isolation of their estate that when a wayfarer arrived, just on the first freezing winds from the skaw, and asked why there was no customary mourning occurring here, the people were puzzled.

Mourn? Why, who should be mourned? The wayfarer was astonished. Had they not heard?!

‘Our lord, Lutens Wenner, has returned to the gods, struck down in his prime by a mischance’.

Wenner dead?! Some folk started dancing, and Juud when she heard of the commotion and the reason for it, impulsively joined the dancers. The Duc arrived, and nodded absently to the news of his mortal enemies decease.

‘Well, well, Lutens dead eh?’ Juud stopped dancing and seized her father.

‘We are no longer exiles father, and the estate is ours!’

‘Well, I suppose’ but he was carried into an impromptu dance by his daughter before he had time to suppose it might be too soon to judge yet.

Donan questioned the wayfarer closely. What was this mischance that befell the king. Did he fall from his horse? The wayfarer had been taken aback by all this rejoicing and when he explained the cause of the kings death he was even more astounded that these folk seemed to find it irresistably funny.

‘He choked’ said the wayfarer ‘on a chicken bone’.

## The Unlaughing General

*The chapter starts with a detailed study of a chicken and we learn that there can be a terrible unforgiveness in people who believe they are wronged. Someone is found surprisingly alive, and Jokim Bonniface brings a smile to the face of Mial Hest, which cannot necessarily be interpreted as an improvement. Tut, I'm making judgements again.*

*Harvess 157, to the end of Old Wast 158*

It was at the great feast of Harvess when the chicken was caught, its head chopped off and the body left to run out its blood in the kitchen yard. A hundred other chickens were slaughtered that same day, but servants later swore that they remembered this fatal bird for its size and the vigour of its death struggles. They said it died like the king himself, a fury of frothing limbs. The bird was stuffed with spices and roasted till brown and marched into the feast hall to sit upon the courtiers table. The king, jovial, affable and hungry, moved amongst the great wash of revelry, snatching a jug of ale here, a morsel there, all the time joking and making clever asides to the amusement of the rest of the court and the chagrin of those insulted. Two women followed his steps, neither his wife, and both anxious to maintain that special favour in the kings eyes. Wenner enjoyed their attention and played them off against each other, amused by the flattery to him and the quick caustic sneers to each other. It was one of these women who first suspected something wrong, when the heaving shoulders and twisted face did not seem like laughter, but a struggle for air.

The court was astonished when the king fell heavily to the floor, his arms and legs flailing and inarticulate grunts coming from his throat. A few hurried over to assist their lord when they realised this was no royal performance. Some even hold tentatively tried to hold him but were shook off by the force and fury of Wenners limbs. Two guards were summoned, but by the time they had pressed through the apprehensive courtiers, the spasms that racked Wenner were already less frequent and his face had changed from purple to grey. Even as they lifted him to a table the last gasps of sound stopped and the wine-drenched table with its mess of half-eaten food became Wenners funeral altar. One courtier prized open the kings left hand and removed a still clenched piece of chicken wing.

There was the silence of death.

One of the kings favoured women began to wail a funeral chant, then stopped and

looked around with crafty apprehensive eyes. The company was stunned, no one daring to say out loud the obvious thought: what the Strom would happen to them now?

As the news of Lutens Wenners death reached out into the kingdom it seemed to affect folk in proportion to their distance from the court. Those furthest removed from the kings influence seemed to think it a great joke, particularly the manner of his death. Those closer to the capital felt uneasy, unsure whether to mourn or rejoice. In Caroyal itself the kings death was seen as a catastrophe. Hundreds of flatterers, groomed courtiers, plump servants, baldymen, the well favoured ladies of the court and the rich merchants that supplied the court were cut totally adrift by the loss of their anchor. They huddled in small rooms anxiously discussing the consequences and urgently seeking to find some authority more reliable than the six-year old boy, who as son and first heir to Lutens Wenner could now be properly regarded as king. Every item of the situation was discussed, the poor health of Wenners son, the emergence of Wenners forgotten wife to claim herself as regent, the marked reluctance of Swaleton to set up the banners of mourning that so immediately bedecked Caroyal, and most of all, the unassailable fact of one person, the great sinister silent soldier and general, Mial Hest — what would he do?

What Hest did was calm and methodical. He gathered his troops together in Swaleton and marched solemnly to Caroyal where he attended the massive funeral service in Wenners honour. His face betrayed no sign of emotion one way or the other, and those that had known him before his disgrace, shuddered, and urgently sought out his favour. Simply by returning to Caroyal all power focussed on the general. The commander of the baldymen was one of the first to offer their services and their loyalty. Old soldiers, who'd battled with Hest down the Rume, also were quick to give their allegiance, and young soldiers gave promises to the general, thrilled that this greatest of all commanders would now be king, though Mial Hest or anyone else ever said that this was so, it just became so, as if a change in wind had blown the idea into mens heads. Merchants, boomed and bustled their way to Hests headquarters, and if they could not see him, would seize upon some lower lackey and ply him with gifts. Courtiers, even while Wenners body was still displayed for the loyal populace to honour, vied with each other to state their obeissances to the alarmingly silent general. Indeed, there did not seem a man or woman in the capital not prepared to pledge either bodies or purses to Mial Hest, and so far he had not spoken a word of his intentions.

After the funeral he visited Wenners wife and son and told them that he had made himself regent over the young boy. The mother was too terrified to protest. She remembered too well the cold quality of ruthlessness that was in this man, and saw there would be no grains of pity for any human obstacles that might stand in his way. She retired back to her lonely country house and never emerged again.

Some weeks later, after Hest had toured the three cities with the sickly heir in tow, showing off the lad to the populations through the grim bitter days of Old Wast, which did nothing to aid the boys health. The boy was then sent to rejoin his mother, and he died in Old Wast of the coughing disease, and such was Mial Hests ascendancy that hardly anyone in the kingdom thought the boys death held any significance whatsoever.

Such was the price Wenner paid for adultery.

Mial Hest did not even allow himself the briefest of smiles at his easy assumption of complete power, but continued with his plans, plans nurtured through the bitter seasons in Swaleton, plans that made the grandiose projects of Wenner look overblown and empty. There was a precision working in Hests mind that gave every action of his a honed cutting edge, slicing through the wanton fripperies and indulgences of Weners Second kingdom as a blade through a tight water-skin. There could be no denying the man. What he wanted was what he would get, and all that was useless to his vision was either cast aside or destroyed.

And there was a subtle penetrating cruelty to parts of his vision. Fioll, who was still his official wife, was summoned back to the court and put to bed every night. There Hest would satisfying himself on her, as if she were a brood mare, exercising his passion night after night then leaving, and never saying a word. Fioll tried some words and there was no answer, she tried a caress and there was no response, night after night the unaccountable copulations continued, till maddened by Hests silence she took poison and her body was buried beside Lutens Wenner in a final macabre joke of her husbands.

The general gathered around him his old soldiers, and some of the new. Baldymen, captains, artisans of war made up his government, whilst the old court languished in neglect. Not one of Weners courtiers gained entrance to this powerful new central body, and as the the money was directed away from the court so the glitter palpably fell away, like scales on a stranded fish. By the end of Old Wast the court did not exist, and the palaces of servants and tapestries were stripped and empty. One was used as a barracks, one as a prison for some court officials, who discovered the unhappy irony of being paupers in rooms they had once been princes.

Hest emptied Weners old gaols and the remnants of the kings quest for power staggered out, amongst them were the last of the prefectors that Hest had himself sent there under Weners orders. Sojon was still alive, and Hest summoned the broken merchant and questioned him closely about the escape of the Duc du Qu'et. The old man was barely comprehensible, but out of ghostly mutterings of the past emerged a sort of understandable story. Satisfied, Hest commanded the merchant be restored his property, and Sojon arrived in Swaleton as a sort of hero, and recovered enough of his wits to enjoy a comfortable life, though still grieving for the death of his wife and the absence of his daughter.

Nothing had been heard of the Duc du Qu'et since his flight, and if this wayfarer and his friends were as competent as he imagined, Hest felt it reasonable to assume they had reached Noll in safety by now. This gave his plans an urgency. For though he had no regard for Ogen, he had heard that Herrietta, Ogens wife, was a force to be reckoned with. She would certainly seize the possibilities of the Ducs presence and flog her husband into action. Soon the snows on the passes would melt. Hest resolved to make a journey to visit an acquaintance of his, and drew a sheet of paper before him and commenced to write, stamping it with his seal when finished and calling for riders. If Sure Sheriat did not respond to this he would be a Drubbin, and that did not seem in character.

The satisfying prospect was interrupted by yet another knock on his door, already well worn down with interminable visitors anxious for privileges and favours. The captain gave a brief terse explanation.

‘He says someone has robbed him of his estate and he wants your authority to regain what was his. Shall I throw him out sir?’

The captain waited for the general to speak, who at the moment seemed lost in some vision he had seen through the pannioned window. Mial Hest was in a good humour and said to the Captains surprise, ‘No, bring him in’. He had not much else to do till the snows melted.

The Captain led in a young handsome looking and well-dressed man, who stood ill at ease before the general who had not indicated he could sit down. Jokim Bonniface told his story like this.

‘Sire, I was granted an estate by my former gracious lord, Lutens Wenner, for my loyal services, err’ (Jokim could see a difficulty here) ‘to the kingdom. It was on the Rume, and I, once I had attended Lord Wengers funeral felt it necessary to visit the estate’ (in other words to keep well away from the court in this dodgy time) ‘and, imagine my surprise when I found some lord or other and his daughter claiming that they owned the land and I was trespassing indeed on my own land. I mean’ (the impertinence of it still had Bonniface bristling) ‘I was gravely outnumbered and...’.

Mial Hest stared so fixedly at Jokim that the poor man was quite unable to continue. He begun to think that the entire meeting was a grotesque mistake and that he should quickly flee those terrible eyes.

An extraordinary notion had overcome the general.

‘This lord, his name’.

‘Err, well’ this was getting impossibly awkward ‘Qu’et, at least that’s what he claimed but I don’t believe...’

‘Qu’et!’ Hest almost shouted in delight ‘the Duc du Qu’et? And his daughter?’ Jokim looked put out.

‘That’s what they claimed sire, but I really think’ and Jokims sense of outraged betrayal swept hotly over him and he pompously talked himself futher into the mire ‘they were nothing but a clever pair of villains. They said that since our Lord Wenner had died they were now the true owners and I could go to Wyrds den for all they cared, why’ Jokim spluttered in frustrated fury over the whole affair ‘they even seemed pleased by his death.’

Hest laughed. The unlaughing general roared with pleasure, and so unusual a sound it was that the Captain poked his head around the door to see the bizarre sight of Mial Hest grinning from ear to ear.

‘And well might they be pleased, Drubbin!’ bellowed Hest, laughing and swearing at Jokim Bonniface at the same time. Bonniface turned to the door before he lost more than his pride in this humiliating interview, but he was stopped by a command from Hest.

‘Wait, Drubbin.

This was a prize indeed. The Duc du Qu’et alive and well on his estate. Ha! But why had they left the Granry? Did Herrietta let them go? And how on earth did they reach the Rume? Not through the Furrowdale Valley surely, with Slortys men prowling, unless, unless, it seemed to fanciful. Hests thoughts raced away with him. It was surely

a great coincidence that Slorty was slain then?

‘When had the Duc returned to your estate Drubbin? Bonniface blenched at this sarcasm.

‘Well, err, Sprig, he claimed, or...’ his voice trailed off.

Sprig, and Slorty was murdered in late Old Wast. The general had no reason to make an assumption that the Duc du Qu’et could be responsible for Slortys death, but it was uncanny all the same, too much like Wyrđ. How he would like to meet this wayfarer Widsith and Givtheem Tallott. What a pair to have on his side, what a partnership, why they were even helping him! Carrying off the Duc, disposing of Slorty, and landing the old fellow back in Caroyal, what a blessed decision to let them slip. At that instant an excellent idea crept into Hests mind. It was a day for excellent ideas.

First he could see Sheriat, and then Duc. Wouldn’t they have the Charmstone? Why he could wrap up the entire kingdom in his bagger by the end of the year if things kept going in this fortunate succession.

A small cough reminded him of his visitor.

Hest faced the wretch and stood up, and quite unconsciously Bonniface stepped back.

‘Can I, I mean, have your authority’ the dice were much easier to handle than this monster.

Hest smiled grimly.

‘No. It belongs to the Duc du Qu’et’.

‘But it is mine’ Jokim said weakly.

‘No it is mine’. Jokim gasped at the enormity of the decision.

He made one final futile protest,

‘You will take it, from me?’

Hest nodded.

‘And return it to the Duc du Qu’et’.

Jokim stared and edged towards the door. Hest burst into his second guffaw of the day. He was really breaking all the records.

## 'Walk Their Wisdom'

*Mikal Widsith arrives in the bosom of his family and the wayfarer reluctantly becomes involved in politics. Solas Sharp arrives full of himself and gossips of the 'downlands', and still the Watchman paces the steaming pools of the Hollowstone.*

As penetrating and as articulate as a long finger, the Fore Range ran in a bony succession of joints and knuckles from the high puzzling mysteries of the mountain lands, (and beyond were said to be only the beginning of ice wastes of such extent that only Strom could see them all in one glance) down to the dismal and no less baffling mists of the great marsh. At its fingernail, the Fore Range finished in the grim moist canyon of the Rume. On the other side of the river? Wyrð knew where those hills went, except to the sharp edge of nothing or whatever was the name for not knowing. So from the Rume chasm the Fore Range started mildly enough, in the gentle billows and sweeps of the Hollering Hills. This was an upland grassland, with wild glens and ponds hidden in the deceptive swells of the ever blown grass stalks. Old farms and a ruined settlement or two showed the waste of men's efforts, for in these apparently fair fields the wind could become a shrieking enemy which would drive even the hardest animals to lower slopes.

Gradually as the altitude increased the tussock grasses gave way to bare rock slopes that reached a high dome point then the range turned slightly and dipped to Tol Pass. This grey mound of rock overlooking the Tol was called 'Stroms Helmet', as on wet days, when the rock sheened with water, it seemed from a distance that it really was the great warrior god reclining in sleep. In Swivvens reign Tol Pass became part of the great 'Royal Road' that stretched from Noll to Beorht to Caroyal, and became the kingdoms highway for those seeking fame, fortune, or preferably, both. Tol was the critical point, so here Swivven built not just a castle, but a community of soldiers, road-workers, and inn-keepers, to keep the road open at all times. And miserable times they would have been for these folk, benighted by the drizzle and sodden fogs that hung over the pass three-quarters of any year. It was sacked at the end of the War of the Lords and left to silence. Occasionally a hermit might lodge in one of the ruined houses for a while, or a brigand band would lick its wounds and plot some new indecency. A squabble, a grave, and another group of bones would be scattered over the cheerless place of 'Tol', the word that meant 'mist'.

From Tol Pass the Fore Range rose sharply, and the grey slopes were pierced with

ribs of steeper rock, and pinnacles like the tips of spears. Here and there tarns in small alpine basins softened the bayoneted army of rock that marched steadily to the Traders Gate. This dramatic gap had been known from time immemorial. The twin rock buttresses that stood either side could be seen from the Rume Plains and the Furrowdale Valley and looked a likely if threatening crossing point of the range. If a true line was drawn from Caroyal to Beorht it would pass directly through Traders Gate, which with a hard ride, could be accomplished in three days from city to city. Tol Pass, for all its easier ways of approach, would never take less than six journeying days.

From Traders Gate the mountains sprang up till almost a thousand longmans high and ran in a giant coxcomb till they were lost in the immense plateaus of the mountain lands. And somewhere on that crest was the only weakness, the famous Three Thrum Pass. Famous because of its obscurity, it was the route of the Ancient Way, and its difficulty, 600 longmans high, and snow most of the year.

So this was the Fore Range, a range that changed its nature according to the ambitions of men. Before Swivven it was an uncompromising barrier, after Swivven it became a mere cultural fence, a boundary marker to distinguish the accent and attitudes of two different races. As the Dark Period enclosed the kingdom the range once again became an obstacle, that choked the trade between the valleys like a spiked pallisade. Only since the Second Kingdom had there been more than the daring traveller across the range, and once again traders were eyeing the passes and considering the profits on the other side. The traders pressured their leaders to clear away the brigand posts so that once again the caravans of merchants could plod through Traders Gate, and, they suggested to Wenner artfully, perhaps royal banners too?

## II

Wayfarer Widsith and Hull made quick progress along the Fore Range. What was an obstacle to most men was a highway to them, and they knew the teasing sidles around rock bluffs that made their way swifter, and the old bivouacs and overhangs that gave them shelter as they strode steadily yornwards. There was no one at Tol Pass, and only a poor encampment of brigands at Traders Gate, which they skirted and climbed onto the wide snow slopes above the pass. The brigands made gesticulating dots as they watched enraged at the travellers who passed them with the steady indifference of baldybirds.

There was plenty of Sprig snow on the mountains, and in Breets warmth would soften till they were wallowing up to their knees in a oaten stew of white crystals. This was hard, and the travellers patiently zig-zagged for wicks, gaining height and slipping from col to col as they alternated from one side of the range to the other. The weather was brilliant and the plains were filled with a the light blue smoke of distance, whilst up here the light dazzled so it hurt and they wrapped cloths around their eyes. Instead of continuing to Three Thrum Pass they turned onto a minor ridge that stuck into the Furrowdale Valley like a rude tongue. Here the peaks softened and some venturesome

farmland risked the searing mountain winds to perch on the tongues tip. They paused for a quiet wick staring into the hazy landscapes of home, then took the farm track down to the Furrow River which they reached on the 25th day of Sprig.

Their progress became a triumph to Fromms Ferry as the villagers were all out in the fields sowing for the new season and would straighten their broad bent backs to recognise and greet the passing travellers. News had already filtered through of Driac Slortys death, though what Sure Sheriat would make of it was still unclear. Gossip moves fast but exchanging it is a slow business, and it took a while for the wayfarer and Hull to reach Fromms. At the ferry was a largish outcrop of crusty, slatey rock, easy to work and the local village had made its home out of it and their living out of it. Here Hull fancied he would build his house. The marshman had bought some land some seasons past and was eager to get his house done before Wast Time. The village welcomed him back and were gratified that such a vast man (and friend of wayfarer Widsith no less!) was to settle in their village. Already there was talk of a wife. The parting of the two was done quickly, both feeling that something final had ended with this journey but anxious to put a bright face on it. Widsith suddenly and urgently wanted to see Mirren and his children, so he gave a brief goodbye to the marshman and turned upvalley. He camped at the foot of the Rises, alone, wanting to think of Mirren and how she would be, what she would say, what would she think? He left before dawn and walked up through the mist and rock battlements to the Rise of Goil.

Here in the still dawn he was able to slip past the villages as only a thickening shadow in the fog, startling one lone herdsman with a brief greeting and then disappearing upwards. The herdsman stared and crossed himself. The Rise of Bleen, birthplace and home. Mirren, Pirran, Sirri, these memories flooded back as he walked through the simple stone dwellings of his people.

Sunshine filtered through the early mist and charmed the houses with a special welcoming light. There was magic upon the well-kept fields and the backs of the cattle gleamed as they lifted their heads to gaze with solemn moist eyes at the quickly passing traveller. Finally he was in his own village and before his own door. There was a girlish cry inside, and a womans calm reproving tone. A clatter of breakfast pots sounded so sweet and overwhelming that he could hardly move, but finally did so, turned the handle of the door and stepped into the parlour.

Mirren started at the visitor. Her eyes looked alarmed until they recognised who it was. The children were caught with spoons halfway to their mouths and watched reluctantly as the two adults embraced, then shyly came forward as Mirren called them. They had grown greatly as Widsith patted and admired them, and looked full of health. Mirren nodded and gazed with fondness at the children. This morning arrival had caught her off her guard and she felt some reservation on welcoming this stranger to her arms, but she quickly remembered her wifely duties and bustled around the kitchen preparing a meal and talking to her husband brightly whilst he sat at the wooden table and regarded his children with curiosity and pride.

By the end of breakfast Pirran was proudly propelling a wooden cart across the floor for the benefit of his father, who had a thumb sucking Sirri on his lap. Breakfast was hardly cleared away before the news was all over the village that the wayfarer had returned, and news-hungry villagers were already filling the parlour and crowding the

door. The senior elder made a brief flowery speech of welcome and that began a hectic day of stories and visits for Widsith, who hardly glimpsed Mirren again till dayend. Local elders hurried in from other villages, anxious to be involved in this exciting outburst of gossip, and they listened greedily to the wayfarers tales of the treacherous princess Herrietta of Granry and the marauding antics of Driac Slorty. When he told them of Slortys death there was a gasp, and when he spoke of the mythical Marsh kings and the vast hidden cities of the marsh kingdom, there were bursts of applause and eager interrupting questions. Everyone wanted to know so as they could carry Widsiths adventures to their families and villages as if it were their own. Of course some fantastic elaborations could accrue onto the basic facts and Widsith knew from experience he would spend more time dampening down these exaggerations than he would actually telling the truth, but you couldn't stop it, this was meat and drink to the Rise people and they wanted to gorge themselves.

Widsith was deadly tired by dayend. He returned to his home and watched Mirren patiently put the excited children to bed. He kissed them goodnight and promised them great bedtime stories in the future. Then they sat together, husband and wife, talking in low tones till the candle guttered and they came to bed, where the sweetness was blended with sleep.

The days passed, and Widsith found much that had to be done and busied with. It helped to work, to keep away the nagging seeds of doubt. Sprig ran into Croppen, and Harvess came fast upon that. The wayfarer had to sort out his estate, make decisions to future, discuss crops with his manager, arrange markets for his goods, generally in fact, take onto himself all the functions of a farmer that he previously detested. He surprised himself by enjoying it, and taking satisfaction to see his fields and his cattle some of the best on the Rise. He even 'put on the smiles' as they say in Rise jargon, that is he let some of Givtheem Tallotts gold coins buy clothes and other luxuries for himself and family.

Then there was his role as counsellor, adviser, and carrier of news of the 'downlands', as the rest of the world was disparagingly called. Within days he was sitting at village council meetings, and at Boden was appointed an elder, one of only three in the village and by far the youngest on the Rise. His advice was sought on every possible manner of business and dispute, till at times it wearied him. Then there was the looming appointment of the Speaker, the representative of the Rise for the great yearly Meet at the Hollowstone. The former Rise Speaker had died just before the last Meet so that the Rise was unrepresented (a shame they felt deeply) so that this time the business of electing a Speaker well underway and it instigated even more tittle-tattle and political skulduggery that the people of the Rise of Bleen loved almost as much as their cattle.

Each village appointed three elders and from these a candidate for selected to be Speaker. With seventeen villages on the Rise, seventeen candidates were put forward, and these men had to 'walk their wisdom' (as it was expressed) around each village, a painfully slow and exasperating process to Widsiths mind, because every village had a meeting where every hot-head, gossip or the simply demented could have their say, and a meeting could drag far on into the night with obscure grievances brought into the verbal fray. The main issues got discussed eventually, and the candidates put their piece, and got applauded (if they were local) and criticised (if they were the remaining

sixteen). It was a long business, but the Speaker was appointed for life and it was a matter of great pride and sensibility to the Rise people to get a worthwhile candidate who would not embarrass them at the Hollowstone. The 'halfway people' had no illusions about how the mountain people regarded Rise folks 'disagreeable and squabbling cattle-herders' was how one Hollowstone elder bluntly put it. So despite the petty disputes the villages were keenly determined to get the best candidate for their money, and Mikal Widsith looked a very fine candidate indeed.

Widsith had allowed himself to be selected as candidate for his village, partly out of duty, partly out of insistence by his village who were anxious to put up such a strong candidate, and partly to escape from his duties as a wayfarer. He could hardly travel again once he was Speaker, and no one would expect it. In his present mood this suited him. He could barely face the prospect of another journey, and a journey on his own, for Hull was busy with his great house and getting himself a wife. It was a shock to Widsith when he went down to see Hull that the giant could talk more freely in the tongue of the Furrowdale Valley, and he was gradually deserting the twittering sounds of his childhood. It seemed to Widsith that the world was changing quickly and the best he could was run with it. Yet as he walked back up to the Rise he thought regretfully of the sudden shedding of his so recent past, and of the happiness that was not quite his. He was leading a busy life, but not a full one. Once, when standing in the sun, basking in the scented mountain air, he admitted to himself that for all his enjoyment of life he was not happy.

And when he searched for the reason, he did not have to look far, he only had to think of Mirren.

She was his wife, she was loyal and dutiful, supported him and was constant to him. She shared his bed and attended to his needs. She loved his children. Widsith sighed, and wondered why it was not enough. She received his love but did not return it. She would never leave him, but then never love him. The wayfarer wondered whether even that was important. After all theirs was an arranged marriage, and many men and women did not love, and did not bother about it, yet, yet, he was not many men, and it bothered him and he wanted it. At these moments he would think of Juud and wonder whether she was carrying his child. It had been so sudden, sweet like the taste of malep. He could still smell the mountain flower she had stuck cheekily behind her ear. And other vivid images flooded in, he did not deny them, but nurtured them so that in the cold nights when he awoke and could feel Mirren's steady breathing beside him, he would have some hope that a woman wanted and wept for him somewhere in this kingdom.

#### IV

Widsith was elected unopposed for the position of Speaker, the first time such a thing had happened for half a century on the Rise. The pride in his own village was enormous, and great speeches were made about a new Fellowman coming amongst

them and all sorts of other nonsense that embarrassed Widsith but continuously gratified the villagers. There were many toasts, too many, and as the celebration degenerated into a drunken party, Widsith took Mirren quietly away up to a shepherds hut on the hills and for a few days there was a joy between them that was almost a love, but it was too brief, and as Wast Time merged into Old Wast and the snows blocked the fields with precise geometric patterns, and then released them again, Widsith knew that he had no knowledge or clever speech powerful enough to make her love him.

The yearly Meet was held at the end of Sprig but long before then a rumour, quickened by disbelief and anxiety had spread over the last of the blotchy old snows down to the Rises.

‘They say Speaker the Watchman is in the Hollowstone!’

‘Has he sat?’

‘They say not, but...’

‘The Meet is still on the day?’

‘Indeed, and they say...’

And Widsith could not stop the torrent of speculation that burst out in a flood that threatened to swamp the Rise worst than any Sprig rainstorm.

The Watchman! It was news indeed, and Widsith was busy going the village rounds, calming his hot-headed citizens. Yet even as he persuaded them that the best thing was to not let their imaginations run after fancies he too was inwardly perturbed. The Watchman?! Some thought it meant war, others treachery. A few argued it meant nothing, but they did not argue out of any real conviction. Universally it was an ominous sign and made the coming Meet more potent than ever. On the seventieth day of Sprig, year 158, as Widsith was preparing to leave for the Meet a burst of excitement occurred at his door and Solas Sharp tumbled in. They embraced.

‘So you toad! You got Slorty first eh?! And the Marsh Kings do exist and are marching. Causing havoc down in the lower Furrowdale Valley, but the greasy merchants of Beorht don’t mind, yet eh? They’ve got rid of that slug Driac Slorty and got a better man eh? ‘Sure’ Sheriat indeed. Ha! They’re in for a shock. Theres nothing sure about him and he’s up to tricks. They say he had a meeting with Mial (that baldybird!) and they came to a mutual agreement. Very satisfying to both eh? But I wonder what it was, the Wyrds. Sheriats got Beorht in the palm of his hand and Hests wrapped up Caroyal. So there’s Noll left. A powerful pair. Sheriat knows about you too I fancy. And now the Watchmans out and wandering and I wonder if he sees the slimy duo busy with kingdoms. If he does we’ll be marching soon and what’s the price of a man blood? We couldn’t let them rule could we? And survive?’

Widsith shrugged. It was a grim outlook. The two most capable soldiers in the kingdom united.

‘And I’m going to the Meet as your adviser. We’ll make a fine team. You’ll be the Speaker, but I’ll speak!’ Solas roared.

‘Did I tell you I had a wife? You should see her, pretty, why almost as pretty as your Mirren eh? But you can’t be with wives for ever eh, there’s lots of work and travelling to be doing, and anyway’ he nudged Widsith broadly ‘a family doesn’t take that much

time. Look at you. You've hardly been back and another on the way!

Solas roared and Widsith tried not to look embarrassed at Mirrens obvious condition. She looked reprovingly at Solas but knew there was little chance of shutting him up. As they tied their baggers Solas made another jest.

'And I'm not eating chicken at the Meet. Look at Lutens eh? Poor Gadabout. Two kings dead and kingseekers by the score, why, who ever said this place was dull? Is Herrietta as lovely as they say? Her beauty against their brains, it'll be interesting if they manage to marry the kingdom on that!'

## A Fair Match

*Moving swiftly we cross to a curious meeting between a sure general and a confident commander. They agree to, what exactly? Anyways, Mial Hest is showing some odd symptoms, that because it is Sprig, or something in the air, could at a distance look like love, but Mial Hest? Donan Shallbody displays unexpected character. A long chapter, but love should not be rushed.*

*The tinker went a travelling-o  
In Sprig with a flower in his hair  
His heart is set on a maiden-o  
But her sister is just as fair*

*1-25 Sprig 158*

It was the first day of Sprig, a romantic and cynical day, with the air polished as if Stuess herself had been out that morn rubbing it with a cloth. Mial Hest felt in a generous expansive mood as he rode out of Caroyal accompanied by a glittering retinue of soldiers and servants and with the tinkers amorous pursuits running through his head. The world looked young on this day and Hest was in the mood for conquests (of all kinds) kingdoms of course, but if maidens should appear. He only at to leer at a girl to have her, but new kingdoms required more effort, and courage, and he felt a great strength in him this morning. He was out riding about the business he knew so well — war.

The city of Caroyal busied in a turmoil of Sprig activity. No less than the country-folk, the townsman, the craftman, merchant, maid and bureaucrats were brought out of the long sleepy *Wast Time* to the abrupt business of earning a living. The dead were taken out of the holdmans and buried decently. The craftsmen chipped, sawed, cut, moulded all manner of produce ready for the Sprig markets, merchants gathered their caravans of merchandise in preparation for sorties out to the villages. Maids dusted, swept and washed every corner of the rich houses under the fussy direction of their

tormenting mistresses. When they got a chance they leant out of the window to gaze at the throng of young men that had descended onto the city when they heard the news that Mial Hest was gathering an army to march on the Granry.

Young men of ambition, soldiers of fortune, hangers-on, the jobless, the poor and the adventurous signed up eagerly for the army, so much so that the city fathers were alarmed at the shortage of male labour. Merchants bargained their prices down to get supply contracts with the army and old soldiers made pleas for good commands. There was no shortage of people, rather an abundance, and Mial Hest had no illusions as to the fighting quality of raggle-taggle lot. But he reasoned that he needed only a seasoned core of about a thousand men and the rest of the army could be bulked up with straw bodies, whose only function was to impress by sheer weight of numbers. The general aimed for an approximate total of three thousand men, for he assessed from experience that attrition, disease, desertion and second thoughts would level the numbers down, and that was before even one sword was raised in anger. He once mused that war, that is the actual business of fighting, was only secondary to preparation, and that the victor in a battle was rarely the result of a cunning strategic move but the prolonged, meticulous, tirelessness of organisation and training. So Mial Hest trained his army quickly and hard, getting his core troops of baldymen and experienced soldiers to battle the soft and unwilling trainees. He felt reasonably satisfied, and remained his captains to work the Gadabouts till they drop.

For himself he had an appointment with another general and pushed a hard pace along the Royal Road, straight towards the Fore Range with its sides streaked with snow. Peasants in the fields lifted their heads to watch this of horsemen thunder by. A few waved, but most just watched, and then bent down over their fields again, unaware of the momentous events being started. The Royal Road quickly failed its name and after three days shrank to an inconsequential mud path, sneaking through the rampaging shrublands with an apologetic air. These same shrublands were often haunted by brigands, but if they did see Mial Hests company, they would have gasped in disbelief and kept well clear, it was many years that the Royal Road had ever seen such royal travellers. Mial was irritated by the twists and turns of the track and vowed that when his kingdom was founded this road would be restored to a glory known only in Swivvens time.

The villages fell away and the fields looked neglected. They rode swiftly into the foothills of the range and followed the sloppy mud trail through the rock hummocks to the pass of Tol. His outriders fell upon a tired band of brigands who had experienced the most damnable ill-luck in the past days. Their peaceful briganding and pillaging in the lower Furrowdale Valley had been ferociously interrupted by an encounter with a group of Marshmen who were not supposed to exist. They lost four men and moving upvalley were chased out of one village by an excessively well organised community soldiery. They retreated hastily towards Tol Pass to recover some pride and rest their wounds, but they'd chosen a confounded time to do so, because an alert body of horsemen from the Furrowdale Valley fell on them with a vicious skill, and only eight escaped. Fleeing with desperation they met headlong Mial Hests company coming the other way and were exterminated on the spot.

On the top of the flat pass settled a wide shallow lake, still iced from Old West. Hest pitched his flaming tent beside Sheriats and the two men shook hands slowly, oddly

aware of the significance of this meeting yet not precisely certain how this significance was to be accomplished. The Caroyal general offered wine, and after a while of reminiscences of battles along the Rume, they felt more oomfortable with each other. Hest came to the point.

I control the Caroyal Plain, you control the Furrowdale Valley, or you will soon. Inevitably as our power increases we might want to fight each other. That is why I sent the letter, to avert a stupid war and propose a greater?.

He paused, certain of Sheriats attention.

“There are other threats to the stability of the kingdom, and neither of us could easily manage these without help from the other. The Highland tribes are of course are formidable, but they probably would not stray far from their traditional lands. The greatest threat is Herrietta of Granry?.

The day was warming under a low Sprig sun and one or two birds pecked cautiously around the perimeter of the tent, keeping a wary eye on the bored camp dogs, and unconcerned that the future of the kingdom was being decided just a beak or two from them.

Sheriat nodded slowly as Hest explained the grand scheme. It sounded simple, and workable, though he was perturbed at having the generals well-oiled army in the Furrowdale Valley alongside his own weaker forces. It was a risk. Certainly Herrietta would always pose a threat to him and to eliminate her would not only settle his position in the Furrowdale Valley nicely but would open up the glorious Granry, but how was that to be divided?

‘It is yours’ Sheriat gasped, completely unprepared for such an answer ‘and I take the Furrowdale Valley’.

And then Sheriat began to admire Mial Hest. He had known he was a clever soldier but this was a masterstroke. Of course they could not split the Granry in two. It was completely impractical as long as he controlled the Furrowdale Valley, Hest would end up with a divided kingdom, but, if Sheriat were granted the Granry, the richest part of the kingdom and equal to the others, then the organisation of their power was simple. Sure Sheriat came from the Granry, it was his home, and no better temptation could be offered a man than lordship of his own land, as Hest well knew.

They talked and argued through aftersun, and then drew up an agreement, a ‘sacred compact’ Hest called it.

After Boden on the first of Croppen, Hest would attack the monks on the Passage of Prayer and force his way directly to the Brilliant Lakes. On the flank, Sheriat would take the greater force and turn the corner of the Raggerok, and like the other arm of a giant claw meet with Hests force at the junction of the Royal Road and the Traders Road at the place called the Crosser. United they would advance on Noll. Sheriats experience of the Furrowdale Valley suited him for the longer but easier task of shifting the great bulk of men onto the Granry. Neither believed the Marshmen really existed. Hest was left with the ferocious challenge of the Passage of Prayer, and Sheriat was happy to leave it to him.

In the last evening light Sure Sheriat and his company rode down into the Furrowdale Valley, pleased that the future so simply agreed. Of course Hest might want to

swallow him in time, but with the Granry under his belt he was sure that even a hungry caerp like the general might have difficulty gulping down such a large morsel. Besides, he was no passive worm.

Mial Hest continued with his journey, humming the same ditty he had had in his head since leaving Caroyal. He turned right below the Tol Pass and followed the sides of the Hollering Hills as they swelled in green waves to the cavernous Rume. They passed dusty shrublands and remnants of villages, abandoned since the war of Stef-fans Succession and never re-occupied. Some of the old huts were no more than balls of flowering tangled vine with a few planks dangling forlornly. Here and there a poor village was passed and the folk were frightened to see such a body of men pass by, and it interested Mial Hest to see how people were faring in this neglected part of his kingdom. Not very well by all accounts, that is until they reached the boundary of the Duc du Qu'ets estate. Here was a remarkable change, an abruptly ordered landscape, the fences straight and the pasture rid of weeds. Sown fields lay in neat rectangles with fat cattle kept out with newly strung fences. Sheds were poised on every corner stuffed with hay, and the children had red cheeks and teasing manners, a good deal less awed by Mial Hests entourage than the poorer villages.

Significant what a full stomach can do mused the general.

They rode over the cropped and tended countryside to the great stone-faced house which stood at the hub of the estate. Their entrance caused a great alarm among the household. Doors were slammed shut, and fearful faces peered through windows as the riders dismounted from their steeds and stamped the cramp from their feet, jingling their spurs as they did so. Hest had only a brief time to admire the ornamentation and character of the house before the front door swung wide and an old man, a girl and two or three others came out and approached the riders. Hest stepped forward with an agile bow.

'The Duc du Qu'et?' he asked politely.

The old man looked at the girl and nodded.

Was this to be another exile? The consequence of Jokim Bonnifaces submissions? No realistic resistance could be put to these men and even when Juud forcibly suggested it the Duc for once became his old self and shook his head. He would neither flee nor resist. 'All dwell in the Roundrell' he quoted the famous epigram and went out to meet the strangers. Juud was in despair, the awful possibility of another imprisonment rose like a black Wyrd in her mind, and despite her fathers refusal she posted concealed bowman around the house and courtyard.

'Let me introduce myself sir, Mial Hest, commander of the Baldymen and regent upon Lord Wenners son who I serve as the rightful heir to the kingdom'.

Juud was stunned.

Mial Hest here! How the oiled words slipped off his tongue. Of course they had heard of his 'regency', not even a polite fiction no doubt, but to find him here so far from Caroyal, to arrest the Duc again of that she was sure. She turned and signalled to Donan behind her who also made a small movement that was a sign for the bowmen to be prepared to fire. Hest was being bold to take such a risk she thought, and wondered if there were hundreds more horsemen waiting outside. With luck and Tilst they could

match these men, though she felt the futility of their position. But she would rather die than face another exile.

'I have long wanted to meet you sire, and assure you I come with only honourable intentions'.

The Duc was puzzled and terse.

'With all these horsemen? Honourable? You have come to arrest us?'

'On the contrary I have come to give you your freedom'.

The general was enjoying their consternation. The Duc looked at Juud who could hardly believe her eyes. She did not trust this man.

'How can you give that to us?' she asked quietly. Hest turned to her.

'Miss du Qu'et? By granting back the land Wenner stole'. Juud gasped.

'You would do that?' she murmured almost to herself, wondering that any favours could come from Caroyal.

'Wenner is dead. He stole your land, as he stole everyones land, and so I return it'.

This conversation seemed astounding to Juud. Her father was also at a loss and looked at his daughter for help.

'You travelled from Caroyal to tell us that?' she asked doubtfully.

'No. I travelled to see the Duc du Qu'et and his beautiful daughter'.

Was this flattery or teasing?

'A dusty ride for not much' she replied with more confidence.

'I do not agree. Rarely has a journey been more pleasant'. The charm of the man began to emerge as he talked, and softened the soldiers cruel outline.

The Duc asserted himself to interrupt this banter between the general and his daughter.

'I completely fail to understand you sir, but I propose to offer some hospitality in the hope you will explain your business more fully inside. Your men cannot stay, but may camp outside'.

Hest nodded and gave his orders accordingly. As he walked in to the house he noticed the bowmen standing by the windows and doors and raised his eyebrows at Juud who looked him calmly in the eye then lead the way on. This was a fine spirited woman and no mistake.

They settled in the old-fashioned styled drawing room where a servant bustled around with leafen and cakes till she was dismissed by Juud. Hest noticed the authority with which Juud managed the servants and realised that it was she, not the Duc, who was the real master of this house. It took some time, some words and some charm on the part of Mial Hest to convince Juud that his explanations were genuine. She could not dismiss the idea from her head that this was still some form of clever trap and probed him deeply as to his motives.

The Duc sat and listened for a while, then gradually fell into sleep. The general and the woman were left to face each other.

'You are ruler of the kingdom?'

It was hardly a question. He nodded.

‘And the regency?’

‘Only a disguise, a temporary fiction till the population gets used to another king’. It was brutal and honest. Juud wondered if she admired him for it. She nibbled a cake inconsequentially whilst she followed a curious idea.

‘You had no love of King Wenner’.

‘Would you? We were partners in war once, both gaining from the other, but power turned him to his own devices. He stole my wife, grasped my command of the Baldymen and sent me to rot in Swaleton, but you could hardly love him either? Your sisters and brothers killed, your father exiled?’

She began to nod then stopped herself.

‘I seem to be agreeing with you’ and then she remembered hotly ‘but you were a part of that killing’.

He shrugged.

‘In war one obeys. The killings were stupid. Lutens Wenner could have attained all his desires by diplomacy’.

‘Is that your approach Mr Hest, for a soldier it seems unlikely?’

‘Only soldiers Miss du Qu’et really know the futility of war’.

Juud looked at him carefully as he said this. He really did seem to mean it and she found herself nodding almost in agreement again.

‘I seem to be agreeing with you when I am uncertain whether you are friend or foe’ she said sadly.

Hest leaned forward urgently.

‘Very much the friend Miss du Qu’et. I saved your lives! Yes, does that shock you? Listen! Was not the escape from Swaleton so easy? Well I restrained the Baldymen who were sent to watch your father, and when you fled over Three Thrum Pass and dodged the Baldymen at the foot, was not that so ridiculously simple? I choose that incompetent to lead those soldiers’.

‘Why should you do this?’ protested Juud.

‘Because I wanted your escape. It suited me to have the Duc du Qu’et wandering around the countryside. It embarrassed Wenner, made him look a Gadabout, and besides I admired the skill of this wayfarer man, Widsith? There is a man who I could trust. Tell me, did he kill Driac Slorty?’

Juud gasped and Mial Hest leaned back in satisfaction.

‘You see? It is a coincidental world. We are linked more than you can guess. The timing of your arrival in Hollering Hills with Slortys death seemed uncanny, and I played my instinct, I would like to meet wayfarer Widsith one day. We would appreciate each other I think’.

‘You already have’.

Juud was boldened by this conversation to give her own confidences. He looked surprised.

‘He told me once, that you and Lutens Wenner threatened him whilst you were hunting one day’.

Now it was Hests turn to look amazed. Of course! The sun and scent of that confrontation more than ten years ago came back to him. Wenner had given him a nasty rebuke. So that was Widsith...

‘Tell me about him’.

Reluctantly at first, then warmly Juud told of Mikal Widsith, and of his abilities and sound judgement, and quick resourcefulness. Almost in spite of herself, an admiring note crept into her description and the general noticed it. When she had finished he nodded slowly.

‘You see how our lives are entwined Miss du Qu’et? Yours, his and mine, have been linked quite inexorably by this man Wenner’.

‘But now he is dead.’ Juud broke in stiffly. She was suddenly alarmed at her confidences to this man who had been, and could still be, a powerful enemy.

‘Yes’.

He sipped at his leafen and gazed out of the window at the rich and glowing stubble of new corn.

‘You have a fine estate, it is managed well’.

He was probing again, looking for weak points and once again he felt he had located them. Though she only nodded in reply he could sense her satisfaction in the prosperity of the estate.

This woman tempted him. He had to admit it. She was strong-tempered, capable and unexpectedly beautiful. He had vaguely imagined a child when he thought of the Duc du Qu’ets daughter so it was a pleasing surprise to find a woman. Could he woo her? Why, was she not sole descendant of the Due du Qu’et and therefore carried the original lineage from Swivven himself. And the Charmstone? Surely they still possessed that? His calm exterior gave no hint to the racing ambitious thoughts that were within him, but by the time he turned away from the window he had already decided to linger on this place and try his fortune on this tempting creature. There were no relations in the way, no dominant father, or suspicious mother. Only her resourcefulness against his. It would be a fair match.

‘I have decided, Miss du Qu’et, can I call you Juud...?’

‘Certainly not. We are not friends yet Mr Hest’. The general took the blunt rebuff with humour.

‘As I was saying Miss du Qu’et’ he continued smoothly ‘I would like to stay and see your estate, and talk to you and your father more about your remarkable journeys. Why you probably know more about the kingdom than any person living, except perhaps wayfarer Widsith’.

Juud was cautious.

‘Your time is more valuable than idleness here surely? We would dull you’.

The general put on his best smile.

‘If I return to Caroyal I will be besieged by people begging favours and pledging loy-

alties that are only inspired by their purses. Spare me that immediate prospect. I have come to do a tour of this land and I can think of no reason to be hasty about it. I will send most of my men back, so you shall not fear that I will be of threat to you. Please it will be a great favour to me’.

The Duc stirred and coughed himself awake.

Juud was touched by Hests pleading tone, although she hardly relished having the ruler of the kingdom to entertain but could they in honesty refuse? Surely he meant no harm?

‘I apologise my dear. Sleep comes remarkable easy when you get old’.

Juud nodded, distracted from her thought.

‘Well’ she said slowly ‘if it pleases you...’ Hest smiled, and the Duc looked absently between both of them. Juud was annoyed at being rushed into agreeing, but then, another thought, hardly conscious in her mind, had also persuaded her. It would be pleasant to have some more company than the lugubrious Donan and her failing father. Her outer shell was resistant to the regents surface charms but there was an inner womanly self that felt a loneliness of spirit acutely. She could feel it move inside her, wanting to escape.

### III

Spring, it is said, is the time for lovers. Whilst the new earth bursts with bud and blossom, and animals rut in the fields, then the heart is stirred in some primeval way to reach towards its satisfaction. The whole natural world, in secret dens and hidden hedgerows, is busy with a million different copulations and the air is flavoured with a rare industry of procreation that poisons the pleasure of your own company. Where begets these impulses? From habit or instinct? Or natural desire? Or the subtle interwovenness of love? But flowers do not love so why do people? Or are people no different from the natural instincts they deride in animals but mask in themselves under the poetry of love? Juud was unprepared for this man and his attentions. She was flattered and alarmed, scared and yet also drawn to his vigorous no-nonsense speech, his face ascetic as a monks and to the great athleticism of his body that could dismiss a days hard ride around the estate as a casual jaunt. His wit was sharp and his manner courteous, and she found to her surprise a feeling of regret for his quickening departure. As the days and then the wicks became precious she was placed under more pressure, and forced to decide, but then, what was it that had to be decided?

On the first day they inspected the estate and in the evening, joined by the Duc, they talked of their journeys and their histories. The next day repeated the pattern, with the lean general always in patient company of the mistress of the estate and a few knowing looks appeared on the servants faces. Juud saw it and flamed with embarrassment. She hated herself yet could not stop herself. At first she noticed that Mial Hest seldom spoke about himself in his tales of the intrigues and infamies of Wenners court, but

later, when she had to invent reasons for riding with him, she no longer noticed the general's silence on this topic and filled the air between them, with what, even the most charitable part of her self-assessing character could admit was only chatter.

She was slipping, tugged by Sprig and loneliness. Tempted by the empty nearness of the general's muscular arms.

Two days had now passed and Mial Hest made it known he would leave the day after tomorrow. Juud was in profound agitation that night, pacing her room long after the candle had burnt out and staring through the thrown open window and staring up for assistance to the few stars that penetrated the haze of silky night cloud. What did she want? This man had disturbed her, got into her skin till now her soul was crying for release. Would she give herself to him? No, surely not. It was her heart that was agitated, not her body. What did she want? Was it a betrayal to Mikal to love this man? But she could not go on loving a man who was not there, who was in some remote unclutchable part of the kingdom. It was the real fleshy presence of Mial Hest that warmed her. Oh, how she wanted Mikal, but he was not here, and may never be here again, stupid, stupid, heart, and stupid love, and she bit her hand hard, drawing blood, and staring helplessly at the cruel pain of absence.

The penultimate day and Juud du Qu'et and Mial Hest rode to the bank of the Rume River where a copse of trees sloped down to the sluggish water and grass glades broke the trees in patches of sunlight. Hest looked around and approved of the site. He had begun to wonder if his courteous wooing had been making any progress at all, and he understood by this discreet place that she had at last given way to his attentions. He should not have been so confident. Juud's mind was a maze of confusion. She hardly knew herself why she had ridden here, except that she had often come when wanting to be alone and it seemed almost like some bizarre Wyrds dream that Mial Hest was accompanying her.

After the high sun, and a little wine drunk, he turned to her and moved very close.

'I will be sad to leave you' and he placed his hand on her knee.

Juud was numbed, unable to respond. The general took this for shyness and pulled her face close to his kissing her lightly on the lips. His warmth and smell were overwhelming and Juud responded timidly then almost angrily kissing and clasping Mial Hest as he fumbled at her riding jacket and loosened the toggles on her jerkin. His hand squeezed on her breast through the light material and their combined weight toppled over and the general was pawing over the ripe body he had sought for nearly three days. Stuess knows that in a bitwick Juud du Qu'et, mistress of the Qu'et estate, and Mial Hest, soldier and regent of the entire kingdom, would have been mating like any other animal that Sprig, if they had not been disturbed.

A dog barked and came snuffling out of the undergrowth. There was a man's shout and Juud in haste disengaged from under the general's body and stood up shaking and bewildered. She really would have given herself.

The man shouted again closer 'Ned!' and there was a rustle in the shrubs nearby. Juud had time to straighten her hair and Mial Hest resumed a more elegant position.

A local peasant burst out shouting 'Ned, Ned, ohh missus. I'm sorry. I was looking for, ah there you are' as the dog came yapping back. The peasant took in the scene

(too shrewdly for Juuds hot face) and with a quick bow retreated through the trees.

The mood was shattered of course and they looked at each other stupidly, trying to smooth ruffled clothes and psyches.

Hest reached out as he stood and took her hands.

‘A stupid fellow. Shall we start again?’

Juud looked shocked and retreated slightly.

‘Dogs sometimes wander’ she said quite inappropriately. She was highly embarrassed at what the peasant had seen, nothing much perhaps, but still too much. Yet Mial Hest had pulled her into his arms again.

She murmured ‘You must not rush me’.

‘But there is only tonight left?’

She nodded and tried to smile for him.

‘Yes we still have tonight’.

Hest smiled to himself. Tonight then.

They gathered themselves together, packed the saddlebags and rode slowly back. That dayend the conversation around the fire was desultory, with only the Duc managing to keep any interest in the well worn journeying stories. Juud was feeling ashamed and Mial Hest was watchful. She excused herself early and paced up and down in her room, tired for sleep and wide-awake to the foolishness of the passion. He would come tonight. Would she let him in? Could she now, in any case, refuse?

There was a gentle knock on the door.

Already?

She stared dumbly at the door whilst the knock was repeated. This time a quiet voice muttered ‘Mistress?’.

She strode over and flung it open to reveal Donan standing awkwardly. She was relieved it was not Mial Hest but furious it was Donan. Her nerves were at shrieking point and she put all her anger into hissing at her farm manager.

‘What do you want Donan?’

What possessed him to knock at this time of night? And he knew he was not allowed on this floor.

‘Excuse me mistress, its late I knows, but, err’ he looked around anxiously.

‘This is hardly the time for a discussion on farm management’.

Donan winced, but he was determined to press on. The peasant had already gossiped and it gave a sharp edge to his news. Strom knew how far it had gone.

‘It’s not that mistress, its, err, private’.

What could the stupid Tilst want? Exasperated, she marched back into her room and gestured him to follow. This was sure to embarrass him, and he followed reluctantly.

‘Shut the door. Well?’ Juud stared as her manager shifted his position uneasily.

‘Errr mistress, its about Mial Hest, the general I means’.

‘What about him?’

Juud was taken aback. If the idiot was going to warn her off she would sack him on the spot.

‘Well, err, I’s heards from this wayfarer you see, whose came along yesterday, that, well the general he met up with Sure Sheriat on the Tol fore he came here’.

‘So?’

Juud could hardly see the point of this.

‘Well, mistress, there was some rumour of some agreement he reckons. He was talking to them soldiery and they reckon a great army is to be got up’.

‘What for?’

‘Dunno mistress, dunno’ and Donan scratched his head slowly ‘maybes to tackle the Marshmen, or go onto the Granry’.

Juud was still struggling to see the consequence of all this, though it was strange Mial had not mentioned it.

‘Well he is a general, what else would he do but make an army’.

Even in her own ears that sounded lame. She twisted a strand of her hair around her finger, a girlish trick that she had never lost the habit of. It helped her to think.

‘Ahh, well, its too much for me to understands mistress, though maybes’ and an inspired idea crept into Donans brain ‘the Furrowdale Valley and Caroyal be linked yer see and who coulds resist em?’

There was silence as Juud digested this. Such an army would be powerful indeed, why, even the Marshmen might not be able to resist, and the mountain kingdoms? Why what would Widsith think of this? Then it was on her, the jarring enormity of what was planned. One great kingdom, and no room for the Past Peoples. Such a force would destroy all of them, the Marshmen, the Highland tribes, even the shy Low-leahs Everything she had found to value would be threatened by this allegiance, it was like an act of war already! Mikal must know! This was a horrible thing, and he, that smugged charmed soldier had said not a word except those persistent questions about the Charmstone. It was all so painfully, humiliatingly clear to Juud now! What a dumb, patient, heart-swooning Gadabout she had been! Even she was a prize in the lottery of power, for the lineage of the Qu’ets ran through her, and the succession, and his heir through her would legitimately claim, and she gasped as she followed the golden thread of Hests ambition.

She clasped her head in her hands and squeezed it, much to her managers amazement.

This man was more evil and dangerous than Lutens Wenner could ever have been, and to think that in a wick she might have been encased in his arms, feeling his body on hers, every intimate part of her exposed for the generals pleasure, and she little better than a whore... and she stamped the ugly thought out and swung around on Donan who jumped backwards at her vehemence.

‘Donan I have been a Bree! A stupid, silly, flirty Bree! Forgive me, please’.

She placed her thin hands on his shoulders and gripped them tightly.

'Listen. This is what we must do' and Juuds mind raced into the problems of flight. 'Saddle up two horses, with baggers and provisions for a long journey. We will take horses up to the Hollering Hills and walk from there, a long walk, to the Highland kingdom'.

Of course! Mikal would know what to do, Mikal.

Donan was a long way behind her.

'How's that mistress?'

'Now, tonight. Can you do this?'

'Well, err, what about the Duc mistress? And I dont's know the way?'

'Neither do I but we must go. I will answer to my father for you. Will you come?' She pleaded at his hesitation. 'I need you and cannot go alone. You have no children, no wife, I cannot order you'.

Donan did not hesitate. It was a matter of duty and he had never flinched from that.

'I'm ready mistress. I'll get everything, now?'

He still had to pose the question for there was pretty well everything he did not understand.

'Yes, quickly. Wake Maggen, and so, so quietly. We must be gone in a wick, and beware of Mial Hest, he will prowling after me and must not know'.

Donan nodded grimly and happily. There was one in the eye for the slimy general. It looked as if the mistress were not keen on him after all.

Juud packed hurriedly and locked her bedroom door after her to repel a passionate soldier. She slipped like a pale ghost to the parlour where several servants were astonished to find themselves packing food and necessities into baggers and saddlebags at this time of night. Juud hushed them, and got them to work in anxious silence. That being done, and Donan bringing in the horses, she padded along to her fathers room. He was dozing in his chair. She woke him and knelt before him trying to whisper the urgency into her words.

'Father, listen, please. We are being tricked. Mial Hest is deceiving us with his kindness and is getting up a great army to subdue the kingdom. He will destroy all the early peoples, I know it, he is that sort of man, and' seizing on a sudden idea 'he will destroy the roundrell too. I must leave, now, and travel to the Highland kingdom and find way-farer Widsith. Something has to be done father, this man is terrible.'

But how could she explain what she only violently felt in her heart. That Mial Hest would outrage the kingdom as he would have outraged her. With a smile and pat on the head.

'I'm taking Donan'.

She paused and looked lovingly at her father.

'You may be in great danger if I leave you, but you cannot come with us. You must hide, somewhere on the estate, there may be places' but what was the use? Her father was too old for hiding. She must trust to Hests disinterest in the Duc and hope he would try to follow her.

'You understand father?'

He nodded slowly and stroked her hair.

'We are a troubled family daughter. Exile and imprisonment, flight, danger, a troubled family, as we are doomed by someone. That charmed stone has no charm for us dear'.

'But I am trying to save the roundrell father, or nothing will be spared'.

He smiled, and murmured softly.

'Spirite alas au veersaad'.

She hugged him and fled.

## Pattern of Movement

*An urgent chapter of movement. Juud du Qu'et takes on another great journey, whilst Mial Hest does the same, with different intent. Caroyal likes the idea of war, it is a change after all, and high in the Rise there is a Meet of great significance.*

The horses were led out of the dark yard, skittish at this strange departure time. Whilst servants held the bridle of the nervous horses Donan and Juud mounted. The old cook thrust a parcel a food tearfully into Juuds arms and they were off, trotting through the night land. Juud glanced back once at the great house, but it was all in darkness, and she turned back to the business of following Donans horse with its pool of lantern light. Dawn found them at the foot of the Hollering Hills. Donan blew out the lantern and let the horses make their own progress up the narrow mountain trail. Apart from an occasional warning word of caution from Donan about a rockfall, or a hard patch of snow, no word was exchanged between them. It was the first time Juud had been up this track since her father had left Widsith and Hull, and it seemed portenous somehow, another great journey begun? Bird sound occupied the air with song and here and there a mountain stream flushed with melting snow bustled past the forest and over the trail. On the forest edge the travellers met the cloud coming down and were swallowed by a clinging mist. After a wick of steady uphill the trail eased and came to a standstill by the tiny stone hut Juud knew so well. It gave her a wrench just to see it.

The shepherd, only just gone up for Sprig, was amazed to see his mistress and manager turn up so abruptly out of the morning, and he hurried around preparing leafen and flatcakes for his noble guests. Juud watched him working and understood the gulf that lay between this simple shepherds ambitions and her own great undertaking. The leafen was hot and the flatcakes fresh and sweet. She felt cheered by the shepherds simple chatter and laughed at the thought of Mial Hest pacing the house with his male passions aroused.

Whilst Donan started the complicated process of repacking everything from saddlebags into baggers, she climbed the wet grass bank behind the hut and went to the round dell, for no clear reason. She never thought of herself as a sentimental person yet here she was, on a foggy chilly hillside looking down upon the dell that had not changed from her first childish visit. So much had happened since. The sun had gone,

not yet from her heart, but she felt that this journey was a more arduous and more confusing than she could know. She knew she was split between her stated public duty and a yearning for one man, and she wandered down into the bleak circle of stones remembering that incident a year past.

If she had not loved she would still be a child.

She could not help herself and she looked at one stone and then another, tipped one over and then another until she found the moss-damp leather purse, and dug her fingers into the grimy sack and pulled out a glittering thing, that even in the grey damp of a Hollering Hills morning had a deep green fire within it. Mikal had one half and she the other. If it was sentimental to bring the two together, then so be it.

When she got back Donan had finished the packing and was immersed in a complicated and inevitably serious conversation with the shepherd about the merits of bringing sheep up so early in Sprig. How that man was serious! A joke fell barrenly on Donan's hairy ears and a smile was rare as a sober man at Harvess. Juud wondered if she had been better to pick another companion for this long travail, but her manager was capable and reliable, sound to his duty, even if he went about that duty with as little humour as Tilst. They would have argued all day if Juud had not interrupted.

'We must go soon Donan'.

'Oh, aah mistress' Donan broke off his discussion which had now turned on the heated point of how thick was a sheep's wool.

'What route do we take from here mistress, for I'd have thought we'd go across the plain like and over Tol?'

Juud shook her head.

'That will not do. Mial Hest will not be pleased by my absence and will try to stop us. We must think like him, and then take the unexpected way. He would surely interrupt us if we tried to cross the plain whereas he would not expect us to go along the tops of the Hollering Hills'.

'Can yee get along this way mistress?'

'Yes' said Juud confidently. If Mikal could do it in Sprig, then surely she could follow a year later.

Yet, once the baggers were loaded onto their shoulders and they were confronted by the mist Juud was not as confident, and they left their horses and the thick solid substance of the hut reluctantly. The shepherd guided them a short way and then retreated with a solemn 'fare ye both well' and the manager and the mistress were left to their own devices.

Juud tried to remember all the advice that Widsith had given when following routes over the mountains in thick weather. They kept climbing, slipping on the wet grasses and feeling the weight of the baggers dig into their shoulders. They tried to keep moving slowly, with few rests, and after the morning felt the better for it. The cloud was still heavy and showed no sign of lifting, and although Juud consulted her father's old map once or twice it was of no clear assistance. She explained to Donan that they must press steadily along and upwards till the crest of the range was reached and then follow the long undulations of the hills as they swung around to the Tol. Donan remembered that

he had seen most of this range from the plain and it seemed easy going, but...

‘Where’s we going to find shelter mistress?’

That answer came on dusk, and the cloud if anything thicker, with a chill seeping wind that bent the drop-bangled grasses. In a cluster of rocks they found a space and draped the canopy over them so that a small cramped shelter was established. They chewed rather miserably on the cold cuts of meat that Maggen had thrown into Juuds arms and huddled themselves into their damp blankets. Juud insisted that they keep close together to Donans embarrassment.

‘I am not going to freeze Donan, and neither are you. Forget I am either mistress or woman and just a body with heat. I will treat you the same.’

Poor Donan could hardly argue and submitted his large body to be pressed close to hers. Juud was thankful that she did not like her manager much, for already she had had a crisis of confidence over this journey and had already pestered her mind with ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ as they lumbered along, but she was too proud to admit any of these doubts to Mr Shallbody. For his part, Donan thought the whole thing madness, but duty was duty and he was bothered that the Duc would let the estate fall into premature ruin before he could return.

In such a way they slept.

## II

Mial Hest had had one poor nights sleep and was Stomed if he would have another. He was puzzled by the locked door that greeted his anxious hand, and despite tapping lightly several times got no reply. Feeling like a fool he stomped back angrily to his own room and silently cursed the fickleness of women. He slept nervously, constantly waking and fretting and in the morning hurried downstairs to the breakfast room where he was perturbed to find ‘the mistress indisposed and feeling poorly and would not be out today’.

This baffled and annoyed the general and he took it as an insult. Although he felt oddly heartsick, and realised that even he, Mial Hest, could feel pangs of unrequited love. In a hurry now to leave these romantic idlings he went out to the stables to find his horse looking as sick as Drubbin after a binge.

‘Ere sire, they’re all like that. Somethin’ they ate I’m sure, it’s right puzzling. Not a standing horse in the stables’ explained the stable man patiently.

He promised to send out immediately for a horse from one of the out farms but it would take a while. Hest fumed at this turn of events and strode back to the house getting more furious as the wicks slowly passed away. The Duc was polite and courteous to the difficulties encountered but only offered the recreation of his library, something that by now Mial Hest was heartily sick of. He had been too long inactive and wanted to be away. This wooing had obviously been a waste of time, and he had better find other ways of gaining the Charmstone that were not so time-consuming.

The stableman came to report a horse was ready in mid aftersun. Hest saddled up and glanced around. There was still no sign of his reluctant lover, and as he looked around the stable his senses suddenly sharpened. He could see no sign of Juuds favourite mare, and come to think of it, neither had he seen that sour-faced Tilster of a manager. So that was how the land lay eh?

Hest bid a courteous goodbye to the Duc and rode off from the house with no backward glance. He urged his mare into a gallop and rode swiftly over the tidy clipped fields of the Qu'et estate till he reached the ragged boundary. A league further he found what he was booking for, a scummy village where six of his men had exhausted the facilities of drink and women (neither of which were cheap) and saw the spurting dust behind the hooves of the generals horse as a welcome sign that business was back to normal.

Hest took two men to travel with him back to Caroyal and sent the rest back to place a permanent house arrest on the Duc du Qu'et, 'and his daughter if you find her but I fancy that baldybird has flown and the manager too, Shallbody, if he's there. Don't harm the old boy and let the estate continue. I'll send more men and further instructions later. Be off!'

Hest spun his horse and not waiting for his two retainers demonstrated his haste to get matters moving. Horses began to ride in two directions across the plain, and one could feel the quickening of action that riders speed entailed. Like Sprig that was also quickening into Croppen, but without that seasons hope.

### III

The second day was spent blundering around in the fog. They found the ridge crest but the slopes dipped and slipped uneasily in all directions, not always uphill by any means, and for one wick they managed a complete circle, getting colder and angrier every wick. At least Juud got furious, and furious with herself for getting furious. Donan maintained a plodding Tilst calm to her spurts of hope and temper. The mist had cleared by the third day and their position and progress was was satisfactory.

The grass basins were full of flowers, and tarns heavy with frogs croaking, though how on earth they got there Juud could not imagine. The views out were stupendous, and for many shaking moments Juud was daunted by the sheer scale of the task ahead, huge ranges of mountains powered their way up to great skies and enormous horizons. Donan commented sourly.

'Me boots aren't big enough for this kingdom missus' and Juud knew what he meant.

She had persuaded Donan to let her carry a fairer share of the weight, as he was staggering under a massive bagger. Donan, quite reluctantly, exchanged some articles and was puzzled and a little irritated by this womans ability. They had stepped into a pattern of movement, waking on dawn, leaving immediately, stopping after a wick for

some doubtful meat and hard dry rye, then continuing to highsun and the same meal. Juud looked forward to when the meat was all eaten. In the aftersun they walked till a wick before dusk then gathered some dead branches from scrubby plants for a fire, and boiled some brutens, which with some tarn lettuce and a treat of malep filled their stomachs. They bedded down on dusk, usually in a hollow stuffed with grasses and mosses and covered with a canopy draped over the sidewall rocks. It was hardly comfortable camping.

Yet the weather stayed mild, and the dampness of their clothes from the night dried out in the sunny Sprig breezes. Donan had been appalled by Juuds breeches, calloused and patched from another great journey and not worn since, but Juud dismissed his protests and welcomely dismissed her long dress for the comfortable trousers, and she nostalgically added her old travelling bodice and jerkin. In one of the jerkins pockets she found a posy of flowers, brittle and dry from their long stillness in the dust of her pocket. Shy, alpine flowers, collected on her birthday she remembered.

They had to skirt large hard snow patches that were like ice to step on, and in the distance as the weather grew finer they could see the higher shining expanses of the Fore Range beyond the Tol, and shivered at the prospect. The shepherd had said that the snows had been long this year, and they could see with their own eyes the snow sticking stubbornly to the hillsides. She privately hoped that with some clear days the snow would melt, or at least soften, but knew from experience that even that could make their progress difficult, and maybe even stop it. On the seventh day they came to a vantage point overlooking the Tol Pass, which looked sunk and deep in its bare rock bed. The lake shone like a great eye. It seemed a tediously long way to descend only to struggle up the other side again. They did not dare camp on the pass itself, and decided to go across at night if the sky stayed clean and lit with the moon. Donan tried to persuade Juud that they should go direct to the Furrowdale Valley.

'It would be quicker mistress, and that's ice look mightily hard'.

'It is not ice Donan, but snow, and it will soften', and Juud stuck to her determination to continue along the Fore Range, to Traders Gate at least. Beorht would be too risky if Sheriat really was in league with Hest, no it had to be the wayfarers way. Secretedly she thought Mikal would admire her for taking such a route, he might even love her for it.

That day they climbed up onto Stroms Helmet and gazed as far as they could. The great Furrow River could be seen twisting like a gleaming snake down the Furrowdale Valley and Donan swore he could see the towers of Beorht. The Rume plain disappeared into haze but the Keeb Mountains stabbed their massive thumb up from the plain, and to their side, even at this great distance, could be seen the rumped ruffled green Forest of Gloreen. Turning around there was the Marsh kingdom, at least it was if you could see it, but as always it was hidden by the permanent mass of squat fog that rose improbably to resemble clouds, perhaps they were clouds thought Juud. It was a rare day of sight, one that such as Strom himself might see.

They scrambled off the smooth rocks of the summit and down to where their baggers were, and spent the rest of the day dozing in sunshine.

At dusk they crept down like thieves over the slabs of still warm rock to the horribly

empty and exposed pass. Every tinkle of rock stood their senses up on end, and the sudden disgruntled shriek of a baldybird made them judder to a stop, waiting like the rocks around them for something to happen. But there were no surprises, only graceful Wene sent a silver shine onto the pass as she crept over Stroms Helmet.

Everything was quiet and they rested by the lake a little, watching the occasional fish spurts as they disputed this little territory to themselves, the ripples sent out to all corners of the pond in a miniature spasmodic upheaval that would then settle as if smoothed by Wenes placid hand. The silence and stars were unnerving to Donan who made motions to put on his bagger. He was a Tilst man, daylight in other words, and didn't take to this night creeping, and his unuttered thoughts stood shaken as an un-earthly sound froze him to the ground.

It was a voice, singing. A ghastly broken song that would have chilled Juuds heart if it had not sounded vaguely familiar.

She stood up and motioned Donan to silence as she listened.

'Come on mistress' whispered Donan in a hoarse voice 'let's leave before it finds us'.

'No listen?'

Donan had already heard quite enough and his peasants blood was half curdled at the thought that Wyrd himself might be poised on their path.

Juud said strangely.

'I know that voice. I'm sure I do, and the song'.

Donan stared at her as she dropped her bagger and started walking towards the singer. Donan was tortured between two choices, whether to flee or follow, and finally let duty settle the matter by rushing after Juud. The singing voice was quite loud and came from a small cup of land where a trickle of fire escaped into the night. Juud and Donan peered cautiously over the lip. Donan started and tried to pull away from the apparition, a dark gloomy bearded figure creature hunched by the fire with a large winged hat like a baldybirds outstretched wings shadowing the creaky horrid voice.

Wyrd himself!

'Mistress come, flee!' he whispered frantically, shuddering to get away from the evil magic God.

'Oh do not be silly Donan' Juud said loudly in a conversational voice, and shook off his tugging hand and walked down to the stranger. This figure looked up, unsurprised by Juuds presence, and broke off his song.

'Eeee missus, travelling far  
to sees a curious star?'

'Hullo Sollo' said Juud and the old trader chuckled and returned to his song of the roundrell.

#### IV

Mial Hest rode back hard from his love-making expedition, a failure for sure, yet he was certain that he would meet Juud du Qu'et again, and he would not let her slip a second time, but in any case he found at Caroyal a city and an army, waiting. This enterprise generated tremendous optimism and once the alliance became public knowledge, no one could see how Mial Hest could fail to subdue the Granry. Adjectives flew in praise about Mial Hest, his brilliance, his shrewdness, his austerity, and they began to call him a second Swivven the Great. The wealthy men of Caroyal saw great opportunity when Hest took the Granry (there was no 'if' in this talk, and no one had appraised them that in any case the Granry was going to Sheriat) and saw the rich fat grasslands would make princes of them all. Even the poor had dreams, of opportunity and glory, Strom knew the ideas that were festering in the taverns amongst peasant men and beggar boys. Anyone who could shout kept shouting and if there was one cynic, he kept wisely quiet.

By mid-Sprig the army was in a body, if not in fitness, and Hest prepared to leave Caroyal taking the vanguard of his army to join Sheriats at Beorht. Other pieces of the army would be brought on as they were ready. Hest knew it was a shoddy and quick way to make a fighting force but he surmised that the mass of soldiers would panic Herrietta. All he needed and all he took was a lean hardened thousand men, mixed soldiers and baldymen, perhaps the best and fiercest fighting force ever assembled. He did not think Herrietta could match that, and as for the monks, they had their prayers, much good it would do them.

On the 50th day of Sprig, Mial Hest rode on his horse in front of a thousand men, and banners flung wishes, the soldiers sung, the crowds cheered, maids threw extravagant kisses to the soldiers from their safe ballustrades, and nervous pop-eyed children ran like fiends between the legs of the adults. A thousand stamping feet did a turn through the city and Caroyal went crazy with euphoria. Let Wenner be damned! Strom will guide Mial Hest! Hest the Great! The Granry and the glory! The Granry and the glory! It was a day that stirred the most cynical heart and every man and woman and child knew that this was a sublime moment in their lives.

## V

With Sollo in shambling accompaniment they walked up the broad flanks of Tol Pass and onto the high grasses of the Fore Range, bedecked with Sprig colour.

Donan grumbled about acquiring Sollo Wramm, even though Juud had patiently explained the traders value as a guide. In Donans books traders were not much better than tinkers or wayfarers, and he tried to impress on his mistress his thoughts concerning the untrustworthiness of the species as a whole, to no avail. He even complained of Sollos vile smell, but Juud stopped that argument with the comment that 'we'll smell

no sweeter by the time we reach the mountain kingdom?.

Sollo in the end had the last word when he made a clever pun on Donans surname.

‘Shall a body be a trusting

Or shall a body be distrusting?’

Donan could not fathom how the trader knew his name and shouldered his bagger sourly and mumbled that ‘he’d do duty to the mistress but he didn’t have to like the tricky fellow’.

Up the Fore Range they slogged, quickly reaching the snowline and finding it (to Juuds relief) soft and not too deep. Sollo soon took the lead and hopped along the glistening slopes in a curious baldybirds gait, his cumbersome cloak flapping behind and his wide-brimmed hat twitching with the wind. Donan was disgusted by the bird bones that Sollo cracked open and chewed with his teeth. For days they just seemed to climb, interminably, till the sun pierced even the cloths they wrapped around their eyes and Tol looked like a deep cool well, unimaginably deep. Strom was up here Donan thought worriedly, and he would be watching, perhaps getting angry at this gross intrusion. He did a few quick prayers to Tilst, but felt the uselessness of it, the ploughman God wouldn’t be much help if Strom got nasty with them. Would this climb never stop? Their sight was strained by the fierce light and sweat poured through their hair and clothes as they laboriously climbed, almost to the sky it seemed, past pinnacles of shattered rock, great cracks in the snow and frozen ponds. Each night Sollo managed to find them some sort of covey amongst rocks where they could rest their eyes and sleep, and for six days the skies were as clear as Stuess eyes. When cloud came it was as if Strom had decided to meet his wife, so dark and ominous did they swirl around the peaks. It confirmed Donans worst fears. Sollo shook his head and tutted,

‘Missus, Strom be preparing a storm,

which is best for us to hide from’.

‘Do you know a place Sollo?’ asked Juud anxiously as the light darkened further and the sun disappeared behind a swathe of thundery cloud. Donan wiped his forehead and said miserably.

‘It looks right bad mistress. Strom he’s out for us’. Juud ignored him irritably.

Sollo stared intensely at the cloud then pulled out a bone from his headband and snapped it with great satisfaction. The others waited and watched this progress of sucking the marrow and grinding down the bone to chips that were spat out on the snow. Not for the first time Juud marvelled that the old trader had any teeth left. Abruptly Sollo twirled around and headed sharply uphill towards a rock ridge, the others anxiously following, their thoughts muted by the tremendous blackness that loomed above them. There was a rattle of thunder in the cloud, and somewhere further along the range lightning flickered weirdly off the rocks. Once Breet penetrated the cloud and cast a strange unearthly glow on the snow till she was swallowed by Stroms cloak. Donan swore he glimpsed a great god-like eye peering at him, red and furious, but Juud snapped at him that it was just the sun reddened by the cloud and stop his nonsense.

Sollo plodded on up the snow slope to the base of a rock bluff then followed it round, slipping and sliding on the steep snow as the wind shrieked around the corners

of the peaks. In a couple of bitwicks he gave a chuckle of pleasure and plunged into a narrow crevice that opened into a dark dry cave.

‘Oh Sollo. What would we do without you?’ Juud was so relieved.

Donan shared this emotion as he slumped his bagger to the ground with a sigh, though all he said was ‘its as dark as Wurds mind’.

They slept uneasily that night, as great flashes of lightning tore at the clouds and thunder bellowed in their ears, swelling inside the cave till it was impossible to sleep. By morning heavy rain had set in and travel was useless. For five days the weather stayed this way, sometimes the rain easing so it raised their hopes, but always thickening by nightfall. Breet remained hidden by Stroms dark temper and it began to seem that it would never clear. They had to eke out their food carefully as Sollo apparently had none of his own, unless you counted the chicken bones, which at the height of boredom Juud found herself doing one day. She thought Sollo had even been forced to ration those. How he managed to travel over the ranges with no food was a mystery. The bones irritated Donan, ‘Gadabouts bones’ he would complain, turning his eyes a way and shuffling into his blanket to shut out the sight and sound of trader Wramms sucking, blackened teeth. Sollo was unperturbed.

‘Let the rain go  
an’ we’ll see no snow’.

It was true as Juud realised as she peered into the gloom of the mountain. The snow was all being washed away and would make travel easy once the storm had passed –if it ever did. Juud realised how lucky they were to have met Sollo as a guide, would she and Donan have survived up here on their own? She doubted it. How did Mikal cope? Oh, but he could cope with anything. She tried to sleep, and spent many wicks in a half-dreaming, half-waking state where people and events floated into her memory, all jumbled up of course with bizarre tantalising juxtapositions. Once she woke up and swore that Widsith was sitting by her, puffing his reassuring pipe. It set her thinking, people had used this cave before so maybe Mikal and Hull had stayed here a year ago?

‘Do wayfarers use this place?’ she asked Sollo.

The old trader turned his amazingly clear green eyes on her.

‘Wayfarers travel high tus live

But none so high as Mikal Widsith’.

She blushed in the dark. Damn the fellow! He seemed to be reading her thoughts. Still it gave comfort to think Mikal had been here before, and as she slept on the ground she sometimes pressed it a little.

## VI

The weather was an annoyance to the general, who did not expect his plans to be thwarted even by a few days, and even by so great a god as Strom. His captains con-

fided that it was a Sprig storm, common enough for these times, and it would clear the snow from Traders Gate. So Hest busied himself with the organisation of his army and did not let his men sit around in the rain getting gloomy with delay. He worked them furiously, assaulting empty fortress crags and attacking towers of rock. He had them marching back and forth across the flooded plain till they hated him and worshipped him. By the time the storm had cleared another two thousand men had arrived from the training camp, and so it was a body of three thousand men who made their way over Traders Gate and unopposed into the Furrowdale Valley.

A few early merchants from Beorht, who reached the pass at the same time as the immense army blocking the pass, abandoned trying to get to the Sprig fairs in Caroyal, and instead set up shop where they did a roaring trade selling knick-knacks to the soldiers, some of whom had thought the valley a mythical place. It took almost two days for the column of colours to pass through Traders Gate, on the 55-56 of Sprig, and the merchants quickly packed up and left once the stragglng rearguard had gone. Some continued to Caroyal, but most chased after the column, anxious to reach Beorht before the army did. With their disappearance the pass became empty again, at least almost silent, except for three figures that crept down into the pass on darkness and stole like shadows quickly towards the Furrowdale Valley.

Juud was in a terrible hurry now, as the urgency of her cause grew more full on her. The storm had delayed them badly and the travel along the rest of the range had been difficult and fraying. To see that joyful ribbon of colour far below them on the Traders Gate been a sharp reminder that Mial Hest was no ordinary opponent, but of a purpose and dedication that would envelop the kingdom. And time was passing, passing terribly fast. They must keep moving, and make haste towards the Highland peoples. That night they stumbled down the mountain track to the Furrowdale Valley, slept a little on the rustling forest fringe, then made their way through forest trails and pastoral lands to the great tongue of rock that lolled out from the Fore Range. It was tempting to try and sneak around it, but that would bring them too close to Mial Hests army, so wearily they followed Sollo over a pass he knew and they came eventually to the banks of the Furrow River only a short way from Fromms Ferry. Donan and Juud were exhausted but could not allow themselves to stop. Sollo Wramm disappeared that night and Juud, who though not expecting it, was not surprised, and was too tired to explain to a grumbling Donan Shallbody that this was the old traders way. They walked steadily up beside the Furrow River and got lost in the bluffs and confusing footpaths that led up to the Rises.

A local shepherd, suspicious, but in the end oblidging, guided the strangers onto the Rise of Goil, and by enquiring along the way received further grudging directions from various villagers on how to reach the Rise of Bleen. It was close on dark, of late Sprig, the 60th perhaps, though Juud was too wearied to care, that they stumbled into the village of Hummer. A dog barked and a peasant came out and showed them to Mikal Widsiths door. Juud knocked timidly and a woman came out of the candlenight to the threshold.

‘Wayfarer Widsith? No, he is gone to the Meet’.

Juud looked despairingly at Donan. So much journey and still not finished.

‘Eeee missus, do yer knows when he’ll comes back like? We’ve come a terrible long

ways to see him' asked Donan.

The woman was puzzled, and turned to hush a questioning child behind her.

'Are you friends of his?'

Donan looked unsure and waited for Juud to reply.

'Yes, yes I am' she said softly, uncertainly 'my name is Juud du Qu'et, but he may have mentioned me?'

The woman looked at Juud sadly.

'Yes he has. Please come in, I am Mirren, his wife'.

'I know' said Juud, and followed Mirren into her parlour.

## This Powerful Pair

*Before we can breathe we have moved to the Granry and Herrietta has not wasted any time, either making the good townspeople of Noll subservient or the abbott, Reeter Serval, compliant. The princess learns two useful things, that Lutens Wenner was no longer a rival, and that it was more powerful to flirt with a man than to bed them.*

It was a solemn moment of pomp when the Prince of the Plains was carried in state through the great weneways gates of Noll and buried in full regalia in the cemetery specially prepared for its first royal guest. Virtually the entire population came out to watch the service, which held under a typically fine Granry day seemed at times more like a fair than a funeral. The princess stood alone in majestic black, and many of the population who genuinely mourned the loss of their beloved Prince felt sympathy for Herrietta as well. Some people noticed the small special wreath of flowers place by Reeter Serval on the coffin, and were touched by this gesture from the man who had so patiently nursed the sickening king through his long final illness. The bodies of Givtheem Tallott and Cean Grin'kel were displayed on the battlements as the murderous villains who had slaughtered Ogen on his bed, just, as rumour had it, the prince was beginning to 'win the struggle to live. Citizens could go and villify these corpses with words or stones, and many did so, and somehow got the impression that they were abusing the body of the Duc du Qu'et himself. Herrietta did nothing to discourage this but insisted in a sharp private letter to Reeter Serval that more proof of the Ducs death be forthcoming.

The abbott had been disconcerted by the night of violent activities himself and sent teams of warrior monks to search the rock gullies for evidence that the Duc had finally perished. A few bloody scraps of clothing were found and Serval sent these back to the princess, as well as a letter where he detailed how he presumed the nights events had occurred, but he admitted he could find no explanation as to why the members of the Duc du Qu'ets party should suddenly start to attack each other.

Herrietta was sorely puzzled by the business and considered the abbott had botched it badly. At least Ogen had an excuse for being dead, but the Charmstone, that glittering prize was probably only glass splinters under a weight of rock. What had Givtheem been up to? She had taken the trouble to preserve Tallotts life and was now confronted with a bloody remmant of flesh swinging from the battlements. The sight sickened

her, and did not remind her of the lusty rogue who had gained a part of her affections, perhaps the first, and if she had anything to do with it, the last time any man would do that!

Herrietta had the whole season of Old Wast to ponder all the ramifications of the events on the Passage. She was obliged to mourn Ogen's death till Sprig, and wear black (which she loathed) and to take no part in government affairs. At least that was the theory, but she privately ignored that injunction of funeral customs, and worked through Fustel to maintain control over her husband's kingdom. She distrusted Reeter Serval in his description of Tallott's death, too succinct and convenient for her liking, and she was in no rush to have him back in the capital. Still a promise was a promise and his letters grew more urgent as he failed to understand why she delayed his rehabilitation to the city. He held letters from her which would damn her to Wyrd if they became publicly known, and in time she would have to think about disposing of abbott Serval, but he could prove useful awhile.

Fustel was appointed regent for young Ogen, and the chamberlain was busier than ever, hurrying around in a perfect anxiety of decision and providing the stir of dust that hid the princess's subtle workings. The merchants and influential people of the city were not fooled of course, and did their dealings with Herrietta as if Ogen had not died and Fustel did not exist, and throughout Sprig Herrietta consolidated the public affairs of the Granry in her hands, till no one, or only a discreet few, questioned her authority. Reeter Serval was allowed to return to the city and was appointed prelate, the chief church officer for the souls of the city's population. He was delighted, and he made the most of his entry into Noll with a body of monks chanting plain hymn and a splendid inaugural service in the cathedral.

At their first private meeting Herrietta outlined the scope of her plans for the future, a double coronation for her and her son, who was sole heir back through the du Qu'ets to Swiven. This righteous cause would be publicised and an army established in Sprig of next year to be ready to enter the Furrowdale Valley in two thrusts. The first, under her command, past the great marsh and via the Royal Road into the Furrowdale, the second, under the command of the abbott, would lead the warrior monks down from the Passage of Prayer direct to Beorht. That Croppen the valley would be theirs, a simple straightforward business.

'And then Lutens Wenner' breathed Reeter Serval gleefully.

'Of course prelate. The Furrowdale Valley is merely the tasty first course. As a judge of food you will appreciate one does not swallow all the morsels at once' and smiled winningly at the abbott.

'It will be a fatty piece I dare say ma'am, grown lazy they say'.

Like all men Herrietta nodded to herself and kept smiling playfully. The abbott's cassock was already fuller than before, and his nose had a tinge of drinking blood in it.

'I will expect you to keep the monks in their best fighting order, they are our shock troops, and to increase their numbers'.

'Certainly ma'am'.

'Any confessions?'

That was a private joke between them. Serval, as prelate of Noll, heard most of the city's powerful people in their confessions, and naturally passed onto the princess the little human failings that could be exploited. What with Herrietta's spies and the abbott's ears, there was little that they did not know about the senior citizens.

'And I have a surprise for you dear abbott' Herrietta spoke again. This was the crucial time. If she had misjudged the man then she would have a problem, but if she judged right he would be hers for ever. She clapped her hands and an unobtrusive side door opened and a veiled girlish figure entered.

The abbott stared curiously, and his lower lip drooped in suspicious anticipation.

'Take off your veil' she addressed the girl, who shyly did so and revealed a charming, young girl of sixteen or about, with a white skin and blonde hair.

'Sweet, I rather think abbott she will be very a helpul to you and an honest child. A virgin of course, and very religious, I thought she would make an excellent companion for your late night prayers. Kneel before the abbott girl and take his blessing'.

Of course it could not be Herrietta's deliberate intention, but the girl's dress was cut low, and when she gazed up at the prelate her breasts were displayed to their full effect.

Reeter Serval stared and his whole body seemed to shiver under his cassock. He stared hard at the girl who blushed in awkwardness, and looked away, and then the abbott himself turned his glance aside.

'Most thoughtful Your Majesty, most thoughtful. She looks a pleasant child'.

Herrietta managed a smile that was neither gloating nor self-congratulatory, and for several weeks afterwards the girl paid regular weekly visits to the princess to tell what revolting deeds the abbott expected of her. When she was used up, the princess sent another, and another.

The news of Weners death came at Mid-Wast. Herrietta was disappointed, for she had fancied herself to pit her skills against this great scheming mind and most famous of lords, but then she heard of the ascendancy of Mial Hest, and she began to suspect that a far greater challenge was in store for her abilities. Nothing that was told of Mial Hest was either complimentary or critical. His reputation as a soldier was awesome and it was said by any that Wenner had built his kingdom on the back of Hest's sword. Strom does the work, but Wyrd is the master the sages would say.

She no longer pined for Givtheem Tallott. She had a ready supply of courtier men who more or less kept her entertained, but unbedded. Flirtation was a more powerful device, and Tallott was a mistake she realised now, and she cultivated a reputation of a pure princess for whom men could die for, in a cult of nobility that she encouraged as fast as she put together an army.

She was enjoying life. Enjoying power.

## The Hollowstone

*A long chapter, but we cover the extensive Meet that takes place in the magical Hollowstone. The wayfarer is no longer a private man. A legal chapter, of great interest to constitutionally minded readers but perhaps dull to someone searching for adventure, but it reminds people that humans do require some sort of sanction for their acts, whether popular support, or legal remedy. The man who goes alone, always stays alone.*

The dust was disturbed from unused seats and the torches crackled and fizzed into long dark passageways. Where there had once been silence and the faint scurry of a mouse, came the stomp of men, the royal and the humble, the elected and the inquisitive, those with profound duties and those with nothing better to do. Elders, speakers, layabouts, functionaries, the greedy, the wise, the opportunists and the bewildered. Some came with a grievance, some with hope. Some because they had to. But all came, to the intricate tunnelways and halls gouged out of the sort yielding block of stone that was universally known as the Hollowstone. From the men who crowded and camped into every passageway and room came forth the tangy and vile smells that marked a man and his geography better than anything else. The hill people that lived close to the Hollowstone, had a sulphuric odour always hanging about them, seeping through their skin like the fumeroles and steamy ponds that seeped out amongst their cropping lands. From the Rises came the hot turbulent smell off the halfway folk, with the flavour of stone, oaten, straw and wind, and some said they could discern the peculiar musty stink of cattle on the men from the Rise of Goil, whose particular obsession distinguished them from the other Rises. The tribes from the alpine shrublands had a lingering odour of wood-smoke on their bodies, and the peoples of the ice smelt, well, ice has no smell, and they moved amongst the rest of men like pale other-worldly sprites.

They are all here. All the disparate, argumentative, disputacious, proud, incestuous, courageous peoples that existed in the mountains and styled themselves the Highland peoples. Once even the Lowleahs had come, that most retiring of races, but that was a long time ago and most men thought they had disappeared into legends and stories. Some of these Highland tribes were old, very old, like the Lowleahs and had mythology that was not of the mountains but of the plains. They were originally part off the Past Peoples, driven to seclusion in the wastes of the mountains from the onslaught of horse warrior horsemen, and in their songs and folk tales they kept these memories, and summed up the scorn and hatred they felt for the warrior horsemen and their descend-

ants in that one utterly disparaging word — ‘downlanders’.

They would spit it out, as if ridding their mouths of a disease.

This great yearly gathering of the Highland tribes was called simply the Meet. It lasted, usually, if no one issue got bogged down in petty intertribal rivalry, six days, and was divided into three parts, Speeches, Disputes and Laws, which generally covered the three main purposes of the Meet, to unite the tribes in kindred spirit to each other, to settle disputes (and appoint the people to settle the disputes), and to make laws to bind the first two functions together. One wit suggested there was a fourth purpose ‘to make steam’, which paraphrased an old expression that ‘to boil water is better than to simmer it’.

The water of words fair boiled in the Hollowstone and the greatest and prettiest of disputes would be wrangled through long harangues as each tribe put its case to the audience. It was not really the strength of the arguments that mattered, but rather that they gave vent to them publicly. One ear was always attuned to what the ‘folks-home’ would think of the speech when it got back to them. The speaking chambers seemed fraught with word battles during the Meet, and any uninformed visitor might have thought the whole affair was nothing more than a riotous display of fondness for the sharp of wit and the fast-tongued, which it was. In all this bustle, amazingly, arguments were resolved, grievances settled, laws made, and quarrells patched. The eruptions of language would be misunderstood if the visitor did not realise that everyone was having a thoroughly good time.

But this year there was an odour of doubt. Other matters were pre-occupying the Highland tribes, whispers of the Marshmen passed around, and talk of Mial Hest ‘that Wyrds son’, and there was gossip about Wenner and rumours of Princess of the Plains Herrietta. And there was a nervousness, which comes from when the senses are alert for the least telling disturbance that might indicate if there was a real reason for the doubters or it was just the Highland tribes isolated and easily excited apprehensions, and of course there was the Watchman. He permeated their thoughts and unerved their arguments just by his presence. He was their prophet but he had no spoken, and the cold stone chair remained empty as if rebuking the hotting gossip and gabbling tongues of the Meet with its stony silence.

## II

The chair was the first object Solas Sharp went with Widsith to see after their arrival. They looked at it with something like awe, even Solas’s garrulity silenced for a moment. Then he sighed.

‘I wonder what the old boy will say eh?’

‘You seem sure he will speak?’ asked Widsith.

Solas shrugged.

‘Why bother pacing this gloomy hole in the ground if you’re going to remain

dumb?’

It was a fair point and Widsith noticed that most of the gathering shared Solas anticipation. They even seemed to be waiting for the Watchmans word, and in the preliminary Speeches each Speaker appeared unusually cautious, so that their words were constantly looking over their shoulders at some more momentous speech to come. Widsith was mixed in his emotions to the Watchman. He was worldly enough to feel a scepticism of all prophets and soothsayers, but for all that, he was a Rise man born and bred, and the tradition respect for the Watchman was still strong. In his lifetime the Watchman had only once spoken. It made him uneasy, and Widsith avoided the windy Speeches and wandered about the Hollowstone, familiarising himself with its complexity again.

The Hollowstone had begun as one or two natural caverns with a small steaming pond of hot water that local villagers used to bathe in as a cure for their ailments. The complex was enlarged as other caverns were discovered, and more pools. Tunnels went down into different levels and accommodation rooms and store houses were patiently chiseled out of the pliable rock. As kings grew amongst the Highland tribes this seat of stone became their palace and each generation would busy themselves with comfortable enlargements and decorations. Battlements were cut out of the natural crags, but in such discreet fashion that from a distance the distinctive hump-like rock seemed untouched. The coming of the elders had shrunk the need for so much space for all the kingly entourage, and many rooms and passageways had been walled up to prevent the careless from getting lost and dying inconveniently of starvation in the labyrinthian rock. Only rare few understood the full extent of the Hollowstone, and it led to the idea amongst ordinary folk that was a great treasure hoarded in its secret depths. One elder remarked ‘that there was treasure, paper treasure’ and he pointed out that the kings old storehouses were now libraries where all the documents relating to the kingdoms business were slowly and methodically accumulated by the clerics who moved ubiquitously and knowledgeably about the passages.

Widsith was constantly bumping into them. They glanced at him carefully then carried on their mysterious official tasks. They were customarily dressed in black and they stepped in and out of the shadows like ghosts. Widsith also found hermits in the Hollowstone, scratching a strange existence in some rooms where they might sally out to accost strangers with gabbling philosophies, until led away by the patient clerics. The wayfarer stumbled on all manner of the Hollowstone mysteries. Grey, gloomy galleries, ingeniously lit by holes drilled through to the outer surface, where the clerics and their students studied the Laws. One room where works of art were stored, and ancient manuscripts that held undeciphered scripts. How the Duc would have wallowed in such a room! There were books here that existed no where else. Then, there were quarters for the elders, and stores of arms, gleaming sombrely in the candlelight, meticulously maintained by grizzled groups of veterans of previous battles. Would these arms be needed soon? Widsith bathed in hot pools that he had to himself, thinking of the future, and watching the luminous mosses glow. Several times the wayfarer returned to the Great Hall to study the still empty chair, and twice he had seen the Watchman moving on his own apparently aimless path, his face creased deeply by the torch light, but revealing no expression except that inner concentrated thought that divorced him

from others of his race.

Widsith returned to the meeting hall and found the Speeches were over, and most people had dispersed. Some back to their quarters and others to the stalls that were permitted at Meet time, and sold a great variety of clothing, ornaments and knick-knacks to take back to an excited family. As Widsith hesitated, pondering whether to return to his quarters or amble through the market hall, an old man approached him and bowed.

'Wayfarer Widsith? Welcome to the Meet, may I introduce myself? I am Tyer, Vin Tyer, one of the older residents of the Hollowstone, as you may have seen'.

Widsith acknowledged the greeting and waited.

'We have heard something about you here' Tyer continued, ushering Widsith gently to a darker, quieter corner. The movement was gentle, polite but firm. There was rock under the white hair.

'The man who killed Driac Slorty can not expect to go unrecognised of course' Tyer paused looking carefully at the wayfarer. One of the elders eyes was sore and red, and weeping slightly, and it gave Widsith a queer feeling. You could pity a man with an eye like that.

'Indeed, you seem to be a man of many parts' Tyer smoothly continued, unperturbed by the wayfarers stares 'as you have met Mial Hest and I have heard other stories, which if even half of them were true it would seem you now more about the downlands than any man here'.

'Has Solas been talking?'

'When does Solas Sharp not talk! And he does it rather well I will warrant, though I hope he chose you as his companion rather than the other way around otherwise we might have to accuse you of excess ambition'.

Widsith smiled but his eyes did not leave the old man's face. Pity would be wasted here. Tyer continued smoothly.

'But what I have heard makes me think that Solas is merely himself, still it is a shame we cannot hear the unvarnished versions'.

The old elder paused and looked at Widsith significantly. Then sighed.

'You are a quiet man wayfarer Widsith. I have always been alarmed by quiet men.'

'I talk when necessary' Widsith replied slowly.

'As long as you do talk' Tyer replied quickly and with some force 'we have too many talking fools and not enough silent judges. I fancy wayfarer Widsith that you have knowledge that could make us all listen, so do talk when your turn comes. We will be listening I assure you'.

With that Tyer courteously bowed and a smile replaced the vehemence of his words and left Widsith mildly irritated. He did not like being flattered, and there was a scheming menace behind Tyers words that the wayfarer found distasteful. He hated this backwater plotting. Just then, coincidentally, as turned to leave, the Watchman strayed into the doorwell of the now deserted Meet hall. Their eyes met, and the old man turned away abruptly.

This was the third time Widsith had seen the man. It was almost as if they were beginning to get in each others way.

### III

The second and third days of the Meet were given to Disputes, whilst the fourth and fifth were given to Laws. Disputes usually kept to small inter-tribal aggravations, such as land squabbles, trade tolls and the like, and this was the area where the local speaker would be expected to shine (if he wanted to keep his place in the tribe) so there was a lot of wordy speakers and flying oratory, that missed the actual point of the Dispute but scored highly for colour, drama and charisma. Widsith avoided these days, and only voted where appropriate, letting the other Speakers of the halfway folk have their flings for glory.

Yet his presence was far from unnoticed. Several times he caught curious glances in his direction, and overheard muttered expressions like ‘wayfarer Widsith that is, he that killed Driac Slorty’, or another day ‘he’s seen the Marsh king has Widsith’. One comment made him chuckle ‘a man to watch I says, dangerous these wayfarers, and will try for anything’.

He was amused and disturbed to find he was a personality. Nobody in the Highland tribes had ever usually taken much interest in wayfarers, but perhaps the activity on the downlands was stirring up old fears. People gave him long careful looks now, so knowledge empowers? Solas made the point even plainer in a long lament to Widsith.

‘Mikal, everyone wants to know about you! All my adventures might be childish games compared to you. Strom! I’ve been in danger just as much, and killed as many, but who do they want to hear from...? Mikal Widsith, the man who has seen the Marshmen, Mikal Widsith who has met Mial Hest, who knows the greasy downlanders, who has carried the Charmstone across half the kingdom and back again, who killed Driac Slorty, knows Herrietta, who is practically a half-brother to Wyrd himself! Mikal, seriously, some of them think you might be nearly a god, at least immortal, and all of them want to meet you but they’re frightened of you as well! The silent one they say, and you don’t say a word! Why Tilst speaks more than you do!’

Widsith sympathised once the torrent of hot-headed friendly abuse had passed, and suggested to his supporter to wait until Laws, there would be the opportunity to speak.

‘Strom I hope so’ muttered Solas ‘talking for two of us is wearing me out’.

Widsith did not believe that.

The fourth and fifth days were devoted to Laws, divided into two parts Laws (Within) and Laws (Without). Laws (Within) was all about domestic problems and disputes, and to see what alteration was needed to formulate the legal power behind the popular decision. New laws were made, old laws changed, or removed, and it was all conducted in a tone far removed from the furore of Disputes. It was dry scholar arguing for the

most part, between the elders who proscribed the laws and the clerics who had to draft them. The Highland Speakers thought it dull stuff, 'straw in yer nose', and even a clever Speaker found it had to argue with clerics and elders who had been buried in the rules for years. It was in the Laws particularly that a wise elder might shine with some gentle wit or sharp aphorism that lightened the heavy plodding passage through the legal maze — the 'heaviest Hollowstone' one elder remarked.

The Highland tribe Speakers stayed away from Laws (Within) and bartered in the market halls. They were waiting for Laws (Without), and it was to do with the mountain tribes relationships with the downlanders. This year, because of the atmosphere of doubts and speculation, and with all the doings-on down below, and the drama of the Watchman, virtually everyone who had an opinion (which was everyone) was gathered for Laws (Without). It was going to be lively. There was almost an indecent hurry by the elders to get through the business so that Laws (Without) could begin. Some clerics protested at the rush but were brushed aside by the eagerness and temper of the gathering. By the aftersun of the fourth day the commencement of Laws (Without) was announced through the echoing corridors of the Hollowstone. People jammed into the hall and spilled out into the passages behind.

When elder Vin Tyler stood up it took some number of bitwicks before the crowd settled into silence. The fog from the hot-herb hang like low cloud in the hall and the torches gave off an eery light through the fog. Tyler waited patiently for the last whispered bubbles of voices to disperse.

'Fellowmen! This begins the contentions of Laws (Without). I ask you of what you know of the doings of the downlanders? Are their troubles our troubles? What say you? And say it well.

A long silence ensued, until one man could not endure the pressure and jumped angrily to his feet.

'I am Farrar, Speaker of Goil' Solas nudged Widsith significantly 'for many years there has been calm from the downlands, at least they did not bother us with their squabbles. A star has arisen, Sure Sheriat, a capable soldier indeed, who they say is mastering the valley under him. His strength is great and his ability formidable. Not since Steffan has such a man appeared in the valley and we on the Rise are alarmed. Further Fellowmen, there is Mial Hest, from Alma, a great soldier himself, and there is talk that these two will combine and attack the Plains of Granry. What do you say Fellowmen'.

Other speakers rushed in after Farrar had finished, like water in a narrow stream, and from right and left came protest and expressions of fear about Sure Sheriat and Mial Hest. Their sacred compact was widespread knowledge though what it contained was not clear. Some hot-heads suggested an immediate sally into the Furrowdale Valley to attack Sheriat, others suggested defence. Some even questioned whether these men represented a genuine threat to the Highland kingdoms or it was just the Rise people getting excited again, about nothing. There were angry denials from the Rise folk and there were some sharp interruptions from both sides as the debate rummaged on. It quickly became clear that rhetoric was winning. Some councilled the old adage of 'letting the downlanders stay down', meaning not let the downland troubles be carried too hastily up into the mountains, others were furious that the downlanders would at-

tack them soon. The ignorance of most was obvious to Solas and Widsith, and Solas whispered constantly to Widsith that the words were as empty as a wine vat in Harvess and why didn't he, Mikal Widsith set them right?

Widsith shrugged and waited. He wanted to have a good understanding first and judged his moment to speak when the passions of the other speakers had sagged, and people were tired with all the conflicting words. There was a pause after one elderly speaker from a remote mountain village that hardly anyone had heard of, rambled to a stop. Tyler looked around expectantly, and caught Widsith's eye. The wayfarer sighed. He knew he was going to be manipulated whether he liked it or not. He stood up and said,

'Wayfarer Widsith, Speaker of Bleen'.

Immediately attention was focussed on him and Widsith blinked, momentarily nervous under so many eyes. Then he swallowed and regained his confidence and began to speak. Neither he, nor anyone else, except that shrewd old Wyrd, Tyler, noticed that the Watchman was in the hall, listening.

'I have listened to the speeches and the Speakers, and heard many different words that do not lie easily together' some people nodded and murmured in sympathy. 'That we are concerned is clear, but that we have not grasped the situation is still clearer to me. I am one who has travelled in the downlands, my business, my livelihood is there. Indeed my travels have caught up with your conversations, and, as some of you know, I was involved with some of the events that have been described'.

This was a reference to both the Marshmen and the death of Driac Slorty. Everyone by now in the hall had heard of Widsith's adventures here, and his words brought a heightened tenseness to the silence that followed his speech. The anticipation in the air was tangible, only the torches fluttering against the dark walls, moved.

'I wondered later if I had not made the path to power of Sure Sheriat easier by killing Driac Slorty, but I think he would have come to power in any case, or another more capable man'.

Widsith paused summoning up his thought.

'All is changed in the downlands. Changed irrevocably. That great black period of war and pestilence that kept the downlanders to their own business has passed, and now there is trade, and barter, and fairs selling goods from one end of the kingdoms to the other. The downlanders are looking outward, not inward as we are used to knowing them, and they have a fancy not only to mind their own business, but everybody else's as well, and make a profit' Widsith added whimsically, but no one laughed 'and the downlanders think the whole kingdom is their business, and it is not just one person like Sure Sheriat, or Mial Hest, or Princess Herrietta of Granry that is to be feared, but the new impulsion amongst these peoples for gain, for land, for money and for power. From peasant to trader, merchant to soldier, beggarman to king, these people have the same intent — to gain more.

Widsith paused and looked around. The entire hall of two hundred or more men were silent.

'This is no easy matter, and will take no easy solution. The greed of the downlanders is the greatest we will ever have to face, for we are not just fighting armies, but ideas.

And the more we kill these people the more we will become carriers of the evil we are trying to strike out. We too may become greedy if we do not take care, for this is not just a matter of swords but souls. We can only fight with good ideal of our own, and these must be lodged like scales of armour in our skin. A good soldier would not fight without a shield, neither must we. A good priest would not gain souls without a faith, neither must we.'

Widsiths voice ended practically on a whisper and there was a stir of expelled breath around the hall as Widsith sat down and the Meet was relieved from the tension of the wayfarers speech. Tyler was quickly to his feet and said:

'Fellowmen, it is late and we should ponder along with the wisdom of all the words spoken. Tomorrow we shall continue' .

The Meet, broke up in a hubbub and Solas grasped his friends tired shoulders .

'Mikal you told them well eh? But how do we fight these downlanders?'

Others crowded around Solas and Widsith, some congratulating the wayfarer, some with poised itching tongues to dispute his speech, but Widsith would have none of it and made his way to his quarters and lay down, breathing deeply. He was frightened by what he had started. This burden might take his life.

From the moment of waiting, almost reverent silence that greeted his words he knew he could never be simple wayfarer Widsith again. He had 'walked his wisdom' before the greatest of meetings and they would not let him be silent again. He cursed at Tyler under his breath, and understood what the old man had been hinting at. He had talked. He had talked of things he knew and seen, and it sounded sensible, it sounded appropriate, anyone would think so, and no magic in Wyrds den could cease the consequences. Just because he talked sense they would roar at his words and fret at his silence. Just because he talked sense they would be afraid when he spoke and even more alarmed if he kept private council. He could never be his own free man again, but must now be theirs. He could sympathise with the Watchman now.

#### IV

The fifth day was the culminating day of proceedings. The air was churning with argument. Some doubted Widsith's wisdom, others thought it profound. Many were confused. As Widsith and Solas moved into the hall their entry was treated with a good deal more respect than previously, with people both rushing forward to greet them and moving away to let them pass.

Tyler once again stood up and the men squatted down among the rugs and skins on the floor.

'Fellowmen, we heard many points of view yesterday concerning the matter of the downlanders. We heard many conflicting points of view, and we also heard wayfarer Widsith speak of greater matters than had previously been spoken of. Do we agree with his judgement? And if so, what can we do to give his words action? Think on this

Fellowmen and say well'.

There was a long pause. If the Fellowmen had thought they were reluctant to say so. The long pause developed into a thick silence that weighed down like a gloomy cloud upon their fears. It was almost as if nothing could be said, though there was an anxious undercurrent of muttering by people who had not the public courage to break the dumb gathering. Then furiously, and apologetically at the same time, Solas jumped to his feet and started to belittle the Meet in a tactful way.

'Drubbins!! Have your whiskers stuck in your throats and dried them up? What worthy names loll around on the floor now, but do they speak? Mutterers! We should be shouting rather than this silence shouting at us? Eh?' Solas spluttered some more at their stupidity 'talk, and talk, we talk fine about the silly petty troubles, but not about the big ones eh? Look at Harrer, he's lost his goat to Donkin and we talk pretty well about that!'

Harrer and Donkin were comic relations of Fellowman, always arguing about their herds whilst Fellowman fought the wars on his own. This jibe was highly insulting, and loud complaints about Solas got called back across the hall, but not till Solas had got a final few remarks scored.

'Big troubles we've got, but where are the big mouths? Eh? Thinking about your goats?'

By now angry interjections were coming on all sides against Solas but he swore at them and a fine old furore developed that only ceased when someone saw the wayfarer standing beside his old friend. Widsith gently touched Solas on the shoulder who shrugged and sat down. Gradually, the Meet quietened. One speaker obviously got a lingering grudge against Solas off his chest by a snarky comment to the effect that Solas would make a good goat-herder, he talked like one.

At last Widsith spoke.

'I spoke yesterday on how I saw the threat from the downlands. I spoke in generalities, and spoke about how the threat would come to our souls not on our arms, but I did not suggest how this threat was to be met, but now I will, and I will be practical for we are I think always a practical people'.

Two hundred men, crouched or sitting on the floor rugs, or else leaning against the pillars. But even the most casual pose was affected, and many sat stiffened, and tense with expectation as the torch flames themselves appeared marvellously taunt. Some people looked at each other as if to say, this wayfarer, there is sane presence in this man, who took their own thinking and gave it a voice.

'I see only one way. It is a fighting way of course, as we have always fought, but it is also a knowing way. We have old customs and sayings and folk wisdom in our language which have been carried through many generations and which are not a part of the laws. Indeed they may be the basis of them. We know what this wisdom is, and call it the roundrell, and we inherited it, as we inherited our existence from the Past Peoples. We must not forget this inheritance with these peoples, our peoples in fact who were driven to the obscure corners of the kingdom by the arrival of the horse-warriors. The Lowleahs in the Forest of Gloreen, the Twig-Tellers in the Sink, the Hollerwalls in the Sard, and the Marshmen, yes they too exist, for I have seen them. With all these peoples

we share a bond, and we have this bond through the folk-fellowship of the roundrell. This is our idea, our shield with which we can protect our soul as we fight with our swords'.

Widsith paused and looked around sightlessly at the hushed meeting.

'I warn you Fellowman, that the coming battle with the downlanders, for there will have to be a battle, will be as good as lost if we win the war and yet adopt the vain ideas of power that drives the downlanders to war in the first place. It is a cruel dilemma. The roundrell is so easily corrupted, and we as a people are not in ourselves better than other people. If we fight, and win, and we will win, the temptation to hold what we have gained will be enormous, but I say we should always remember to return. Return both to our homelands, and return to the roundrell, the peacable, accepting faith, where the spilling of blood is regretted and gain given away. Fight and return, fight and return, those should be our creed'.

Widsith paused and saw with shock the Watchman standing framed in the doorwell. The wayfarer looked away and continued with the final part of the speech, running down almost to a whisper.

'This is not a time for small actions. I have seen the power of the downlanders grow, and I see it growing further if nothing stops it. It has destroyed much of what our ancestors knew, and now threatens our lands. It has destroyed much of the roundrell, much of what we have implicitly based our lives upon. To hesitate will see the Highland peoples fade. Oh there will be people who will always live in the mountains, but they will not be of the mountains and will have brought the ways of the downlands up with them. Do I need to say more? We must arm and fight, and return, we must return'.

He stooped and sat down, suddenly despairing that he had made himself plain. They had heard the call to arms, but would they heed to put them aside?

A long hubbub of voices started to swell and many people stood to take Tyer's attention so they could speak, and spoke anyway when they saw everyone else speaking. The swell became an uproar of shouts and exclamations and just as Tyer was trying to calm the noise he was distracted by a young cleric who hurriedly tugged the elders arm and whispered urgently in his ear. Tyer looked astounded, yet almost pleased, as if he had been expecting some such event.

'Fellowman! Fellowman!' he shouted several times and no one took any notice till he shouted again and again 'The Watchman! Fellowman, the Watchman is seated! Fellowman the Watchman is seated!'

Despite the horrible uproar, his words sang over the crowd and were taken up by other cries. There was a panic rush of Speakers towards the door leading to the hall where the Watchman's seat had remained unoccupied so many long years. The Speakers noisy gesticulating rush into that so silent place hushed them, and they fell dumb as they entered, like schoolboys confronted on the turn of the passage by a teacher. The enormity of the moment became evident. Hardly anyone could remember the Watchman sitting in their lifetimes before, and yet he was, sitting placidly whilst the speakers jammed themselves into a room smaller than the main Meet hall.

Widsith felt he had wasted his words. The sudden cry of the Watchman had unset-

tled him and he wondered if anyone would later wonder what he was trying to say. Would he even remember? Yet it seemed important to say it then, but now? What other things were stirring. Solas took his arm and they followed the crowd, almost the last to enter, and indeed they would not have found a place if some people had not made a way for them.

The Watchman waited until every nimble was silent and all the fidgeting ceased. He looked around, almost as if he had forgotten how to speak words, so that when he did speak they tumbled out with a fierce peculiar abruptness, the sentences getting in his throat and crackling out.

‘We must have a leader. The troubles are known and we must meet them. Do not deceive yourselves. This will be no Sprig war, to be quickly settled before the crops are harvested. The wheat may never be cut. The woman will wait long for their man. Call a leader to lead you in the spirit of the roundrell’.

Then incredibly the Watchman began to sing. This ancient foreboding figure, with a voice that came from some dark cave, lifted his head and sang the song of the roundrell.

It was a ghastly, chilling and strangely exciting sound, and when Widsith heard the rasping of the old Watchman's voice he wondered wildly whether Sollo Wramm had crept into the Hollowstone and was fooling them all. His mind flashed back to Hors Follerdyke, and Bum Grandy, this infernal song, and he hardly heard the muffled swelling chant from the speakers who tried to join in the song, or noticed the Watchman's slow exit, for his head was full of other things, and he felt numb and exhausted. He saw faces turned towards him and Solas laughing and shouting like madman there were shouts of ‘Widsith, Widsith’ but he never took any sense of them, until he felt himself being lifted onto shoulders up to the blank cavern roof on a score of anxious arms. All he wanted to do was sleep and shut out the roaring sound from his ears.

## Leading to the Pasture

*Juud du Qu'et and Hull meet again and resume a journey that in some ways they never left off. There is unfinished business and Juud knows the pain of betrayal. They go up into the pasture and at the Hollowstone arrive at the moment that the business is settled.*

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The two women were not dissimilar in character or looks. Juud was the head taller, and Mirren's hair was shorter, but just as dark. Each preserved in their manner an independence that was implicit rather than spoken, and a straightforward and direct way of thinking and seeing others and themselves. Both were reserved outwardly and thoughtfully quiet in manner, which gave them (though they would be surprised to know it) an assurance in their acts that other people found sincere and admirable. Both women were attractive, yet did not send the usual feminine signals in the way men expected. This was disconcerting, and it is strange to say that people missed the obvious depth of warmth in their personalities and found them aloof, and rather cool. As they said on the Rise (they have an expression for anything and everything) they were people 'born apart'.

It could not be expected that two such likes would get on together. Mirren, for all her buried strength, still came from a peasant family, and felt daunted by Juud's obviously aristocratic bearing. For her part Juud felt uncomfortable in the busy domestic home and felt ashamed that she was desiring this woman's husband. She was desperately disappointed that Widsith was not here, and this must have showed in her face in the first few bitwicks of meeting Mirren. She was too tired to hide her disappointment and too tired not to refuse Mirren's polite insistence that they should stay. A bitwick of thought should have warned Juud that this was a silly and impossible situation, as became obvious in the strange atmosphere of the morning.

The journey had taken its toll and it was late morning before Juud arose and found Donan playing with a child on his lap. He looked embarrassed and started up.

'Morn mistress. Ye slept well?'

It briefly occurred to Juud to wonder why he had never married.

'Thank you Donan. Sit, sit, you slept well too?'

'Aye mistress. Mistress Mirren here says that her husband has gone to a big meeting up on the hill'.

Juud felt her heart slip at the word 'husband' and could not look at Mirren as she handed her a cup of leafen. She sipped it cautiously.

'It's the yearly Meet' said Mirren, taking Sirri from Donan and ruffling her hair gently 'Mikal was appointed Speaker for the Rise and he has gone to represent us'.

Mirren had the right to say 'Mikal' Juud thought sadly, but turned away from this thought.

'Will he be back soon? We have come such a long way and we have urgent news'.

'I do not know' Mirren replied to Juud 'not long perhaps, but it is an important Meet and it is hard to say'.

There was an awkward pause. Sirri disentangled herself from her mothers arms and tentatively touched the strange breeches Juud wore.

'The mistress says' broke in Donan 'that everyones much troubled by Mial Hest these days, and that other fellow'.

Juud nodded indifferently. She felt suddenly miserable and lonely and had not even the heart to pursue questions. She quite absently stroked Sirris hair, who looked alarmed and ran back to her mother who was busy at the sink.

A knock at the door brought in a local elder who was eager to find out more about these strangers. He told them volubly about the Meets business and the great words to be spoken and how proud their village was that Mikal Widsith had been chosen as speaker, and on like this for some time. Mirren took the children out and Donan made his mistress some oatmeal, adding rich cream and syrup to 'put some body in her' as he thought she looked a little pale and tired. Juud hardly touched it. The elder left. Perhaps it was the hardship of the journey that made her want to cry? Or the sight of Mikal's children. They could hardly stay here till Mikal returned, perhaps there was an inn at the village? Donan said he'd go out for a look. Mirren returned and busied around the parlour but their mutual uneasiness stopped any but the most trivial of questions.

Other village people dropped by and gossiped happily with Juud, intrigued by the fact she was a 'downlander' yet a friend of wayfarer Widsith. Oh they knew all about him, and his father! Why hadn't the wayfarer kept them entertained for wicks with his stories! Juud managed to glean some titbits about the wayfarers past (she realised how little she actually knew) which was interesting, but did not ease the sense of pointlessness she felt. Donan returned without finding anything in the way of lodgings, and he too was kept busy answering the villagers numerous questions and fending off the little items for sale that would magically appear. Indeed soon the parlour might have turned into a market place if Mirren had not shooed them out and received her children hungry for highsun meal. Juud and Donan joined in with the simple meal still no resolved on what to do, when a loud thump occurred at the door. Mirren was getting vexed by all the visitors and opened the door to quickly dispose of this one, but a huge shape seemed to fill the doorway and Mirren retreated before it and Hull stooped and entered.

Juud gave a gasp of surprise and ran forward and hugged the giant. Donan was quite taken aback by the mans size and pondered that the mistress seemed to be familiar with a good many random men around these parts. Juud bombarded Hull with questions, not even realising that in Hulls replies he was talking to her directly for the first

time in his life.

‘Why Juud exclaimed ‘you can talk? I mean’ and she blushed in annoyance ‘you can talk, talk in our language’ she stammered in embarrassment.

‘Someways Miss du Qu’et. I learned it now from the other folk, and my wife...’

‘Your wife!? Why Hull how good! You’re married?’

Hull nodded smiling. Sirri and Pirran knew Hull well enough and had grappled hold of him until Mirren ordered them back to their meal, but she smiled warmly at the giant who had momentarily startled her. Hull explained he had heard of two strangers passing by his village asking for Mikal Widsith, and he was amazed when he heard the ‘du Qu’et’ name stated. He guessed the woman could only be Juud and followed them up to the Rise.

‘You followed us?’ Juud was very pleased ‘thank you, but Mikal is not here, hes at a big Meeting or other. Do you know about it?’ Hull nodded.

‘Aye Miss. It’s in the Hollowstone, up in the Highland kingdom proper, two days from here’.

Juud had an idea.

‘Can we go?’

‘Aye, I supposes. Though I’d better warns yer they will not let women ins the stone’.

‘You will come?’ asked Juud delighted with the turn of events. The giant nodded and laughed.

‘I thought you would be wanting to go so I tolds me wife I’d be aways a while. You likes the adventuring miss’.

That comment surprised Juud, but they were plunged into packing, and the kids were madly dancing around, excited by the business, so she hardly had time to think on it. They left a wick later. A short formal thanks to Mirren and the three of them were trudging up the mountain trail, and it was only then, in the comparative solitude of walking that Juud remembered she had called Widsith ‘Mikal’ whilst Mirren was in the room. It gave her a heart wrench to think of it, and her stride momentarily faltered. Was she mad doing this? Hurrying recklessly towards another womans husband? She could hardly turn back, and what would she do if she did? There was still the message to give. She could finish that duty and leave, at least, she could believe that — how Wene would mock her.

The route to the Hollowstone lay into the heart of the mountain kingdom. They had a lot of climbing to do, first from the bare rocky soil of Bleen with its neat squat houses, through the cliffs to the top Rise of Yutts. This was a wider, better watered and fertile place, with cropped fields and copses of trees outlying the villages. Great stone hedges had been built up separating the fields, and where a narrow lane or footpath penetrated, it was sunk a longman below the level of the field so that the traveller could see nothing. There was no clear boundary marking the end of Yutts Rise. Gradually the road left the settlements behind and meandered up into a low mountain forest, shaggy with hanging lichens. The air became colder and a wind, roving from the Furrowdale Valley, rustled the fringes of trees as a lover touches her beloveds hair.

They camped that night in a small clearing, putting up the tired old canopy in case it should rain, and falling to sleep quickly. Juud felt comforted to be by Hull's great breathing bulk again, and her heart was excited at the prospect of Mikal soon. She cautiously asked Hull if Widsith had changed and the giant was puzzled by the question. Why everything changes eh? But still remains the same. This was hardly a satisfactory answer but she was content not to press for a better one. Soon enough she would know.

From the alpine forest they emerged into a flat narrow valley, covered with waving grasses. During the warm Croppen the Rise folk would bring their cattle up here, but for the moment it was empty. Snow-dotted hills overlooked the valley and bright eager streams raced off down their slopes and joined the brand new Furrow river, barely a knee's depth to cross. Low cloud, which had been sulking about the upper valley, dispersed and sun swept down the grasses turning them to gold. It was becoming a perfect Sprig day and Juud chatted gaily to Hull about his new home and wife.

At the head of the valley was a low stony pass and two round lakes that shone like two blue lillies in a grey garden. This was the very beginning of the great Furrow River and it was said that on a clear day you could see down this great valley to the marsh itself, from source to swamp in one great eyes view. There was too much haze today to see more than the glittering peaks of the Raggerok fading in the distance. A small shepherd's hut provided a highsun rest out of the cool wind, and then they topped the pass and followed a steep track down to a broad plain. The mountains ran away from them as they crossed this wild empty place, only a few baldybirds taking an interest in the travellers till they moved on, their wings sharp and angular.

The plain was cut by steep gullies and surrounded by marching armies of distant peaks. There was little shelter except in the gullies, and these seemed interminable to Donan as the track wound about like a fussy housewife. Donan was relieved when Hull finally stopped by a copse of stunted trees, and looked back in gloomy satisfaction at the plain they had crossed. He supposed they'd have to come back that way.

'Oh don't be glum Donan! It's still lovely'.

Juud found a patch of snow in a shady gully and rubbed some of it on her skin in an impromptu snow bath that tingled her flesh even if it did not clean it. She came back looking pink. Donan shook his head disapprovingly as he unpacked their threadbare blankets.

'That'll give you chills missus, and what if folks see yer?'

'Nonsense Donan, and there is nobody else here'.

As if to contradict her words about a wick later a small group of traders came from the other direction and camped nearby, sharing their food and gossip. It was from them that Juud first heard mention of the Watchman.

The cloud was back by morning and Donan quickly predicted it would rain. The traders waved them off with the colourful handkerchiefs they had tried to sell the night before. Juud had bought two and tied them around her head as a sort of scarf where it fluttered in vivid golds and oranges wherever the wind wished. The track plunged off the plain and into the mountains, following the confines of a gloomy gorge which was locally known said Hull as the 'Sad Gorge', from a story told of how a young woman wailed over the death of her lover down the cliff. Juud shivered as they encountered

the harsh angles of the gorge, letting the track pass it seemed as if only by forbearance. Just when the gorge became lost in a deep chasm the track scrambled clear and climbed and turned past a ridge of rock to face another low pass. On this stood a great mound which Juud realised had been made by thousands of passing travellers adding their contribution to the great pile.

‘Why have they done that Hull...?’ Juud began to ask when Donan excitedly interrupted.

‘Looks mistress’. It was the first cheerful words he had said for days.

He was standing on the crest of the pass and before his feet stretched a great opening in the mountains. A longish plain, green, with tiny fields and villages scattered along its length. Here and there largish lakes dotted the sward and watercourses could be seen linking them. Trickling chimneys of smoke rose from the plain in an irregular and strangely soothing way, they calmed the view. At the dead middle of the valley was a large hump of rock. Knotted and twisted shapes cluttered its surface as if they were statues, and weak smudges of smoke appeared to rise from its flanks so that it seemed a great beast was resting on the plain, the sweat steaming from its sides.

‘That is the Hollowstone’ said Hull simply ‘and this is the Pasture, the heart of the Highland kingdom’.

Juud gazed at the scene, absorbing it. It looked fragile and beautiful, with the great white mountains encircling it.

‘It is so green Hull, and what are they burning?’

The giant grinned.

‘Its steam miss Qu’et. Steam from hot waters underneath. The waters warm the soil and speed the plants. Twice, sometimes, thrice a year there may be harvest on the Pasture.’

Donan gasped. His peasant dourness was awed by the thought that a field could produce two or more crops a year. Such a thing was unheard of, why it must be Tilsts field himself, what he heard of in stories. He had never thought there were true...

‘Tis the gods fields surely? They’s cannot be mortals?’ He asked disbelievingly.

‘They argue like mortals Mr Shallbody’.

Was Hull laughing at Donan? Donan did not notice. He was shaking his head at the Pasture, it was truly close to Tilst up here.

‘And the Hollowstone, Hull, is that where the meeting is?’ and she almost added ‘where Mikal is?’ Hull nodded assent.

‘Well Donan, was it worth the journey?’

Donan paused and scratched his head, on old habit of his when he did not know what to say.

‘Well if it is the end of the journee mistress?’ Juud smiled.

‘I think it is’, and she stepped down quickly onto the track leading to the Pasture.

They crossed the neat fields, past quick fumeroles, and pretty villages where the children bubbled and boiled like the hot springs. Steam sprang up from cracks in the ground and infected their senses with dark earthy smells. They walked quickly in spite

of themselves, each village holding a rumour as the Hollowstone approached, and the people grew thicker in the markets and stalls surrounding it, the rumours flew to their ears. They heard about the Watchman, that old shrewd elder Tyer, the downlanders, and most of all, to Juuds alarm and secret pleasure, about wayfarer Widsith, that Fellowman amongst men.

The village that stood by the main entrance to the Hollowstone was crowded, almost like a festival day, and three more travellers were hardly noticed in the tumult, and they had hardly managed to struggle through the people and come close to the main entrance of the Hollowstone, when a stir occurred there, and several figures ran out screaming 'leader, leader' at the top of their voices.

And so it was, that on the 75th day of Sprig, as wayfarer Widsith, Speaker of Bleen, now leader of the Highland kingdoms armies, had left the deafening commotion of the Hollowstone and walked blinking into the strong daylight, his eyes and ears bedazzled by all the nonsensical excitement around him, and so blinded that he could really only half believe the massive figure of a man who grabbed his shoulders, and the suddenly shy woman who stood back and said 'Mikal' in a fashion that he had heard only in his dreams, till the closeness of her body convinced him that he was, after all, despite the extravaganza of sound around him, really awake.

## Sweetness of the Earth

*A respite, and a meeting time between two people whose time has come. We see those strange creatures, Hooks and Pitters, and we learn why Wene weeps and covers the earth with darkness.*

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The rough warm smell of Mikal was quick and gone. He was carried off in a flurry of shouting men leaving Juud bemused. She shouted to Hull ‘what’s happening?’ but the giant shrugged his shoulders and grinned. Donan sat on his bagger and grumbled at the confusion.

‘Was that hims mistress, who we’ve come to sees?’.

The crowd had disappeared back into the Hollowstone which swallowed their chanting like a great yawn. Leader? Of what? Neither of them knew and were left sorely puzzled by the upheaval of people disgorged by the Hollowstone then gulped back again. Accommodation in the village was scarce but a friend of Hulls gave them space in an old storehouse, which they shared with some voracious rodents. He also told them that a leader had been appointed to face troubled times, and yes, wayfarer Widsith was the chosen man. Did they know him? When Juud explained her journey the man promised to send a message into the Hollowstone but explained, ‘there’s a day of Meet left miss and I doubt you’ll see wayfarer Widsith before then’. Which was infuriating. She could still feel his arms.

That day was a long and fretful one to Juud, and she spent it trying to discover more about Widsith. Why had he been appointed leader? ‘Oh he’s a fine one’ confided the woman stall holder, ‘fine manner about im’. Another fellow chipped in, ‘I heard him talk plain and no one could match his wisdom. He’s the plain man’, and yet another man, this time a local warden confided, ‘I was sat next to im on the day of Meet and he’s such a power in ‘im. When he speak even the rocks listen’.

All this was very fine and pleased Juud but it did not make Widsith appear. She was hungry for him now and it seemed frustrating in the extreme to see each other for a bit-wick then be snatched away. She was annoyed she could not enter the Hollowstone and had to wait until Hull and Donan reappeared and told her of the events inside.

‘He’s appointed leader, and there’s talk of raising an army’.

‘Why an army Donan?’ Juud asked anxiously.

‘To battle Mial Hest, so they reckons’.

An army, and Mikal at the head of it!

So they already knew of Mial Hest and all his schemes. Juud began to wonder again if her whole journey had not been an exhausting waste of time, and she pestered Donan with questions about what was being said in the Hollowstone. Donan did his best to answer but was interrupted by a stir in the crowd and people hurriedly left the stalls and bustled towards the Hollowstones entrance. Juud and Donan hastily followed wondering what new event was happening and they saw a great procession come before their eyes as hundreds of men trooped out in a solemn and noisy mass. They formed a sort of rectangle about the square and an old man stepped forward and began reading in a weak voice that the Meet was closed and every man could disperse to his home and tell of words and speeches that were made these six days, and the Disputes settled and the Laws made, and mostly, of the appointment of an army leader by popular election. This should be spread to the kingdom by speed and the business thereof of this meeting heard by everyone, child woman and man, who had entitlement to hear.

Juud muttered under her breath, though loud enough for Donan to hear ‘and about time these silly Wyrds told us what was happening’. Donan looked shocked at Juuds language, and wondered if he would ever get used to the mistresses strong ways.

The crowd broke into a commotion of talk and movement once the old man had made a dignified exit and Juud sat down in utter irritation. She knew it was unfair to blame anyone for her upset, but she had travelled a long way to see Mikal, and now, what with armies and leaders and everything else, would she ever see him again?

‘Eee mistress’ Donan tugged at her sleeve and gestured to a man waiting.

Juud looked up.

‘Juud du Qu’et is summoned to the Hollowstone to present the purpose of her journey’ the man said.

Juud jumped up excitedly.

‘Wait at the storehouse Donan, at last we are going to be of use’.

Donan did not like to see the mistress going off alone but his protest was already lost on her retreating back. And where was the giant man? He shook his head at the continuing puzzlement of it all, and he was even a little afraid of being left on his own in this strange contradictory land.

Juud was lead into long dark passages, eerily lit by flickering threatening torches. The silence was deeper than anything Juud had experienced before, their Juud only saw the odd garbed shape, which motioned her across another large chamber. Another door and Hull suddenly loomed up and placed a great hand on her shoulder and said he was going on a long journey and wish him well. He was gone before the wish was completed from her mouth. The shape motioned her towards another door and retired. The room was full of tapestries and some sort of light filtering from the ceiling placed a loving glowing colour in the room that it took Juuds eyes a while to focus. And then Mikal was before her.

The embrace was long and they fondled each other with soft words and touches

upon the skin. Juud began to be tearful and rubbed her head against his.

'It has been too long Mikal, too long?'

'Yes, you had no child?' Juud shook her head, and he pushed his face even closer to hers.

'I wanted one, I wanted your child?'

They kissed again.

'I saw Mirren...?' Juud spoke hesitantly.

'Yes?'

'I do not know we should be doing this Mikal'. She could not see both the shadow and the smile on his face.

'You love me?'

'Oh my love of course...'

They embraced more anxiously searching for each others eyes and mouth. Widsith murmured 'love, love' softly into her ear. In a short while they relaxed and Widsith took Juuds hands and led her over to a long seat. She spoke quickly, and told him of her return to the estate, of her management of it and her declining father. She spoke of Mial Hests unexpected arrival and her loneliness and Hests desires for her. Widsith looked amazed at this turn of events.

'You wanted him?'

'Oh Mikal I was lonely for you! Oh and he's a charmer, like you?'

Then her realisation of his deceit, and then the harrowing journey over the Fore Range to the Hollowstone.

'We found Sollo Wramm on Tol Pass, and he guided us. Why without him we would never have made it. It was as if it was pre-destined to meet us, placed there by someone?'

She sighed.

'I feel it has almost been a wasted journey, since you know as much about their plans as I do?'

Widsith puzzled at the layers of her hair with his hand and refused the idea.

'It was not a waste. You know more of Mial Hest than any of us here, and we will need every grain of knowledge to match him?'

He now told her of his loneliness with Mirren, and his election as speaker on the Rise 'a sort of escape I suppose', and of the great Meet and his astounding appointment to the position of leader to lead the mountain peoples army.

'I talk too much' he added wryly.

She smiled softly.

'You love Mirren?' she had to ask.

He held her head tightly with his hands so that she could not turn to see his eyes.

'I love you. She is my wife. They are my children...?' Juud could say nothing to this but stroked him. There were some bitwicks of silence between them, and they kissed

again, like lovers. Then Widsith deliberately changed the subject.

'I have sent Hull and Solas Sharp to warn the Marshmen' Widsith said 'and the Speakers are riding back to gather men for our army. It will be collected at Boden and we will move shortly after. I have an enormous ammount of work that has to be done, yet not so immediately, we could go away, for a while?'

'Oh yes Mikal, if we could'.

'It will have to be discreet'.

'Yes, yes...' and Juud wept then, and muzzled her streaming face on his, holding to him with a desperate crying happiness.

Donan of course was puzzled and Juud could not explain why she was going away for some days on her own. She followed Mikals instructions carefully, riding on her borrowed horse across the Pasture and picking up the well-worn cattle trail with its empty shepherds cottage halfway up. She was there early and yet Widsith was already waiting, and they embraced, almost a little shyly and began the ride up into one of the many secretive alpine vallies at the back of the Pasture, which led and ended abruptly under towering mountain peaks.

'Boden vales' Widsith explained the locals call them, places for grazing the stock during the warmer months. They passed fumeroles of steam, and rock pools of strange lurid colours, often edged with small many sided crystals. Juud could not help herself and stopped to collect some as Widsith teased her, 'close to nature' punning on her name. As they climbed they left the steamy Pasture behind, winding up on steep trails, sometimes leading the horses. The weather was calm and the air deliciously sweet with bursting alpine flowers, and they seemed to cast off the restraints they felt as they climbed higher.

'You remember the flowers Mikal? I still have them'.

There was a short rocky scramble, and they led the horses, and they came over the lip and into a perfect hanging valley. Cliffs of yearning steepness surrounded the green secluded valley, and above those walls pinnacles of dazzling ice towered above. Juud had never seen such a scene. It took her breath away. When her eyes focused down, she saw the valley blanketed with alpine flowers and self-important bustling streams that ran from the snows and were deeply cold to touch. The moment of arrival was perfect, and even Breet conspired to be on their side, breaking away the layers of cloud impatiently till the colours of earth and water leapt into the sky. It was suddenly hot, and it was natural to take their clothes off and plunge into a turquoise pool. The chill was an exhilarating shock, and Juud lost her balance as she staggered out laughing and screaming as the water danced on her body. They made love then and there, amongst the early Sprig flowers, and let the sun dry their skins.

After some wicks they dressed and just on sunset, which came early in this confined vale, they reached a tiny shepherds cottage, small underneath a vast rock wall. A waterfall fell alongside and gathered itself into a pool-hollow slightly below the hut, then brushed past the shade of the only few trees in the valley and hurtled down below as if eager to explore the wondrous world below. Juud did not think it needed to hurry so much, the wonder was here.

'Mikal' and words failed her again as she looked at him. He leant across and kissed

her. This was the only love she had ever known, and it seemed perfect. At dayend they sat in the last reclining sun watching the colours change on the mountains and sipping hot malep. Widsith was fussing with his pipe, trying to get the hotherb to 'take'. Juud watched him fondly, and the sudden aromatic smell of the hotherb once it lit brought her instantly back to that damp scary day on the marsh.

'You remember Mikal' she started to say, then was startled by a creature scaling the rock wall only a few longmans from where they sat.

'What is that?'

'It's a Hook' explained Widsith 'there are Pitters too, watch and see'.

Slowly, small furry creatures gathered about the craggy slopes overlooking the cottage. Hooks they were called, Widsith said for the way they clung to such impossible rocks, scurrying about them with a casual indifference.

'I have never seen them fall'.

Some of the Hooks came closer and Juud could see that they were not much bigger than her arm, with brown longish fur, very lively and chattering slowly to themselves. Their inquisitive noses sniffed at the rocks and pulled out tiny plants and berries.

'There's a Pitter' Widsith said softly, and Juud stood up to get a better view.

It was a slightly larger animal, more angular and bony than a Hook. Its fur was short and grey, and its arms extended further than the compact nervy Hooks. Their long reach served them well and they seemed happier amongst the sheerer faces, moving disdainfully and cautiously among the quicksilver Hooks, their movements silent except for the occasional discreet cough.

'They are cute. I like the Hooks though'.

They watched in silence for a while as there was a brief squabble amongst the Hooks.

'They live together?'

'Usually, though you would think they would fight. Look there's more Pitters'.

It was almost dark and hard to see the two sorts of animals scabbling around on the cliffs. The Hooks kept up a persistent muttering sound, and interesting though the creatures might be, their voices kept Juud awake most of the night and she wished they would shut up. Not that she entirely minded, as she could listen to Mikal's breathing and occasionally brush her fingers on his calm sleeping face.

Two days they spent in the cottage, walking under the great rocks, absorbing the thin hazy mountain sunlight and coaxing a few of the bolder Hooks to eat out of their hands. The Pitters were however too suspicious of such advances and gazed banefully, and even a little enviously perhaps, at the well-favoured Hooks with their large doubtful eyes.

'Well it is their own fault' smiled Widsith.

One day they scrambled up a steep spur to a vantage point and looked towards a vast and pristine ice-river that flowed from the high lands. The sight awed Juud.

'Have you been there Mikal?'

'No. They say beyond the ice rivers there is an ice-plain many Caroyal leagues

across...? his voice followed his eyes into the horizon of imagination. Juud was with him.

'I would like to go there sometime. What could live there?' she asked.

'Gods perhaps but not mortals'.

She teased him at this.

'Mikal! You do not believe in Gods now, in your old age?'

He did not laugh it off as she expected but faced the question wryly.

'I would if it could help defeat this diseased kingdom, but I think the gods are part of the disease. It's vanity'.

Juud pondered this.

'So there is only the roundrell?'

'Strom! I'm sounding like Thomas au Morad! Let's go down'.

Wene rose early in the evening, pouring a subtle and sensuous light down the narrow valley. Juud thought of it as a good omen. The moon was always elusive, pale and slipping away through the clouds that clung to her like entwining arms. It was once said that Wene was as bright as her sister Breet, and in distant days men never slept but worked full and happily through the day without sleep. But Wyrd had approached the lovely Wene and when she refused him took her against her will, and darkness fled onto her face and onto the earth below. Wene wept sadly through the night sky, watching the evil that Wyrd spread with his dark intents, aware that she was the first wronged person, the first person that evil had touched.

But that was only one story as Juud remembered it. For some damned Wene as Wyrds wife, as corrupt and evil as the vile magician himself. But then as Juud remembered, that was always the mens view. The women saw her sad graces as a reminder of the potential for evil in mens hearts. It was the men who saw Wene as a whore, the womenfolk saw her only as wronged. Juud had heard of women on her own estate dancing to the moon god, though the men tried to stop the activity. She was curious and tried to find out about the dancing, but no one would tell her. Donan said it was wrong without saying why, and none of the women would say, though on one occasion an old woman cottager confided that the dances were done quite often but in great secret for fear that they would be condemned as witches. Juud tolerated it, but was puzzled by the strange passion that these women experienced to honour a deity that men could not make their own.

Juud pondered her own past and saw some of the same shadows of experience that had tainted Wene. Was she a part of the moon goddess? But she like the wayfarer found it hard to swallow the superstitions that plagued the stories about the gods. Wyrd to her was Driac Slorty, and he was flesh and blood. Yet there seemed to be some truth in the gods somehow, there was evil, and good, perhaps they were universal symbols?

'Perhaps' said Widsith thoughtfully when she had told him of her notion 'that Wyrd is a part of us as well'.

'Wyrd in our nature? What a horrid thought, but it sounds true enough Mikal. Oh why did I have to talk of such things'.

'Because Wene is a part of you and tells her own story'.

'The gods are just ideas based on our emotions? But Wene was cruelly wronged, I mean I could hardly rape myself wayfarer, it's different for women'.

'No, not yourself, but there are other people' he did not have to finish for Juud to see the bleak truth in this. She started to cry. Mirren would be suffering now.

'But if Wyrd is in us, oh I do not know, how can we get rid of it? If it is always there?' Widsith poked the fire with a stick and sent a spark hurtling to the moon-glazed darkness.

Juud rummaged around in her bagger and brought out the well worn pouch. Widsith was surprised and looked dubiously as Juud unwrapped the gemstone, glittering brokenly in the firelight.

'You still have the other half?' she asked.

He nodded looking away.

Juud looked concerned.

'I am sorry Mikal, I thought it might bring luck, I mean it always seems to be our roundrell'.

He looked and smiled a half sad smile.

'Yes you are right, I should have thrown my half away but I never could. It seemed to cling to me. Sometimes I think we are the cursed ones. It is strange don't you think? As if we are a convenience for the Gods or even the Charmstone itself. The Wyrd thing has a life of its own'.

'Oh surely it's not evil?'

'Sometimes I think it could be. But I'll take it. We will need all the luck we can get in this battle, and it will enliven the elders that is for sure. They do not think the gemstone has ever existed'.

Widsith brought out his pouch and fitted Juud's half snugly against it. The sexual symbolism was not lost on Juud.

'It fits exactly' he said.

'You carry it Mikal, you might need it'.

'For luck?' he said ironically.

'It's part of us whether we like it or not. Let us say, for love'.

He took her then and she murmured.

'The roundrell, always the roundrell'.

The fire glowed on their naked bodies as they, like the Charmstone, fitted themselves perfectly together and momentarily became one being. That night there was nothing held back, nothing not given that was not returned, and it seemed to them both that the very sweetness of the earth was flowing into their bodies.

'It will never be like this again Juud' Widsith said as they got ready to leave on the last morning.

Juud would not allow this thought to settle.

'It will be Mikal. If you can rid the kingdom of Mial Hest'.

'And not get killed'.

'You always seemed to me indestructable'.

He laughed.

'Now do not turn me into a god'.

'Your people already have'. He nodded sadly.

'And gods only fall out of favour or get immortalised by death'.

'Do not say that, come to me'.

'Again?' he looked surprised.

'Of course. You men always think you are the only ones who have lusts? I love you dearly'.

They left on midsun, as Bree boldened the mountains.

## In Between Times

*Generals, and it must frustrate them, cannot say war, and it is so. Preparations have to be made, plans too tedious to go into, stores collected, men trained and all the massive paraphernalia of getting an army into order and moving approximately together across the landscape. This early Spring time of the year is known as Boden, a festival of preparation, preparing for the spring sowing, but this year men are sowing the seeds of war and it is appropriate that the great God of Boden is the comic fellow Gadabout. We race back and forth across the kingdom, see Gadabout dancing everywhere with mad glee. Gormiah Threadon even takes a bow, and there is a death in the Rume. Something very strange is happening in the Sard, be aware of it, it will change things.*

It was Boden, the in-between times. Neither the crops were ready for harvesting nor were the fields bare. Stomachs were full on early food, but not yet fat on the harvest to come. It was a time of promise rather than fulfilment and Boden was never accorded the full-hearted status of the other festivals. And its God was Gadabout, the gleeman, the comic god-for-nothing, the droll jester of the Lords, always poking his long nose into others business. At his worst he was potentially as evil as Wyrd, with schemes for ruining Breet or making himself powerful with Wyrds borrowed magic, but at his best he was the children's clown, almost an innocent, giving presents to the kids who readily joined in with his clumsy fun. He played a mouth harp as he went, twanging his way from trick to tumble. The adults tolerated the God, giving out sweetmeats to children in vague obedience to Gadabout, yet somehow not altogether sure that the god was not a malevolent idiot. Scholars were always quick to point to this confusion and claim that Gadabout was an uneasy amalgam of two gods, the horse-warriors' cruel jester, and the Past Peoples' Sillyman, a sort of kind gentle clown.

An irrational contradictory God, and it seemed to some it was appropriate that there should be plans for war.

When Widsith and Juud arrived back to the Hollowstone they found Gadabout twanging a jig in the street, leading the children with long streamers. They said a quiet goodbye and went to make their own preparations, Mikal to be a warrior leader and Juud? She reflected with irritation that she was condemned to wait.

As the Highland tribes sent in their men for fighting they encountered dozens of

humorous village Gadabouts, mocking and scampering with the childers. These village clowns did not hesitate to turn their attention to the gathering soldiers and there was a lot of good natured horse-play. In the Furrowdale Valley, in the great camp established outside Beorht by the twin armies of Sure Sheriat and Mial Hest, they held a Festival of Fools and all many of tricks and competitions were set acted out between the rival armies. A favourite were pole races across the sweep of the Furrow River, and there was a great demonstration or otherwise of prowess, the soldiers crowing with delight when the opposition belly-flopped into the water. Everyone played tricks, some cruel, and in principle no one could be offended whilst the festival was on, though no soldier was game to try the experiment on Mial Hest. Even the boldest Gadabouts were cautious when the general appeared.

Mial Hest watched some of the antics without smiling. There would come a time when these games would be real and the real Gadabouts would have their sides split by swords. He begrudged this waste of time, but knew it was unwise to stop it. The fools needed their fun. He had been disappointed with Sure Sheriats force. It was large on paper but empty of much real soldiery, mostly adventurers and town beggars as far as he could see. It was as well they were going the safe way around the marsh. And he had heard reports from shepherds about the abbey ('a fortress abbey' one aptly called it) and he knew he was depending a great deal on his baldymen. There was not room for an army to move up there and if the peasants were right these monks were a fanatical bunch. There was something else troubling him too, what was it...? Oh yes! Yesterday a fellow had called out to him as he was riding by.

'Allos sirs, and does yer remembers me Lord? A great helps I was to you in past, and maybe I'll bring more lucks to you eh?'

The wretched figure that popped up in front of him made Mial Hests face more severe. Oh yes, he remembered and he brushed past the man angrily.

'Gormiah Threadon sirs thankee, and at yours pleasure. I joined up to yours great cause, heres success' and Gormiah chanted a patriotic tune at the generals retreating back.

Tilster! The man was drunk! Is this the quality of man that made his army?

It made him uneasy and he suddenly thought of wayfarer Widsith. What had Sheriat told him? That the Highland kingdom had appointed some great leader? He should throw Mr Threadon out with the armies garbage, but if he did that, he would have no army left to speak, since most of it was rotten. Gormiah had given the general the best of his smiles, and the effect was ghastly. With Stroms luck he might be able to leave that smile behind at the Passage of Prayer, but what about wayfarer Widsith? Why was the fellow troubling him now? Did the Duces daughter flee to the Highland kingdom? She was a sweet bitch, and he almost had her. Though he would never have admitted it, he still smarted at Juuds quick escape. She was a high spirited wench and no mistake, and had outwitted him. Had she gone to her wayfarer? Everywhere he turned these days he sensed Widsith in the shadows.

Beorht was gay with Boden. The city had always made this a special event for some long lost reason, in any case there were Gadabout kings and princesss, Gadabout days, Gadabout sports, the whole city came alive, and with the presence of two great armies

close by the city fairly bellowed with noise and drunken soldiery. The merchants wrung their hands at the damages, yet marked up the profits all the same. It was a glorious time. Some one had started up the fashion this Boden for disguises and lots of people walked around in fancy cloaks wearing wicked grinning or groaning masks. Solas Sharp found it much easier than expected to nip into Beorht, pick up some equipment and slip out to meet Hull some four leagues from the festive city. He showed Hull the mask, a grotesque rendering of Reeter Seval, the abbot on the Passage of Prayer. They did not rest that night but carried on swiftly, sometimes passing unnoticed a few longmans from a soldiers campfire with some gleeman prancing in the fire circle.

‘They do not take much precaution eh’ Solas remarked.

‘They think they will win’ replied Hull.

Princess Herrietta of Granry had little patience with fools, not even unearthly ones, and she regarded the festival of Boden as a useless interruption to her preparations.

She already knew of the great army being gathered in the Furrowdale Valley, knew of its size, its composition, even the number of horses. Reeter Servals monkish spies had already observed and reported. Mial Hest would have been astonished to know that Herrietta knew the fighting quality of his force (‘a raggle-taggle mob mostly, except for the baldymen and a core of Sheriats army’) and disturbed by the princesss forceful preparations for war. She had appointed her regent Fustel as general, which fooled no one in Noll, and Fustel was called ‘General Gadabout’. The merchants of Noll realised the extent of Herriettas ambition too late and they gave for the most part only reluctant support to her gathering army. Fortunately for Herrietta the population was wildly in favour of war, especially when they knew of Mial Hests evil intentions, Of course the populace would not have found out unless Herrietta had told them, and her spies promulgated the fervour needed to inspire the usually careful craftsmen and countryfolk to drop their tools and rush for the glamour of war, but it worked well, and the enthusiasm was self-perpetuating.

Only a few merchants would grumble quietly about what chance ‘this girl had against a general of Mial Hests proven abilities’. They watched gloomily as their money clothed the Granry peasants in cheap chest armour and gave a pike or a crossbow to each, and got little comfort watching the ungainly glittering mass manouever around the Noll city walls in the warm Boden sunshine.

‘A time for fools’ muttered one.

And Gadabout danced, and danced, sometimes the buffoon, sometimes the clown, sometimes the trickster. Everyone in the kingdom was touched by the god. He was everywhere at once, and in a perverse way Gadabout was linked to the coming battles so that the grinning masks held a chillingly humourless threat.

The Duc du Qu’et watched him in his courtyard, then had to be helped to his bed by servants who already knew that he was dying. The Duc got up one morning to make the yearly ritual of giving gifts to the household children, but the effort was too much for him and the children had to come to his bedside, humbled by the privilege and frightened by the gaunt, ill eyes of their benefactor. Sometime during Boden the Duc died and was buried with sad pomp with all the servants and countryfolk gathering for the gloomy and worrying burial. For where was Juud du Qu’et, the rightful heir? And

Donan Shallbody? Who was now in control?

That same day Mial Hests guards rode off hastily to the Furrowdale Valley, relieved of their duty and determined to catch up on the fun, and the god danced and danced and danced.

Weneways, by the low green folds of the Sink came a stir of dust. Here on the edge of the plain some riders gathered, lean, haggard, somewhat old-fashioned in dress, as if time had slipped by them, and they looked over the Granry eagerly, as if seeing it as a child sees a present handed from Gadabout.

The riders were well armed and looked accustomed to riding. Behind, in makeshift carts, were their tired women and squalling children, but they hardly attended to them, but sniffed the plain air as if they had never breathed such. When they rode, they rode in a body, steadily with no altering of pace. They almost seemed to know where they were going yet not one of them had been here before. Their fathers had, but that was by glancing over their shoulders, and they now lay buried in the eating, drying, dust of the Sard. When the riders stopped they would study the books in their hands and nod as if satisfied.

If Herrietta had heard that the Righteous had escaped from the Sard it would mean nothing to her. A body of armed horsemen could always be a nuisance but a company of Noll soldiers would see them off. Mial Hest would not have understood the Righteous presence, neither would Sure Sheriat. Widsith might have done, but he did not hear of the event till much later. The Marshmen would have understood, but if they heard, or felt a tremor in the scheme of things, they did not say. And the Due du Qu'et would have understood, but his thoughts were buried in the low mound of his grave covered with pasture flowers and tumbled over by larks. The Twig-Tellers knew of course, because they knew it was foretold, and they had cut the track through the bogwood to aid the riders, but kept themselves discreetly hidden, tucking their long legs under their tunics and watching the Righteous struggle through the dripping forest, their exhausted horses floundering with mud up to the bellies. The Lowleahs, perhaps the oldest and wisest of the Past Peoples, knew that the Righteous were free and that they carried the disease with them, and rejoiced, yes, they rejoiced, though can anyone say why this was so?

## Chapter 66

# Stromer

*This is a chapter on warfare. Mial Hest launched a bloody assault on the monks at the Passage of Prayer and Sure Sheriat marched triumphantly into the Granry, so where the Strom is he? Down from the Rises comes the leader and his army, Beorht is burning, and Herrietta is burning with anxiety. The air is hot with summer and thunder clouds, but if it is not a storm coming, what is it?*

*'This is the story told, that Strom was so angry at Wyrds interfering that he stole down late at night and wrecked Wyrds Den, breaking all the furniture and magical apparatus into hundreds of pieces. However, because every part of Wyrds Den was malevolent and evil, the small pieces that fell into Stroms tunic by accident gave Strom all manner of bad luck for a season afterwards. Not till every particle of evil had been removed from the tunic did Strom feel better. So Fellowmen, Wyrds evil is great, greater than Stroms good intentions'*

*'The Wife of Wyrd' story from The Articles written by Doao*

*1-10 Croppen 158, to the festival of 1-10 Stromer 158*

The long colourful thread of Sure Sheriats army detached itself from the scraggling mess of billeted canopies, stinking latrines and the store dumps of Mial Hests army and wove a bright design through the tiny hamlets of the lower Furrowdale Valley. The peasants, long used to the comings and goings of armies, hardly bothered a glance towards the column as it passed. They looked briefly, then bent to the tasks in the fields, measuring the height of the crop with satisfaction. The column of men was interminably long, and was difficult to manage as it jostled along the narrow country ways. Sheriat and his captains had a busy time riding up and down the endless chain of men, encouraging, keeping order, and watching for any deserters, enthusiasm had quickly ceased once the drudgery of army life had become apparent, and the hearty singing that was heard as the army left camp gradually faded under the relentless days of plodding down the deep mud roads.

The camp seemed inappropriately empty once Sheriats greater half had left. Mial Hest gave the necessary orders for the demolition of the camp, and mustered his leaner

army into manageable units. He sent some baldymen to reconoitre the route, and the rest of the army filed to the foot of the Raggerok, leaving behind a squalor of debris that the peasants would pick over in their careful way and marvel at the waste of a great army.

Judging that Sheriats force should have reached the Royal Road by now, Mial Hest broke his army into various assaulting divisions and took them up the severe mountain tracks that led to the Passage of Prayer and to the great monastery. Of course once he had started the approach their could be no turning back, for to attempt to retreat an army from the Passage down these thin mountain tracks would lead to awesome confusion. It was bad enough getting up there, with a Drubbins muddle of order and disorder, and long frustrating wicks as the men waited aimlessly for the line to move. Five soldiers were killed simply waiting, as a large rock tumbled off the hillside and crushed them. Somehow Mial Hest kept the army moving, keeping the baldymen up in front and despairing of the argumentative rabble lower down. He was not cheered when a voice yelled distinctively.

‘Swivvens glories are yours yer honour, and victories fores us an’ all’.

A plague on that horse-trader! Hest got two soldiers to seize Gormiah Thre-adon and forcibly beat him and deposit him back in the Furrowdale Valley. At least that was one piece of bad luck that would not be following them.

Above the generals head the baldybirds circled uneasily at the banners coming up into their domain, and with some leisuredly flaps they could select any of a dozen up-drafts arid soar effortlessly to the bare slabs of rock that hung over the convent, where if anything above the moan of Druel could be heard, it would be the sound of the monks chanting prayers. The abbot was making his preparations, but they would have puzzled Mial Hest, for there was little of sword play or wrestling bouts to encourage strength among the monks, no, rather the abbot urged his men on by prayer and exhalation. He suggested that Mial Hests army was Wyrds, nothing less than the actualisation of the evil mandarin trying to overcome this world with his evil . He got the monks to sing stirring hymns and chant hypnotic fervent prayers that worked their religious souls into a passion of belief that every blow struck against Mial Hest was a blow for Strom, and Strom himself would receive them into his great hall should they die. Reeter Serval could guess that not one monk would hesitate to die for that belief, and if the monks lacked skill in warfare, they had the desperate strength of the fanatical. His spies told him Mial Hest was coming and he was quite confident that the general was to receive a shock — ambition for the soul was greater than ambition for the body.

On the Granry, Herrietta gathered her amy and made impatient slow progress along the Royal Road to the Crosser, the great junction where the Royal Road and Traders Road met, here she would make her stand. She had to heard her raggie-taggle mass of men like a teacher with a brood of mischievousness children. The seriousness of the outing had not sunk into her army, most of whom were taking advantage of the country wine and country wenches along the way. Fustel was hopeless and impotent, and Herrietta had taken direct control, all pretense of working through her regent being cast aside. The queen occasionally felt that she was quite inadequate to control this rambling product of her ambition, and she was grateful for the clear sunny sky that hung beneficially over them, with not a smudge of storm cloud anywhere to be seen.

Her army matched Hests and Sheriats together in size, but that would fool no one. Herrietta prayed that Reeter Serval could stop Mial Hest, or least weaken his force severely. To meet both approaching armies at once would be too much. At the Crosser she began to organise some discipline into her force, getting the captains to train the men hard. This was not popular and a few men tried to desert. They were caught and publicly hung, which brought every soldier to their senses. It seemed to give a purpose to the army that had not been there before, and whilst the men trained, Herrietta fidgetted through the false Croppen, the ten days of that season that fell before the Festival of Stomer, Strom's festival, the time of Strom, the days of thunder.

On the 8th of Croppen, Widsith led out his small army down towards the Furrowdale Valley. Juud refused to stay behind and she and a grumbling Donan followed a discreet way behind. Widsith had little real plan in mind, though he thought occupying the Furrowdale in Hest and Sheriats absence would block their line of retreat, and perhaps he should destroy Beorht as well? On their own they could not match Mial Hest and Sheriat but if Hull had got to the Marshmen first, well, they may well have the strength.

Widsith could see only bloodiness coming out of their march and he could not understand how the men could sing and cheer him? Did they not see the future? Did they not know the force of Mial Hest? The skill of Sure Sheriat? And how pitifully their show of arms could muster against such generals? It did not seem so. It was like an outing, a strange sort of holiday, arranged by Gadabout under the concealment of Fellowman. Widsith did not like the way the men associated him with that mountain god, he could not live with that expectation, and was only too mortally aware of how many widows there would be at the end of this war. He had tried to instill in the army something of his ideas, and the subtle ideals of the roundrell, but it was a curious army that could wield a sword in one hand whilst trying to soften the blow in the other, and the wayfarer despaired of making the bubbling mountain tribes from seeing how quickly the horror would prick and collapse the advantage. And the roundrell? Did he even believe it? Or was he using it as a device. Perhaps he did the intelligence of the Highland tribes an injustice, for at one place on the march a young brawny lad had swung past and yelled 'fight, and talks after eh leader?'

So perhaps they did understand.

The army passed through Bleen, but did not stay. Widsith stopped by with Mirren and rubbed his childrens hair as they talked of ordinary things for a while. She asked about Juud du Qu'et, and Widsith said, yes, he had seen her, and she did not ask again. Her lips were stiff and it was a relief to leave the Rise and concentrate on keeping this patchwork army together. For the first time in many generations the Highland people were coming down to the downlanders, and they were greeted by the first heavy clouds of Stomer, rolling up the Furrowdale Valley like a thick viscous liquid.

## II

During the early hot days of Croppen great pillars of cloud would gather on the plains, and push up towers of bulbous black cumulus. Sudden squalls of wind would lay the early wheat low and driplets of warm rain would intensify the hot waiting air. Humid, still days followed each other whilst the sun made striking colours on the massed clouds and sullen waiting earth below. Then it would release, in harsh blinding gales of rain and rapid flashes of light. Thunder, as if it were Stroms own voice, would bellow from the sky and the ditches would flood with the outburst of water and break into the dry fields. A pause might come strangely in all this tumult and the clouds re-gather, till the sting of hail would announce another onslaught.

The peasants would watch anxiously from their dripping door lintels and mutter prayers to Strom. It was a fearful time, and it was felt that the god himself was breathing his harsh breath over his servants, judging where to place the retribution of lightning, rain or hail. Everything was done in Stroms name now, each prayer at night, each punishment of a child, each beating of a wife, hopeful that Strom would not hurt their meagre agricultural hopes. Stromer traditionally began ten days into Croppen, and lasted twenty days. If it came early, it could wash the thin crops out of the ground. If it came late, it could flatten the wheat. If it lingered, the crops would slowly rot in the saturated ground. Strom himself would decide, and his servants could only hope.

Throughout the kingdom, people watched the violence in the heavens and prayed for peaceful times in Croppen ahead. That is they prayed for peaceful times in heaven, what happened on earth was another matter.

## III

Scurries of cold rain dashed against the leading elements of Hests army as it clambered up the mountain trails to the Passage of Prayer. The higher the men got on the track the colder and worsier it became, turning almost to snow and clinging to the lightly clad baldymen with a sticky chill. The night got thicker, and so did the mens curses, except they muttered them under their breath and the captains looked viciously at any one who even made an involuntary cry whilst stumbling against a rock. The foul weather made cover for the army, but it also made it confusing. As Hest picked his way past the waiting clumps of men he began to regret making a night attack. It seemed a clever idea at the time, but now, as Druel slithered amongst the unseen high peaks, he began to wonder the wisdom of it. That wind was like a woman, complaining, niggling, screeching in the dark corners. Twice baldybirds had suddenly let out an unearthly howl and the hundreds of men struggling upwards would stop, was that a monk? The Passage was getting to them. Many men had died in this place before, and many were going to die soon, they hoped it was not to be them. The monks would certainly be surprised

eh? So perhaps it was worth it, scrambling up the rotten track, and swearing nervously at the unexpected black chasm at their feet.

It was well into the old night now, and as Hest reached the advanced party he peered into the black where he could dimly make out the abbey's thick walls against a shrouded sky. Not a star, or hardly a hint of light. Were the monks moving? Were they watching?

'No sign sir.'

There were a couple of hundred baldymen gathered closely down on the track. The brunt of the attack would have to fall on them and the rest of the army would have to follow higgledy-piggledy.

'Are the ropemen ready?'

'Aye'

There was nothing for it then. Hest gave the order to attack. Just at that moment there was a low boom of thunder somewhere, and a growl from Druel.

Ten or more ropemen crept forward. Each had a long hook with a grappling iron attached. It was starting to rain, and there was a glow of lightning high up on a peak which made it stand out dramatically. It was as if Strom himself were following the proceedings with Godly interest. Two baldymen muttered a quick prayer then slithered after the ropemen to the base of the walls. At another signal more men went scurrying across the rocky ground to the foot of the great walls. Hest sent another party around to the main gate, with axes at the ready.

Still there was silence.

Not a sound came from the monastery and Hest wondered if they were all actually asleep. That would be a good joke. The storm was approaching fast and let off two quick flickers of light to the skaw, and the thunder came quickly afterwards, rolling around the pass as the first irons were thrown up and men began grappling up the walls. Still no monks! Were they dead? The axemen had started furiously against the great gate and more than a score of men had got to the top of the walls. Had could the monks stay asleep with that Strom's racket at the gate? Still no movement. Strom himself could be battering in, and it was difficult to see in this Wyrds blackness, and the rain was thicker. Hest began to feel pricklings of alarm. This was not right. His archers were ready in case any cowled figure should top the walls. Where were the monks?

Then the general had his answer.

Scuffling with sandalled feet and with incomprehensible voices the monks came out of the fog and rocks behind the monastery, where they had lain hidden in wet cold secrecy for several wicks. The surprise was total, many of Hest's men caught halfway up the walls dangling on ropes, or else pointing their bows stupidly at the monastery walls. The monks rush initially overwhelmed the soldiers till they started to desperately fight back, and the fighting quickly became vicious and confused. Armed shadows hurled at other armed shadows and it was certain that men sometimes killed men on the same side. The swords made a clanging noise, like kitchenware, and there were shrieks and despairing cries as the opponents hacked at each other. Most of Hest's archers were killed straight off, unprotected, their bows useless in this dirty dangerous night. Hest

was in the middle of it, fending off the murderous long pikes that were jabbed by the monks. He rallied a group of men around him, conscious that unless he could bring his men together coherently they were lost.

Slowly, as the initial surprise of the attack wore off, the better armed and skilful baldymen began to assert themselves over the monks. By now more of Hests army had trickled up from the track and sheer numbers were beginning to tell. The ground was thick with dead and groaning men who often tripped those still fighting. Occasional flashes of lightning would freeze the combatants as if in some garish melodrama performed at Harvess. Then it would be dark and thunderous, and the metal would seek out flesh again. Outside the walls Hests men were brutally beginning to win, though every monk fought till death had eclipsed his mind, but inside it was a different story. The monks had waited patiently for Reeter Servals signal, and the ropemen and soldiers were badly outnumbered and were run into corners like rats and slaughtered. Hest got the axemen working again and they broke through with a shout and several soldiers wriggled through.

This was the crux of the battle.

The soldiers opened up the great gate and poured into the courtyard, stampeding the cattle inside and attacking the cowed shadows that kept coming at them. Hest followed his men into the courtyard and encountered fierce hand to hand fighting in the labyrinthian monastery. Now the positions were reversed and the monks became the hunted, trapped in fearful squealing corners as the swords sunk in. Gradually the noise of battle subsided, and Hests men chased of into the building, looking for monks and loot. Some men battered down a well locked and barricaded door and found, to their amazement, a group of elderly scared nuns.

A sickly silence fell over the monastery. The air was thick with blood, and only when the torches were lit did Mial Hest begin to see the carnage of crippled and dead men on the ground. He sent the apothecaries to the wounded, though there was little could be done. It had been a brutal battle and had cost more lives than he had bargained for. He had sustained a glancing wound from one fanatical pike and he would not forget in a hurry the gleam of Wyrds eyes that flashed from the monks face as Hests sword plunged in, almost as if he were sending the man to his joy rather than his death. Strom they fought! He got his captains to organise food and water for the soldiers who were for the most part sitting in quiet groups, cleaning their swords and discussing the battle. And whilst Mial Hest was glancing around, aimlessly taking in the scene he wondered what had become of Reeter Serval? Then there was a kerfuffle down one corridor, as an old naked woman rushed into the courtyard screaming and a long pike skewered her to the ground.

No quarter asked or given.

## IV

When the small Highland tribe army arrived at Fromms Ford word had already come to the leader that Mial Hest was gone up to the Passage of Prayer 'I hope the monks send him to his prayers' commented one captain. Since Sure Sheriat had gone to the Granry it was an easy matter for the Highland army to move at a steady pace down valley, displacing the feeble resistance of Mial Hests small rearguard that brought him to the gates of a closed and horrified Beorht.

Various reconaissance groups went out, some cautiously following the pace of Mial Hests army over the Raggerok, and others mopping up stray resistance down towards the marsh. They were filling a vacuum of power left by the other armies, but no word came from Solas or Hull, so had the Marshmen acted? The wayfarer was kept busy with all these thoughts as a deputation of five merchants rode out to parley and were shaken to hear that it was the leaders intention to leave Beorht an empty smoking ruin.

'But where are we to go lord?' spluttered one merchant with dismay.

Anywhere that pleases you' Widsith replied coolly.

'But sir, sire, this will ruin us. Would not we be more profitable to you as a city intact'.

'If you could ever be trusted, yes'.

The merchants looked hopeful.

'But you have become fat fellows indeed on the business of war. Now you shall know the old saying 'that the sword cuts two ways'. I shall be calling with my torches the day after tomorrow'.

'We will fight' they said unconvincingly, knowing as Widsith did that the city was ill-prepared for a siege. Its main water supply was outside the city walls, which in any case had been ruthlessly pillaged for building material. The elders, when they consulted the Sergeant of the Watch as to how long they could withstand a siege, just laughed and pointed at the poorly maintained walls. He suggested half a day.

So the merchants and citizens fled in confusion, and all that day and the next the carts loaded with possessions creaked out of the city gates and parked themselves at a watchful distance from the city, still incredulous that Widsith would carry out his word. Why not even in the barbaric days of Swivven the Strong was such a thing known!

On the appointed day Widsith rode in with his men, assured himself that not a dog moved in the city and set alight to numerous buildings, feeling a strange mixture of disgust and pleasure in the resultant conflagration. Some men tried to souvenier a few items and were promptly and harshly punished, and, a worse punishment for most, humiliatingly sent home. Even by the time they were a league out of the city the smoke was dense above the city and a few flames towered up. It was an extraordinary sight, somehow evil and purifying at the same time. Widsith could not fathom his secret delight. Perhaps he was cleansing the land again? It burnt all night and for three days afterwards the ruined city sent a black cloud of smoke to the already troubled and stormy heaven.

The inhabitants had watched incredulously then fearfully. What would these mad Highland tribes do next? And they turned from the pyre of their homes and reluctantly, sluggishly, like people who were not seriously afraid of their lives but unsure of their destination they moved down valley, as if some mysterious instinct had triggered the action. No one seriously thought of staying till Mial Hest returned, and they could not go up valley. Widsith watched the plodding and squalling baggage carts, piled precipitously with useless possessions, childers crying, women sad and the menfolk grimfaced and afraid, urging on their over-worked mares and going to Strom knows where, and he felt immensely sorry and tired. He broke every silent promise to himself, and to Mirren, and rode upvalley at dayend where Juud encompassed him in her arms and took the violent anguished tenderness upon her body without protest, holding him till dawn.

## V

Reeter Serval on the whole was pleased, it had almost worked.

The violent unexpectedness of the monks attack had for one hesitant wick almost threw Hest off the Passage of Prayer, ahhh, but almost was not enough and in the dark gross confusion of battle the abbott forsook the certainty of defeat and slipped out with two loyal monks down the track to the Granry. It was a long tiring night, the track was greasy with snow at the top and rain at the foot and the abbott had a great deal of thinking to do. Of course he had never really believed he could stop Mial Hests army, and in his devious mind plan 'b' was already far advanced. Certainly he did not fancy being under Herrietta now, and what would she have with her amateur army against Hest? He still had friends in Noll, merchant friends who he had been corresponding with for some time, men who would be more interested in bargaining with Hest than fighting him. Dawn was creeping over the low hills surrounding the Brilliant Lakes as the three riders approached the Great River.

By the time they had got the grumbling ferryman out of bed and crossed the sluggish current, the abbotts mind was well made. A baldybird watching from on high would have observed the cassocked riders, turn their horses off the Trade Road and travelling up beside the Great River, in a circumlutory direction to Noll, and pointedly away from the Crosser where Princess Herrietta was counting the wicks with an uneasy fury.

## IV

An army does not sit well in one place and the confidence with which they had reached the Crosser had evaporated. The men were getting fidgety with inactivity and the most astounding rumours circulated as to the size and splendour of the approach-

ing armies. They seemed to get bigger each day. Herrietta consulted with her captains about what should be done but they could only mumble helplessly for 'more training'. It was a sham of course. All the training in Stroms field would not make these men better, they were carpenters, tavern-keepers, beggars, cobblers, peasants, and not one of them had more than a passing interest in facing an army like Mial Hests. And of course she was trapped, since the Crosser was the best position to be in. She simply had to wait, and that was not a skill she had acquired well. Every wick she expected an urgent rider from Reeter Serval to tell off his triumph in repulsing Mial Hest from the Passage of Prayer, but every wick the road from the Raggerok looked empty and forlorn. She tried to hide her impatience from her soldiers by organising elaborate competitions and games, and more, more training of this army growing daily more unwilling.

Still no news came. Where the Wyrd were these armies? If Serval had succeeded or failed surely she would have heard? Her captains shrugged uselessly and suggested she send out more scouts. More?! She had half the Granry filled with riders dashing back and forth yet not a word of any army, not a word of anything! The Granry was as quiet as Wast Time, a sullen ominous quiet. Herrietta paced her tent, fretting at the food offered her and drinking too much of the wine. So this was what it was like to be a man! She had all the power at her command now, dozens of men running to her will, yet all she could do was parade nonchalantly during the day and fume in private. Scouting groups returned and left, and still no word! Why it was as if the Raggerok had swallowed the lot.

She took to thinking back over her ascent to power, inspecting her decisions, trying to uncover the mistake that could have led to this impatient inactivity. She had never spent so long in waiting and events had got beyond her control, how could this have happened? This situation was not like Noll, where every man and his vices were available to her spies, and she could use her physical beauty to lure and tempt men, an easy business, and Mial Hest? She sometimes imagined bandying words with him, and the subtle gratifications of a dalliance between two kindred spirits. After all, they both sought power, wantonly, and it was the gaining of power that pleased them surely. Eventually, as the game grew larger, the risks became so great that you won or lost everything upon a single trick, and no sexual act had ever gratified Herrietta as much as that deeper passion. She paused before the mirror and groomed her hair a little.

What sort of man was Mial Hest like? She heard he was attractive, and he would surely find her so. She felt sure that Hest tasted the same sweet fruit of power as herself. It was not found on any earthly orchard and the pity of it was that there was only one fruit to be eaten and two very hungry people.

At last, on the final day of Stromer, came word. Two riders, the sweat still pouring off them and stinking of horse, were rushed into Herriettas tent.

Yes maam, Mial Hest was on the Granry, beside the Great River and looking to cross soon. And Reeter Serval? Why maam, no sign. No sign at all? The riders shook their heads sullenly and the princess dismissed them. Already word was in the camp that Hest was crossing the Great River and the monks had been destroyed. Quickly the whisper grew that Sure Sheriat had been seen advancing on the Royal Road too, and what was a weak rumour became a certain fact. Herrietta tried to stop these fears rum-maging through her army like beggars, but it was already far far too late. The captains

reported that dayend that scores of men had disappeared and more could be expected overnight.

'Dogs deserting' snapped Herrietta, maddened at her swiftly changing fortunes.

'Hang every one caught, no better, hamstringing them, and make them an example'.

The captains looked at each other anxiously. They did not dare suggest a retreat to Herrietta in this mood, but plainly against both forces converging and with an ill-trained army, they could not fight out on the open plain. The city walls of Noll looked temptingly secure. Herrietta had a bad night, muttering curses against Reeter Serval and hoping he got the death he deserved. What had gone wrong? And she felt lonely, and craved solace. She was a woman after all and she thought bleakly back to the caresses and love-making vigours of Givtheem Tallott. He was a treacherous dog, of course, like all men., but there had been a sort of sweetness. It was perhaps all she had ever known. Herrietta drank and became maudlin, and summoned one of her bodyguards, a rather fine young man who had taken her fancy. She broke every promise to herself that night and the soldier found himself dallying splendidly with a princess groaning under his willing body.

Worse news greeted Herrietta in the morning, sleepless already from tossing the doubts and decisions of war in her mind. The captains came and saluted nervously. Almost a battalion of men had fled that night, despite guards, and a rider had arrived with news that would surely madden the princess, so they came in numbers. Herrietta saw their grim faces and knew there was bad tidings.

'Well, what is it?' she spat.

One captain shuffled and said nervously,

'Princess, a rider has reported that Reeter Serval, the abbott, is in Noll...' Herriettas face turned fluid with silent rage and the captain had to make a physical effort to continue 'they say, they say that he is rallying the merchants to withdraw support from you and welcome Mial Hest...' she screamed, and lost all princessly control.

'I'll kill the Wyrd. I'll cut off his parts and roast them before his eyes and eat them myself. The dog, the treacherous deceiving evil Wyrd dog!! So he failed and will now cheat me!!'.

She was beside herself with rage, almost incoherent. When a dog deserts one master he is distrusted, when he deserts two masters he is destroyed, for who could trust such a beast? Herrietta would kill this fat slimy thing herself and she gave out orders so savagely to get riders for Noll that the captains did not dare add another warning note, that some strange riders had come into the city by a mischance and that they had brought an illness with them that had already killed many folk and was dismaying the people with its virulence.

It seemed as if the city were besieged with evils from all sides.

## VII

Two days later it was Mial Hests turn to wait at the Crosser.

On what should have been the place of a great army were empty fields, a few broken carts in corners and the odd hastily dug grave. Herriettas army had dissolved on her absence, and the captains were unable to resist the weight of men wanting to fly from the expected onslaught of Mial Hest, and fearful for their families safety in Noll, what with news of disease and all. The ground was as thick with rumour as the sky was swollen with cloud ‘everyone in Noll was already dead from the weakness’ (as they were calling the disease), ‘Mial Hest had outflanked them and was already enjoying supper in Herriettas boudoir’, ‘the merchants had agreed to terms of peace but Mial Hest had insisted the army be slaughtered’, that ‘Sure Sheriat was only a wick away’, that ‘Herrietta was murdered and Reeter Serval was in charge’, and so on and so on. Herriettas sudden departure looked like flight, and nothing the captains could say would have changed that impression. At first secretedly, and then boldly in the open, men packed up their baggers and high-tailed it behind the princess back to Noll, like Breet chasing Strom. The captains made the best of a bad job and followed, forming a semblance of an army out of the most loyal men.

It amused Mial Hest that his reputation could inspire such a panic. She must have a poor army he mused, for if Herrietta had known the depleted state of his force, she might not have taken to her heels so hastily. Over four hundred baldymen had been killed at the Passage of Prayer, and a couple of hundred more incapacitated, a loss he could ill-afford. The bulk of the army had proved dismal in the whole episode, many getting injured unnecessarily and panicking at every alarm. Just getting the force over the Passage was an achievement, several men just fell to their deaths on the track and the general knew that most of them would run away at any serious battle. So although he was disappointed at Herriettas non- $\neg$ appearance he was also quietly relieved. Of course it was easy now, with barely a march to take possession of the city and the whole Granry. Lutens Wenner would be boiling in his grave at the prospect of so easy a prize.

Hest congratulated himself with these thoughts and pondered upon how long it would take Sheriat to bring his men up to the Crosser. In fact he was surprised that his scouts had not yet contacted his advancing army. He stretched and yawned, deliciously at ease. He was almost tempted to ride on straight to Noll now and take the city, but there was Sheriats feelings to consider and a grand entrance of both armies (he could not imagine the citizens would resist) was appealing. There were Nolls city walls of course, but he doubted if the citizens would want a siege, what would it achieve? They would give him Herrietta on a platter. Quite a beauty it was said, and it was pleasing to think he would probably not even have to ask favours of her body, after all the sexual position was the only one she had left in her armoury.

Yes, it had been well planned, and he had seen his plans come to full maturity in a way that only Swivven the Strong had matched. That analogy had been made several times, why didn't a fellow, that beggarly scoundrel, oh what was his name, shout out

'likes Swivvens glories are yours your honour'. Of course he did not acknowledge the compliment, in fact he had rather hoped Gormiah Threadon had perished somewhere back in the Furrowdale valley, but nevertheless, it was satisfying, and true. His captains said it openly, and his mistresses preened him with his triumphs at night. He had virtually the entire kingdom at his command. It was very gratifying, very gratifying.

The next morning brought the first prick of discontent.

Two riders came in urgently with the news that the Furrowdale Valley had been invaded by the Highland tribes and that great pillars of smoke and fire had been seen over Beorht. Hest was visibly angered, of course! Those Highland tribes would get their reward for this stab in the back!

'Who is leading them?' he demanded.

The men shrugged.

'We heard the name of Mikal Widsith sire'.

The generals jaw dropped at this, and then his mouth closed grimly. That wayfarer again! He should have killed him when he had the chance, but how was he or anyone to know that fate would bring them like this together? How Widsith had dogged him, and now the fellow would be having fun whilst he was whittling away wicks waiting for Sure Sheriat to whip his arse along! Hest swore viciously at the news, and the two messengers retreated unthanked for their grueling ride. Beorht was one of the jewels in his plan and its ruination was a blow. And what was worse, Hest suspected that this Widsith was a thorough leader and would destroy most of the crops in the valley too, that could make the return difficult. Hest paced the tent and planned a nasty revenge on the Highland tribes, ignoring the almost carnival atmosphere in his army at the prospect of Noll.

The next days news was disturbing.

Still no word from Sheriat, and a strange furtive deputation from Noll came and begged the general to spare the city. That was well and good and Hest was pleased, but there was something pasty and ill-looking in their complexions that he did not like, and Hest sent them off with no promises and vaguely disquietened by the rumours of sickness and death in the city. Nothing he knew alarmed soldiers more than the thought of disease. They could be a superstitious lot at the best of times, but mention disease and you could not get them to fight for any price. And still no Sheriat? The general sent out more riders and walked around the camp watching cautiously for any signs of alarm at the bodings from Noll. No, the men were cheerful. The prospect of wine, loot and women kept them in high spirits, indeed all they wanted to know was when they were going to Noll?

Towards dayend he noticed a caravan of sorts toiling along the road from Noll and he sent out some baldymen to bring the leader in. This man was terrified at being brought before Mial Hest, and he too had the same sad furtiveness about his face, as if the muscles had sagged. Yes, there were many deaths in the city, many of them. They called it the weakness, because mens flesh just seemed to fade and weaken on the body, as if they were rotting from within. He spat, and looked nervously around. How many? Well, hundreds, thousands, no, the elders didn't know what to do and no one had heard of Princess Herrietta. He spat again. Her and her follies. Thousands of deaths, and

the people were fleeing surely, but not this way? The old man looked guiltily at Hest and the general had his answer. Little chance of getting past Hests army at the Crosser, and Sheriats coming up behind. Reeter Serval? Never heard of 'im. Was the princess beautiful as they said? Well, he seen 'er once, and she looked fair enough. The man looked cunningly at Hest and made only a poor attempt to conceal it.

'But her heart is Wyrds, if she 'as a heart'.

Hest dismissed him and sat down to think.

He could never persuade his men to go to Noll now, and what was the point? Thousands of deaths, there was something about that fellow too, and what from? Hest gave orders that no outsider was permitted in the camp, women included. That would cause a few grumbles. The general drank heavily that night and looked at his own face carefully in the mirror. His face was sagged too, but it was the familiar faults of age and hardship. The skin looked healthy, and he could wench and drink as strongly as ever. The general watched moths flutter around the torch, unable to resist the flames that burnt them.

Things were coming unstuck. Beorht a burning pile, and the Highlands tribes waiting for war in the Furrowdale Valley, they would not be that easy to fight. Noll full of sickness, and what sort of prize was that? And still no Sheriat? Where in Wyrds name was the Drubbin! What had seem so well planned now looked risky and he had a silly perception that some force greater than himself was manipulating things and making him look foolish. But he did not believe in Strom, and yet? He shook his head from the silliness, but the drink had made him maudlin, and the iron general, the fearless general, the great ruthless Mial Hest, looked quickly around in the half-light of the tent to make sure no one was watching, and got awkwardly to his knees and tried to remember some rusty prayers to Strom, prayers he had not spoken since he was a child. It was worth a try.

## Chapter 67

# The Weakness

*A company of strange riders arrive in Noll, and breach the citys defences. The city elders start to learn some history and Mial Hest finds strange corpses on the plains. Herrietta loses her temper again and death starts to stalk the plains like a great, grim over-arching baldy-bird, shrieking and muttering.*

There was a saying, from The Articles, that if a man is unfortunate or unlucky then he 'has the mark of Wyrd' upon him, and everything he does to escape his poor fortunes only brings greater confusion upon his head. Reeter Serval fled the mistaken past of his exile at the Passage of Prayer and into the lap of a greater error. With his two accompanying monks they rode hard for two days up beside the Great River till they reached the old Ancient Way. This they turned along and urging their tired horses, made the first sighting of Noll two days later, just as Breet was burnishing the city walls in golden evening luminescence. They would have to ride quickly to reach the weneways gate before it was locked for the night. As they forced the last effort out of the horses they overtook a shabby bunch of riders going the same way, dusty and dirty they looked, with strangely old-fashioned clothes, with childers and wives following behind in carts. The abbott hardly glanced at them in his own haste and reached the city gate just as it closed with a heavy thud.

'Ho there!' bellowed Serval 'open the gate again you Gadabouts, you're too quick for Bree'.

There was still a tinge of sun on the topmost battlements. One guard poked his head over the wall.

'You there, you Wyrd. Tell you're captain its Reeter Serval, abbott of The Passage of Prayer, on urgent business for the princess, and be quick about it'.

The man looked apprehensive and there was an argument of voices behind the walls. Other faces peered over at them. At this delay the company of shabby riders rode up behind. Reeter Serval glanced at them but saw them only as tinkers.

'The Gadabouts have closed early, but they'll open. You'll be in the taverns tonight eh? Have you come far?'.

The leading rider mumbled a reply that the abbott could not distinguish and then was

distracted by the big rumbling noise of the gate as it swung open. Serval manouevered his horse through the half open gate (the Wyrds could not be bothered to open it properly!) and loudly upbraided the captain. The shabby company of riders were waved through by the guards, who thought they all belonged to the abbotts party, and firmly swung the gate closed. The abbott had finished his chastisement of the captain and rode off with his monks. The captain spat disgustedly.

‘Serval be Stromed!’ the captain swore ‘and what happened to those others eh? The other riders?’

‘Weren’t theys with the abbott?’ said one guard unwittingly.

‘No you Drubbins they weren’t. Where are they now eh? We’ll lose our heads if anyone finds out’.

They looked around but the horse riders had disappeared.

A wick later a hostelry owner did not fancy the looks of his guests at all ‘evil-looking if you ask me’ he said to his wife and got her to fetch some kings men. Two soldiers arrived and questioned the riders, casually at first, then more suspiciously. There was something queer-looking about these strangers. As if they were ill, and they spoke in a funny difficult dialect. The two soldiers looked quickly at each other, left the inn and returned half-wick later with twenty or more foot-soldiers, but the riders had left.

The hostelry owner approached them excitedly.

‘Theys went that ways, to the square, I saw em’.

The foot-soldiers dashed out and caught up with the Righteous with their women-folk and children trailing behind. A short vicious fight broke out which woke the whole neighbourhood and sent a flurry of alarm through the city. Was this Mial Hest already? By the time more soldiers had arrived and there were fifteen dead and wounded in the street, six of them soldiers. The Righteous were rounded up and put in the central keep, the women and children as well, and a verbal report was made to the elder in charge, who as it happened, was dining with Reeter Serval and being swayed by the abbotts lies and persuasions.

The elder turned to Serval as the captain left.

‘Well my dear Reeter, I will have some work in the morning. A nasty ill-tempered bunch. It will be a pleasure to deal with them. I cannot imagine how they came to get into the city’. He paused and sipped at his goblet of wine. ‘Did you hear the captain say they all looked rather ill? I trust they have not brought any disease with them. That would only add to our troubles at present’.

The abbott shifted uncomfortably in his seat and pointed out to the elder.

‘Long travelling can make anyone look poorly’.

‘Indeed, you look pale yourself, have some more ale. I think you will find the other elders and merchants more than willing to listen to you. Mial Hest sounds like a ruthless Wyrd, but well organised. And surely he can be made to see the advantages of a city whole than a city ruined?’

‘I am sure of it’.

‘And he is a man after all, that is something we can trust’.

The abbott smiled to himself. It had been easier than expected. The elders were only too willing to dump Herrietta, and even the thought of a tribute or a bond to Mial Hest did not seem shocking. After all, with the kingdom united, there would be trade aplenty one elder remarked. The abbott listened to the elders words for a wick more then went to his chambers tired and gratified. He inspected himself briefly in the mirror, and noted he did look a trifle pale, but that was to be expected after four heavy days in the saddle. On the morn he felt groggy but shook it off in the urgent round of visits he undertook amongst the wealthy and influential in the city. They were all anxious to hear of Mial Hest.

‘In four days you think abbott? Hest will be here? And what of Sure Sheriat, do we know?’

They desperately wanted to avoid a battle with either general, but how was Herrietta to be got around?

‘We imprison her, kill her if you like’.

‘Hush, hush abbott, these walls have ears in this city. Herriettas spies are everywhere’.

But Serval shrugged off their fears. He was confident that the wind was blowing away from the beautiful princess, and he might still yet come out of this silly war with honour and a position. By the day end he had secured some sort of loyalty from half of the important people in the city and would have been well satisfied if it were not for the disconcerting reports of sickness. It seemed everywhere. A meeting with one elder was interrupted by a whispered report that the wardens had refused to approach the Righteous in the keep, saying they were full of disease and several wardens had gone ill already with fatigue, or the ‘weakness’ as it was beginning to be called. Over supper with another elder, Servals patient explanations as to how Mial Hest was to be approached were interrupted by the elders worried words.

‘Yes, yes, but what are we to do about this disease prelate? Have you heard of it? It’s all over the city now and two soldiers on the weneways gate collapsed and have died. They call it ‘the weakness’ and people who catch it can hardly move, as if all their muscles were rotting’. The elder tapped his knee impatiently. ‘They are blaming us you know for letting the Wyrds in’.

The abbott hastily altered the direction of thought.

‘Have any of these horse riders died?’

‘No, and thats the curse of it. They seem to live, though not much longer if the people have their way’.

‘The people are right. Excise the disease before it gets out of control.’

The elder broke in angrily.

‘It is out of control prelate! Those soldiers died, perhaps everyone who catches will die. There’s no cure, and Mial Hest will have a city of corpses for his prize if we do not do something’.

‘Are people leaving?’

‘They are beginning to. I saw several carts leave this morning, and a merchant friend of mine is packing up. I am beginning to wonder I should too, but I have my position’

the elder drank his drink helplessly ‘oh we’ll kill the riders, but what then? No one knows what the disease is, the apothecaries scratch their heads and mumble. ‘The city is half terrified’.

The abbot was soothing.

‘Kill the riders. It is too early to tell if the deaths are significant. We will hold a service to Strom and appeal to him’.

The elder was hardly listening.

‘Do you know what these riders call themselves prelate? The ‘Righteous’, ah I see you start. You know your history too. It is evil. I thought Swivven got rid of the Righteous, were they not his priests? And another thing. They have these books they read, The Articles, and there was one passage that they quoted, and I looked it up.’

The elder reached over to the table and opened an old leather bound volume.

‘Here it is’.

*‘Wait, in the wilderness where Breet is cruel*

*Wait, till the passing of the green jewell*

*Wait, for Boden, then its plain*

*Then begin your ride again*

‘That’s an odd couplet, it’s as if they were under some sort of instruction to ride, and didn’t those other traveller fellows carry a green gemstone with them? The Charmstone? There were all these strange rumours about it a while ago? But here is another couplet, more disturbing, prophetic, listen.’

‘Always strong, always weak,  
the weakness is your strength,  
that will destroy all others on the plains  
and leave you fit to ride again’

‘What do you make of that prelate? It fairly frightened me. It seemed too coincidental. There it was written down ‘the weakness’, in a book that is centuries old!’

Reeter Serval smiled faintly.

‘These prophetic couplets can be made to mean anything elder, I mean what does it really say? Just words combined to create a strange effect that troubles the senses afterwards, but meaningful? Bah! It’s only the suggestive work of Wyrd’.

The elder got angry and excited.

‘But my dear abbot the weakness is real, these riders are real, and the books they read are real, yet written generations ago. It is a Wyrds mystery’.

The elder fell silent.

After a while Serval took his leave, getting the elders promise to be on the side of those who wished to plea with Mial Hest. The prelate went to his palace well pleased with his days work, but Stroms truth! If the city elders had known who had let the riders in, well, his goose would be cooked, but fancy these riders having the books on The Articles, and a shabby lot, but he could not take this disease seriously. He sent for his

two monks and quietly counted on his fingers the guarantees of support he had from the elders and leading merchants. A servant knocked and entered.

'Scuse sirs. Your two men cannot come, they are ill. They think it's with the weakness'.

The abbot was chilled at the message. He had himself only stood two longmans away from the riders, closer indeed than his men. He dismissed the servant and sat down. He must now act more quickly than he had intended, for if he was to get the weakness, he must send a letter to Herrietta, getting her to come to Noll, but as the prelate reached out for his quill he found his fingers refused to close around it. He looked aghast at his unresponsive hand and knocked it sharply against the table top, hoping it was some sort of temporary cramp. But the fingers would not unstiffen, and hung powerless like old brittle twigs on a still healthy trunk.

He stared at them.

## II

The general had bided his patience long enough. He could not understand Sheriats absence and decided to approach Noll with his own resources, and at the very least sort out the confusion of rumours. Taking only a company of baldymen he rode out early towards the capital of the Granry. They passed rapidly through a number of small villages where the peasants peered at them suspiciously from behind slatted doors. They stayed that night in a small wooded valley, deserted except for a shallow grave, which had been partially dug out by a dog and a half severed arm revealed. The baldymen looked at it dubiously. Hest had promised them high reward for venturing to the capital, but even from these most loyal of troops, he was surprised at how reluctantly they agreed. They all had a morbid fear of disease.

The mood of pessimism deepened on the next day as they came within sight of the city. Outside one small village Hest saw a group of old men squatting by the roadway, virtually the first people they had seen. As they rode up Mial Hest realised to his horror that these were not old men, but young adults, some barely out of their teens, yet their skins sagged on their faces like curtain folds and their bodies were held stiffly and at odd angles as if crippled by a premature old age.

Only Hest was game enough to approach, the baldymen watched from a distance.

'Are you from Noll?' shouted the general from five longmans away.

One man stepped forward a few awkward paces.

'Any water master? Water?'

'Are you from Noll?' asked Hest again, and watched in fascination as the mans lips quivered, unable it seemed to control enough movement even to speak properly.

'Water master' at last the words came and Hest rode away, repelled by the sight and pondering what awaited him in the city. He could not force his men to follow.

'I am carrying on into Noll. You may follow if you wish' and with that he spurred his horse towards the city, relieved when he looked back, that after some indecision, the baldymen had loyally followed him.

The skaw gate was carelessly open, and the riders picked their way cautiously into the city past two huddled bodies. A dog was picking at something red and ran away with it. The city seemed stricken with silence, and only that snuffling frightened dog moved in the deserted street. There seemed little point in going further and the baldymen baulked at it. This was a dead city and they should leave. The general sent his men back outside the walls but he could not restrain himself from penetrating this baffling streets. This disease, illness, weakness, whatever it was, had the pestilence and rapidity of a plague, and no ordinary plague at that. It was like a sort of judgement set upon the people. As if the Gods had tired of the petty peoples and decided to clear the earth of them.

Mial Hest looked around despairingly.

On another day this should have been a triumph, but then only thing to greet him were a few corpses on the ground, often paralysed into grotesque shapes as if their muscles had frozen immobile in their last living positions. Hests mare pulled away, smelling death in its nostrils. There was nothing to be gained here. This was supposed to be the richest prize of his ambitions, and now it mocked him with empty streets and a stinking smell. Hest turned his horse back to the gate and noticed a guards brazier still glowing faintly. In a sudden rage he leapt of his horse and stuck a shovel into the brazier, heaving a few embers onto a thatch roof and watched it smoke till a small puff of wind excited a flame to flare in the dry straw. By the time the general and his baldymen escort had ridden several leagues out from Noll he could look back and see a thin pillar of smoke creeping skywards, and thickening each moment.

They rode right around the city walls and out breeways, searching for some of the ex-inhabitants. After five leagues they came across a large cluster of carts and caravans lumbering slowly Breetways. The childers ran alongside, and the carts were so heavily laden that they made only a Drubbins pace beside the quicksilver children. Judging from the gesticulations and shouts that occurred when the riders came over the brow these people at least were not diseased. Hest rode alongside one of the carts and hailed its perspiring owner. Their strange uniforms and the baldymens shaven heads made the man look fearful.

'Hail fellow, are you a citizen of Noll?'

'Arrr, what of it?'

The man reluctantly stopped his horses and inspected the general cautiously. He had a ruddy, drink-swollen complexion, and some of his children hid behind the cart.

'What's this disease you are fleeing?'

'It's Herriettas ambitions, that's what it is' the man said coarsely. Hest found this a novel cause.

'Herrietta? Your princess. I thought things were prosperous under her?'

'She's a Wyrd!' the man exclaimed 'a very black Wyrd! This is Stroms punishment for her greed'. The man slapped the reins and started to move the horses again.

‘Wait fellow. You’ve not seen her?’ Hest had to trot alongside

‘That she-Wyrd? I’d cut her heart out if I did. And anyways who are you calling fellow?’

There was a crude shallow confidence in the challenge.

‘Mial Hest’.

The mans jaws went slack and his thick-veined hands released the reins limply so that the horses ambled to a halt. His red face looked suspiciously fearful.

‘Says again? You’s Mial Hest?’

The general nodded.

‘That’s no Gadabout joke?’

Some men from the other carts had gathered by now and were equally amazed. Hest was amused at the effect his name had upon these people. They seemed stunned into silence and exchanged glances. Would Mial Hest kill them?

‘Where are you going?’

The man shook his head hopelessly. Another man said ‘away from Noll’ and another ‘any Strom out of here, out of the Granry anyways’.

‘And are all the people going that way’. Hest gestured breeways.

‘Aye what’s left of em’.

‘And if we make it’ added another.

‘One of the childers has got the weakness’ and he shook his head sorrowfully. The baldymen stirred at this and Hest grinned sourly.

‘Well, go well fellows. What is at the end of the plain?’ and they all looked the way Mial Hests arm had vaguely pointed to, a bare undulating horizon that ran into nothingness where the eye could see no further. It was a horrible unanswerable question, and the peasants looked despairing.

Hest left the caravan and the question unanswered, and took the riders on a sweep weneways down to the Ancient Way. This was deserted. Why had no one gone this way? Surely this was as good, perhaps better, for the Great River watered the soil here and he could see low green hills in the distance. The people had fled altogether, massing in the same direction, probably not even sure which way was the better way but going because everyone else had. Hest doubted if the exodus would get far. There was that same droopy furtive appearance on that fellows face as had marred the others.

They turned back and in two days rode across the deserted country, an uneventful ride except for one macabre discoverey. They saw two horses, patiently standing between the shafts of an apparently empty cart, but when they rode closer they found the body of a fat man slumped over that of a female, flies clustered around the dry blood on his back and the knife slashes on her face. The baldymen guffawed and made jokes about what the man was after, but Hest was disturbed. The woman was young, and might once have been beautiful under that congealed blood. Her dress was very fine. It was a strange thing to find out here. They untied the horses and took them with them, leaving the cart motionless with its gruesome load.

### III

They found the city in utter chaos when they rode back and Herrietta heard abuse shouted at her as the soldiers pushed the crowd back. A bruten was thrown and bruised her shoulder and other missiles followed. She was hustled through the cart-jammed streets and into the palace where the silence amongst the waiting group of elders was fearful.

‘Well?!’

‘It is the weakness maam’ the senior elder explained ‘many have died and others are very ill’.

‘Why was I not told?’ Herrietta demanded.

‘You were maam, we sent a messenger, about Reeter Serval and the disease..’

‘That dog! Where is he!’

The elder shrugged helplessly. How could he explain to the princess that the prelate was as much in control as she was, and Mial Hest more in control than anyone, if indeed anyone was any longer in control. Herrietta scribbled out a letter.

‘This is a note for his arrest. Well?!’ as the elder hesitated.

‘Maam, he is well supported’.

Herrietta looked incredulous, taken aback at the chilling import of the elder’s words.

‘You mean you will not do it Wyrd?’

The elder shrugged helplessly.

‘Maam, I cannot do it. I have no guards that can be trusted. They are either dead, sick, fled or they support the prelate. Only the men who came with you are loyal, and they..’ they could not be relied on for long his looks intimated ‘you will need those men to protect yourself’.

This point was well made and Herrietta could still feel the bruise from the well-aimed bruten. She tried to control the fear growing in her.

‘The people blame me for the disease?’

‘Perhaps they do maam, and they know Mial Hest is on the Granry’.

‘But that was that abbotts fault!’ she exploded, infuriated at how Reeter Serval had turned events upside down against her ‘we must seize him!’.

She walked rapidly up and down, gripping her shoulders in tight spasms. If she was a man she could arm herself and kill the abbott, but as a woman, no, she was not completely helpless. She could use other means.

‘You know where the prelate can be found? Good, tell the prelate I will meet him, not in the city, but outside, five leagues from the skaw gate at the place they call Witches Wood. No guards, no other people, just him and me. Can you do this?’

The elder looked doubtful.

‘To what purpose maam?’

‘To keep our purposes together! If I cannot beat him we must join forces. Go! Take three of my guards’ and she dismissed the elder, sure now of his duplicity. He would warn Serval of course but the prelate might be over confident. She summoned the court apothecaries and found out the symptoms and causes of the disease. Why had not the riders been killed? No soldiers would obey.

‘What men we have in this city’ remarked Herrietta sarcastically. She wanted to talk to the people, explain to them that the disease was none of her doing, but the captain of the guard advised against it.

‘You will be mobbed maam, and I cannot guarantee your safety’ .

The princess paced up and down in fury.

‘What short memories these citizens of Noll have’ and dismissed him. She was effectively a prisoner in her own palace. And was she even safe here? Word came later that the abbott would meet her as agreed, on his own, tomorrow at mid-Breet. She spent the evening plotting her plots in a bizarre logic that no longer was fixed to the reality of the situation. The truth was that everything had failed, and her great schemes shrivelled by war on one hand and disease on the other. Her life was a slim unlikely thread, yet all she could think of was meeting Mial Hest, a vigorous man surely? And disposing of Reeter Serval, a knife secreted in her bodice should cover that eventual-ity.

In the late morning she disguised herself in a long cloak and hood and was guided by the captain who had a horse standing by. He was told to wait, and mounting the horse she rode briefly to the small straggly copse of trees known as the Witches Wood, from the time when witches were hung there. Now they were burnt joyously in the square.

Noll looked pretty and peaceful from here, and apart from the slushy sound of a stream nearby there was almost silence. One or two birds chirruped and the horse coughed to itself. A lovely day too, and Herrietta could almost forget the humiliation of having to sneak out of the city in disguise. She spat in disgust on the ground. So people were no better than she supposed. Where was the abbott? Was this another trick? She felt the firm knife under her bodice and repositioned it more carefully. The abbott was some time in coming and only the slow creaking approach of a cart alerted her.

What was this? Some trick of Servals? She saw only one figure guiding the reins but rode around cautiously till she was sure that there were no hidden soldiers. She could see the abbott plainly now, rather hunched on the seat. He stopped the cart and hailed her.

‘Well be Princess Herrietta of Granry, so you are dallying with mere priests these days?’

She rode closer, puzzled by the croaky tone of his voice, then she realised. The weakness was on him. She laughed and rode up beside the cart and stared mockingly.

‘So abbott, your flesh is as withered as your soul now?’

Reeter Serval did not reply.

Her beauty he saw was still unmarked, her eyes clear and her skin a creamy sweet-

ness, unblemished. What a dark Wyrd soul she had for such beauty! He had come with one purpose only and was prepared for her insults to gain it. He shifted a little in his seat and felt the dagger stiff at his side.

‘Your turn will come my pretty princess’.

‘Not before yours I think’.

She laughed aloud, throwing her head back in a delicious curve.

‘And to think I was scared at what you would do’.

She looked at him coolly and taunted him.

‘Do you not find me still beautiful? I am sure Mial Hest will to. I know we will take to each other nicely because we are so much the same. Oh yes prelate, you look angry. Your time is past. They say Mial Hest is handsome too, do you think he will be able to resist me? Could you? No, you are weak, like all males. I will shortly ride out to meet this great general and who knows what new partnership can be formed’.

The prelate had to find a way to get Herrietta on the cart, and he visibly drooped as Herrietta was boasting.

‘Dear, dear prelate, you are weak’ and she fell into the trap.

She dismounted and clambered up on the back of the cart. Serval drooped uncomplainingly as she toyed with hair, pulling his head this way and that. Suddenly, with what remained of the last of his strength and mobility, Reeter Serval put an arm round her legs and pulled her forward and down underneath him. Herrietta screamed and struggled but Servals great fat bulk pinned her underneath him.

‘Ahhhh, princess, there’s still a little life in the prelate yet. Too much life for you’.

Herrietta wriggled, trying to free her arm but the abbotts weight was too much at first. And then Serval did a brutal thing, and with his knife slashed at her perfect face, cutting her cheeks and lips open till they ran red with blood. Herrietta screamed and with at last a mans strength pulled free her arm and gripped her own knife, jabbing it repeatedly into the abbotts cassock hitting flesh wherever she could. The abbott groaned and his eyes widened with surprise.

‘The very Wyrd’ he gasped.

The sudden lurchings and struggles on the cart joggled the horses into motion and they started to pull the cart along.

Henrietta’s knife had struck deep and at some point the abbott’s life left him, with a gurgle and curse. She tried to breathe freely but the blood kept filling her mouth. For a while there was only the sound of the harnesses jingling and the clip of hooves along the road as they pulled patiently away from Noll.

Then there came a pitiable crying, as Herrietta lay alive and trapped under the prelates slumped body. Blood was seeping from her wounds and filling her eyes and mouth, choking her. After a short wick her whimpering ceased and the horses plodded on undisturbed, carrying their grim cargo across the Granry.

The silence was complete.

## Chapter 68

# 'We Are All Diseased...

*A panic sets in motion vast armies of peasants and peasant armies fleeing the terrible disease, that seems to fly in the air before them. Mial Hest begins to realise that there is truth in old legends, and there is a poignant meeting. Everything is coming unstuck, and in all this Mial Hest sees a sort of pattern that he had not realised before.*

There was nothing else to do but leave.

The citizens of Noll went breeways, toiling across the Granry, heading for a vague destination and stopping repeatedly to bury their kinsfolk as they travelled, often voicing the despair that soon there would be no one left to bury the dead. To skaw, Mial Hest collected his army and force-marched them down the Royal Road, keen to escape the pestilent airs of Noll and still sorely puzzled by the absence of Sure Sheriat. His men were as eager as himself to leave and for the first few leagues roared along at a terrific pace, singing raucous marching songs and jeering at the frightened peasants peering through their shutters. The general gave strict orders to leave the Granry folk untroubled, for he still had hopes of returning in a better season, but he despaired nevertheless. This was like a retreat, even singing songs did not help, and what would be left of Beorht anyway? And if the Highlands tribes come out fighting?

It was on the third day of the march that two of the soldiers complained of feeling tired and had to be carried behind on the food carts. The general had only to glance at them to see they had the weakness, their faces old and their limbs grown crooked. So it had caught up with them. To carry them along with the army seemed foolish yet to leave them behind would be cruel, the peasants would kill them quickly, and it would hardly improve morale to see men abandoned. The general could see his men muttering about the situation and reached a compromise that did not fool anyone. A cart was put at the disposal of the weak men and would follow a league behind the main force, and camp one leagues distance away each dayend. As men caught the weakness they were sent back to the 'last cart', which quickly became a synonym, for death, for no one who caught the illness ever seemed to recover. It was a one way, or as they put it 'a Wyrds way', trip.

The armies pace slowed down and it was the fifteenth day of Croppen that they recrossed the Great River again and came under the shadow of the Raggerok. Each day a few more men were stricken and the 'last cart' became 'carts' as waggons were purloined from the peasants and utilised to hold the dying men. At first, each man was given a decent burial, with prayers and incantations to ward off Wyrds interest, but as the days wore on the graves grew shallower and the prayers more brief. By the time the Raggerok was approached it was all the other diseased men on the cart could do to push the dead men off, and leave them sprawling on the road in grotesque frozen positions like broken statues. These corpses would putrify under the beaming Croppen sun and the baldybirds would peck at the remains, their harsh black wings circling eagerly so that one could easily say where the army had gone for the second black wheeling army overhead. The baldybirds picked at the rich selection of flesh and carried the prospects of the disease to even the remotest villages.

Almost half of Hests army had trickled away, in sickness and death, and some desertion. But most soldiers stuck together, out of habit as much as fear, and the baldymen kept a semblance of discipline, and sent scouting parties out occasionally. But for all that it was an empty shell of an army that turned the crucial corner out of the Granry and into the narrow strip of land that lay between the Raggerok and the marsh. Hest scutinised himself every day in the mirror, and flexed his muscles nervously to make sure of a response.

The army crept forward on the Royal Road merging into the damp fog that swallowed this corner of the kingdom in a perpetual white drizzle. Yet Breet still managed to heat the fog and the men found it hard sweaty work trudging along the soft road, sometimes cursing foully as they sank up to their knees in sloppy bogs. Hest kept moving up and down the tired column, encouraging where he could, and keeping the men together. There was an alert up at the head of the column, and Hest saw some riders hastening towards him and his heart beat rapidly. It was something so incredible that Hest could hardly believe the breathless information.

The general went white and spurred his horse frantically forward to the head of the army and a league further where a group of baldyman riders waited on the edge of a desolate scene. For over two leagues or more of grassy ground, sparkling in the brilliant water dew of the mist, lay the broken remnants of a great army. Row upon untidy row of corpses fouled the soil, with pieces of armour scattered about and gleaming dully in the faint sunlight. Carts were standing broken or just empty of horses, their shafts a roosting point for the carrion baldybirds that flocked about the scene, gorging themselves. Hest was quite silent. So here was the answer, and he rode slowly amongst this swamp of death, his baldymen following aghast and the whole weary column of soldiers hushed to silence by the slaughter.

Hest just could not understand it.

The whole of Sure Sheriats army butchered by some vast unknown hand, why it looked as if it were Wyrds work, so final and complete did the scene hit the senses. The stench was terrible and the column moved quickly through the remains, mostly silent except for an occasional exclamation from a soldier who recognised in some skull a mate of former days. Hest sent out riders to find Sure Sheriats body, hoping forlornly that they would not succeed and that Sheriat had managed to salvage something out of

the catastrophe.

What had overwhelmed them? This was probably the largest army assembled since Swivvens day, and now some four thousand men lay rotting with no clue to their demise. There was no sign of any enemy slain, no other weapons. It was an evil business, and the old soldier hands looked it over and felt anxious to leave. This might have been Stroms work they muttered. The young soldiers did not understand and could not believe their eyes at all and would have stared for wicks if the captains did not push them on quickly. A baldyman had found Sheriat, and Hest went to look at his body, which although pecked over by the baldybirds was recognisable. Sheriats own sword was gripped in his hand and his face looked calm apart from the fact his head was almost severed. A terrible blow, and there was the banner, wet and limp on the grass.

‘The Marshmen?’ Hest asked aloud, but no one could say, and they retreated from the scene, leaving the mist to swallow their last hopes.

That day almost twenty men sickened and fell back and now not even the pretence of caring for them was made. If they could not clamber on the cart they were behind to stagger along till the strength deserted their legs and they lay groaning and helpless in the mud. Some men who did force their way onto the carts were pushed off and left screaming futilely as the carts pulled away. Hest quickened the pace and they moved away from the marsh and the mist and came into sight of small settlements again. This time there was no show of concern for the peasants. Their doors were battered down and their food taken. Any resistance was silenced by the sword. Hest was indifferent, and the soldiers slowly realised their leaders despair and grew more disorderly as a consequence, finally grasping that they were a defeated army, and they might as well take what came to hand, whether bread or flesh. They could barely be formed into a sensible column for each days march and bickered with their captains till the officers began to fear for their lives, the dreams, the songs, the glory, all gone now. Men deserted, and only the baldymen remained a disciplined and loyal force.

Hest took the baldymen officers aside.

‘Men, there is little point in going to Beorht if it is ruined, and the Highland armies are waiting for us in any case. We would not stand a Gadabouts chance against them’ and he waved a hand disgustedly at the sound of revelry coming from the camp. Many of the soldiers had found drink now.

‘We should go over Tol Pass and leave the rest to their own devices. What say you?’ They nodded in approval.

‘Aye lord, there’s no point in lingering here’.

‘No, and we should reach Caroyal in four days hard riding, and may escape this disease. Do not venture any public words on this. We will not move till closer to the pass. Even this rabble might put off the Highland tribes if they attack us’.

He dismissed them and went into his own tent, sitting down heavily, a twinge of tiredness in his legs.

How quickly things had fallen apart. Were those banners in Beorht flying for him when they left? He uncorked a wine flask purloined in some village and held it to his mouth. The drink went heavily into him and did not lighten his mood. He was going to be another Swivven, ‘Hest the Great’ weren’t they calling him? He was going to

unite the kingdom more thoroughly than even Swivven had done, subduing the troublesome mountain tribes and maybe even laying the mythical Marshmen to earth finally. He dropped the flask empty from his hand. Instead they had done him he thought thickly. Was this disease Stroms work? No, it'll be Wyrds, only that demon magician could think up such a terrible way of finishing a man. Making his muscles loosen till his face drooped in age and his bowels emptied into his breeches. Those gods had it in for him from the beginning. He was used, played with, yet did he really believe in those things? And yet he had felt some force dictating his fate. What was that nonsense? The Roundrell, bah! But then if there was not some Wyrd controlling it all who else could be blamed for his failure? Mial Hest tried to grasp the mistakes he had made, where he had turned wrongly; but he could not fix them. He had not made mistakes damn Wyrd! He had judged it well and was at the brink of seizing the Third kingdom, and it dribbled away, like the last wine from his flask.

Noisy singing came from the camp. He listened to it for a while and felt urgently hungry for a woman. He called to the guard at the tent door.

'Are there women in the camp?'

'Yes sir'

'Fetch me one'

'Sir'.

She came a bitwick later, flushed and cheerful and not in any region of youth. Hest motioned her to his cot and she oblidgingly undressed and lay waiting for the generals pleasure. Hest looked down drearily at her. The hunger had gone as quickly as it came and he was almost tempted to send her away, but there was a teasing inquiry in her eyes so he supposed he had better do the job. He undressed and swayed slightly on his feet as he sat wearily on the cot. He felt suddenly unwell as she began stroking him and waiting for him to respond.

'There sir, a fine gentlemen. I've never 'ad a general, a fine body sir, a fine body' she murmured as she touched him over.

Hest looked down and saw the sad flesh hanging from his body and knew he had the weakness. The mirror swung over the cot and he peered into it, and saw the hooded furtive expression that he had first seen in that deputation from Noll.

So he was to die...

He pushed the woman aside with sudden fierce strength and curled up in a ball on his cot, ignoring her loud shriek and protests as she made a noisy fearful exit.

In the morning Hest mounted his horse slowly and carefully and ignored the startled stares and whispers of his captains. The general gave no orders and left the captains to organise the men as best they could. Some of the soldiers were too drunk too travel, and many straggled behind in a disorganised way. From Hests proud stallion to the shambling, foul smelling carts in the rear the column stretched to almost two leagues. The ford of the Furrow River was shallow but even so, several soldiers weakened by drink or disease, were swept downstream and no one even glanced towards their feeble cries. One soldier stumbled in only two thrums of water and drowned because he was too weak to lift himself out, and no one offered a single hand to help. Many men had

deserted now, making their own way through the country and carrying the fatal sickness with them.

The general was past all caring.

His horse followed the trail of road with no guidance from its master and could even snatch a mouthful of verge grass till Hests tired hand twitched the reins. The day was sunny with puffs of small cloud edging over the Fore Range, and small birds stalked about the column on quick long feet, snatching at the insects stirred up by this slow mass of men. It did not surprise the general to see a scurry of riders confront him a league ahead on the road, nor did the glimpses of other riders in small groups moving down the flank of the column. The captains alerted him to the raiders but the general just nodded dreamily and plodded on. The baldymen could see their lord declining ('he has the weakness') and talked urgently amongst themselves, pointing to the low dip of Tol Pass in the distance. If they broke through these screens of riders they would be strong enough to get to Tol Pass on their own account. But the lord? One shrugged 'the lord was dead'.

The fast outriders had disappeared and an ominous stillness crept over the countryside, even the birds were hushed and the heat breathed thickly upon the necks of the marching soldiers. One of the baldymen swore and pointed ahead. The general looked up and saw what he had been expecting, a line of armed men formed across the road, blocking their approach. He glanced around indifferently at the folds of land and nodded satisfied to himself as he noted the low hills hemming in the column. It was well chosen, a subtle valley that would screen their opponents and provide ramps for the coming attack. Perhaps wayfarer Widsith was behind this plan? It would be pleasing to meet this wily opponent, why, they could talk over the old times.

'Sir, sir!' some fool of a captain was interrupting him 'we are surrounded'.

Hest smiled. The Gadabouts! Of course they were surrounded, and would be destroyed shortly. The captain drew back in horror at his lords sickly smile and realised there could be no sensible orders from Mial Hest.

The baldymen wheeled around in a huddle of horses, and the captains raced along the line trying to get the men ready for defence, a pitiful lack of understanding on the soldiers faces as groups of riders came tumbling over the low hills and square purposeful blocks of infantry followed. Sudden alarms up and down the column as first the enemy riders and then footmen with pikes came into contact with Hests bewildered army.

Everything happened to fast. The company of baldymen, scurried back and forth like lost sheep trapped by a wild beasts. They looked despairingly at their lord patiently sitting oblivious to the armed struggle, and after some indecision they slashed through the opposing riders and struck in a body to the skaw and the tempting escape of Tol Pass. The mountain tribes hurled themselves on the unready column and found their swords and pikes striking down the weakened soldiers with ease. Indeed the battle was pitiable, with most of Hests army quite unfit to put up any sort of defence. After the first onslaught the column broke into panicking pieces, many of the soldiers dropping their weapons and their hopes and running wildly away. Only the baldymen remained strong and they left the foot soldiers to their fate, breaking out with a desper-

ate strength. Widsith could see their determination and signalled strongly to the skaw section to let them go.

He wanted an easy victory, and after he had seen the baldymen disappearing in a bundle of sweat and dust, and turned back to the real issue before him and saw the matter already closed. The Highland tribes had already finished the job, and the feeble resistance made the killing too easy and bloody, and those not dead were mostly being rounded up in almost amiable helpless groups. Here and there a small pocket of resistance still fought on in a bloody focus of movement. Widsith found it unimaginable that the battle should have been so quickly won, and through the brief confrontation, although he kept his eye on the main battles and continuously gave directions to waiting messenger riders, his eye always came back to the still solo mounted figure that stood serene and apparently untroubled at the tempest around it.

Widsith gave out more orders and with Hull and Solas in company rode down into the slight valley. He brushed past the last lingering squabble of arms where two captains were desperately holding off a circle of stabbing pikes, and rode to where Mial Hest was sitting motionless in his saddle, encircled by a group of perplexed and noisy Highland soldiers, shouting taunts at the general.

‘Heigh general, where’s your army now?!’ and ‘Yours never be Hest the Greats’ and ‘Cant yers raise a smile Mial?’.

The leaders arrival hushed them and they fell back. The two men looked at each curiously. For his part Widsith was shocked at the grey aged face before him, the man looked half dead. What had happened in the Granry?

Solas was amused at the encounter.

‘Well Mikal, so here’s the famous man. Mial Hest himself, and not saying too much eh?’ Widsith ignored his companions chatter.

‘Mial Hest?’

The general nodded.

‘We have met before wayfarer Widsith?’

Now it was Widsiths turn to be surprised and slowly nod. Both were rather fascinated by this encounter.

‘I should not have let you go from that sunny glade’. Hests voice was low and almost smiling. His eyes seemed deep and lost.

‘You had other chances’.

‘Ahhh, but that suited me you see, to let the Duc du Qu’et escape benefitted me’.

‘You had no love of Lutens Wenner’.

‘None. And you?’

Widsith shrugged. This was a bizarre conversation.

‘Did you destroy Beorht?’

‘Yes’.

Hest nodded satisfied.

‘It all has a logic you see. We could not have existed without the other, and I could

have made a great kingdom out of it.’

‘And crushed the Highland tribes in the process’ Widsith sharply replied.

‘Of course. A king must control. Actually we might have agreed. We have so much in common, you and I. Does it please you to meet me formally after all these tribulations?’

Widsith hesitated. Pleasure was not quite the word, perhaps inevitability?

‘You are such an old opponent you almost feel like a friend’.

Widsith was embarrassed by this turn of the conversation and shifted his horse a little, looking at Solas who was grinning from ear to ear. The other mountain soldiers were standing baffled by this unintelligible conversation.

‘Such friends’ laughed Solas, and Widsith looked annoyed ‘I’ll check the war dead’ said Solas grinning ‘come on you men, leave the generals to talk’ and he rode off with the other soldiers in company.

Hest hardly saw them go, and concentrated his eyes on the wayfarer.

‘And tell me wayfarer Widsith did the Duc du Qu’ets pretty daughter reach you?’

Widsith nodded, and was suspicious. Was that hate or admiration in the general’s eyes.

‘You had more luck there than me I fancy. She is a fine woman. I wish you the best, really, I mean it.’

Widsith looked grim. Hest continued dreamily.

‘And does the Charmstone, that mythical thing actually exist?’ Widsith again nodded.

‘You see I am tidying up things, my affairs almost finished now. You need not kill me, just look closely’.

The sun beat solidly on their shoulders and for one moment a bird twittered furiously in a tree close by, adding to the unreality of the scene. Mial Hest stuttered into speech again.

‘We are all diseased, all of us. Look in their faces, the dumb, the vain, we are all diseased one way or another’.

Hest looked at the wayfarer with an intensity that unerved Widsith for a moment. He looked at Hull who shook his head slowly. ‘They had heard a rumour of this. Hull swung his horse round and galloped down the pacified column to the carts at the rear.

Hest and Widsith waited till he returned. They did not speak. Hull rode back and said that the men in the carts looked ill.

‘Once all the soldiers are disarmed tell the men to fall back. Tell the captains to gather the men and we will march back to the Beorht camp. Warn the captains about the disease, that will get them organised faster than any of my orders’.

Hull galloped off and Widsith turned to look closely at the general and noted the slackened face muscles and slight trembling of the upper body.

‘Let’s leave’ he muttered to himself, and swung his horse about and watched the Highland tribes plodding back, leaving Hests soldiers bemused and puzzled. Already

the sun was making the bodies smell.

Hest started as if from a dream when he realised Widsith was leaving.

‘Sure Sheriat? What happened, who killed them?’

‘The Marshmen’.

The general nodded absently and rubbed beads of sweat from his forehead. Widsith actually felt a moment of compassion for him. For such ambition to end this way, but he pushed the pity away and spurred his horse up the grass flanks, meeting Solas and Hull. At the crest Widsith hesitated, turned awkwardly in the saddle. He could not resist a last look at the man who so nearly destroyed them all. He was slumped in his saddle, his head gripped in the hands that had once grasped a kingdom.

## The Pity of These Times

*Retreat is in order, not triumph and Widsith makes a great speech that does not please anybody and on the edge of the great celebration we meet two old familiar men, who have yet another prophecy. Donan has his opinion on the proceedings and there is an interlude of love, and death. Gormiah Threadon receives the greatest gift of his ignominious career.*

The march back up the Furrowdale Valley had more the flavour of a retreat than a triumphal procession. It was quiet, ordered and quick. Many of the men were scared by the 'weakness' and although a few boasted about the battle there was little enough to boast about. The yorn road was usually cluttered with carts from the slowly moving inhabitants of Beorht. They had been astounded when the Highland tribes army rushed past them down valley to meet Mial Hest, and turned their laden vehicles back to the city, anticipating the defeat of the Highland army. Now this same army came singing upon their backs telling of Mial Hests destruction and Sure Sheriats extermination, that they stalled their progress, hopelessly confused by the switch and harry of events. They sat around for wicks and days arguing what to do. Should they believe those lying braggart Highland tribes? But then some of Mial Hests remmant army trickled through and only confirmed the tales, and what was worse told of the ominous wasting disease. The refugees could not decide. Beorht was in ruins and the Highland tribes on the rampage to the yorn, or the weakness down skaw. It was not a choice, but by slow degrees, often for no clear reasons, the refugees turned down the Furrowdale Valley towards the Tol Pass or out of the valley altogether. And the disease began to eat into their numbers, slowing the gloomy progress even further. It was as if hope were fleeing as well.

Widsith watched their indecision with little sympathy. The merchants had kept Driac Slorty supplied with arms and money, and encouraged Sure Sheriat and jumped on Mial Hests coat tails, all for profit. It was the greedy Wyrds turn to suffer now! Widsith even felt a sort of pleasure in this slow parade of misery, yet in the back of his mind he was vaguely aware of huge events that seemed to be stirring all the peoples like a thick stew in a pestilent pot. He did not feel victorious, but gave sharp orders, kept the men

together and marching, and did not sing in the songs. The weather was shining and hard, a good dry surface yet he could only see the haunted broken face of Mial Hest and he asked himself this question constantly. Was he so different from the general?

At the end of the second day they arrived back at the camp outside Beorht. The city had stopped smoking and the burning smell overwhelmed by the wild flowers and new growing crops. The men marched in singing and triumphant. Widsith was mobbed and cheered and despite himself felt cheered and announced an evening of celebration and feasting, doubling the ale ration and inviting all minstrels, gleemen, and jugglers to perform. This got a great cheer, and a tremendous bustle filled the camp as the attendants rushed away to slaughter the pigs and prepare the thick heavy puddings that were the basis of all Highland tribe feasting. Huge piles of wood were accumulated and riders sent out to gain the services of any local entertainers, and tempt them with the enemies gold. Men wandered about swapping stories and watching the preparations for the feast with eager greedy eyes.

Widsith stayed in his tent, listening to the commotion. He knew there could be no possibility of seeing Juud, though he hungered to do so, and she was waiting only a couple of leagues away. The men would expect him to be present at the celebration. It was his triumph as much as theirs, and there would be amazement if he did not appear, and maybe rumours would start, and Mirren would get to hear of his unfaithfulness. Widsith stood up and stretched his tired body. Could he now return to the Rise and still sleep beside her? The loyalty that they had agreed to at their marriage, if that was now broken, but could he return with Juud? Would she want to? And her father? Overwhelmingly Juud came to him and touched him with all the private gestures and fondnesses. For a bitwick he revelled with her in his mind, then the moment slipped away and he was standing in his tent with the army at play around him.

A discreet cough from outside.

‘Yes?’

A captain entered.

‘Sir. Preparations are ready and the men want you to speak and light the fire.

Widsith nodded, immensely tired but dutiful. As he stood up he felt a slight wobble in his legs and for a wild moment wondered if he had already caught the weakness, but dismissed the idea. No disease could spread that quickly.

Outside Breet had sunk and Wene was rising softly in the darkness, the stars were vivid. There was a great anticipation about the camp and Widsith sensed the great mass of men waiting around three huge unlit bonfires. The captain gave Widsith a torch and he felt the warmth flush and light his face. There was no other light in the camp, the men were hushed silent, expecting, waiting.

What should he say?

‘Fellowmen! We have done well!’ there was a great cheer, and Widsith waited till the noise settled ‘Sure Sheriats army was destroyed entirely by the Marshmen, we owe them a vote of thanks fellowmen’, and another huge cheer went up ‘and we ourselves faced Mial Hests army and defeated it’ this time a longer cheer with a few already drunken notes lingering in it. ‘I have heard that Noll was destroyed and Herriettas army dissipated, so there are no warring armies left in the kingdom’.

He paused, that was the easy part said.

“This is our duty done. We have done all we were asked to do and can do no more. The great evil forces that threatened the kingdom have been destroyed and the threat to our homeland is removed. We can return, to our wives and children and villages, and our mountains’ many sporadic cheers went up as Widsith pushed on with his speech ‘I was a wayfarer before I joined you and will become a wayfarer again. I was appointed leader for one purpose and now that purpose is done I need no longer be your leader, and I will be standing down from this night’ and Widsith could not continue with the confused cheering and roars of Widsith.

When the hubbub had flickered down Widsith continued more quickly, anxious to get proceedings started. There was an intense anticipation from the soldiery, they knew Widsith was going to say something more, something important.

‘It has been a bloody time. Some of our friends are dead’ (‘and lots of our enemies’ someone shouted) ‘and we should remember them in Fellowmans name. You will be accorded heroes in the Hollowstone but do not let these moments of triumph hide the grim business we fulfilled. Take the pity of these times away with you as well as the glory. Remember that, and we shall stay true to the roundrell.’

Now why had he said that?

‘Fellowmen! Let the proceedings begin!’ and with this the last act of the leader was to plunge the torch into the dry mounds of firewood, three times into the kindling, and tried hid his grief in the sparks that blossomed out of these fiery unearthly flowers.

The beasts, gutted and cleaned, were put on spits over smaller fires and tubs of ale were brought out. Several musicians started up with pipes and drums and marched around in a circle around the bonfires, getting well roasted as the heat seared the night. Widsith retreated to a seat set aside for him and accepted a tankard of ale. Several captains came up and awkwardly stated their thanks for his leadership, though what they had to thank him for Widsith could not imagine. For glory? For killing? He had not mentioned the disease at all in his speech, deliberately he supposed, but he hardly knew what he was talking about, why, it was as if someone had been talking through him. Why had he mentioned the roundrell? Half the men here would have little truck with that old nonsense, yet he had still said it, and it had come out naturally, as if his heart were full of the thing.

A juggler sprang before Widsith and commenced a series of tricks, pretending to be clumsy but showing great skill by always retrieving the impossibly flying objects. Widsith laughed and gave a gold piece. He drank some more ale, and yet another group of soldiers loomed up to submit their thanks. It looked as if he was going to be thanked all night.

It had been too easy. The Marshmen and the weakness had done most of the fighting. All that was required was to burn a city down and disarm a crippled army. That was a victory? Widsith sighed. He could not understand men at all. He wondered what had happened to Herrietta (another comic juggler was trying a turn before the leader, Widsith got the impression the captain had arranged a series of amusements to take the leader out of himself), he would have liked to have met her. Juud said she was lovely, that changed his thinking. Juud was only a few leagues away, and by tomorrow

evening. A wry, savage, thought came to him. As a wayfarer he could presumably commit adultery whereas a leader he could not. He drank heavily. He did not want to think of Mirren this night.

Local vendors had been attracted to the evening celebrations and all around the growing rim of bonfires, at least twenty by now besides the three great central ones, a great deal of haggling was taking place. Clusters of soldiers, half drunk by now, anxious to get a few souvenirs for the march home. Gleemen of several kinds had set themselves up in various corners and were singing in different styles. Some were bawdy, others sweetly sentimental and yearning, the soldiers seemed to like either extreme. Widsith got up unsteadily and walked amongst the festive crowds. In the darkness and fiery shadows no one recognised him and he wandered freely, watching the jesters make Gadabouts of themselves, and the men stuffing their gullets with great chunks of hot dripping meat. There were thousands of roasted brutens as well, with a thick sweetie sauce to pour on. Some fire crackers exploded and there were great shouts of laughter as some poor Drubbin had a nasty surprise. The men were well befuddled now, and Widsith wandered amused and saddened amongst them.

Did they understand? Did he understand?

A thinner, screechier tune reached his ears and he turned to a smaller gaggle of people. There was something in the sound he recognised, and he saw two old men dancing rather grotesquely in a circle singing a song in very bad voices, one of them playing tunelessly on a pipe. As Widsith drew closer, the old men suddenly stopped and turned towards him.

‘Well leader now, and leader not tomorrow. Eee recognise us?’

Widsith was startled.

‘I see thee does. Hors Follerdyke at they service and this is Bum Grandy, stills the same’.

Some of the soldiers drifted away but a couple hung on, droopy with drink, and awed by the leaders proximity.

‘Telling the same stories?’ asked Widsith

‘Of course! Cause the stories still the same’.

‘Riddles and riddles, do you never talk clearly!?’

Widsith was exasperated. Perhaps if he was sober he would be merely amused. Hors Follerdyke seemed surprised.

‘Ahhh, we duz talk clearly’ he said knowingly ‘but men dont listen clearly. That’s theirs fault, not ours’

The word play missed Widsiths attention.

‘So, what’s my future foretellers?’ he demanded.

The answer was snapped back.

‘The same as it always wus, if you knew it’.

The two soldiers had drifted away from this obscure conversation so Widsith was left alone with the two insane old men. They started to dance a little, their limbs moving stiffly in the firelight.

‘Oh wayfarer’ said Hors again ‘we come to meet you, can’t you see us?’. Widsith was struggling to understand.

‘Why?’ he protested.

‘To sings a song’ said Bum Grandy abruptly and they began to sing the song of the roundrell, and this time, despite the drink, and his face red from firelight, and the bizarre encounter with these two relics, the words made a chilling impression on Widsith.

His drunkenness drained away as he listened, and he heard with a clear mind. Why had he not listened before?

‘Greed and war’ an ‘unruly law’, but that could be of any war, but ‘curious armies’? The Marshmen were certainly curious, and the Highland tribes, ‘great stars’? Mial Hest? Himself? Surely not, and by Fellowman! ‘Weakened flesh will cleanse the land’, not dead flesh, but weakened. Wyrð indeed! Why history was coming true in this song. Widsith shook his head in sudden terrible consciousness. So it was foretold then? Everything was foretold, to begin anew ‘in the roundrell’.

The two men had collapsed with the effort and groaned feebly. Widsith stood over them wonderingly. He could not bring himself to speak for a moment, then he spoke softly and sadly.

‘So it is all foretold, and you knew’.

‘Everyone knows. Only they don’t sees said Hors Follerdyke grumpily ‘isnt that so Bum?’

‘But who wrote the song?’

‘Aint it a puzzle’ said Bum Grandy sleepily from the ground.

‘Did you’ demanded Widsith.

‘Ha ha, the leader made a good one there Bum. Did we write the song, ha ha’ and they giggled stupidly on the ground. Widsith could see it was hopeless.

‘What is meant by the writing hand?’

‘Ahhhh...’ Hors breathed out.

‘You’ve haffs to writes befor you can reads, stands to reason, there’s a mind behind the words I expects’.

‘Gods?’

‘But those gods are written about, oh yes, and a nasty squabbling bunch they are’. Grandy farted.

Widsith wanted to walk away. Why should he take these Drubbins seriously, yet the questions still came from him.

‘It goes on and on, the roundrell? One cycle, then another?’

‘Of course says us, heh heh’.

‘Then everything will happen again, as it has before? Endlessly?’

‘Definitely I thinks, don’t you Bum?’

Widsith was in an agonised state of mind. One terrible question remained.

‘But why?’ he whispered at last.

'Dunno' and there was a snore from Bum Grandy.

## II

It was a long tiresome day to get the Highland tribes to their feet and plodding yornwards to home. The effects of last nights revelry were thin on every ones tempers, and the captains showed a sudden uniform reluctance to let Widsith relinquish his title. They fancied a grand triumph at the Hollowstone, with speeches, praise and plaudits, but Widsith would have none of it. His firmness wore them down and they reluctantly agreed to manage the army alone. Solas Sharp was appointed by Widsith as 'commander to the Hollowstone only', which rather chuffed him, and he swaggered about a bit but was still sorely puzzled by the wayfarers reluctance to come along. As for Widsiths emphatic statement that he was not going to return 'to the glory of it, but the pity', well, Solas shrugged, and plunged into the tedious business of getting the army moving with the passion he gave to everything.

He took Widsith aside and said 'and what lies beyond the Marshmens cities eh? There's a good business if your interested'. Widsith was not sure but Solas was still flushed with the excitement of seeing the marsh cities.

'Such grandeur, and who would have guessed eh? And there might be other worlds we don't know'.

The wayfarer waved him on his way and the camp was finally deserted. With Hull he rode slowly up the valley where a gleam of firelight in the dusk revealed where Juud and Donan were patiently camped. They had been kept abreast of all the news through Hull, and Juud embraced Widsith with a quick affectionate hug that for all of its briefness did not hide any of her emotion.

'You have succeeded Mikal. You look tired'.

He nodded. Donan busied himself around the fire stirring the pots and trying not to feel to awkward at the intimacy between this man and his mistress. He privately thought it was a funny way to be carrying on, him with a wife too. Hull sat placidly by the fire as Widsith told for Juud and Donans benefit of the last few days incidents. They already knew the general result of course, every baldybird in the Furrowdale Valley told of the battle, but meeting Mial Hest.

'You met him!'

Juud exclaimed when Widsith got to this part.

'Well, I cannot feel any pity for him, the brute!'

Widsith teased.

'You nearly made love with him'.

Juud blushed, and glanced sideways at Donan.

'Yes, well, he is attractive, and, well' she was at an embarrassed loss. She had kissed him, and almost, ugh! The thought repulsed her now.

Hull rescued her.

‘He has lost his good looks now miss’.

Juud was shocked at the description.

‘What is this disease Mikal? It kills in a horrible way’.

‘I think its justice mistress’ interrupted Donan dramatically ‘for them wicked things he’s done’.

‘Oh, do not be ridiculous Donan. Life is not like that. I mean we might catch this disease too, and have we done evil things?’.

The manager shrugged, and Widsith pondered whether the retainer was not right in some sense. There did seem a terrible sort of justice in it.

‘But are not we diseased too Juud, by all this killing and war?’

Juud was horrified at the idea.

‘But we helped save the kingdom Mikal? Surely?’

Then Mikal told her of the foretellers and the strange meeting with them. It was almost dark when Widsith had finished his story, and they had eaten the meal Donan served up. Of course the earlier meeting with the foretellers had to be explained to Donan, otherwise he would have missed the point, and he gave a grimace when he heard of ‘that funny fellow’, Sollo Wramm, mentioned again.

‘The plots alwus thick with ‘im’ he muttered.

Sitting in the firelight, with Hull and Widsith so close, it reminded Juud of their earlier travels together, only her father was missing. This jolted her into a bad conscience, but she promised herself that soon, she would be going back to the Rume. Later that night, with their blankets coiled close around them Juud whispered in the private darkness to Widsith. She told him what Sollo Wramm had said.

‘A curious star’. Widsith nodded.

‘Do you think he meant you? And now in the song, I mean, its twisted somehow. Everything seems to be twisted on itself’.

Juud shivered, and hugged Widsith closer. He yawned and enjoyed the delicious feeling of peace now that the weight of leadership had gone. He felt very tired now, as if he had been living on borrowed time, and his limbs felt heavy.

‘Those old baldybirds dancing around, chanting. I wonder what those Wyrds really know. Are you cold?’

‘Yes, but it’s not only the air, I mean Mikal’.

He knew what she meant. There were other chilling things in the air as well as the frost and cold stars. He was tender to her, brushing away the hair from her face. A night bird hooted miserably in the trees above them. Juud was quite for a long time then said in a small voice.

‘If you are in the song Mikal, am I in it to? Is everyone? How did we get there? Can someone really foretell the future so well?’

Widsith shook his head in silent ignorance.

‘It’s as if our life is not our own anymore, but someone elses. How can we be vic-

tims to a song? Who could write such a song, and manipulate us like that? No surely not, I am talking nonsense. I do not believe in fate.'

The night bird sounded again and they slumbered.

In the morning Donan had to be gently persuaded to accompany Hull to his home at Fromms Ferry.

'And where's be you going mistress' he asked stubbornly.

'To the Dell of Azel, we told you Donan. It is only a little way from the Ferry and we will join with you in a few days. Then we will go back to the estate.'

Really the Tilst! Didn't he realise that Juud and Widsith wanted to be alone? Donan was pleased at the thought of returning to the estate, though Juud searched Widsiths face anxiously. As Donan and Hull saddled their baggers Juud turned to Widsith.

'Are you alright Mikal? You look tired.' Widsith smiled.

'I need more peace and sleep'.

Juud grinned and said coyly.

'The peace I can guarantee wayfarer'.

Widsith smiled again, but did not say as Donan and Hull left, nor when they had saddled their horses and began the leisuredly journey, until they reached the Dell, that he knew that the weakness was on him.

They crossed the Furrow River and as they rode towards the Dells a curious procession approached them, curious because although there were six horses pulling three carts, who linked together, there was only one man at the head. Widsiths eyes narrowed as they approached. That figure looked familiar.

'Strom...' the wayfarer muttered

'Who is it Mikal?' asked Juud

By then the caravan was almost to them, the carts piled high with lumber that once would have filled any respectable drawing room in Beorht.

'Why sirs, 'ow are yous, and greetings to yous fair madam and I 'ye hears a lot of good about yous wayfarer Widsith and I'm pleased to greet thee again, and to think it was by my inspiration that granted your escape and Stroms be thanks and so I must be going for I wouldn't want to delay your mightships any further...'

'Stop, you dog!' Widsith roared and grabbed the lead carts traces. Gormiah Threaddon flinched back.

'Now sirs please and I've got good reasons for not deliverings those horses, and I'll explains...' and Gormiah began a tortuous maze of sentence construction that demonstrated most effectively to everyone concerned (especially himself) that he had not deliberately cheated on Mikal Widsith but had been stopped by the baldymen. Widsith glanced at Juud who was open mouthed at this verbal diarorhee.

'Who is this Mikal?'

'Gormiah Threaddon, horse-dealer, horse stealer, trader by night, thief, ingratiating Gadabout that I should have killed some time ago, is that right Gormiah?'

'Nows sirs I dont...' and as Widsith withdrew his sword slowly and pressed it against

the old dealers neck. Gormiah went red then white, and quivered his hands gesticulating the words that would not come out.

‘Sirs, sirs, I please your lords, please release and I’ll gives my word not to, not to, erggh’.

Juud looked alarmed.

‘Mikal? You cannot kill him in cold blood?’

‘Will hot do? This rogue makes my blood hot’. And the sword pressed firmly into the flesh.

‘Your last wish peasant’.

Gormiah looked around desperately.

‘Sirs, lords, as Stroms my lord, Is, Is...?’

‘Mikal you cannot’ Juud was shocked.

Widsith grinned and took the sword away. He reached about his waist and pulled off a leather pouch. Juud recognised it immediately.

‘Mikal thats the Charmstone!’

¬‘Do you want it?’ Widsith asked her.

She looked puzzled for a while, then shook her head slowly.

‘No, it has done nothing for me’.

Widsith reached into the pouch and drew the gemstone out onto his palm.

‘Ohh Mikal! It’s back in one piece! Oh how can that be?’ Juud did not know whether to be pleased or horrified. ‘Did you mend it?’

He shook his head.

‘No. It joined itself’

He looked at her.

‘No, I do not know how but it seems to me evil, and I cannot help think that it should go on to carry its spell to someone more appropriate, eh?’

Gormiahs eyes had opened with amazement at the green lovely thing glittering on Widsiths open hand.

‘Do you want it Gormiah?’

‘Well, sirs, such an item is pricey, I mean my means are slightish and that is...’ and Widsith tossed the jewel on the ground where it rolled in the mud, and threw the pouch after it. Gormiah could hardly restrain himself.

‘Lord, I’s...’ and his pupils shifted between the jewel and Widsiths eyes. He scabbled down in the mud, feeling with one hand for the Charmstone whilst keeping an eye on the wayfarer. Widsith looked at Juud, who nodded and they moved off.

‘Whys, thankee lords thankee...’ came a hoarse and excited voice after them, long after them in fact.

‘You were right Mikal. It belongs with the Wyrds of this world’ and they rode comfortably on, aware of the significance of the moment and that the thing that had driven and riven their lives for many years was gone. Breet shone brilliantly, and Juud could

not understand at first why she felt such a relief.

The Dell was still secret and untouched, the brooks bubbled noiselessly in the forest and there was that sighing whisper in the teasel trees as they walked out into the glade. The azels burned, and it looked as if no one had ventured here since their last visit. It was poignant to walk past the lake and their old campsite, and sit inside the tiny temple.

‘It seems smaller Mikal, we must have grown. Do you think this place can cure you?’ And she looked lovingly at him as he shook his head.

‘No’ she said ‘well it is a place to die gently. Can you see the disease on me yet?’

He looked carefully, but only saw clear unwrinkled skin and glowing eyes, and the smooth paleness of her neck which he still vividly remembered from the first time he had seen her in that farmhouse. She looked lovely.

They walked back to the lake and unpacked their baggers.

‘That’s where I saw Tysa and Tallott’ she pointed and grimaced ruefully at the memory. ‘How jealous I was, and sorry for myself. Well, I was innocent, it seemed unfair, Tysa was so much younger, and no one looked at me’ she said defensively as Widsith teased her, then hugged her. They remained holding whilst she murmured her recollections.

‘I had a dream that evening, earlier, of a man, whose face I could not clearly see... At the time I thought it was you, but do you know who it was? Mial Hest’.

Widsith was surprised, and Juud looked puzzled.

‘He was supposed to be my future I think, but it was you I wanted, but of course I did not say. Did you think of me?’

‘Yes.’

Juud moved the topic away.

‘And Tysa’s dream, remember? She told me of it later. It was of a huge water snake. Ugh.’ she shivered. ‘Later, after I had seen Tysa and Tallott together I felt so miserable, what with the dream and everything, I sat inside the temple and had a sort of vision. I can remember that it was wonderful and I felt healed, but I cannot say what it was about, it’s strange. Something moved in me’.

Widsith lit a fire and remembered other things about that night. The teasel trees hummed to themselves.

‘Your father talked to Thomas au Morad, and saw a book’.

‘Yes. Wasn’t it strange? The things we dreamed seemed to have come true, though father surely never met Morad’.

She laughed and grew more thoughtful.

‘I hope he is well, really, I have been away too long. I wanted you to come too Mikal’.

‘I would have’ and he did not say the obvious.

She huddled closer to the fire and stared into it as Widsith busied around with a meal. At one point she reached out her arm and touched him, and Widsith leant over and kissed the top of her hair.

'I love you'.

The azels filtered their blessed heavy scent out to the couple, bathing them in memories of sweetness. The last light deserted the clearing but the shadows that followed did not have that usual menace, but crept gently into the folds of the glade, moistening the grey grass with dark pools. Wene rose, spilling the silver light into the heavy dew-wet dell.

'How long does it take to die?'

Juud rubbed Widsiths head as she asked this question, and immediately regretted asking it, and Widsith had no answer but took her with a sudden passion that only the moon witnessed.

'Mikal, Mikal, will I die to?' Oh, I do hope so' she murmured and fell asleep as Widsith pulled the blankets over her skin yellowed by Wenes persistent light.

The azels drowsed them through the days. The wayfarer got quickly weaker, and soon found it more comfortable just to lie still. Juud refused to help him dig a grave and wept when she saw him struggle to his feet and hack out from the turf a shallow pit. When the blood should have come it did not and she told Widsith then. He was delighted, her own skin was still unblemished and the future looked lonely for her.

Juud was grumpy at the prospect of a fatherless child.

'My father will be shocked, so will the servants, and Donan! Imagine that old misery guts'.

She laughed.

'You wanted a child?'

'Of course!' and then the strain broke through 'a child to be shared' and they comforted each other, deeply, without any need for words whilst the teasel trees murmured their own soft incantations.

That night the azels seemed to glow in the darknes and the teasel trees stirred their shaggy moss limbs and talked cannily to the stars. Wene came quickly, and somewhere in the old night of the season of Croppen, in the year 158, Mikal Widsith, once a leader of the Highland tribes and mostly wayfarer, the man who knew as much as anyone of the kingdom and its devices, died, his face lined as an old mans. Juud woke to find him cold to her touch, and for a moment drew away repelled by the sight, and then she realised her loss and wept lonely tears over the wayfarers body.

The effort of dragging Widsith to the grave was almost too much for her, and she had to stop several times as she replaced the earth, felling a sickness in her stomach. She was sick that morning but determinedly gathered her belongings together and took a last look around the glade. The sky was overcast and Breet a blank disc. The azels still bloomed, but the old teasel trees said nothing to her, even the temple, which she sat in for some moments gave her no solace. Leaving should have been better than this.

She pushed patiently through the dell forests and reached the forest fringe where the horses patiently cropped the pasture. It was a strain (every movement was a strain now) to saddle the horse, and a terrible wrench to turn the horses away from the Dells, all the time her heart crying for Widsith. When she met Hull and Donan coming along the road towards her she was overwhelmed with grief and sobbed uncontrollably. Hull

rode back to pay his last debts to his old master and companion.

Donan did not know what to say.

'We wus worried at yours delay mistress, that's why we came. Ahhh, and he's died, ahhh...'

It puzzled Donan, the whole business. It did not seem proper somehow. Did he know he was going to die? He rode beside his mistress pondering the difficult ways of life glancing back occasionally at the small hills that held the Dells, but more frequently forward to the return to the estate. His unease was not helped when Juud, who had been quiet for some time, suddenly broke down again and turned to him, her face strained with the effort of crying.

'I have his child Donan, that at least I have'.

## Chapter 70

# Some Huge Folly

*A great silence fell on the land with death everywhere. The Righteous trekked out of the kingdom, and formed a hotch-potch body of men and women, peasants and baldymen who in their retreat blended into a caravan of sorts. Two sons of Wyrd meet and Gormiah at last meets his match.*

*Croppen and Harvess and Wast Time 158*

The land that was full was becoming empty. Those that could flee the weakness did so, and piled their possessions high on carts that swayed dangerously as their owners whipped the horses further and further away to no certain destination. But often the weakness was swifter than their strength, and it was not unusual in these Croppen days to find a cart stark and silent with its burden of goods and dried motionless corpses. And the carts stayed un plundered, for there was an abundance of wealth but not of health. In the villages, the peasants died, yet not as regularly as in the cities, and any scholarly gentlemen might have commented on it, but such scholars were also dead. Sometimes of course whole villages were emptied and the milking cows would moan desperately as their udders swelled to bursting. Unfed dogs would scavage for corpses and when these resources failed them, form into larger packs and hunt the bigger farm animals, and the humans. Only the baldybirds prospered. Thick, black, flocks of these scavengers would hang over the dying towns and countryside, wheeling in large circles and screeching at each other like so many demented Wyrds, overwhelmed by the bounty of food below.

The Granry was the first to fall under the terrible silence. To breeways trundled the dreary depleting caravans of the citizens of Noll, burying their dead as they went, and leaving behind a smoking city (Mial Hest did a poor job) of Noll which was overrun by dogs and rats, that fell on each other with a terrible ferocity. It was not Croppen they said it was 'wurds time'. Perhaps it was. Out towards the marsh, the fisher folk villages there did not experience the savagery of the weakness so much as on the plain, Morad remarked on it, but what of the Marshmen? Those terrible giants that crushed Sure Sheriats ambition with one blow, did the sickness come to them? Surely it did, but they carried it discreet into their mire till only the legends of their presence lingered, no one

knowing if it were truth or fancy.

The Highland tribes were frightened by the weakness and hurried into their homelands, hopelessly hoping that the disease would not trail with them. It did, and ran into their numbers, and forced them into their former seclusion, some scholars there stating the popular belief that this was a punishment for war and ambition. They slipped into the old cautious customs before those strident quick-limbed wayfarers had so distempered them. One part of the Widsith's army, hearing of his death visited the Dell of Azel and built a temple to him, plain and unadorned and marked on it the words 'All dwell in the Roundrell'.

The baldymen broke from the decaying centre of Mial Hests army and retreated towards Tol Pass, and there became indecisive. Some wanted to try for opportunity up the Furrowdale Valley, some stayed behind, and some crossed the pass, unwittingly and inevitably taking the weakness with them. So Caroyal was not spared, and soon the trickle of citizens from Beorht thickened to a flood, and as the refugees poured onto the plain they brought their harrowing escort of baldybirds with them. The elders of Caroyal panicked, justly, rounded up the baldymen, and slaughtered them. 'Too, too, late dear sirs. They tried to bar the refugees, but the weakness was already in the city. They fled to Swaleton first, but the disease moved more hastily than their lumbering imaginations and as they entered Swaleton the first victim died. To skaw went these peoples, now nomads. They loaded up their carts and drove their beasts before them, a great herd of people that were winnowed to a lean flock by the time they were swallowed into the Verd.

And the land was bleeding behind them, the collective body of a peoples sagging as its parts fled like pulses of blood from a great gaping wound. Many were left behind, either to die early and get a decent funeral, or die late and get a scruffy grave that the dogs tore at and quickly revealed. But corpses will decay and the stink of them crumble into the soil, where weeds and then maybe flowers will spring up upon the remains and bees will move among the polished ribs of bone in search of Sprig pollen. It was as if a giant broom were at work, sweeping the land clean of the detritus of the past, except that the past soon re-invaded the empty land as the Past Peoples now found space to re-emerge from their hiding places to occupy what they had never forgotten was theirs. A strange result, and Morad commented on it.

'Sturess dislikes a vacuum and the Past Peoples, who seemed curiously resistant to this disease, began to move back into their old habits. As dreaming, dreaming lay the land...'

In Noll the Righteous broke out of their prison keep and following the witness of their words they headed doggedly in the tracks of Mial Hests army, hearing the Song of Roundrell in their heads as they travelled past the dull wasteland of bodies. Deaths amongst them were few, and caused by natural accidents. Not one died by the weakness, as some diseases are borne by folks who do not suffer them. They were a terrible people these Righteous, such a fright of emotion, and only the texts in their hands, which they consulted as they edged slowly around the marsh. Here they met the rattle-taggle outpouring of refugees from the Furrowdale, some of the merchants of Beorht still lumbering on with their huge folly of possessions. And a group of dispirited baldymen riders also came along, and here the various groups met, the refugees frightened by the

tragedy that had overwhelmed them, and fused by their fear into a distrustful unity with the Righteous, whose cruel songs and prayers seem to give a sympathy with the cruel times.

These curious groups travelled, weary and bitter, their swords blunt and muttering bloody obscenities. They left the ignorance of the marsh behind, rejected the possibilities of Tol and paused briefly at the Rume, but seeing those stupendous walls, carried on, anywhere, anywhere away from this polluted kingdom. They went to the end of the kingdom as they knew it, into the Verd, and trundled off the edge of the page into some other history, and it is stated (by one who should know) that it will be a hundred years or more before they will be allowed to return.

In the Furrowdale Valley a curious conversation took place.

Gormiah Threadon had been minding his own business, hadn't he? Greed was his business and he had been minding it very well, thank you alls sirs. There was a vast bounty of possessions left behind the burning of the Furrowdale Valley, Strom there were chances! It confused and puzzled him. So many goods just lying around. He had left the Dell with two horse and now had five, pulling two carts, full of odd stuff he picked up. Every league seemed to have a cart piled high with goods and how could he resist? He plundered mercilessly, first from one cart, found another, plundered that, dumped some stuff, found another cart, took the best, broke an axle, shifted stuff, found a village empty, plundered, got two more horses, lost those, it had been a nightmare, a surfeit of opportunities, a colossal impudence of wealth. And he'd been given the Charmstone! Gormiah was lost in the wonder of his wealth. So gaining and pruning as he went Gormiah had struggled with his eventful and peculiar caravan up onto the Tol Pass, and on evensun had been approached by this Wyrd of a man who looked like Wyrd himself.

It gave the horse-stealer a fright, for the man had piercing green eyes, shadowed under a broad brim black hat. And he spoke in riddles, as if if he knew Gormiah's soul. Surely it was Wyrd himself?

'Welcomes Gormiah  
you marvellous liar  
canst I see  
the Charmstone under thee?'

Gormiah was stunned.

'Eh?' and drew his sword 'be off rogue, get you gone to Strom' but he said it unconvincingly. He was shaking with fear.

'The gem, the gem  
that's made by men'

And the old demon thrust out a huge gnarled hand, as if it was his right. Gormiah quivered. The day was almost gone and there was a metallic sheen on the pond nearby. What little wits Gormiah possessed, he was now scared out of them. No mortal had ever met Wyrd before, trust his luck. He prevaricated one more time.

'I aint gots your Charming things or whatevers you calls it.'

The strange man, half-man half-God, drew out a dagger of great length and kissed it.

‘I’ll have your heart  
for a start  
and roast your brains  
with onions’

Gormiah gave in. He fumbled in his clothing and took out the pouch that held the Charmstone. It was snatched from him and Gormiah burst out angrily.

‘That wuz mine’ and he swung his sword wildly in a sure bid to split the gods head open. But the thing dodged him, again and again, and no matter how madly Gormiah flailed around he always missed. And then Sollo Wramm began to chant the Song of the Roundrell, starting to dance round and round the stricken horse-thief.

Gormiah collapsed in a fright, and fainted clear away as he tried to shut out the sound of the evil song. When he awoke he was alone.

People went to bed early in the Rume, they always had done, in the manner of farm folk and obedient to Tilst, and partly, let it be said, because the night had a superstitious terror for them, for it was Wyrds time, and all manner of nasty doings could occur. And this habit prevented the servants on the Duc du Qu’ets estate from witnessing a curious scene, which if they had, would have undoubtedly convinced them that their prayers to Strom and Tilst should be more fervent in the future. For out by the small cemetery, close to the Rume River, where the Duc du Qu’et lay, a figure, black-cloaked with a large winged hat busied about on a gruesome task, digging into the grave where he reached the wooden coffin, already eaten with rot and worms.

Wyrd himself!? Surely?

This figure bent down and prised up a corner off the lid, and we do not need to tell you fellowmen what was there, but something else was deposited into the box, something green that glittered briefly in Wenes light. The lid was slammed back and the earth piled up over. What was Wyrd doing, or was this a mortal grave digger, but who had ever heard of a grave stealer that put things back into graves? Fortunately the servants were abed, and no one would comment on the scene, or hear any song, which when completed was followed by the snap of what could have been a bone, and crunching, grinding teeth.

## Chapter 1

# 'Dar Omu Asam Oht'

*We reach a sort of conclusion, and find it inconclusive, such is history, and it has been my pleasure to take you into this world and demonstrate its joys and follies. There is a birth and a death, and an unexpected union. There may be clues in the last few pages that will reveal to an intelligent reader much useful explanation of the events of the past. Everything may be revealed to you, or then again, if you see nothing, then you will find nothing.*

The morning was pale, and washed with thin coloured streaks in the cloud that suggested a dry painters palette. One last goodbye and Juud and Donan were trotting quickly down the Furrowdale Valley, leaving the tall isolated figure of Hull waving his long slow arms in farewell. The horses motion upset Juud and she was sick again whilst Donan looked apologetically aside. The cloud had thickened and a fine drizzle had smattered the empty villages and fields with a mournful weeping. Occasionally, glimpses of people could be seen in huts as they passed, and once out in the fields two peasants waved at them, at least some people were alive. The great exodus of people had already swept down the valley and left the remaining few inhabitants stranded like pieces of driftwood on a bleak shore. Everywhere the fields were bursting with uncut crops, and trees heavy with fruit.

Why had they not caught the disease?

Juud wondered aloud and Donan shook his head anxiously lest Strom should overhear and remember his omission. He could only think the Gods had favoured them and they should not tempt fate by talking about it. On nonsense Donan! And they argued as they travelled, a habit that was almost akin to friendship. Juud had to rest frequently and Donan did the loyal Tilsts work, setting up camp, preparing a meal, and watching out nervously for any brigands that might be drawn to their campfire.

But they saw hardly anyone, except the hungry dogs. Even as they skirted around Beorht, two leagues away, their seemed no sign of anybody picking over the ruins. They hurried past and climbed sluggishly up onto the Tol where they camped almost on the same spot where they had met Sollo Wramm. How much had passed then!

'You did not much fancy him Donan?' Juud teased, and the manager shook his head.

'I thoughts he wus Wyrd himself'.

Well he'd been wrong, about that, as about most things. He was 'outsides the soil' he confessed. Juud felt sudden sympathy for her manager then and tactfully changed the subject to the estate and what it would be like. Ruined was Donans gloomy supposition, but Juud was more confident. My father will still manage it, and most of the servants will be still there, they have no where else to go. What about the disease mistress? Yes, that would have taken its toll, but surely someone would be alive?

That night Juud dreamed of Sollo Wramm and remembered the curious details, how he always rhymed, his penetrating green eyes, those chicken bones! It would be odd to think of him as dead. He seemed to ignore the usual living purposes of other men and carried his own time around with him, what was it he once said? 'When I was born the land was torn, when I dies it shall unifies'. Well there was no unity now, except in emptiness, unless that was what Sollo meant. Mikal had always taken the trader seriously.

Mikal! She should not have thought about him, for tears immediately sprung to her eyes and she had to screw her fists into them to prevent the hot wet flush of sorrow. She had his child and she must keep it. Defensively she moved her hand down to her stomach and fell to sleep that way, her hand protecting the bud of flesh that kept her united to Mikal.

They kept riding slowly and on the very first day of Harvess they crossed the boundary of the Qu'et property.

It should have been an emotional moment, but Juud was too exhausted to enjoy it. Donan noticed the decay immediately, the overgrown track and the unharvested crops. Some cattle scittered away wildly at their approach, as if not used to seeing people. Juud pushed on, eager to get the journey over and see her father, and Donan followed grumbling at the sad condition of the land. Turn his back for a season and look at it! They came in sight of the great house and it looked outwardly the same, almost happily the same.

Juud saw people moving about the yard, and people who stopped and stared at the riders as they approached. One lad with sharper eyes gave a yell which brought out more people, women mostly and there was a sudden flood of people around the horses weeping and laughing at the return of the mistress. Juud leapt off the horse and ran to old Maggen, who was standing there with huge tears on her cheeks. They embraced deeply.

'Oh mistress. What times we've had. So many have died, why there's hardly a fit man on the estate, and the crops wasting, and, and' she gulped at the news she had to give. 'your father, mistress, he died, some two seasons gone'

It was Juuds turn to be humbled, cry and be comforted.

She visited her fathers grave frequently, taking flowers and sometimes sitting for wicks beside the mound staring into the pointless, unforgiving distance. But she could not give the past its due for the present demanded her. There was the estate to think of, and Donan was hacking it back into shape, grouching of botchers and working most wicks of the days, and there was the swelling of her own body to occupy her now. Some of the servants were shocked at Juuds condition, but after a while got used to it and even begun to look forward to the occasion. As Maggen put it 'something living in all this death'.

Juud worked closely with Donan as they laboured to put the estate in order and by the time of her own personal labour the property was looking after itself again. On some days she used to just break down and cry, and Donan gave clumsy comfort, though he could not understand the wrenches in her heart, sometimes triggered by a remark that reminded her of her father, or a whiff of hot herb that floated her into Mikals company.

She bore a son, and gave him away.

It broke her heart to do so but Donan insisted that it must be so. The child could never be accepted as the rightful heir, the ways of the land and the Rume folk were too slow for that he argued. Juud could not understand it and was too weak to argue against Donans grim tradition. It was he who arranged a family to look after the young boy, a couple called Morad who lived on the fringe of the estate. They already had one child of their own and called Juuds son Thomas, and added the word 'au' between his fore and past names to indicate that he was with their family, but not born through it.

Juud saw her son often, and was much saddened by the boys attachment to her adopted family, and his puzzlement at the grand ladies visit. He looked like Mikal, just like him in fact, except that he had her dark hair. Juud despaired on her return from these occasions and it was Donan, gloomy tempered, fussy, gruff, Donan Shallbody who comforted her in his peasant way. He proposed a season later and she accepted, it was somehow inevitable she felt, and there had to be heir.

They married in Sprig and the son was born in West Time. The midwives warned this was an ill time to bring a child, so bitter were the days, but at first it looked as if their misgivings were wrong. The baby was healthy and Juuds seem to keep her strong health, yet in Old West, she seemed to slip inside somehow, and sickened, and nothing the ministrations of Donan or the women could do could bring her back. She made Donan promise to look after Thomas and educate him, and to give him the Ducs journals so that he would know a little about the woman and man who had brought him to life.

'I knew death would come early for me, I think it has to do with the roundrell' she said faintly, and that dayend, Juud du Qu'et, youngest daughter of the fourth Duc du Qu'et, died, leaving a lonely man to bring up her children.

They buried her by her father and the servants planted the grave with blue flowers that bloomed vividly in Sprig and drew the children to pick them.

Thomas au Morad, and the young heir, called Talmon, played together, and grew up in mischief all through their schooling. 'Theres proper little wurd's' the servants called them and sometimes their pranks would cause the wrath of Donan to bear heavily down. Thomas lost his fourth finger when Talmon tried to dig out a wart, and Thomas nearly dying from the loss of blood, and Talmon nearly died from the severe beating that his father administered. On his twentieth birthday, Talmon, good looking, athletic, inherited the estate and married in the same year, soon producing a horde of offspring. Donan reluctantly retired himself out to the cottage on the estate, though still interfering whenever he could with grumpy criticism of botched jobs. All the old servants had died, even the indomitable Maggen, and then one icy West Time morning, Donan Shallbody slipped and fell, breaking his neck, so the secret of Thomas origins died with

him, for Donan had never explained who his real father was.

Thomas au Morad grew up and left the estate for a while, travelling through some of the byways and mysterious corners of the kingdom and returned with a head full of theories and fancies to become scribe to his former playmate. The post suited him, for in his middle and later years he had become secretive and rather crotchety, and the Ducs children used to poke fun at the shambling man, wrapped in his great black coat and wide brimmed hat, looking for the world like Wyrd himself. Morad's work as a scribe must have been undemanding for it was about this time that he wrote his first book *The Cultures and Customs of the Past Peoples*.

It leaned heavily on Morad's travels and notes (and some said his imagination) but it contained many fascinating insights into cultures that he provided the collective description for: the Past Peoples. The Duc was impressed when presented with a copy, and asked Morad if he would care to marry his eldest daughter, who at forty was almost beyond marriageable age. Thomas was improved in appearance briefly, probably the last time in his life any improvement was ever made, and to everyone's surprise the union produced a child, though the mother died, as was too often the case, shortly after. The scribe was hardly suited to raising a son (named Pirran, who grew up to be a wayfarer and took on the name Widsith that meant 'to journey'), and was content to let the servants manage the burden, besides he had found for himself a greater occupation.

Burying into the past records of the Ducs du Qu'et, he had come across the old journals of the fourth Duc, and was doubly surprised, first that his name was written on the leaf with instructions to learn and enjoy (a womanish hand he thought), and secondly that the Duc often expressed ideas that he himself cherished. He had seen something of the kingdom in his travels, and found little in it to be commended, and so gathered unto himself the notion of writing a vast allegorical tract that would set down the wicked pointlessness of human existence.

He shut himself up in his den, and darkened the windows with thick curtains so needs not be distracted by sunshine, and commenced work on his greatest work. Under his hand and through his eyes Morad fashioned a huge world of invention, of people and characters, of strange events and wonderful occurrences and customs.

When he needed a map to fix the destination of his characters, he laid down his damaged hand and drew around the four gnarled fingers, and labelling the resultant outline as fancy took him. When he wanted a song, he wrote it, and chuckled at its cleverness, and when he wanted a symbol, he cast it out of the cool green eyes of his imagination. He created a caste of priests as a mechanism to show how humans re-infect each other with the same wasting diseases — greed, power, rivalry — and therefore not learning from history, are condemned to repeat it. He plotted himself into the story, with amusing references, and he wove into his invention a philosophy of belief, which he called the roundrell, and which he offered as a source of comfort to those baffled by the terrible inscrutability of their lives. And he made this roundrell implicit, so that people would have to puzzle out its meaning, following the slow spiral of his intentions.

Some would find religion in it, some a politic, some a poetic, some a joke.

For years he laboured in primitive, furtive seclusion, so that few knew anything of him and his son grew in ignorance of the father. Those that inadvertently met the old

scribe (always at night, as if daylight threatened him) found the sight chilling. The black garbed figure with its large winged hat would shamble along muttering rhyme and incantation, oblivious of anyone it seemed, till the head would tilt and out of a grey face eroded with deep wrinkled channels of skin would appear a crystal pair of green eyes. One day the cook found that the food had not been taken in from the door, and in a panic she fled to her master who followed, amused by the turn of events. He himself had not seen his old playmate for several years. He banged loudly but there was no answer. He banged again, and then called for the door to be broken down.

The axeman had a slow time cracking apart the stout timbers, but once they broken the lock the door swung inwards of its own momentum and everyone fell silent. After all, was Thomas not some relation of Wyrds himself the axeman muttered, happy to let the Duc go in first.

The Duc stepped into the hushed gloomy chamber.

The room was a clutter of dust, so dark that for a while he could make nothing out, and his nose revolted at the smell. Mice scrambled for shelter amongst the pile of old rotting books, sending spirals of dust to the cobwebbed ceiling. It was like Wyrds den. The old scribes figure lay slumped over the table and the stench of death permeated the room. The Duc almost shrank from going further, then he sneered at himself for his lack of courage. Had not he once played with this fellow? Yet there was something sinister, something unfamiliar in the thick air. He crossed to the table and moved Thomas body back in its seat, and saw the dull dead gleam of the scribes open eyes, still glinting, though all life had left them.

The Duc closed the eyes, his fingers shivering at the task, then turned to the table where a book lay with Morads arm across the book. An impressive thing, a heavy red cloth with thick brass studs on the edge. Why he must have bound this himself! A curious scroll pattern was shaped on the cover and underneath in small careful gold lettering the Duc could read the words 'a fable of history in three parts', but when he lifted Thomas au Morads great dead arm off the book it revealed the main title, a strange one.

The Duc opened the book on the first page and began to read.

'It was a time when usurpers were themselves usurped, a time then (as now) that people had wilfully not learnt the lessons of history...'



## *List of Characters*

Beno and Mallil (both Baldymen)  
Beon Derdane (wayfarer)  
Captain Bulm (Baldyman)  
Captain Yarler (leader of the Baldymen)  
Cean Grin'kel (son of Herret)  
Doao (mythical author of 'The Articles')  
Donan Shallbody (manager du Qu'et estate)  
Driac Slorty (commander, lower Furrowdale Valley)  
Duc du Qu'et (fourth)  
Fioll (wife to Mial Hest, mistress to Lutens Wenner)  
Fustel (chamberlain to the court of Ogen and Henrietta)  
Givtheem Tallott (smuggler and adventurer)  
Gormiah Threadon (ex-soldier, horse-trader and ne'er-do-well)  
Hector Yussaf (merchant in Alma, father of Givtheem Tallott)  
Herret Grin'kel (landowner Rume Valley)  
Het 'Sure' Sheriat (commander of the upper Furrowdale Valley)  
Hors Follerdyke and Bum Grandy (foretellers)  
Hull (companion to wayfarer Widsith)  
Jokim Bonniface (courtier and layabout)  
Jos Earden (peasant)  
Juud du Qu'et (daughter of Duc du Qu'et)  
Kalmentier (wife of Sojon)  
Karee (mother of Lutens Wenner and Angoyard Pheus)  
Katy (whore)  
Lilla (witchwoman)  
Locii (only son to Steffan)  
Lutens Wenner (king of the second kingdom)  
Maggen (cook for the du Qu'et estate)

Matha Shallpinier (Matchmaker on the Rise)  
Matthew Culler (boatman)  
Mial Hest (commander of the Baldymen, Vey of Gion)  
Mikal Widsith (wayfarer)  
Mirren Thomlan (wife to wayfarer Widsith)  
Ogen, Prince of the Plains (brother of fourth Duc du Qu'et)  
Pirran and Siri (children of wayfarer Widsith)  
Prince Ryall Reger (son of the Marsh king)  
Princess Herrietta of the Granry (wife to Ogen)  
Reeter Serval (abbott of monastery at the Passage of Prayer)  
Sarra (maid and sometime whore)  
Smy (member of Lowleahs tribe)  
Sojon (merchant of cloth, Alma)  
Solas Sharp (wayfarer)  
Sollo Wramm (trader, traveller and mystic)  
Swivven the Strong (son of King Weal II)  
The Watchman (prophet of the mountain tribes)  
Thethe (member of Hollerwall tribe)  
Thomas au Morad (scholar, author of The Culture and Customs of Past Peoples)  
Tull (gardener du Qu'et estate)  
Tysa (daughter of Sojon)  
Vin Tyer (speaker, mountain tribes)  
Wisdom Shorroch (headman of fisher village)

## *List of the Gods*

### General to all the Kingdoms

Strom (husband)Stromer warrior		lord of the gods, weather, male, (days of thunder)
Sturess (wife)	Harvess	wife of Strom, fertility, nature
Wyrd	Mid Wast	magician, underworld, night, evil
Wene (sister)	—	moon, female, sexuality, mysterious, wife to Wyrd
Bree (sister)	—	sun, wife to Tilst, day, flirt
Tilst	Tilst	ploughman, farmer, honest, dull
Drubbin	—	apprentice to Wyrd, stupid, oaf
Gadabout	Boden	clown, fool, gleeman, drunkard, children, slyly smart

## *Local Gods*

Fellowman	folk-hero	mountain tribes
Harrar & Donkin	comic gods	mountain tribes
Caerp	golden fish	Rume valley, villages and estates
Vorst	marsh-serpent	marsh villages
Druel	wind (male)	Passage of Prayer
Sard	wind (female)	Hollerwall tribe
Korruk	water (male)	Hollerwall tribe
Rakshass	everything	Hollerwall tribe

## *Glossary of unfamiliar words*

azel, sweetly flowering shrub

bagger, canvas bag held on shoulders

barewood, type of thorny leafless trees

bogwood, tree with sickly, sticky flowers, found in swamps particularly the Sink

bruten, starchy vegetable

canopy, light woven waterproof sheet used by travellers

Croppen, the season of growing and fruiting

Doao, mythical writer of the The Articles of Faith

Harvess, the celebratory festival of Croppen

holdman, shed where corpses are stored through Wast Time and Old Wast

Hollerwalls, tribe living in the Sard, one of the Past Peoples

homeberry, small white berries eaten by Lowleahs

hooks and pitters, small furry rock-crawling creatures found in mountain areas

horse-warriors, any people who live on horseback

hotherb, plant used for smoking

leafen, a hot drink made from leaves of the eder tree

longman, unit of measurement, based on height of a man (see note on mesurement)

Lowleahs, tribe of the Barewood in the Forest in the Gloreen, one of the Past Peoples

macrimon, starchy food of Lowleahs

malep, sweet syrup

Meet, annual gathering of mountain tribes

Mid Wast, festival of Wyrđ midway through Wast Time

nupper, small rodent bred and eaten by Lowleahs

Old Wast, strictly the second part of Wast Time, after Mid Wast

prefector, teachers at university

quam, alcoholic drink

Righteous, caste of horse-warrior priests

ryet, chewy sweet or bread  
 skulm, woolen skull cap, distinctive to the Furrowdale Valley  
 spirite alas au veersaad, Past Peoples expression 'travel with my heart'  
 Sprig, the new season  
 stuppen, domesticated animal owned by Lowleahs  
 teasel trees, found only in the Dell of Azel  
 The Articles of Faith, books of the Righteous  
 thrum, short unit of measurement (see note on measurement)  
 tout, small lively bird found in the Gloreen Forest  
 Twig-Tellers, tribe living in Sink, one of the Past Peoples  
 Wast Time, the cold bitter season  
 wayfarer, professional guide  
 wenderweed, floating plant found only in the marshes  
 wharett, execution site  
 wick and bit-wicks, parts of the day (see notes on time)  
 yiggen trees, mainly in the Rume Valley, symbol of spring 'river of life' or 'blood of life'

## *Compass Directions*

- yorn north
- breeways or breewise east
- weneways or wenewise west
- skaw south

wybs 'which way?', a combination word made up of the front letter of each direction

## *Terms of Measurement*

The three common measurements in the kingdom are:

- thrum, measurement based on the length of the index finger
- longman, measurement based on the height of a man
- league, measurement based on the distance around a walled town

Generally, 24 thrums equals one longman, and 1000 longmans equal one league, however the units were flexible depending on the customs of the local people.

For example the distance around a walled town varied depending on the size of the town, hence a Caroyal league is bigger than a Swaleton league. And since Caroyal is the capital of the kingdom, its increased status may be reflected in a longer league than is strictly true. So a 'Caroyal league' could be a sarcastic joke at the expense of the pretensions of Caroyal folk.

Both cities of Beorht and Noll are smaller in circumference and therefore generally have smaller leagues, and people will make a distinction such as a 'Noll league' or some such.

These semantic quibbles equally apply to longmans and thrums, sometimes more so since there is more vanity associated with personal size.

## *Time*

A full day in the kingdom is divided into eight parts called wicks, however this technical division of the day is supplanted by more conventional terms unless a specific time is required. A wick is the approximately the time it takes to burn a normal-sized candle. Smaller parts are referred to as bit-wicks which can be anywhere between a moment and a short wick. It is a vague but widely used term to describe any short section of time.

morning           •           dawn  
                          •           mid morn  
                          •           high sun

aftersun (or halvesun)

dayend (or twilight or evensun)

night           •           new night  
                  •           old night

## *Seasons*

There are four seasons, in a total year of 365 days. Each season is divided from the other by a festival, usually associated with the forth-coming season. So Tilst, the patient ploughman, is associated with Sprig, the growing season.

Mid Wast (3 days)	Wyrd
Old Wast (86 days)	
Tilst (5 days)	Tilst
Sprig (86 days)	
Boden (5 days)	Gadabout
Croppen (10 days)	
Stromer (10 days)	Strom
Croppen (66 days)	
Harvess (8 days)	Sturess
Wast Time (86 days)	





