Riderch the Red



Riderch the Red (2nd draft)

by Zachary Ross

www.knottyingrabbit.com
zachary@knottyingrabbit.com

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Doughty Dinistrith, cast down a kindly shaft upon my pate,
And pith and power of war, with which to wake
The yellow bile in my yellow heart
And conquer every craven inclination
That would spur my soul to fury or contention,
That would drive to mindless murder and the blood-bath.
Rather, ruddy rider, grant me boldness,
So to break the beastly steed that is my heart
With saddle of serenity, benignity its bit and bridle
And restraint its ready reins,
Riding wide the stroke of the requiting sword
- A hymn to Dinistrith, as inscribed upon the tomb of Riderch and the crypt containing Dinistriol's head

1

"If you keep this up, Riderch, you'll lose more than an ear." And then, a few moments later: "You'll follow that rabbit all the way to the river, and there you'll drown."

Riderch had withheld his attention easily enough until then; but that last comment, so full of condescending self-assurance, was more than his pride would abide. He halted his climb and wheeled around on Disma, thrusting his face near enough to bite. "You reckon I don't know how to swim?" he snapped, jabbing a stiff claw into his chest. "You reckon I won't stand on his head if I have to?"

But Disma did not flinch at the outburst; indeed, he was too stunned to do even that. His eyes, so huge and probing in their great black sockets, were now half the size of his head. His thin limbs, hidden beneath their dusky gray poncho, hung stiffly in mid-stride. All that moved was his tail, ringed and bristling, back and forth, back and forth.

"I don't know much good it will do now, Riderch," Disma answered, alarm souring to irritation. "I would be surprised if he was even in there."

"You reckon I'm losing my touch because of this, don't you?" asked Riderch, glancing at the twins to his right and left. "One bad job and you've already written me off."

"Why are you accusing us all of a sudden?" asked Disma, furrowing his brow so hard that his eyes nearly disappeared behind their sable mask. "If this is gnawing at you, that's hardly our fault."

"You're the ones gnawing at me," Riderch smoldered. "I'm the one doing something about it. Is that not good enough for you?"

"But you didn't do it, boss," said Tennyn, the elder of the twins. "No one would have ever found them all the way out at Cyrn Gwerthon, and we could have gotten more for that one halser's gold. It's the least you could have done for dragging us out here."

"And so you're threatening me now, aye?" said Riderch, raising his voice so that it clattered against the starlit rocks cascading down to the desert floor. Now the other hares were tense; Riderch's own fists were balled, and even in the late winter's cold he felt hot enough to steam.

"Riderch, no one is threatening you," Disma chided. "Hell's teeth, we're out here in the middle of the Deepwaste. Sandstorm season came early, and we're on the wrong side of the Greteboga for that. Is it really so surprising that we're all tense?"

Riderch's snort could have come from a warning bull, but he did not raise his voice again. "I won't let him get away with this, Disma," he said. "I won't be made a fool of."

"Then do what you're going to do and let's get back to camp," Disma barked. "We could have been back in the Anialdir by now."

The climb resumed with Riderch at the fore, Disma behind, and the hares flanking them both. The stone steps, so steep and so wide, could have accommodated them all in a line twice over, and the four folk made little sound in the stepping. Disma made none, as usual: his searching raccoon paws rose and fell with nary the click of a claw, and he moved at all times so carefully that his poncho never swept the ground. It was silent, utterly silent, such that Riderch could hear his own pulse beating in his ears.

The Deepwaste was always so silent at night. So far from any folkish habitation, only wind and water made noise, or else the odd cry of an owl or its doomed prey. There were none of those here, however, so high up the throat of the bald mountain. With every step the loneliness became more of a living thing, a thing with flesh that weighed upon one's shoulders. Riderch felt a leathery burden press against his chest, burning him with his own anger. He adjusted it through his shirt, finding it more abrasive than it should have been, then left it alone. It had bled out quickly, and days in the blistering sun had tanned it handily enough; but a part of Riderch wished that it were bleeding still, that he might fling it in his foe's face and watch it spatter against his fur.

These thoughts carried him to the top of the last flight of steps, high above the desert floor where an outstretched arm of red rock gestured southward, to the Sunneweg and a stark full moon. Upon this arm stood pillars, rows of thin spindles which the grating wind had worn down from once-mighty columns. Many had long since fallen, taking with them the sandblasted roof which lay at their feet in heaps; while farther back, against the face of the mountain, the rocks slouched to shelter a few stubborn holdouts, leaving only the head and shoulders of a higher tier to the open air.

It was for this higher tier that Riderch led them, threading the maze of pillars and shattered white stone, until they came to the place where the maze became a cave and plunged into the mountain face. Taking a lantern from Tennyn, he posted the three outside, patting the hilt of his falchion out of habit.

"I won't be long," he told Disma.

"One of us should follow you in, at least," said Disma.

"I don't want anyone scurrying out when they realize why I'm here," Riderch scowled. "Stay and keep watch."

"Someone should watch your back," said Disma.

"Are you going to argue with me?" Riderch snapped.

"Are you going to brush me off?" Disma snapped back.

Riderch stood facing him for a moment, balling his empty fist; but seeing which way the wind was blowing, he shrugged mightily and turned around, making for the inner passage. "You're waiting at the bottom of the steps," he said, and like a shadow Disma followed behind.

The inner passage, like the outer court, was much abused by ages of sandstorms, white stone in a red mountain blended by time until the two seemed a part of the same ageless formation. Unlike the outer court, however, the pillars here still bore the marks of tools on their leeward sides; and on the white ceiling, fallen in some places and gripped by red spurs in others, were star-studded faces just barely recognizable in the lantern's light.

That light was all that showed their way for a while. The moon could not see far into the cave. It grew steadily, inexplicably warmer; the air stank subtly of brimstone. But then at last, when they were near enough the back of the corridor that they could see sand piled up against a farther wall, Riderch and Disma arrived at a second flight of steps. These were narrower than the climb up the mountain, though no less steep, and the moonlight spilled down them in silent cataracts.

"Take this," said Riderch, pawing his lantern to Disma. "It'll be bright enough for me to see up there, and I want both of my paws free."

“I want to come with you,” said Disma, taking a step past him so that they stood side by side at the foot of the stairs.

“Why are you pressing me so hard about this?” asked Riderch. “I already told you no.”

“I’m looking out for you!” Disma chittered. “And shouldn’t I be? Who else will?”

Riderch did not know what to say to that. He opened his mouth to speak anyway, then closed it, then opened it again and moved his jaw from side to side. “You said you wanted to watch my back,” he muttered apologetically, already mounting the first step. “That’ll be fine.”

He made the final climb with a paw on his falchion, his tawny poncho concealing his arms so that no folk would know it. Even now there was no sound. No lights flickered through the round opening at the top of the steps. Only the bright field of stars could be seen, with the green Quetzal Star foremost among them; but with treachery already committed, Riderch expected nothing less from the tunneling rats.

He emerged alone at the rim of a bowl, a white bowl nestled in the streaked mountain rock, whose ruined finish still caught and held the moonlight so well that Riderch swore it was condensing in drops before his very eyes. Those drops rolled down, mirroring the crowded firmament, to collect at the bottom. There stood a single figure, as black as jet, upon a windworn flower-of-life mosaic; and after scanning the whole rim of the bowl to find it empty, it was for this figure Riderch made.

They did not hail each other. The rabbit, Riderch knew, must already be wondering behind his bone mask why his hired sword came alone, and he himself was well past the point of politeness. They met upon the mosaic, and there sized each other up: the one concealed beneath his poncho, the other drowning in a black-feathered cloak.

“Are you going to ask me where they are?” said Riderch after a lengthy silence.

“I know where they are,” the rabbit scoffed, his voice little more than claws scraping in the dust. “They are walking through the Deepwaste, toward Sunstone. Why?”

“If you know that, then you know why,” said Riderch, shifting subtly on his feet. “I won’t abide being tricked. I won’t abide being robbed of my rightful payment.”

“We would have paid you,” said the rabbit.

“Hare’s scut, you would have!” Riderch barked, storming across the stone flower until he loomed over the dwarf. “It was a trick, and you know it. If you reckon I’d kill three halsers for an *empty* mountain, just because you asked nicely, you’re as fool as they were.”

“Our stores are vast, you wad of sinew,” the rabbit rasped, and for the first time Riderch saw that he was trembling beneath his cloak. The thought pleased him. “You agreed to a mountain of treasure in exchange for their bodies. You have no bodies, therefore we award you no treasure.”

“I don’t want your tongue slithering over me,” Riderch spat. “That was not the deal. The deal was *that* mountain’s treasure. Cair Cunning. But there’s nothing left in Cair Cunning but a few rocks.”

“The treasure was taken elsewhere,” said the rabbit. “You would have seen it if you had brought their bodies as we asked.”

“Is that so?” said Riderch. Swelling with rage, he reached beneath his shirt and pulled the leathery burden out of his collar and over his ears. He shoved it in the little rabbit’s face, violently enough that he must have thought Riderch was going to strike him, for he flinched and recoiled, his milky eyes narrowing behind the sockets of his mask. “What will this buy me, then?” Riderch demanded, shaking it in front of him. The long ear, still shockingly red even after days of tanning in the hot sun, still supple though not putrid, dangled listlessly between them from its leather cord, pierced through the root. “Surely this is worth a chest of gold all by itself, isn’t it? Well? Where is it?”

“It will buy passage to the Sunlit Lands, if you really want to know, for you and your whole band.”

“Is that some kind of threat, rat?” Riderch roared.

“Get that scrap out of my face this instant, you witless cutthroat,” the rabbit hissed, only to step back himself when Riderch would not budge. “I see now that you’re crazed, as all folk must be who willingly abide in this wretched oven. You’ve no right to demand anything of me. You left your work half finished, and for that you get nothing. Nothing! Do you hear me? Return to the stolen hole you choose to hide in: I have nothing more to say to you.”

Riderch’s rage turned white then. Ceasing to rail, he pursed his lips and nodded his head, gingerly replacing the ear beneath his shirt. “It’s a shame, you know,” he shrugged, hiding his arms beneath the folds of his poncho. “I would have preferred gold, but I’ll take payment where I can get it.”

The rabbit does not answer Riderch. His carriage does not change, neither does his countenance, but in that moment Riderch grasps the wire-wound handle of his falchion, throws back his dusty poncho and draws it clear. It flashes in the moonlight, a streak of cold fire, then descends to bite his foe. But Riderch’s falchion meets no flesh; he does not feel the parting of the sinews or the spraying blood, but without resistance the blade cuts through thin air, and at the end of its arc he stands alone upon the flower-of-life. All sign of his treacherous foe is gone, and with him all hope of profit.

Riderch, being no stranger to the illusions of the desert, did not long wonder what had happened. He had been duped from the beginning: there was no treasure, just as there was no rabbit. He had dragged his whole band out into the Deepwaste for nothing, and now the cutting loneliness of the desert mocked him openly. He spat on the stone circle, slid his sword back into its scabbard, and walked back out of the bowl the way he had come, leaving behind him a string of curses.

Disma was sitting on the lowest step when Riderch found him. “Get up,” said Riderch.

“No luck?” asked Disma, knowing the answer already.

“Back to the Anialdir tomorrow,” said Riderch, and swept past him down the pillared corridor.

“Was he even there?” asked Disma.

“No,” said Riderch. “No, he wasn’t there.”

“I was afraid this would happen,” said Disma, clucking his tongue. “It’s time to cut and run, Riderch, don’t you think?”

Riderch bristled. “Of all the times to bring this up, you reckon I want to hear it now?” he asked, rasping in his anger.

“There won’t be a better time, and you know it!” Disma pressed, unexpectedly hot himself. “I’d wager my rings that every time from now on will be worse. The mark’s almost around the corner.”

“Cut and run with what?” Riderch challenged, wheeling around on him.

“With what we’ve got stashed back in Mydge,” Disma proposed. “It’s enough to get us out of the Anialdir, at least. We could slip off in the middle of the night, and none of the others would bother looking for us.”

“Enough to get us out of the Anialdir,” Riderch mimicked. “And then what? We start from scratch? I’m not quitting the Anialdir until we’ve stolen our life back from those flea-bitten dogs, Disma. One bad score aside, they’re paying our way out. Don’t tell me to let them off the snare.”

“I warned you it was too good to be true, didn’t I?”

“I don’t need you to tell me I shouldn’t be surprised,” Riderch snapped, resuming his way down the corridor. “Rabbitfolk are liars and street-magicians, every last one of them.”

“Then why did you do it?” asked Disma, quickening his pace to keep up.

“I reckoned it would be a way to steal from rabbitfolk twice,” said Riderch. “All the old tales say that Cair Cunning is still full of their gold. It’s a matter of pride for harefolk, Disma, you don’t understand what it’s like.”

“Is that how you’re going to explain it to the others?” asked Disma.

“No,” said Riderch.

Silence encroached for a time, until Disma spoke again: “Why exactly didn’t you kill the rabbit, Riderch? If it’s such a matter of pride to you.”

“I didn’t want to give that little rat the satisfaction,” said Riderch.

“Did it have something to do with that other halser?” Disma pressed, clearly unsatisfied by the answer. “The hare?”

“It doesn’t make any sense!” Riderch barked, throwing up his paws. “Why would a harefolk – even a halser – want anything to do with those little thieves?”

“That sounds like a reason *for* killing them,” said Disma, “not against it.”

“I’m done talking about this,” said Riderch, speeding up again to leave Disma behind.

“Do you envy him?”

“What the hell did you just say to me?” Riderch growled, wheeling around to loom over Disma once more.

“I didn’t say anything,” Disma growled back.

“Do you reckon I’m deaf?” Riderch challenged.

“No, Riderch, I don’t reckon you’re deaf,” Disma scoffed. “You’ve got three ears, after all.”

Now it was Disma’s turn to storm off. Sweeping past him, the little raccoon left Riderch behind to stand, alone and puzzled, in the dark passage, and he was the last to rejoin them at the mouth of the cave.

2

The descent from the Greteboga was made in silence, with each party wholly unsatisfied by the outcome of the night – indeed, the outcome of that whole winter. They were tired, hungry, thirsty, and cold, climbing down to the rest of their band on the desert floor who had already been each of those things when they had left them. The only change for several more days would be the change from cold to hot and back again, until they were some distance into the Anialdir once more and could rest securely at the watering holes they knew. In the meantime, Riderch thought ruefully, they were returning empty-pawed, and he was never in more personal danger than when they were empty-pawed. The thought ate at him like a canker, and he nursed it all the way back to camp.

The sun was threatening to rise when they arrived, summoning the hidden life beneath the desert scabs to come alive and trumpet. Revealed by a red sky, cacti stood defiantly amidst the scrub and crouched between the rocks, and stiff-leaved yucca trees swayed in the southerly Whirlwind already too eager for their liking. There was no real gwerthon there, only a pitiful stream that trickled down from the rocks above and disappeared into the rocks below. It was enough for them to drink from, and barely enough for their horses, but Riderch knew that it was an insufficient camp – they must move on that day, or else turn back toward Cair Cunning, and one of those was sure to get him killed.

He could see a single, weak fire among the close-packed tents: for this he made, head down and hailing no one, only to find a good number of his band seated at breakfast around it. There were twenty-one of them in all, and more than half were eating, or else puffing away at pipes packed with whatever dust still lay at the bottom of their humidors. Most of them were Anialdir harefolk, heads still bare and ears all erect awaiting the fearsome sun. A few, however, were not, and these – to Riderch’s chagrin – were the first faces to see him approach. Gwyarc was there, the sour-faced bushdog with his black limbs and blacker eyes; Sawl sat beside him, almost invisible, a dullard sloth with a peccary’s nose and a dirty brown coat who at all times looked as if his favorite dog had just been killed in front of him. He was dressed in red and white hemp linen, the red distantly reminiscent of the vermilion that Godnu pounded from the cinnabar around the broad, flat boardlands, although his square poncho – bound tightly about an ample gut with a belt drawn over in spider webs – was out of fashion in the

Anialdir. Hawen reclined on a saddle blanket with her back to the fire and her face to the west, her prodigious curves exaggerated by the flickering firelight. She regarded him the most keenly of all, evaluating as if on scales what it meant that he returned with arms unladen. The others regarded him with varying degrees of bitterness, and Gwyarc himself with open disgust. Riderch's face burned.

A glance over his shoulder told him that Disma had gone to his tent. Tennyn and Dedrys were already at the fire, claiming what cornbread they could before it was gone. Knowing, then, that no one would fetch his seat for him, Riderch left the fire as soon as he arrived, weaving through the tents until he found his own. Ruddo was hitched there where he had left him; the liver mustang grew alert at his master's approach, ears sharply forward and flanks quivering, and Riderch offered him the briefest greeting before throwing wide his tent's flap. There atop his bedroll was his seat, a shaggy red wolf's skin whole but for the legs. He draped it over his arm, fetched his bowl from a hanging saddlebag, then turned toward the door again, only to wind the faintest whiff of desert lily. He paid closer attention then, scanning the tent in near darkness to find that nothing seemed to be missing. Hawen had been in here: he made a note to ask her why, then returned to the fire.

The others were waiting for him now, all huddled around their one modest brush fire. Half of them did not even bother to eat, having eaten already. They chatted instead, or pretended to, wagging their tongues at one another while their eyes stole glances at Riderch. Tennyn and Dedrys were sitting with Gwyarc now, as was Kay, that mass of corded muscle whose mother must have been an ox, though his father was an Anialdir hare. The four of them, with a few of the others, had once been thieves in Ancathair, then outlaws after King Cyngen had posted bounties for their lives. They gossiped together, Kay's every word the beating of a bass drum; and judging by the flasks of brightwine in their paws, Riderch would soon hear it even from the other side of the fire.

For there is where Disma sat, bunched up in his poncho near Hawen, no more than a dun rock to unsuspecting eyes. The harefolk parted when Riderch approached him, making room on the raccoon's left, and it was there that Riderch spread his wolf skin as he always did. The paper-thin chattering slackened, though it did not stop. Disma said nothing, but gnawed singlemindedly on a round of flat cornbread. Riderch took the last of these rounds from the breadbox beside the fire, ladled over them some of the stewed screwbeans and sweet potatoes which had ripened so out of season at the gwerthon beside Cair Cunning, and sat down upon his skin, drawing his pitted deer knife with a jerk. The hares beside him flinched, and at any other time Riderch would have laughed at this; instead he only scowled and set to eating, cutting the cornbread to pieces beneath the stew and carrying all to his mouth with the blade.

"And how was Quilla the second time, boss? As empty as it was the first time?" Dargan mewled to his left. The little hare resembled a scorpion, the way he squatted with his knees and elbows splayed. His red lips were the poisoned stinger. Dargan always spoke up when Riderch was eating food that he had foraged: it was Dargan who had dowsed the little stream at the foot of Quilla, and Riderch knew him well enough to guess that he considered both of these things points against him.

"There was a full moon last night," Sawl muttered. "It shouldn't have been empty."

"Maybe he's hiding all the rabbitfolk treasure under his shirt with that little halser's ear," said Kay; judging by the way he slurred, he was almost through the last of their brightwine. Tennyn and Dedrys laughed at his joke nevertheless, as did Gwyarc, his pinched face wrinkling into a fiendish grin.

"Nothing but a bunch of rocks, Kay," the bushdog replied, slurring himself. "Just like the rest of this damn griddle."

Disma flinched, and Riderch glanced at him, then at Hawen who still reclined in her ruffled violet dress, smoking out of the only meerschaum pipe they had. It always struck him how tall Hawen was, even given a vicuna's long neck. The he-folk rarely grew so tall. In order to find a dress large enough to be tailored for her, Riderch remembered, they had stolen from a wealthy llamafolk dame. It

still fit poorly, though in a way that Hawen no doubt intended. He shook his head and ate faster, ignoring how quiet the fire had grown.

"At least those halsers are going to die in the Deepwaste, aye?" Dargan said to Gwyarc. "We can all go home satisfied now!"

"Oh aye," Gwyarc tittered. "I'll console myself with that when we're eating the horses."

"We won't have to eat the horses," Riderch snapped, licking his knife clean and dropping both it and his empty bowl beside him.

"All right, all right, whatever you say, boss," said Gwyarc, throwing up his paws. "We'll eat the tack first."

"There's still plenty of loot to be gotten on the roads," said Riderch. "And with the gwerthons fruiting so early, none of us are going to starve."

"No, we're just going to scavenge like nomads," said Gwyarc, spitting in the dust. "That's why we joined up with you, ain't it? That's why we're risking our skins for you: for some screwbean stew."

A few of the band laughed at that. Gwyarc grinned, drunkenly satisfied. "If you want to say something, say it, Gwyarc," said Riderch, jabbing a claw at him from across the fire. "Don't swagger around like Hawen."

Gwyarc's grin cracked, but remained. "All I'm saying, boss, is if you're going to drag us all the way out into the Deepwaste, hide what little loot we got in your own tent, and leave us empty-pawed, we all might as well be grinding war-band corn in Gorseth Floyd."

"Watch it, Gwyarc," Disma warned. There was no steel in the little raccoon's voice; his admonishment, unique among the whole band, was almost friendly.

"Or what?" Gwyarc snapped. "You'll pray down the wrath of Dinistrith on me?" Disma scowled and looked into his empty bowl.

"I'm carrying the halsers' loot for your sakes, you damn fool mutt," Riderch growled. "We can't just sell it in Godnu: no one would touch it. We have to find someone willing to buy, or else melt it down ourselves."

"And in the meantime we throw ourselves at Rhuddri's riders on the Swartway," Kay sighed.

"Maybe he's just trying to thin us out a little," Dargan ventured. "Lose a few in the Deepwaste, lose a few to Rhuddri's noose. Shares are bigger that way."

"Well he'd better not thin us out too much," said Gwyarc, almost roaring now. "He won't have anyone left to cut his meat for him!"

Riderch stiffened. Disma, knowing well by now what such stiffening meant, reached out a hesitant paw to grab his arm, but only too late. Riderch rises to his feet in a blink, seeing red in the flames, red in Gwyarc's face, and throws himself over the fire, tackling and rolling with the wire-haired dog. Gwyarc, drunk and unsuspecting, puts up no fight at first, and his failure proves decisive. Riderch gains the upper paw with ease that startles even him, straddling his legs to keep them still, and rains blow after hard blow upon his face, smearing his self-satisfied grin into a grimace, bloodying his nose and mouth. Teeth are battered loose and fall out. Curses fall out with them. Up come Gwyarc's claws, too late to avail him much.

Riderch might have beaten Gwyarc to death that morning. Certainly he intended to. He did not, however; for in the middle of his outburst, Kay reached down and hooked his oaken arms under Riderch's armpits, then hoisted him off of the dog and dragged him away from the fire – only with the greatest difficulty, to the amazement of the whole band. They were silent now, save for Riderch's indignant demands and Gwyarc's pitiful groaning, until Riderch realized what he had done and only the groaning remained. He stared at his band, each one open-mouthed in damning horror, and found Disma already at his side. He raised his bloody paws in surrender; Kay let him go as Tennyn and Dedrys rolled

Gwyarc onto his side, pouring water over his face from a waterskin. The silence of the desert was in the camp now, just on the edge of dawn, a loneliness as sharp as any knife.

"There's still plenty of money to be made on the road," Riderch declared to them all, in part to stave off that silence. "I'll see that you all get paid. I always do. If any of you doubt me, you can go grind corn in Gorseth Floyd for all I care. See how long you last before someone comes to collect your bounty."

"Riderch," said Disma, gripping his arm and pulling him emphatically away from the fire. "Come with me. Now."

Riderch followed without a word, through the camp, past their horses, until they returned to Riderch's own tent. It was still dark within, though the approaching dawn was already fingering the gaps between the canvas and the desert floor. Riderch could not make out Disma's face; but the pregnant silence that ensued, and the strained, almost frightened tone of his voice when it came, told him enough.

"You're going to turn them all against you," he said, "every last one of them."

"You reckon I should abide him calling me boss, and in the same breath talking about me like I'm some kind of toothless suckling? Is that what you reckon I should do, Disma?"

"They're angry, Riderch!" Disma rasped, just barely managing to hold his voice below a shout. "I'm angry too, except now I have to be angry at you instead of at the rabbitfolk. We lost on this. We lost a lot."

"We'll get it back," said Riderch, shaking out his aching knuckles. "We always do. That's why they put themselves *under* me, and I don't aim to let them forget it."

"You'd better pray to every Star you see that you're right," said Disma. "Horse's hooves, now we have to worry if Gwyarc can even ride out. If you keep us in the Deepwaste any longer, Riderch-"

"Tell him to rub some creosote on it," said Riderch, pouring water over his paws from his waterskin and scrubbing them clean. "It's not like I ruined his good looks or anything."

Disma was silent again for a time; outside the tent, Ruddo stamped. "We have to ride out this evening," he finally said. "Until then, I would dig myself a scrape and keep clear of camp if I were you."

"Fair enough," said Riderch. "Say, have you seen my compass? I was looking for it before we left for Quilla, but I couldn't find it."

Disma scoffed. "You left it in my tent," he answered, "on the floor with your fire-striker."

"I won't ask you to get it for me," said Riderch.

"I wouldn't," said Disma, already turning to leave. "I have to go make sure they're not tying a noose for you."

"There's still plenty of gold to be made on the roads," Riderch repeated at the raccoon's retreating tail. "I'll steal from Rhuddri himself if I have to – Rhuddri, and Cyngen, and Sheen, and Osging. We'll make it out of the Anialdir as rich as kings, Disma, just like I promised – you and me, together."

After a few moments of incautious palpating, Riderch determined that none of his claws were broken. He balled his fists again, accepting their ache, then ducked out of the tent himself and padded over to Disma's. It smelled of white sage within, as it always did. Disma was more fastidious than anyone else that Riderch had ever met, and had less cause to fear pests than most, and yet he detested them even more than Hawen. Because of this, Riderch spotted his own discarded items at once: an ancient compass with a scratched glass face and a curved steel and flint, both lying on the ground near Disma's bedroll. The swelling sunrise revealed them; Riderch bent down to pick them up. He recoiled, however, when out from the folds of the covers skittered a barbed black burr, which armed itself the moment it saw the hare's paw.

Hissing out a curse, Riderch drew his falchion; and the scorpion, as brave as it was, could not combat it. It lay dead in two pieces a moment later. Riderch swept them aside with his foot and retrieved his things, sheathed his sword once more, and was out of the tent. Ruddo must be fed and watered, he thought, and prepared to ride that evening. The climb over the Greteboga would be cold in the Whirlwind. Ruddo hated the cold, and was sure to protest; but after that they would be back in the Anialdir, where the long, slow curve of the mountains held in the warmth ever so slightly longer. There his band would profit, as he had promised them, and would have no more cause to complain.

3

Four days later they were among the rocks, the whole band save for Hawen and Gwyarc. Hawen never bloodied her hands in the raids – it was part of their arrangement – but Gwyarc's savage swordplay would be missed. Riderch cursed his own rashness, lifting his bandanna to spit on the blood-red rocks from his saddle, and scanned the heat-ribboned road up and down from beneath his wide-brimmed leather hat. One of Mydge Boardland's eight great spurs forked down on either side, hemming them in; the road dipped between them, finding relief in the cliffs' greater shade in summer, then returned to follow the River Fawwyrm upstream toward Cetelacu and King Sheen's city of Gwall high in the eastern Greteboga. Beyond the road, to the north, were the great dunes which lay like buried Hellknights between it and the Fawwyrm, and beyond them were green fields of corn which only swelled in size until the Fawwyrm flowed into the wider Rinnea.

That pair of spurs was as sure a bottleneck as any in the Anialdir: every one of her cities knew it, and every one would have rather hugged the riverbank all the way to Gwall if King Rhuddri of Gorseth Floyd were not so rabidly protective of it. Riderch, therefore, was not surprised that morning to learn from Disma that King Osging of Godnu had sent a knight and his riders to escort a passing caravan. The knight bore the arms of Godnu upon his red poncho – a braided, golden tree above a golden four-petaled flower – while his riders wore only the red. And yet those riders were few, for Godnu could not spread herself too thin while pressed between Gorseth Floyd and Ancathair. Knight or no, Riderch's band did not fear the dunes, just as they did not fear Mydge.

There were three stagecoaches in that caravan, each of ironwood trimmed in Godnu's striking red. With armored riders as their escorts, Riderch knew that he could not take all three, at least not without losses Disma had told him a dozen times he could no longer afford; but it hardly mattered, for two of the stagecoaches were pulled by mere mules. The one in the middle, which Riderch planned to cut off, was pulled by a pair of draft horses. He waited for it with nine others in the dwindling shade among the rocks of Mydge's eastern spur, Ruddo stamping impatiently beneath him. Ten waited at the western spur to fan out at the rear, preventing a retreat back to Godnu: Disma was among them, who did his best work while his quarry's back was turned.

They had been waiting there, concealed in their tawny drapings, since dawn, when Disma had come to warn them of the passing caravan. Now the wait was nearly over. Riderch could just make out the mules of the foremost wagon between the sweltering sun-bands. They would be passing Disma's company, and when he saw the rising sun flashing on their blades he would know to call his own advance. In the meantime they must be silent, as still as the rocks among which they hid, and as silent as rabbitfolk in the charge, for they would be hard to spot until the thundering of their horses' hooves gave them away.

They must be silent, thought Riderch, and yet they were anything but. For someone in his company of riders, someone he thought hidden, horse and all, behind a nearby rock, was singing. He balked, jerking his head around to find the careless voice, but saw only the flanks of horses and the odd pair of ears peeking over the tops of the red rocks.

“Doughty Dinistrith, cast down a kindly shaft upon my pate,
And pith and power of war, with which to wake
The yellow bile in my yellow heart”

“Who’s doing that?” Riderch hissed, twisting around in his saddle until Ruddo grew alert and began twisting around with him, looking for the foes he was to fight. Riderch let the reins slip through his paw and braced himself on the saddle horn, but his unease spread throughout the horses nevertheless. “Would you shut up?” he demanded. “You’ll give us away.”

The singing melted to tittering, then died, leaving them in silence. Riderch’s band was staring at him, perplexed, and Riderch in his indignation thought them mocking stares.

“This would all go easier for you, Riderch, if you would only accept the bit and bridle yourself.”

“Who said that?” Riderch barked. “Damn your ears, look me in the eye if you’re going to insult me.”

“Said what, boss?” asked Kay from behind him. “Nobody said nothing.”

“How fool do you reckon I am?” asked Riderch. “Are you all so lily that you’re afraid to talk to me face to face? Do you love your teeth that much?”

“How many folk will you trample in your stampede, Riderch?”

“Come out here so I can spit you!” Riderch roared, drawing his falchion in a blink and gripping the reins to turn Ruddo around.

“Is he all right?” he heard Tennyn mutter.

“He looks a little flushed,” Dedrys replied.

But Riderch had no time to challenge the accusation; for at that moment, across the wide slope of rocks, a bright flash arose from the western tip of Mydge’s spur. Nine more followed after, blinding in the young sun, and Riderch’s rage narrowed to a single, keen point. He looked down at the road: the caravan was between the rocks and the dunes, rolling toward the shade of the boardland. The time had come to ride.

Raising his falchion high, Riderch snaps Ruddo’s reins, kicks spurs to his ready flanks, and together the hare and his mustang shoot out ahead of the band, threading the stones with peerless skill. Behind him follows an avalanche of hooves, a bristling cactus of swords and knocked arrows. To his left, Disma and his band draw near the road. It is only the galloping horses who make noise, however: the caravan rolls on, cautious of the bottleneck yet unaware that doom approaches from the ancient stones.

It is only the horses who make noise, indeed, until the same unwelcome voice begins to sing again:

“Rather, ruddy rider, grant me boldness,
So to break the beastly steed that is my heart
With saddle of serenity, benignity its bit and bridle
And restraint its ready reins”

The song is from some desperate charge, a line of knights with bannered lances running down their foes head-on. Rising for an ambush, it strikes Riderch as the most heinous sort of mockery. He stands in his stirrups again, looking back in mad wrath for the insolent mouth, but it evades him yet again. “Shut up!” he roars, earning only gapes from those behind him, but it hardly matters now. Ruddo bursts out of the rocks and takes to flying. Disma’s band fans out onto the road, howling like the ghosts

who haunt the Western Waste. The stagecoach drivers stand up on their benches and cry out, striving to turn tail and break for Godnu, but by then it is too late. Disma and the others slither in, a host of serpents.

Osging's riders, Godnu's best, draw blades as well, forming up behind the caravan until Riderch's company draws near enough to shout themselves. Now the hapless train perceives its desperate plight; Osging's riders, calm within their red bronze mail and whitewashed leather, split in two to intercept the second charge.

Riderch's falchion tips the ninefold wedge, pointing unfalteringly at the foremost stagecoach. Kay and several others bear away right, the giant's hulking mass a burden on his swollen steed. The wedge falls slack, or so it seems, for Riderch and the twins pull back the reins; and Osging's knight, to their thrill, takes the bait. He rides ahead to drive the band away from the foremost stagecoach. Kay, with five behind him, plays along, swarming and stinging the spear-wielding escorts just ahead of the screaming mules. Disma's band is harrying the rear, until in this churning fray a whistle sounds. The foremost stagecoach shoots ahead. It cannot turn around to make for Godnu, and so it races with all speed toward Gwall, toward the Fawwyrm's open banks where there is room to breathe.

Seeing then that Kay has tied up Godnu's fighters, Riderch and the twins make for their true target. The midmost stagecoach is dismayed, its draft horses straining, chomping at the bit, turning to no avail back toward Godnu. The pilot on his bench attempts to master them, as Tennyn and Dedrys circle around on either side to seize the doors. Alone, then, Riderch knees Ruddo toward the cockpit, toward the unprotected pilot who has no time to arm himself. Riding up beside, he raises high his falchion, buck teeth bared to land a fatal blow.

"Stay your paw, Riderch!"

Riderch seizes as if struck, his whole head ringing with a hundred bells. He realizes only then how hot he is, how he swelters with desert heat he should be tempered for. Panting, he beholds the stagecoach pilot's frantic face, a lank maned wolf who sees the naked blade and makes one final, forceful whip against his horses with the reins.

This hesitation cost Riderch dearly. He had one decisive moment to strike the blow, while his foe was flailing on his back foot, but now no longer. The eastern band was fraying, pushed apart by Godnu's savvy spears, and the fight with Disma's band was straying too close for comfort. Seeing their only opening, the draft horses bellowed and galloped forward, pulling the stagecoach with a groan through the eastern fray. Riderch nearly missed its departure, so dizzy was he, until Disma's more familiar voice called out behind him: "Stop him, Riderch!"

Then Riderch shakes his head and slaps himself, claps spurs once more to Ruddo, and pursues his quarry down the road. The knight intercepts him, but he is spitted cleanly through on Riderch's mighty sword, and now all bright and bloody he bears down upon the stagecoach. The fray collapses behind him, cutting off the twins; he alone gallops east, and Ruddo knows his desperation. Bred for desert stretches, the liver mustang closes the gap in half a mile, and in full sun Riderch rides alongside the pilot yet again. To slay him from his horse will be to send the stagecoach on ahead to Gwall, thinks Riderch, or else the horses will turn tail and make again for Godnu. Neither one will he allow; and so the hare drops his reins, stands up in the saddle, and leaps from Ruddo to the pilot's bench.

He grapples with the pilot there, fielding blows from spindly arms and a desperate, painful bite, until his latent might and greater arms avail. The bloody brand rears up to strike.

"Riderch, no!"

The same voice begs, but Riderch disregards it. He pins the pilot's neck to the ironwood boards, loosing a red fountain, then turns his attention to the horses pounding frantically toward Gwall. He takes the reins and pulls, to no effect; the beasts have left their wits behind, and nothing will dissuade them from their fleeing.

Seeing then his plight, Riderch knows what he must do. He takes his bloody falchion to the tethers tying horse to stagecoach, severing the beasts from him. They pull ahead, and at once the stagecoach starts to slow. Riderch smiles then, envisioning himself atop the stagecoach, showering his band with booty, but does not see the way the stolen cart veers off the road. Its left front wheel collides with a stone at speed, smashing the axle and throwing the whole heap into the air. Riderch is upside down before he knows it: he sees the flying wreckage over him, the body of the stagecoach pilot, sees a sparkling shower of gold spraying in the air, and then he tumbles hard into a dune. The stagecoach, body, gold, and all fall down around him, scattering in the sand. Riderch fears that he will die, but in a moment it is over. He lies unscathed amidst a wrack of gold, save for a bleeding shoulder bitten by the pilot. Godnu's riders, routed, thunder past him, seeking shelter from King Sheen of Gwall, and then for one long moment all is still.

It was Dargan who found Riderch in the dunes. He was already standing, having brushed himself off, and was busy sanding the blood from his blade, dragging it through a dune again and again until it all fell off in clumps. Dargan called to the others, who rode in among the wreckage, full of mingled awe and anger. They regarded Riderch like some rabid beast, afraid to draw too near. Tennyn was bleeding from his thigh. Kay led Ruddo beside his own horse, the giant bathed in blood not his own. They circled Riderch, beholding without speaking the chests of gold which had spilled across the desert floor, and the addled hare found only two words appropriate: "You're welcome."

Disma was the last to arrive. Dismounting his slender steed Lithrig, he slipped through the circle and approached Riderch, snapping at the others to begin collecting the gold before it was lost to the dunes. They obeyed, and in their scramble Disma grabbed Riderch's chest with one of his slender paws, gripping both his fur and the ear which lay upon it. Riderch gasped in unexpected pain, but Disma did not care.

"Are you out of your double-damn mind?" he hissed, pulling Riderch so close that he could feel the raccoon's breath against his ear. "They almost *killed* Tennyn when you left them stranded. Just sitting there raving sunstroke while the carriage drove away! What were you thinking?"

As angry as he tried to sound, Disma's voice quavered with fear. Riderch opened his mouth to reply, scanning the sand for the coins and chains of gold that lay there, then spotted the mangled body of the pilot. He shrugged, still dizzy, and closed it again.

"Well?" Disma demanded, and shook Riderch with more force than the hare expected.

"I told you I'd see you all got paid, didn't I?" Riderch called for all of them to hear. "There's still plenty of gold to be made on the roads. I said as much."

Disma scoffed, disgusted, and stormed away. Returning his sword to its scabbard, Riderch began to gather up the gold with them, his breast burning all the while.

4

Hauling their treasure back home was a simple matter compared to the robbery. The chests of gold, once reassembled, fit easily inside the mule-drawn stagecoach they had claimed from Godnu; and while the mules found them heavy, they did not have far to go.

Between Mydge Boardland's eight spurs were eight towering statues, so worn by the Whirlwind as to be unrecognizable. The statues within its tunnel-thick walls, however, being only smaller versions of the same, revealed their original forms clearly enough. Each was a seated folk with a snake in its paw, and each was of a different kind: a bushdog, a gray fox, a gray squirrel, a weasel, a spider with six arms and two legs, a swallow, a scarab, and a locust. To enter Mydge Boardland required the repetition of certain phrases in Old Talk to these statues; if the right phrases were given, a seamless door would open in the base of the statue's seat.

It was Sawl, the sulking sloth, who had first given Riderch the passwords for Mydge, as well as others he claimed would open the other boardlands of the Anialdir. It was how he had won his way into the band, and how he had earned trust enough to steward their hideout and their coffers. Sawl had commerce with Elves, the rumor ran, who had taught him the secret passwords and many other little spells for hiding treasure and himself. This made him a peerless scout, proven time and time again whenever Riderch spied his witless face in places he had sworn empty mere moments before. He did not believe the rumor of Elves, however: for Elves dwelt in the Otherworld, according to the old Coyote tales, and it was not they, but the Hellknights, who haunted the top of the boardland where all but Sawl feared to go. Riderch chose not to think about it.

Mydge Boardland made a peerless hideout, nevertheless, near enough the well-trafficked roads of the Anialdir and yet unknown to those who trod them. Within it was space enough to fit all of Gorseth Floyd and still have room to spare, enormous halls so wide and so high as to be useless for all things save spectacle. There was a well in the northernmost hall near the road, however, and so Riderch's band camped there when their purses were fat, amidst innumerable ranks of unmoving white birds. They were huge things of hollow stone, each with rigid, outstretched wings and the legs of sandpipers; who had made them, or why, or in what bygone Day of the World, none of them could guess. Their heads, wide-eyed and grinning, showed with vibrancy of color what the sandblasted monuments of old Godnu must once have looked like. Painted along their flanks were the same four-petaled flowers found all over that city, in fact, the flower that gave shape to the city itself. Riderch's band had never found a use for those birds, had never found anything on or in them that folk were willing to buy, and so they remained where they were, stretching their pinions always over the thieves' heads.

All that day and into the night they had squatted in their secret fortress, after they had buried the ruined stagecoach and its pilot in the dunes, and now – for the first time since they had gone into the Deepwaste – the mood in the camp was almost light. The gold helped, of course, but would not be of use to them until they could sell the rings and chains and use the four-petal coins to replenish their stores. What raised their spirits, rather, was what they had found in the rearmost stagecoach: six casks of aged brightwine marked with triple distillation, resinous perfumes, and the finest sun-cured tobacco Godnu grew. They were royal gifts to Gwall, no doubt intended for King Sheen and his household. Why King Osging had sent them, Osging who detested every member of Rhuddri's triple war-band, Riderch had been pondering that whole day. It gnawed at the back of his mind, it and the hundred other little changes chipping away at the Anialdir, but told him nothing he did not already know.

It was for this reason that Riderch crossed the camp that night, carrying in his arms a mound of his own loot from the morning's haul, making for Hawen's tent at the very edge of their loose convocation. Disma met him on the way, glassy-eyed from drink and still damp from a bath. His gray poncho hung over his shoulders, amply concealing in the low light.

"There you are," Disma slurred, eyeing him up and down, "I've been looking all over for you. Haven't you washed your clothes yet?"

"They're drying," said Riderch, whose unclad breast revealed new bandages and the ear hanging from his neck. "Do you want something?"

"We got the coach emptied," said Disma, pointing a long claw toward a makeshift stable where the horses were bedded down. Beside it was the stagecoach, freed of its mules and with its doors hanging open. "I was arguing with Dargan earlier, and we can't agree on what to do with it. He reckons we can find a buyer in Gorseth Floyd, but my rings are painted if there's a buck in that whole city willing to be seen with it."

"We can sell the mules in Gorseth Floyd, at least," said Riderch. "I have to go there to change some of those coins and try to find a fence for those halsers' silver. A couple of Gwyarc's boys can sell

the stagecoach in Ancathair once we paint over the red. They're always taking trips there, and Cyngen has no shame."

"You couldn't drag my dead body back to Ancathair," Disma muttered.

"I won't try," said Riderch, venturing a grin. "Shoot, Gwyarc would normally be asking to do it –Dargan can go, maybe, but I'd rather send Tennyn or Dedrys with him to make sure he doesn't get himself hanged for stealing from the wrong folk."

Disma gave Riderch an odd look, then glanced back toward the fire at the middle of camp. "We cut that too close," he said in a lower voice.

"We took what we set out to take," said Riderch, "or most of it. Whatever happened to those draft horses?"

"What do you think happened to them?" Disma snapped. "They're probably halfway back to Godnu now, which is exactly what we were trying to avoid."

"You reckon they're gonna tattle on us?" Riderch jabbed. "We did fine, Disma. Don't pull your whiskers out over it."

Disma scowled so deeply that Riderch could feel his friend's claws once more gripping his chest. He lifted the ear to scratch, fumbling with his burden, and cast a subtle glance toward the fire himself. Seeing no eyes on them, he swept the black horizon of the boardland's cavern in all directions, then leaned in closer to Disma. His breath smelled of brightwine not yet soured; he stiffened when Riderch's whiskers brushed his. "You manage to pick anything extra out of the dunes?" he whispered.

A practiced guardedness came over Disma, an expressionless clay mask assumed too swiftly to notice. He made his own brief sweep, bright eyes bobbing in spirit, before a clenched paw emerged from his poncho. Black claws uncurled, revealing a fistful of glittering gold coins. His teeth glittered no less brightly when the grin split his face, the smile of a hopeful suppliant or a loyal dog affirmed by Riderch's own grin. "Half a purse full," he whispered proudly.

"Atta boy," said Riderch, patting his cheek twice. "Hide it with the rest. That's almost a mule, right there."

"Cut and run?" Disma proposed, as he always did.

"Someday soon," Riderch answered, "when we've got enough to live on for good. We'll turn tail to the Anialdir, and you can forget that Ancathair was ever there."

Disma's grin disappeared as unmarked as it had come, replaced by the clay mask which hid his disappointment a little too well. His paw slipped behind his poncho once more; it was empty when it reemerged, though Riderch never heard the clicking of coins. "Are you going to see Hawen?" he asked, changing the subject so that Riderch could not change it for them.

"Aye," said Riderch.

"Good," Disma nodded. "Let her straighten you out, or Dinistrith will."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Riderch.

Disma assumed a sarcastic posture in response, thin-lipped and looking out from the tops of his cavernous eyes. Loosened by drink, what might have been merely a whisper emerged as a mean, muted bark: "Don't steal the cleaver from the butcher's belt, Riderch! The Stars don't like it when you kill halsers. It's bad luck."

"I didn't kill them," Riderch protested, drawing back in surprise at the sudden scolding.

"You stole from them in the Deepwaste," Disma slurred, "and you left them stranded. Any Shepherd would tell you that's murder. That's why Cair Cunning was empty."

"And where was this before we left to do it?" Riderch challenged. "You didn't say a double-damn word back then."

Disma's gaze fell to the floor, and his voice with it. "I reckoned we would leave after that," he said.

Riderch flinched at this, but Disma was already past him and did not notice. A moment came and went in which Riderch looked up at the stars through the long, bowed slits in the boardland ceiling high above; but when he did not see Disma's invoked Lord, he hurried on across the cool floor, listening to the revelry around the fire.

Hawen was in her tent when he arrived. She was standing with her back to him in the half-light of a few little lamps, draped in a loose blue robe, holding up a mirror with one hand while she combed the golden locks of her long neck with the other. The timid flames cast suggestive shadows across the canvas walls; the gold and silver rings she wore around her neck lay gingerly upon the pile of cushions she called her bed. She stared at Riderch through the mirror, so that its white handle, carved to resemble flowing water, seemed to pour from her neck: not smiling, yet not unamused. Her expression confided, as it always did, that she knew at every level why he had come. It was an expression Riderch hated with a fiery passion, one that bit him like a host of ants; but it had proven so useful to him so many times that he could do no more than endure it.

"Is this a good time?" Riderch asked, letting the flap fall shut behind him.

"That depends on what you brought me," she answered, in a smoky alto she had honed to a deadly point.

"The catamount's share," said Riderch, holding his bundle out to her. "I reckon I earned it, and nobody said otherwise."

Hawen smirked and set down her comb and mirror on a chest at the foot of her bed; then moving the rings beside them, she accepted the gifts and sat down upon the cushions to examine them. A pair of heavy glass bottles made up the bulk of them, full of a golden spirit much closer to amber in the lamplight. Beneath them was a clasped box of locust wood embossed with the braided tree of Godnu. She opened it and grinned.

"Aye, I would say it's a good time," she husked.

"I don't know anything about the scent," said Riderch, "but the tobacco is good, and that's turquoise in the rings. They fit me fine, so I reckon they'll fit you."

"And real, virgin brightwine," she added. "None of that cutthroat's turpentine." She uncorked the bottle of scent, a thing of green glass in the shape of a sugar apple, and suddenly the whole tent was filled with the mingled odors of copal and sweetgum, with allspice and a dozen other spices Riderch could not name. The hare cleared his throat, and Hawen replaced the stopper, lay the bottle in the box, and placed all upon the chest. "Come to take the temperature, have we?" she teased.

"How's Gwyarc?" asked Riderch.

"Why don't you sit down?" said Hawen, scooting over to one side of the bed and offering him the other.

Riderch shook his head.

"Oh, you're no fun," Hawen scoffed, and began to pack her pipe with new tobacco from the little chest. Its once white bowl had long since yellowed, and now the crocodile's maw that received the leaf was as mottled as the real thing. She lit a thin cedar wand from one of her lamps, and her pipe from the wand, then puffed a few times before speaking again. "He'll be all right. Lost a couple of teeth and had one of his eyes swollen shut, but he'll live. I would stay away from him if I were you."

"He's angry?" asked Riderch.

Hawen sighed. "When you got his band to bend their necks to you, the assumption was that you would stop doing things like this. What do you think?"

"How angry?" asked Riderch.

"Not angry enough to kill you, if that's what you're asking," said Hawen, letting her eyes drift down his naked chest. "At least not now. That might change if he sees you with that revolting thing around your neck."

"It's a trophy," Riderch scowled, "and a good one. You're not a harefolk, Hawen, I can't expect you to understand."

"It's the harefolk complaining about it the loudest," Hawen tutted. "You're just lucky you took that stagecoach when you did."

"Disma seemed to think the same thing," said Riderch. "I told you I would pay you. Have I ever let you down?"

"Before or after Cair Cunning?" Riderch scoffed at this, and Hawen gave him a look much like Disma had given him, looking out of the tops of her auburn eyes and crossing her legs as she blew smoke from her nose. "Why do you reckon we went into the Deepwaste with you, Riderch?" she asked. "Do you think you're Osging? Or Sheen, or Rhuddri? Blinda's eyes, or even Cyngen?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Riderch, knitting his brow.

Hawen leaned forward on her bed, her long neck jutting out so far that her face was almost too near Riderch's. "Tennyn can hardly *walk* on that leg," she whispered. "Kay had to come to his rescue, and that cost us the draft horses. Are you trying to compete with Gorseth Floyd, Riderch?"

"Sun bake me if I am," Riderch swore.

"Then don't send us into battle against Godnu!" she snapped, slapping his cheek just hard enough to startle him. "Gwyner's garter, Riderch, we don't want to be *paid*. We want to be paid *out*. To be able to pay off our bounties, to melt into Gorseth Floyd without worrying about being hanged, or even Gwall or Ancathair. Don't you understand that?"

"Only too well!" Riderch snapped back, resisting by a hair's breadth the urge to trade blows with her. "Disma wants to leave the Anialdir for good, and I know he's not the only one."

"Then what are you going to-" Hawen began.

"Robbing wagon trains is still the best way to make a profit," he inserted.

Hawen shook her head. "That was true five years ago," she sighed, "when Godnu still had nothing to worry about. Now those wagon trains are more wary of each other than the odd thief, and they're armed to show it. And don't you dare tell me that it doesn't bother you – I know better."

"It does bother me," Riderch conceded, feeling his face burn. "And it bothers them too, as it should. But we can leverage this, I know we can: each of those four kings is looking for a leg up on the other three. I'm sure I could get them to believe me, but…"

"But you beat Gwyarc to the Abyss and back," Hawen finished for him.

"I didn't come here to paw you my whole share because I can't live without you, Hawen," said Riderch, finally deciding to sit on a stray cushion across from the bed. "You know how to sway them. Whisper in their ears."

"You want me to smooth things over for you," Hawen sighed. "Again."

"Can you do it?" asked Riderch, fingering the ear around his neck.

"Three little chests of gold is nothing compared to a whole mountain of treasure," said Hawen, sucking intently at her pipe. "Especially when those chests are so hard won."

"But can you do it?" Riderch repeated.

"They told me what you did," said Hawen, ignoring him. "A few of them, one at a time. They told me, but none of them really knew, ken me? You kept on raving about someone insulting you, and then you stiffened up on the road and wouldn't move. They thought you were sun-stricken."

"It won't happen again," said Riderch.

Hawen narrowed her eyes until only her pupils remained, lightless pools without bottom. "It had better not," she said. "Because if it does, there isn't a thing I can do for you. You're a cony among

cacti now, boss: make them think you're unreliable, and it'll be twenty-one knives before you can blink."

Riderch balled his fists. "Do you reckon I'm unreliable, Hawen?"

"I reckon you're ruthless," Hawen corrected him. "I know it, and you'll never change it; but a hot iron is a dangerous thing to hold."

"So you reckon I'm dangerous too," said Riderch.

Hawen paused then, smoke still in her mouth, and began to laugh, expelling it in a single, slothful cloud. "Since when do you care what I think of you, Riderch?" she cackled, opening the little chest again and putting a golden ring on one of her few still-naked fingers.

"I care how many swords I'll have once the money's pawed out," said Riderch, "if things are as dire as you're implying."

Hawen grinned, and Riderch's skin crawled. "That's not what's bothering you at all," she crooned, reaching out to caress the ear hanging over his chest. Riderch batted her hand away, and she clucked her tongue. "You've got a bug under your skin," she continued, "one that has nothing to do with us at all."

Riderch scowled and stood again. "You've sure got me pegged, haven't you?" he sneered.

"Oh Riderch, of course I have you pegged," she tittered, standing and pressing herself against him. Her lips brushed his; his whiskers twitched madly. "That's what you brought me here to do, isn't it? I get to know folks before they realize it, and then I give them what they want before they know they want it. You want harmony in your little band, I can make it happen; but not even I can keep it up forever, the way things are now. The cat goes hunting, and if he doesn't catch anything, he doesn't come home."

Riderch did not speak for a long time. He would not look at Hawen, but neither was she so impatient as to goad him. She merely lingered there, smelling of her new scent, of Godnu's fine tobacco, and of brightwine already imbibed, rubbing against him like a cat fresh from the herb garden. Her hand, less than dainty despite how she spoiled it, drifted down his spine toward his scut. Then at last Riderch reached out and took hold of the other, the one wearing its new golden ring, and stared hard at its flawless, round turquoise.

"Are you just going to stand there?" she purred in his ear.

"So what if I am?" Riderch challenged.

"There's no need to play the rabbit with me, Riderch," she smoldered. "You're as flush as a rolling kettle."

"Since when are you my first choice?" he asked.

"And what is?" Hawen almost whined. "Just say the word, and that's what I'll be."

"Then be quiet," he said, and promptly pushed her down onto her bed. "You want to cash out? Fine. I'll see that you cash out. But you're going to work for every copper you get."

"Gwyner's lips, what's the matter with you?" Hawen snarled, smoothing out her robe. "I work harder than all of you bragadocious bucks put together."

Riderch nodded. "Then you can keep an ear to the ground."

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

"I'm going to Gorseth Floyd," said Riderch, "and so are you. If I'm going to leverage their spat with Godnu, I need to find some loose lips."

"You weren't kidding, were you?" said Hawen, pulling at her pipe to find that it had gone out. "When you said you'd steal from Rhuddri?"

"I do what I say I'll do," Riderch barked, jabbing a claw at her.

"Then I'll pack my things," Hawen shrugged. "Are we going together?"

"No," said Riderch. "We shouldn't be seen together. I'll have Disma run between us."

"You want to tell me what you're thinking?" Hawen pressed.

"Not until I'm finished thinking," said Riderch, and turned toward the door.

"Wait," said Hawen, clomping a hoof on the stone floor. "What do you want me to tell them?"

"What?" asked Riderch, raising an eyebrow at her. "Tell them whatever you like, I don't care. You've got Gwyner's lips."

Hawen sighed and rubbed her face. "No, Riderch, what do you want me to tell them we were doing in here?"

"Oh," said Riderch, sucking his teeth. "Make something up, you're better at that than I am. Tell them I was angry if you reckon it'll make me look good."

"Leaving after ten minutes won't make you look good," said Hawen, "no matter how I spin it."

"Damn it all, you're right," Riderch grumbled, then sat down hard upon his former cushion. "You mind sharing some of that tobacco?"

"I mind you coming into my tent to sulk while I'm trying to enjoy myself," said Hawen, relighting her pipe and handing it to him. "There's no reason I have to make anything up."

Accepting it with a grunt, Riderch pulled at it until the cherry glowed, staring all the while at the crocodile's open mouth. "You are what you are, just like you told me," he mumbled around the stem. "I know it, and you'll never change it."

"You don't want to cash out at all, do you?" asked Hawen, in a voice so low that it might have been the wind moaning through the dunes.

Riderch looked in her eyes for the first time, stretching out his paw to return the pipe. "I enjoy what I do," he said.

"Then we understand each other," Hawen nodded, and neither spoke again until Riderch rose and left the tent.

He returned to his own after that, desiring no more company that evening; and lightning the tall, smoke-blackened, chimneyed lamp which hung on chains from the middle of the tent, he lay down upon his bedroll. His wound itched and smelled of creosote. He scratched it, and thought that it felt unusually warm, but there was no pain. The face of the stagecoach pilot elbowed its way into his thoughts again, framed dead against the clear blue sky below him, while over his head were countless golden grains of sand, as innumerable as the stars. He tumbled with the stagecoach, around and around in dizzying circles. The pilot lunged for his throat again, but Riderch was turning too fast to reach his sword.

"Riderch, listen to me."

Riderch strained, then jerked, then fell, scrambling to sit up on his bedroll. "Aye?" he slurred, looking around in the dim lamplight. "Disma?"

But Disma was not there. The tent was empty, save for Riderch. He realized then that sleep had overtaken him. Judging by the noises from the camp and the level of oil in his lamp, he had not been asleep long; but he was more tired now than he had ever been, and the soreness from his wreck was catching up to him, and so he found himself pulled back down into bed before he could rise to blow out the lamp's flame.

"*Listen* to me, Riderch."

No sooner had he fallen asleep again than the voice spoke in his ear, close enough and loud enough to startle him. He rose panting, standing on his bedroll, and stumbled over to throw open the door of his tent. The smell of copal was in the air. "Is that you, Hawen?" he asked, circling the tent once for good measure. "What do you want?"

But Hawen was nowhere to be seen, and there were no folk anywhere near his tent. Besides, he thought, the voice had sounded more like Disma's, or at least not *unlike* Disma's. He tried to place it

while it was still clear in his memory, but could not; yet even after he had gone around the tent a second time, he could not quite make himself believe that he had dreamed it.

It was then that Riderch heard a second voice droning in the camp, beside a distant bonfire whose furtive glow probed along the smooth floor between the tents. It was nothing like the first, but rather slow and dull, with none of the urgency that Riderch felt – Sawl's voice, and no mistaking it. He paused at the door of his tent and turned his ears toward it, struggling to make out the words until he had slowed his breathing:

"'I have been thinking: there is little food and water left. Being a fly, I am content enough to feast on the fallen horses, and later upon fallen you, but what would you do? The siege cannot go on much longer.'

"'The way I see it, there are three choices,' said sly Coyote: 'to die now and remain dead, to live until we starve or are made slaves, or to live forever as we are now.'

"'Surely we don't want to live forever,' said the other folk. 'What will become of us when the Wheel of Time turns away from our Day? Will we be left behind?'

"But the fly laughed at them. 'Is there any choice at all?' he said. 'I, for one, choose to live forever, and I advise you all to do the same; for then it will not matter if the Serpent King takes this fortress, or who moves in amongst us. We will abide as seeds, and will sprout again when the newcomers perish and our Day returns.'

"The fly convinced them all with these words, I'm sorry to say. They chose to live forever, all of them, and now the boardlands are haunted, and…" Here Sawl's voice dropped too low to understand, though the new quaver in it when he spoke up again suggested to Riderch that the sloth had been sobbing. "'Ah, you folk, why do you listen to me? Tell Coyote you want to die forever.'"

It was not the first time that Sawl had told the tale. He was full of fables about Coyote, every one of them censorious of the old shyster, who more often than not faced no retribution for his underpawed schemes. It was all that ingratiated the moribund wretch to the rest of the band, besides a scrupulous accounting of their coffers; for he was queer and unsociable, even by cutthroat standards, though he could not bear to be left alone for a single hour.

Hawen's warning about Gwyarc returned to Riderch then. He stepped back into his tent, and for a moment stared at his lamp, deciding in the end to dim it rather than blow it out. He pulled his poncho down from where it hung on a little red cedar rack. It was practically dry now, save for its thickest seams. The blood had stained the collar most of all, and would never come out completely; but it was almost as dull and brown as the rest, and in the low light only a keen eye could tell the difference. Riderch folded it into a square and laid it at the end of his bedroll, picked up his falchion in its scabbard, then lay down with it across his breast, resting his head on the cool poncho.

Sleep was reluctant to claim him a third time, but in the end it did. The singing and brawling around the fire evaporated, leaving him in unbroken stillness, and that stillness remained even after the voice woke him the third time.

"Riderch, listen to me. Don't get up, just listen to me."

Riderch's eyes snapped open. He gripped the handle of his falchion so hard that his claws ached. His eyes darted around the tent, but Gwyarc was not there, neither was anyone else. He felt hot – feverishly so – just as he had during the robbery, but now there was no delirium. "What do you want?" he whispered.

"You're going to Gorseth Floyd to sell those halsers' tokens." It did not sound like a question, so Riderch did not answer.

"Nobody will buy them, not even there; but there is a place where all of you can profit from them."

The voice did not speak for a while, and so after a dozen breaths Riderch spoke himself, surprised by his own thin sibilations: “Where’s that?”

“A jaguarfolk named Malmuck owns a shop on the river near Pedwar Ceinych. Sell the tokens to him before you do anything else in that city.”

“Which shop?” asked Riderch, trying to turn his head but finding that he could not. “What’s it called?”

But the voice did not answer him again. The queer fever left him, along with a sense of presence more imminent than Hawen’s caressing; and whether he was awake or dreaming, Riderch remembered nothing more until he rose in the morning. Every word spoken in his ear remained as clear as the moment he had heard it.

5

It was three days before Riderch rode out at last for Gorseth Floyd. A company of red riders from Godnu rode past Mydge on the second day, followed only a few hours later by a gray one from Gorseth Floyd. No doubt, thought Riderch, the draft horses had found their way back to the city alone, and had been seen by both. Yet though they rode east toward Gwall, and would in time follow the Fawwyrm’s flow back west, they would find nothing. The stagecoach belonged to the dunes now.

After this, therefore, Riderch thought the time ripe to do what he itched to do – or perhaps overripe, for their stores were dwindling and the camp was growing restless. Their plunder did them no good as chests of gold in Sawl’s tent, save to elicit covetous looks from Dargan and more growling from Gwyarc and Kay. On the twenty-second day of the Month of the Badger, then, very early in the morning, Riderch divided the gold between Dargan, Dedrys, Disma, and himself, under the unspoken assumption that absconders would be hunted to the ends of the earth. Dargan and Dedrys hitched the mules to the stagecoach and rode wide across the Fawwyrm for Ancathair, while Riderch and Disma – when Riderch had bundled the halsers’ staves and lamps in a buckskin – cut north across the dunes on their own horses. Hawen would follow them that night, accompanied by Kay and whomever else was thirsty for the amenities of the Sandhill.

If it had been later in the year, the great, straight wall of Tin Boardland would have sheltered Riderch and Disma from any northerly winds; as it was, the southerly spring winds, so early that year, sprayed sand against it and them. There were little hovels in the fallen stones, however, and hidden gwerthons – what the harefolk called watering holes – to shelter them through the angriest part of the day, so that their savvy navigating made the way as easy as any in the Anialdir can be.

They could have simply taken the Swartway north, of course, then parted with it to follow the Rinnea northeast into Gorseth Floyd. It would have been a shorter journey, and an easier one; but the patrols along the Swartway were growing more numerous – and more suspicious – every day, and Riderch thought it best that they appear to approach Gorseth Floyd from the farther northeastern Ancathair, whose King Cyngen was somewhat friendlier to the city of the harefolk.

By evening they were among the Fawwyrm’s corn fields, all aslumber as they awaited their pawfuls of seed. Red and yellow mills turned in the prancing, sinuous stream and in the winds which poured down from the mighty Greteboga, whose countless shattered peaks defended them from the haunted Deepwaste. To see the mills and the meager greens of sagebrush and river cane after days among glaucous cacti and red rocks was intoxicating, to say nothing of the little blacks and reds of nightshades or the white thistles who had died standing up. They allowed their horses to stop and drink, then rode on more slowly, until they rounded the hooked northern curve of the boardland and came to the confluence of the rivers.

Standing there, even in the middle of winter, any folk who did not know better would believe that the Anialdir was as lavish as any jungle south of the Running Sea. For the banks where the Fawwyrm met the Rinnea were the grandest watering hole in that part of the world, the only one capable of growing enough corn to keep the Anialdir alive. And there, nestled between Tin Boardland's sickle-curve and the round expanse of Elksand Boardland which separated her from Godnu a day's journey northwest, was the city of Gorseth Floyd.

They could see her lights winking on as they took the road up the wider Rinnea. Sheltered now from the wind, they rode between thatched huts and mere wooden shacks, constructions which even there were new and shortly weathered. To the towering, unassailable walls of the boardlands, those houses must have seemed ephemeral weeds, springing up for a week or two before withering. It was a universal feeling in the Anialdir, where there were a thousand things older than memory for every one folk – a feeling Riderch hated, but that he had grown used to hating.

The sun was still glittering on the Rinnea's face when they arrived at the wall of Gorseth Floyd, now nearly complete save for where the river ran through. Her former palisades were being overtaken, foot after foot, by sloped boardland stone thick enough to repel a Hellknight's sling. Bodies often hung from those walls, and today was no exception: warriors or spies from Godnu who had been captured by the war-band, or else petty Anialdir stock who had committed ignominious crimes for which no one dared claim the bird-stripped bones.

The Gwyner Gate on the southern bank was heavily guarded, yet still open. Despite their best efforts, Riderch and Disma were pulled out of a homebound crowd by a leery warden on the side of the road. The veil over his wide-brimmed, mirror-polished helmet was pulled up, for the sun was behind him, and so it was that Riderch could see the way the hare's eyes slithered over them and their horses. Ruddo shifted under him uneasily.

"What's your business?" asked the warden.

"Looking to buy a workhorse," said Riderch, pulling an overstuffed purse from his saddlebag and shaking it suggestively. The coins within sang; all of the jewelry was with Dargan and Tennyn in the stagecoach.

"Where'd you come from?" the warden continued.

"Where else?" Riderch chuckled, and hooked a thumb back up the road toward Ancathair.

"You're both from Ancathair?" asked the warden, producing two claws from beneath his obscuring gray poncho to point at him and Disma.

"Born and weaned, brother," said Disma, wielding Hareish every bit as deftly as they.

"What's that slung across your back?" asked the warden.

"I like to carve staves," said Riderch proudly. "I'll unwrap them if you'd like to see them."

The warden paused then, glancing back toward the gate where his fellows oversaw the milling crowd. When he looked back at Riderch, the hare was pinching a silver coin between two claws, his paw hanging level with the warden's eyes. "We're mighty weary, brother," said Riderch, "and so are the horses, if you don't mind."

The warden palmed the bribe before he finished speaking, and slipping his arm back beneath his poncho jerked his head toward the gate.

"Much obliged," Riderch grinned, and the two passed together into Gorseth Floyd.

While formerly they had been among wood and sun-bleached thatch, beneath unsophisticated mills and barns grown up among acres of corn, now they rode through the blunt blocks of the gray city herself. Mud brick and stucco homes, imitations of similar constructions from ages past which lay unclaimed and undemolished, sat new upon old foundations. Long beams overhung their flat, foursquare roofs, their shadows so many gnomons marking the course of the day. Between and around them, other foundations lay empty, shattered and grown up with grass for the livestock that lowed and

stank and quarreled just off the street. Crude huts for cavies sat beside the smaller houses, pens for the foolish capybaras in the larger, llamas and bighorn sheep with their wool and milk beside ducks with their eggs. Rarely did they pass any houses higher than a story tall, and these without exception belonged to the king's noble Guilurs, who used their higher porches as raised garden beds and who could stand upon their parapets to survey the Rinnea for miles in either direction. A few did so as Riderch and Disma rode beneath them, smoking to rival their own chimneys with falchions belted to their wastes. Their wives worked below, cooking or weaving or sweeping the endless dust out of their front doors, while their children tended the animals. All of them were harefolk, as was most of the crowd in the street.

Soon enough they parted from this crowd, however, when Riderch led Disma north down the bank and past three cross streets toward the river. Its smoky flow, fast enough to bear away the dust and filth, was nevertheless opaque between the mighty boardland walls, dyed as purple as pokeweed downstream and yet as yellow as the creosote flower upstream. Folk were spreading out in all directions now, brushing past anglers who stood beneath the slouching palm trees on their way to their houses or inns.

Before them was an arched bridge, its stone pilings sunk deeply into the Rinnea's muddy floor, with just enough clearance to float the odd deck of logs underneath. Across it Riderch could see the incomplete wall, markedly farther along than it had been when last he visited; the way the boardland dwarfed it tickled him, and he laughed under his breath.

"The foundations must still be solid all the way around if they're willing to build on top of them," he said, but Disma only frowned and would not answer him.

"You swallow a cactus?" Riderch pressed. "You've hardly spoken all day."

"Where are we going, Riderch?" asked Disma.

"To find a room," Riderch answered. "I told you that already."

"The Sandhill is that way," said Disma, pointing downstream.

"We're not going to the Sandhill," said Riderch, "or at least I'm not. You can do whatever you want, but it's foolish to flash all of that gold in one place."

"And what if I want to stick with you?" asked Disma. "We always work together when we're in town. Who's going to run interference for me when I lift?"

"There will be plenty of time for that after you change our coin," Riderch shrugged. "I intend to fence these staves before I do anything else, and I don't want to be seen going to and from the Sandhill."

Disma's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to get rid of me?" he asked. "Are you planning something?"

"Always," said Riderch, daring a smirk. "But I'm not fixing to give you the slip; I'm just skittish after what happened on the road."

"So am I," Disma sniffed. "That's why I'm staying with you, at least until Hawen gets here. She's bringing a wagon, so we'll have to meet up with her eventually if we want to take supplies home." He turned to follow the river upstream, unwilling to hear any more objections.

Seeing then that he was vexed, Riderch reached out and flipped up the hem of Disma's poncho, playfully swatting his swaying tail. Disma wheeled on him with a beastly snarl, and stretching out his paw, caught Riderch's collar. "You want me to gut you?" he hissed.

"I'd like to see you try," Riderch snickered.

Disma scoffed, and did not say another word until they had ridden beneath a high, breezy wall to cross an empty terrace in the twilight. "That was a lot of money you gave that warden," he said, just loud enough to hear.

"One kernel becomes one hundred, Disma," Riderch replied. "We'll make it back."

"You must be mighty confident in that if you're willing to flaunt halsers' staves around before we've even made a copper," said Disma.

"If you have something to say, go ahead and say it," said Riderch, glancing at him from the corner of his eye.

"Tell me what you're planning to do, Riderch," Disma snapped. "Are you going to rob one of the Guilurs? Are you going to rob Pedwar Ceinych?"

"Could you say that any louder?" Riderch hissed, wheeling Ruddo around until he had cut Lithrig off. "What's the matter with you?"

"With me?" Disma balked, adopting the queer expression which Riderch was beginning to recognize, in the velvet purple twilight, as contempt. "You're beating folks half to death in camp, and you're asking what's the matter with me? Where are your priorities at, that a few halsers matter more to you than we do?"

Riderch looked away from Disma then, knowing that his rage would boil over if he continued to see his face. His eyes alighted on the faded figures lining the upper faces of the terrace's walls, gray coyotes in their feathered headdresses, their mocking tongues hanging out of grinning muzzles. Riderch's shoulder itched again; he scratched it underneath his poncho, surprised by how hot he felt. "There's money to be made in the Anialdir, Disma," he said, "more than ever. I just need time to find the angle. In the meantime, we have enough gold to hold us over for a good long while. What does it matter to you that I want to sell the halsers' magic wands? I earned them."

"It matters that Osging sent a knight to guard three little chests of gold headed to Gwall," said Disma. "What do you reckon was in the first stagecoach? The one that got away?"

"It doesn't matter," Riderch shrugged.

"It does," Disma insisted, "and that's exactly why I wonder what you're thinking, that you don't see it. There's an open patch of shade here, you know, right under our noses. We've talked about it before."

"I'm nowhere near that desperate," said Riderch.

"Aye, Riderch, *you're* not," said Disma. "But it would solve all of *our* problems if *we* were clever about it; and you, I know, are clever enough to make it happen."

"I'll keep it in mind," said Riderch, and kissed the air to invite Ruddo forward again.

"Where do you plan to fence those staves, anyhow?" asked Disma, following behind him. "I've never met a merchant who wasn't afraid of finding a rattlesnake in his bed for selling holy things."

"There's one who owns a shop along the river here," said Riderch, waving the question off with the back of his paw. "Goes by the name of Malmuck."

"Is this someone you trust?" asked Disma, raising an eyebrow.

But Riderch only pulled ahead and did not answer, and once more in silence they trotted upriver. The old gray coyote who overhung the portal through which they rode seemed to laugh in Riderch's ear.

Pedwar Ceinych, royal abode of King Rhuddri and the only true fortress in Gorseth Floyd, was in sight over the low roofs when Riderch at last settled upon an inn. The pinnacle of its keep, strong and square, stood athwart the hem of the day, its great brazier unlit. Colossal gray stones, spared the brunt of the grating desert wind, stood more solidly than the fallen towers of the open Anialdir, though they were pale indeed compared to the buried galleries within Mydge. Similarly pale harefolk patrolled its squat tiers, their lamps revealing the countless heads of carven hares hanging upon the walls. Brightbushes sprouted from their stone heads, stripped or nearly stripped of the turquoise paint which had once covered them. Riderch had assumed, at his first visit to Gorseth Floyd as a child with Eguin,

that the king had ordered them carved himself; he had since learned that they were already there when Rhuddri took the city, and that no folk knew who had made them.

The inn itself, like the Ceinych and the Guilurs' houses, was one of the few tall buildings in Gorseth Floyd. Folk gambled and drank upon its upper terraces, the doors behind them shut against the encroaching cold. Another pair of double-leaf doors beside the street beat like a bird's wings as folk filtered in and out, fanning a clay chimenea around which many pairs of paws warmed themselves. A sign swayed over the lintel, displaying a gaping green mouth shockingly similar to Hawen's pipe. "Islawr" was displayed between its teeth.

The hitches out front being occupied with too many horses already, Riderch and Disma rode around back, where a simple stable was overseen by a groom who could have been no more than ten years old. The little harefolk, unmistakably of Anialdir stock, was reticent to board them when once he learned that he would not be paid until they had broken their gold; but when flashing one of Godnu's coins did not sway him, cuffing him twice across the head did. He led their mounts sulkily to their stalls, and they carried their purses with them into the inn, Riderch with his bundled staves slung across his back.

Islawr was as motley a watering hole as any in Gorseth Floyd, its tavern populated by tables and chairs made from the hard palms that grew along the banks of the Rinnea, as well as ageless slabs and stone benches too heavy for anyone to bother moving anywhere else. The bar itself was half of each, stone built out in wood on either side to accommodate the hosts of patrons who drank and fumed with tobacco in a lower, round grotto sheltered against the southern wall. A pair of painted crayfish flanked that wall, faded and flaking.

Games of bridge and backgammon proceeded like the hands of a clock around the room, whistles of triumph and snarls of protest marking the hours. Maids in their layered and winding robes skated across the paw-polished floors, shouldering trays and rebuffing advances from any folk without coin in paw. A few folk rooted at the bar looked up at Riderch and Disma as they entered: two of them were gray-clad riders, the third an elderly coyote in simple hemp linens. This coyote was speaking out the side of his mouth even as he stared, addressing an innkeeper so fat for a harefolk that Riderch thought he must have eaten one of the patrons. He was tall as well, with large, widely-set brown eyes that named him on sight as one of the war-band stock.

The chatter was too loud for Riderch to make out what he was saying, but it seemed to him by his scowling and the coyote's sympathetic nods that the innkeeper was complaining, a reversal Riderch found queer until he stepped down into the grotto and the innkeeper noticed him. He stopped speaking until the pair approached, though the coyote smiled around a tumbler of brightwine.

"I'd like to rent a room, if you've got any," said Riderch to the innkeeper, declining to meet the coyote's lingering eyes.

"You the two that was just out back?" grunted the innkeeper, slapping a pair of broad paws down against the bar. "Kyntaw come in crying, telling me what you done."

"Is Kyntaw your groom?" asked Riderch. "I'm not sure he understood what he was doing himself, by the way he spoke to me."

"You cuffed him!"

"I offered to pay him," Riderch corrected, "which I'll do, just the same as I'll pay you for a room and something to eat."

"He says you were trying to pass off a fake gold piece," said the innkeeper, "like the ones folk find out in the dunes sometimes."

Riderch laughed then, grinning back at Disma, who seemed rather too uncomfortable to play along. "Well now I know he didn't understand," said Riderch, producing the same coin he had offered

the boy. Slapping it down on the bar in front of the innkeeper, he slid it over and glanced at the old coyote, whose own smirk was gone. Disma blanched until he looked sick.

The innkeeper's eyes narrowed: first at the coin, then at Riderch, then finally at Disma. "What do you want?" he asked. "Is the castle too crowded, or what?"

"A good guess, but you're off the mark," Riderch chuckled. "I'm in town from Ancathair on business, and haven't had time to get my money changed yet. I'm offering to pay you for a room, fair and square – whatever your usual rate is."

"It's less than that by a pair of ears!" said the innkeeper, fielding an empty cup from the end of the bar and filling it from a tap behind him.

"Which is why I'm offering it as collateral," said Riderch, "for you and Kyntaw. I still have business to do tonight, and I should be able to come up with whatever you ask by morning."

The innkeeper was in a much better mood when he turned around. "And if you don't, I get to keep it, aye?"

"Do you reckon I could get anyone to believe I gave you a gold piece if you pocketed it?" Riderch shrugged.

"Riderch!" Disma hissed in his ear.

"You make a real good point, Lording," said the innkeeper, now looking at the gold piece exclusively. "A room for the both of you, then?"

"Just for the night," said Riderch. "I'll be staying myself a while longer, but my friend here prefers the Sandhill."

The innkeeper glanced up at Disma then and grinned, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Ah, I see, I see!" he laughed. "Well maybe I can't compete with the Sandhill, Lording," he told Disma in Old Talk, "but for what it's worth to you, a few of the does here are-"

"I'm a creature of habit," Disma replied in Hareish, tapping his claws on the floor.

"So am I, Lording!" the innkeeper bellowed, pounding the bar with his fist. "Much to the wife's relief, eh?"

"You have an empty room, then?" asked Riderch.

"Upstairs, aye," the innkeeper nodded. "Two of you tonight, then one a while longer?"

"That's right," Riderch nodded. "Room and board, and enough drink that I don't have to worry about keeping track."

The innkeeper paused to think, a moment too long in Riderch's eyes. "You're looking at five coppers a night," he said. "But the room has a big bed."

"We could say six a night if you throw in your wife," said Riderch.

The bartender laughed loudly enough to fill the whole tavern, drawing eyes from every corner. "Don't you tempt me!" he roared, then pocketed the coin at once. "Don't worry about rushing, Lording. Bring me coin for as long as you reckon you'll stay and I'll give this back. Just don't drag your feet, or it might burn a hole in my pocket." He extended his paw then, nearly as big as Kay's if half as strong, and Riderch shook it.

"Fair enough, brother," said Riderch.

"The name's Teyrngar," said the innkeeper. "And yours?"

"Lording is fine," said Riderch. "Do the doors lock, by the way?"

"Er, a-aye," said Teyrngar. "I'll have Fordredder give you the key when she takes you upstairs, and I'll have supper for you when you come back down."

"Much obliged," said Riderch. "We won't get to the market until tomorrow, and we'd like to keep our things in the room. We keep very careful track of our things, I'm sure you understand."

"Well I do," said Teyrngar, tugging at the tip of his ear; then shouting past them both: "Fordredder! These two bucks, in one of the double rooms upstairs!"

"Coming!" someone shrilled, just as the coyote emptied his glass and tapped the bar for more.

Fordredder powdered her face even more than Hawen, to much less effect. Her voice was grating, and she chattered incessantly about gossip neither Riderch nor Disma cared about. She was a windblown hare, as the saying went, so that the pair were eager to be rid of her when at last she showed them to their room and pawed over the key. It was no grand place, as they had half expected from the mention of a 'double room.' Indeed, thought Riderch, if this modest stone cell with its square hostel bed was a double, only a rabbit could enjoy a single.

"I can see now why you'd rather stay at the Sandhill," he chuckled, shrugging off his burdens and setting them down in a corner before throwing his poncho onto the bed. "The does here aren't half as graceful."

"They also serve Rhuddri's bucks," said Disma, crossing the room to test the door to the upper terrace, then locking it with the heavy key.

"Is that a problem?" asked Riderch.

"I don't reckon you should be flashing that gold around in front of them," he warned.

"Is that still stuck in your craw?" Riderch tutted.

"It's hardly been three days since we took those stagecoaches, Riderch," said Disma, lighting the lamps in the room from one in the outer hall. "The riders must be in Gwall by now. I can't help but wonder what will come back from them."

"Come back to Gorseth Floyd?" asked Riderch, then shut the door behind them. "I can't imagine anything will. Osging was trying to tickle Sheen's whiskers, that much is obvious. Neither one will want to bring Gorseth Floyd into it."

"Rhuddri sent riders to the dunes," said Disma.

"Because he saw the draft horses," Riderch nodded. "So what if we give Rhuddri some of Osging's gold? Any one of those riders would thank us if they knew."

"So you agree with what I said, then?" asked Disma, and for the first time that day Riderch saw the shade of a smirk on his face.

"I agree that the Sandhill is a better inn," said Riderch; and taking the purse from his belt, hid it between the straw-stuffed mattress and the bedframe. "But I aim to fence these staves tonight, and I want gossip from the Ceinych as near as I can get it."

"What makes you think this Malmuck keeps his shop open so late?" asked Disma.

"It's worth a try," Riderch shrugged.

"I've never even heard of him," said Disma. "How do you know him?"

"Someone from camp told me to look him up," said Riderch. "I can't remember who."

"Probably Hawen, if he's willing to buy halsers' staves," said Disma.

"Aye, likely as not," said Riderch. "Now if you're done chewing your own tail, I want my supper, then I'm going to see Malmuck so I can forget about the Deepwaste."

"You want me to come with you?" asked Disma, rising to follow him downstairs.

"I'd rather you stay here and eavesdrop," said Riderch. "I can sell a few things on my own."

6

"They fought over her too?" asked Teyrngar.

"Oh aye, like dogs over a bone," the old coyote snickered. "That was the wedge that started prying them apart, if you ask me. Them two were so green when she picked him, they spread out to three different watering holes just to keep from killing each other."

Teyrngar whistled. "And now they're fighting over the girl."

“He promised them each one of her daughters!” said the coyote. “You can see how well that worked out. Got one daughter and a stillborn son.”

“I heard Cyngen was in the king’s chambers that same night demanding assurances,” added Teyrngar, “before the midwife could so much as wrap the dead kitten up to bury.”

“Rhuddri hanged that midwife,” the coyote said around his glass. “I used to know her, if you can believe it.”

“No kidding!” Teyrngar husked, leaning more intently over the bar. “She deserve it?”

“Well folk say she buried that kitten herself, without telling nobody,” the coyote shrugged. “No funeral or anything. I don’t know if that’s worthy of hanging, but it was sloppy. Damn sloppy.”

“Well he’s only got enough to buy one of them now, anyhow,” Teyrngar agreed. “It’s a damn shame.”

“They might have taken Godnu in the first place, all three of them, if it weren’t for her,” said the coyote. “Fat chance of that now.”

“Aye, but speaking of rosy cheeks!” Teyrngar beamed, placing a pair of heaping plates before Riderch and Disma as they took up the bar again. “The does love the red ones, they say. So do the bucks, apparently.”

“Do they?” Riderch smiled. “I must have rotten luck, in that case.”

Teyrngar leaned in and winked. “You and me both, Lording,” he whispered, then burst into laughter.

Supper was fair by the standards of a modest inn: better than camp food, but by a slimmer margin than they had hoped. Cornbread and cavies made up the bulk of it, both of them swimming in a stew of beans and dried spicebush berries. Teyrngar’s wife had made it, he said; and while they ate, the corpulent hare tried again and again to make conversation with them. Riderch and Disma, however, were in no great mood to chew the fat, at least until one of King Rhuddri’s riders rose from his empty glass beside them and stumbled out of the grotto, leaving them alone save for a pair of half-conscious bucks on the farther end of the bar. The rider’s spurs jingled with every uneven step, melting into the buzz of the tavern; when he could no longer hear them, Riderch looked up from his plate.

“Say, you’re in the same part of town, I reckon,” he said to Teyrngar. “You happen to know the name Malmuck?” Disma stiffened beside him, casting a wary glance from the corner of his eye.

“Malmuck?” the innkeeper mouthed, closing his eyes in thought. “Can’t say as I do, Lording. Why do you ask?”

“He runs a shop around here, I’m told,” said Riderch, picking at his teeth with one of the cavy’s little bones. “I was wondering where it is.” Disma’s tail began sweeping behind him, sighing against the stone bench.

“You know what kind of shop he runs?” Teyrngar asked. “There’s a lumber mill just under the Ceinych by the water, then a carpenter one over to the east with a nailsmith behind him. One of those?”

“Could be one of the last two, I reckon,” Riderch muttered, scratching his gray chin.

“It’s neither of them,” the coyote interjected; he was sitting much nearer the pair when Riderch finally noticed him, and appeared more intrigued than he strove to let on. “Where’d you hear the name, if you’ve never been to his shop?”

“Someone told me he’d buy some odds and ends I’m looking to sell,” said Riderch.

“Odds and ends like?” the coyote pressed.

“Just a couple of staves I carved,” said Riderch, “and some old silver that belonged to my pa.”

The coyote licked his lips thoughtfully, then drew back and looked Riderch over again. “Worth a shot, so long as they’re good pieces,” he shrugged. “I know Malmuck. You want him, he runs the import store. One street down, between here and the corn exchange. Little place called Utschella, with the bird on the door.”

"The one in the alley?" asked Teyrngar. "I've walked past it, but I've never been there myself."

"He deals in things from outside the Anialdir, mostly, or else things he can send out," said the coyote. "Whatever the merchants bring in from the Swartway or float down from Iwan way out west. I don't reckon he'll care a lick for your staves; but if you're looking for him, that's where you'll find him."

"I can't imagine it's easy being in imports these days," said Riderch, pushing his empty plate across the bar toward Teyrngar.

"You imagine right, Lording," the coyote said darkly.

"Worth a shot then," Riderch smiled. "Much obliged."

Disma was already standing when Riderch rose from his supper: as stiff as a board, and by this Riderch knew that he was eager to be anywhere else. "And much obliged for the food, brother," he appended. "Tell your wife she's a fine cook."

"She underseasons everything, I know," Teyrngar grinned. "You wouldn't know it to set eyes on me, but you're polite to say so anyhow. Don't you want something to drink?"

"Not yet," said Riderch, already making for the stairs. "But Disma might when he comes back down."

The door to their room was barely shut when Disma began to pace the floor. "You didn't even know where his shop was?" he shrilled. "You've never even met him, and you're about to show him a pair of halsers' staves. Hell's teeth, you have one of their ears around your neck!"

"It hardly matters," said Riderch, slipping his stained poncho over his head and slinging the long buckskin bundle over his shoulder. "If he's willing to buy them, he won't say a word to anyone else; if he's not, nobody will care if he does. Those halsers weren't even from the Anialdir, so nobody's looking for them. You're washing empty paws, Disma."

"Worrying about the things you won't has kept us alive, Riderch," Disma scowled.

"Which is why we make such a good team," Riderch snickered; then hanging the room key on a hook by the door, he turned to depart. "Try to relax. Have a drink so you won't need to catch up to me when I get back. Hawen will be here tomorrow, and then we can turn this gold into something more useful."

Teyrngar's claim that Utschella was located in an alley was strictly correct, it turned out. A low dock jutted out into the Rinnea from the lumber mill, then stretched eastward one street over until it met the front of a fishmonger, one of those who caught farther upstream where the water was cleaner and sold as near as it possibly could. Behind it was a furrier, the very place where Riderch had gotten his hunted wolf pelt tanned more than five years ago. He had forgotten about it until that very moment, when he stood in the neglected little alley between the sleeping shops, shouldering yet another unlikely piece of plunder wrapped in skin.

There, into what once must have been a mere storeroom for one of the other shops, led a single wooden door. No lamps burned anywhere in sight. Only the stars and the waning moon afforded light, and so Riderch strained to make out the figure painted upon its face: a seabird with a queerly curved bill, carrying a pair of shells in its claws. Block letters he could not read arched over it.

It was the first time since his dream within his tent – for that was how he now preferred to remember it – that Riderch felt foolish for what he was about to do. The compulsion born of that nocturnal voice had been so strong, so painful to ignore, that he had simply let it carry him away without thinking. He was surprised, therefore, to find that the name Malmuck belonged to anyone at all, and even more that it belonged to a shop he must have passed at least once before. He was wise to make Disma stay behind, he thought: for by the way he stood there now, his paw hovering motionlessly over the doorknob and his ears flicking like a moth's wings, the little raccoon would have been right to

think him mad. Very nearly he walked on, itching to throw his bundle, buckskin and all, into the Rinnea; but he was growing hotter by the second, hot enough to make his head swim, and so in the end he followed his deeper compulsion to test the knob. The door was unlocked.

A long, narrow hallway led him between the furrier and the fishmonger, a hallway windowless and unlit save for a flickering lamp at the very end. He shuffled along with a paw against either wall, feeling his way in silence, until the hallway spat him out into a wider room lined with shelves and a single, high counter. Upon these shelves were all manner of artifacts, both from within the Anialdir and from without: lead-glazed plates and cups displaying antiquated figures with thin bodies and triangular heads, blocky sculptures of fool's gold grown rather than hammered into the shapes of Stars, books with chapped red and green bindings, and baked clay tablets featuring unreadable charts, among diverse other things.

A number of tin lamps were clustered on a higher shelf in the corner opposite Riderch. These especially caught his eye. Seeing one of them lit, he walked around the counter toward it to find that it illumined a figure leaning back in an upholstered chair, sucking on a cigar that hung from his lips. At first Riderch thought that the chair was unoccupied, tilted of its own accord, and stared for half a minute before he made out the liquid form of the body who sat therein: for his fur was so profoundly dark, and his attire – save for the high-collared white shirt that peeked out between his coat and waistcoat – so perfectly matched, that even the most keen-eyed folk could have missed him in the low light.

"Are you Malmuck?" asked Riderch.

Yellow eyes that burned like twin suns shot open in a black face. The figure gasped, then fell into a fit of coughing, having inhaled the ash from his own cigar. His velvet paw groped along his waist, and Riderch's own paw fell to his falchion, but whatever weapon the folk hoped to produce was out of reach. He groped then along the shelf, pulling down the lit lamp, and shoved it in Riderch's face. By it his own face was revealed, that of a jaguarfolk purely black: the golden buttons of his waistcoat shone, but Riderch saw no sign of steel.

"What did you say?" the jaguar husked, still fighting with the ashes in his throat.

"I asked if you were Malmuck," said Riderch. "This is the import store, aye?"

"It's nigh on midnight!" he protested, flashing pristinely white teeth.

"Aye, and you're still here," Riderch nodded. "The door was open, anyhow."

"I had company," said the jaguar. Now composed, there was something buttery about his voice, deep and mature, that made Riderch's fur stand on end.

"And now you've got more," said Riderch. "I was told you buy things from outside the Anialdir. I've got things to sell."

The jaguar stared at him for a moment, reading him up and down, then placed the lamp upon the counter and stepped to his left to put it between them. "What kinds of things?" he asked.

"You're Malmuck?" Riderch pressed.

"Aye, that's me," he answered. "Put it down on the counter, let me see what you've got."

Both of Malmuck's paws were hidden behind the counter. Mindful now of his intrusion, Riderch unslung his bundle and set it down gingerly with both of his own paws in clear view. "It's silver, mostly," he said, untying the buckskin and peeling it away, "but there are a couple of real fine ponchos too. One of them is sized for a child, or maybe a mouse."

Malmuck stiffened when the first staff's head was revealed. His eyes shot to the hall from which Riderch had entered when he saw the second. A rabbit's riddling head stared up at them beside a placid cat's, both in sunkissed ash wood. As Riderch peeled away the rest of the bundle, Malmuck's unease only deepened, settling into an expressionless suspicion that invoked Riderch's guard. It was too late to turn back now, however; he unfolded the little woolen cloak and the larger poncho, within which sat a

pair of silver swinging censers and a matching pair of six-sided silver lamps. They lay upon the counter, cradled in the buckskin, for an interminable moment before Malmuck did so much as twitch a whisker.

"How dare you bring these into my shop?" he whispered without looking up. "What kind of sun-stricken sacrileger would think to-"

"They're not from Gorseth Floyd," Riderch interrupted. "They're not from the Anialdir at all, or anywhere that sends news to the Anialdir. Just look at them, they're nothing like ours."

Malmuck looked at Riderch instead, a little too long, then began to examine the bundle in earnest. He would touch nothing save for the garments, which he gently slipped out from under the holy tokens, holding them up to the lamplight before folding them and setting them down on the counter. "These lamps look more like the tin ones you find way down south, past Sunstone," he said at last, pointing a claw at his own; then glaring at Riderch: "I imagine that's what they are, aye?"

"You've got the Great Cat's eye," said Riderch.

"And the staves are for blind old bucks, I'm sure," said Malmuck. "Nothing more than a third leg."

"I reckon you could sand the heads down if you wanted to," Riderch proposed.

"You'd best button your lips if you're going to talk nonsense," Malmuck snapped. "Where did you get these?"

"Well now, there's a question I didn't expect to hear," said Riderch, earnestly surprised. "I was under the impression that you were someone who dealt in this kind of thing. What does it matter to you, where I got them?"

"And who gave you that impression?" Malmuck smoldered. "Are you from the Ceinych, horse-lord? You look like one of them."

"Why, because I'm a little gray?" Riderch chuckled, baring his pale chin.

"You've had your paw on your sword since you walked in here," said Malmuck, nodding toward the hare's left side. "Is this what Rhuddri's got you doing now? Snaring shopkeepers so he can shake us down? Are the raids against Godnu less profitable than you'd like?"

"You've got the wrong idea, Lording," said Riderch, raising a pair of open palms. "I've got things to sell, and someone told me I should come to you. Nothing more, nothing less."

"You don't sound like you're from Gorseth Floyd," said Malmuck.

"Neither do you," said Riderch.

"Don't get clever with me, cony!" Malmuck growled.

"That's because I'm from Ancathair," Riderch supplied. "I hope that doesn't put you off."

Malmuck blinked then, and a moment later relaxed a little, reaching up to twirl his whiskers. "I can't buy these," he said, almost apologetically. "And you knew that already, or else you're out of your gourd."

"But you can sell them," said Riderch, "or at least most of them. Certainly the ponchos, and probably the silver. Definitely the silver if you melt it down; it's not hard-"

"Didn't I tell you to button your lips?" Malmuck hissed. "Be quiet, for Blinda's sake, and let me think."

The jaguar stepped out from behind the counter, and Riderch took two steps back, his paw returning to his sword; but Malmuck only slipped past him, making for the door down the hall. It was then that Riderch saw the falchion hanging in its scabbard from Malmuck's belt, a falchion he must have kept behind the counter and retrieved while they spoke. Riderch had seen no such motion; he set himself on guard from that moment forward.

A bolt clattered into place, and soon Malmuck returned, resuming his station behind the counter. There was a silver slyness in his expression now, just beneath the frigid surface. “I can’t buy them,” he repeated. “I can’t and I won’t. But I’d be willing to make a deal.”

The words Riderch had heard in his tent returned to him. Every hair stood on end, but he nodded nevertheless, fighting to not betray himself as he had at the dunes. “I’m all ears,” he croaked.

“I reckon it’s safe to say that you’re ruthless, Lording,” said Malmuck. “There’s no need to say anything, I don’t need you to convince me. I won’t have money changing paws over this, but what I can do is offer you some work that may profit you. If you reckon it’s worth what you brought in, I’ll take it off your paws; if you don’t, you’ll take it with you and never come back. How does that sound?”

“I can just walk away?” asked Riderch. “You’ll tell me regardless?”

“You’ll find it’s worth it,” Malmuck nodded, “if I have the Great Cat’s eye like you say.”

To see the pilfered bundle lying on the counter, out of his paws, was already enough to make Riderch giddy. He could not abide the thought of touching it again, and that fervent desire swayed him before he could weigh the matter further. “I’ll be the judge of that,” he said.

“Fair enough,” Malmuck smirked; then clearing his throat, he leaned over the counter, lowering his voice as if he feared eavesdroppers. “You know that King Rhuddri was married once before, don’t you?” he said.

“Aye,” said Riderch. “He had a wife when the war-band rode into the Anialdir. She caught sick and died, I think.”

“She bled to death in childbirth,” Malmuck corrected him. “One of her kittens died too, but one of them survived: his most beloved princess.”

“Aye, and?” said Riderch.

“The girl’s name is Rhian,” said Malmuck, “and she’s the most coveted doe in the Anialdir if I’m the Great Cat’s son. She’s also well of age, and should have been married by now.”

“I take it she isn’t?” asked Riderch.

“Not yet,” said Malmuck, “but that’s about to change.”

Riderch felt his spine begin to prickle. He seemed to hear distant laughter filtering into Utschella, and wondered just how thin the walls were. “Go on,” he whispered.

“Rhuddri is giving her to King Sheen of Gwall,” said Malmuck. “Rumor has it that he promised one of the old queen’s daughters to both of his warlords, Sheen and Cyngen – although Cyngen is old enough now that she would go to his son Brockwell, who’s been begging her paw for years – but with only one daughter left, he’s giving her to the one he reckons will be most useful to him.”

“Against Godnu,” Riderch added. The sound of showering gold echoed in his ears; he felt himself tumbling tail over ears, only to slam into the dune again.

“He’s sending her to Gwall with an escort, and a whole train full of dowry,” said Malmuck. “I don’t know just when, but my benefactor – and yours too, maybe – tell me it’ll be soon. There have been full-on skirmishes on the Swartway lately, and Cyngen is dragging his hooves in sending help.”

Riderch’s mouth was dry. He sucked his teeth and scratched at his burning chest where the ear lay. “He’ll send some gray riders with her, I bet.”

“The best he can spare,” Malmuck nodded, “along with his prized horses, and all of the gifts he gave to the old queen. But something tells me that a few riders aren’t enough to dissuade you.”

“You’re looking to hire some yourself?” asked Riderch, almost whispering now himself.

“Not me,” said Malmuck, holding up a velvet palm. “I’d go between you and him, for privacy’s sake. He’d make it well worth your while, that’s all you need to know.”

“For robbery?” asked Riderch.

“For kidnapping,” Malmuck corrected.

Riderch’s eyes widened.

Standing up straight again, Malmuck smoothed his creased waistcoat with a satisfied smile. “So how does that strike you?” he purred. “Worth what you brought in?”

“Aye, I reckon that’s worth it,” said Riderch. He thought then that Malmuck laughed; but his mouth did not seem to move, and in the low light Riderch could not be sure.

“In that case, I look forward to doing business with you again, Lording,” said Malmuck, beginning to bundle up the items again. “Don’t come back during the day.”

Riderch made no reply. There was no exchange of bows between them, no clasping of paws; no scales had been produced to put away. Riderch simply turned and walked back down the hall, unbolted the door, and stepped out of the shop into the cold winter air. His first breath of it nearly knocked him flat. He staggered back up the street toward the noise of Islawr, watching the heavens spin like a top, and found out front another cluster of gray-clad riders around the chimenea. He laughed at them as he passed, imagining them great moths ignorant of the fire into which they threw themselves.

Disma was no longer in the tavern. Riderch told Teyrngar to keep his gold a little while longer – to which Teyrngar did not complain – and padded upstairs, so hot by the time he reached his room that he had thrown off his poncho before he knocked on the door. Moments passed; the bolt clattered back, and Disma opened to him, stepping out of the doorway to let him stumble in. Riderch had to slump against a wall to stop himself from falling over, but he hardly cared.

“I saw you coming in from the terrace,” said Disma with a pipe hanging from his teeth, then closed and locked the door behind him. “Are you drunk?”

“No brightwine is this good,” Riderch tittered, plucking the pipe from Disma’s mouth and pulling on it himself.

“I take it you sold those staves?” asked Disma.

“I did more than sell them,” said Riderch. “Dinistrith’s bloody sword, Disma, those halsers are going to buy us a mountain of plunder after all.”

“They are?” said Disma, his great, pale eyes flashing in the lamplight. “What makes you think so?”

“I’m going to have work for you and Hawen come tomorrow,” said Riderch, as he unbuckled his baldric and propped up his falchion in the corner. “The last work we’ll ever have to do in our lives, if we do it right.”

7

The stables of Pedwar Ceinych were on the south side of the castle, separated from it by a small parade ground fenced in by the waist-high stumps of ancient walls. A far cry from the castle itself, the stables had clearly been built by the war-band: partly of reclaimed red stone, partly of baked brick, with a roof as flat as any in Gorseth Floyd and a team of attending barns. They were the largest stables Riderch had ever seen: a single building stretching from one end of the castle wall to the other, boasting great double doors for horses and their riders and lined on all sides with breezy awning windows. Gray riders were out in formation on the parade ground, running drills in full armor. The Whirlwind, slithering around Tin Boardland to fall into Gorseth Floyd from the west, carried the rank animal smell to Riderch’s nose. It was a smell he minded as little as his own after so long.

Disma had gone to the Sandhill early that morning, hoping to convey Riderch’s message to Hawen when she arrived, and she in turn to the rest of the band. She would make the offer sound enticing, thought Riderch – more enticing than he ever could – and would prime them to swallow the risk with the promise of incomparable plunder. In the meantime, it hung on Riderch to provide them with the details: for the devil lived in the details, and it would betray them all if he did not ensure that every little thing was accounted for.

To this end he went to Pedwar Ceinych before so much as eating breakfast, before the sun had risen over the Greteboga, hoping to arrive before the stablepaws. The sky was a bowl of lapis when he arrived, just dark enough that his silhouette resembled every other as he skulked between the barns toward the great stables.

In the eastern wall was a smaller, open door, accommodating the grooms and the odd trainer. Most of the grooms were boys half Riderch's age, little Anialdir bucks dusted with hay and smelling of muck, bearing rope and tack and sacks of grain upon their overdeveloped shoulders. Older boys oversaw them, mostly war-band stock, and one of these eyed Riderch sidelong as he passed through the door. Riderch paid him no mind.

There was a narrow hall within, perhaps ten paces from one door to the other, with simple quarters for the grooms and a series of ladders climbing the wall to a hayloft. A pair of older bucks were forking hay down the far side of that wall. He heard the whispered padding of harefolk feet, as well as the unmistakable conversation of a multitude of horses, then passed through the second door and began to search the stalls.

Immediately he was met with a host of steeds more magnificent than he had ever seen – aye, more magnificent than he had ever imagined. Gorseth Floyd was famed for her horses throughout the Anialdir, for their strength and steadfastness was matched by a spirit as expansive as the Deepwaste. It had been King Rhuddri's greatest advantage against Godnu, and even now both Gwall and Ancathair bought sires in that city. Those nearest the door were quarter horses mostly, chargers of that lighter sort who thrive in the desert because they can hold their water better than any other. Though shades of gray one and all, they possessed such subtle variations in their coats that Riderch thought them draped in trappers, each with arms distinct against the gray field of Pedwar Ceinych. Above their stalls, on the walls over the windows, were new reproductions of the Ceinych's hare-heads sprouting their blue brightbushes.

Farther down were palfreys, sleeker of sinew and more diversely colored. Many of these were marked as the Ceinych's as well, while some on the north side were draped in badges of other colors, bearing other tokens, marking them for members of King Rhuddri's household or visiting guests.

All of those that Riderch could see were in standing stalls half-barred and spacious, though the chargers enjoyed the most room. Their walls were stained gray-green, the color of bloom upon brightbush leaves; and their wooden posts, though newer than most things in Gorseth Floyd, already bore the impatient gnaw-marks of many teeth. The troughs against the walls were full or half-full of hay. Grooms breezed past Riderch carrying bags of corn and quinoa for the Ceinych's mounts, while others brushed or picked hooves or turned out to pasture. A cluster of bucks debated in the middle of the lane, between the palfreys and an open pair of double doors. For these Riderch made, noting their gray wool and the turquoise sash wound around one of their waists.

He had nearly forgotten his purpose in coming at first sight of the steeds. He forgot it entirely when he drew near the group of bucks and spied, out of the corner of his eye, one of the palfreys belonging to the Ceinych. Here was no dun stallion who would melt into the Swartway or the dusty rocks of the Anialdir, in the mornings and evenings when it was dark enough and fair enough to ride. Nay, this palfrey was positively golden, its mane stark white; only the sun-beaten dunes could match its coat, the sea of sand stretching westward over the Swartway and beyond the mountains entirely. He was tremendously handsome – or he would have been. Riderch gaped when he saw it, stopping in his tracks, then diverted his course to stand before his stall.

His head hung low, overburdened by a swelling lump hanging from his neck so large that Riderch was surprised the beast still lived. His eyes betrayed his misery, glassy and forlorn, sharing with Riderch a quiet desperation he could not voice. His breathing was labored; corn mash lay untouched in his trough. Riderch was reaching out to touch him before he knew it, compelled by

memories of his father standing over mountainous patients wielding bloody knives, only a few of them dead – though a few was still too many – only to be prevented.

"Withdraw your paw before I cut it off!" a voice snapped in his ear. Riderch jumped and wheeled around, fumbling for his falchion before he realized he had left it at the inn. Before him stood a tall buck in gray wool, his pristine blue sash dangling just above the knee, the same he had just seen speaking with the crowd of grooms. Those grooms had scattered to other work, however, leaving only this Guilur to seize Riderch by the wrist and drag him away from the wretched palfrey. Riderch let him, though he burned with indignation.

"Who are you?" the Guilur demanded. "Did you ride here from Cetelacu?" He was one of those war-band bucks too tall for his frame, though stronger than he looked, with eyes as widely-set as his horses'.

"How old is he?" asked Riderch.

"What?" the Guilur barked.

"That palfrey," said Riderch, nodding toward the stall. "He can't be very old."

The Guilur blinked, flabbergasted, then pulled up the hem of Riderch's poncho to look for his falchion. "You're no rider," he said. "Tell me what you're doing here right now, or I'll have you-"

"You're the stablemaster, aye?" Riderch interrupted.

"The next words out of your mouth had better answer my question, or so help me Quetzal I'll have you put in the stocks."

"I'm here looking for work," said Riderch. "I came all the way down from Ancathair because I reckoned Rhuddri would have some – you know, considering the times."

"As a rider?" asked the Guilur.

Riderch shook his head, thinking for a moment that he heard laughter beside him. He looked, however, and saw no one.

"What, then?" the Guilur demanded, stamping an impatient foot. "Spit it out!"

"As a horseleech," said Riderch, fingering the ear through his shirt. "I know the craft, and you look like you could use one."

"A horseleech," said the Guilur. It was not a question, and the way he wielded the word was less than promising.

"Or a groom," Riderch shrugged. "I can do either, or both."

"Where's your letter?" asked the Guilur.

"My letter?" said Riderch.

"A letter from your master!" said the Guilur, rubbing his claws together. "Are you deaf, or just sun-stricken? You've come all the way here from Ancathair, you say, trespassing in My Lord's stables, and you'd have me believe you're a horseleech. Prove it!"

"Oh," Riderch grunted, cursing himself for mentioning it in the first place. "Well I haven't got one of those."

"No, I'm sure you don't," the Guilur muttered. "And now I'll have to drag you out of here myself, of course."

"I don't have a letter," said Riderch, stepping away from the buck's grasping paw, "because there's nobody to write one. I am a horseleech, though, and that's turkey. I studied under my father ever since I was old enough to remember, at least until he croaked. I've got nowhere else to go, so I reckoned Rhuddri would take me."

"You didn't inherit your father's sickroom?" asked the Guilur.

"There was nothing to inherit," said Riderch. "There was a fire at the ranch one night when I was out hunting with my brother: it took the stable, the house, even the barn. Everything inside."

The Guilur paused then, just long enough that Riderch felt a snare tighten around his neck. “But you aren’t here with your brother,” he said.

“No, Lording, I’m not,” said Riderch, turning and spitting on the straw-strewn floor. “The little bastard’s a pickpocket now. I left him in Ancathair.”

The Guilur slapped Riderch hard enough across the face that he winced. He nearly lost his temper for it, and if he had been wearing his falchion he would surely have destroyed his chances then and there, but through a great exercise of will he managed to master himself.

“Spit in front of My Lord’s horses again, dog, and I’ll have your ears,” the Guilur smoldered.

“Of course,” said Riderch thinly. “Didn’t mean to offend.”

“What’s your father’s name?” asked the Guilur.

“You’re the stablemaster?” Riderch asked again. “I don’t want to waste your time if you aren’t.”

“You’re wasting my time now,” he seethed. “But aye, I have the honor of being My Lord’s stablemaster. Master Kyllister, if my name will pry your father’s out of your mouth.”

“Eguin,” said Riderch. “His name was Eguin, son of Ureich.”

“Never heard of him,” said Kyllister.

“Why should you have?” Riderch shrugged. “Since when do the war-band’s husbands care a lick for the Anialdir’s?”

“If only you had asked yourself that question before you came here,” Kyllister frowned; and turning away, watched a group of riders filing in from the parade ground. “I don’t need any more grooms, and I *certainly* don’t need a horseleech, especially a tumbleweed who blew in from the street.”

“See now, I’m not so sure that’s true,” said Riderch. “I’ll muck stalls and fork hay if you want, I don’t care. I grew up around horses, I can do any job you throw at me.”

“Then go break mustangs at the river fork, if you’re so skilled,” Kyllister scoffed. “If you won’t take up a falchion for him, get out of My Lord’s stables.”

Riderch stood there in the middle of the lane for another pawful of moments, watching the riders draw nearer and nearer. His ears burned; but when Kyllister finally looked back, he was already halfway through the stable door.

Riderch spent the rest of that morning walking up and down the Rinnea, surveying the wall that went up, block by block of boardland stone, above the northern banks where Elksand Boardland was too distant to protect the city from Godnu. The odd surviving section of wall, discovered when King Rhuddri rode in to claim Gorseth Floyd for his own, provided the model for the whole; and while the old had been torn down to make way for the new, the new sat upon the old foundations in just the same way, slightly sloped and insurmountably smooth. It was almost complete, he realized for the first time, save for the far western wall which ran beside the Swartway, and therefore mostly functional even now.

Godnu would certainly attack from the east, if it ever came to that, following the bend of the Rinnea so that they would not need to ride around the western side of Elksand where the Anialdir was brutally bare of water and shelter. Riderch watched the builders pacing atop the battlements, watched the mules pulling stones and the pulleys hoisting them up, and thought again of Rhuddri’s hares patrolling the terraces of Pedwar Ceinych. He imagined both as they must have looked in buried Days of the World when the castle had been new and the foundations of the wall had just been laid. They looked no different in his mind’s eye, and he wondered how many times the same Gorseth Floyd had been built. For Gorseth Floyd, folk said, was older than any folk could remember, and the dust that the does swept out of their front doors was nothing less than old bones chewed up and spit out by the jaws of the earth.

When the heat of the day grew too great, Riderch retreated to Islawr to drink away some of his gold piece and stew in his frustration. If he had only thought to fabricate a letter ahead of time, he

thought, he might have appeared to the stablemaster a savior instead of a snake. But Kyllister was no buffoon, as Riderch had half hoped – doubtlessly the old rider would have sent for Ancathair to inquire after Eguin, even if he had half believed him, and all would have been lost. This way, at least, he had a chance to try again tomorrow.

He listened as he drank to the patrons packed into the cool shelter of the grotto, picking through the mingled din with a practiced ear. Osging was foaming at the mouth, folk said, that Rhuddri was rebuilding the northern wall of Gorseth Floyd, enclosing territory that he had once agreed to let Godnu retain. He was taking it now without terms, just as he had once taken the southern side of the city. Thrice in recent days had lone red scouts ridden in sight of the wall, surveying its progress just as Riderch had done, and now the Swartway was perilous enough that folk took their business to Gwall rather than risk the circuit up and down the old highway's gwerthons. Rhuddri was running his riders ragged there, collecting broken mustangs from his husbands along the rivers so that there would be enough mounts to rotate the tired and the injured. Desperation rang its bell in every little word of gossip. This cheered Riderch more than any single piece of news he could have received, and he left Islawr that evening grinning.

Disma was waiting for him at the riverbank when he arrived, underneath a palm tree below the terrace near the bridge, just as they had agreed. He was anxiously skipping stones across the water, snapping his claws whenever one made it to the cattails on the farther bank, but was by no means distracted. He heard Riderch coming before he saw him, and did not flinch when the hare swatted his tail. His unquiet face was pale with twilight when he turned around.

"Good news?" he asked, fingering a small stone he had yet to throw.

Riderch shook his head. "Not today," he said, "but I reckon it won't take me long to wear him down."

"What makes you say that?" asked Disma.

"He doesn't have much time to belabor these days," said Riderch.

Disma nodded, then turned and skipped his stone. It started beautifully, but caught its edge in the middle of the flow and tumbled, sinking to the riverbed below. "Hawen's at the Sandhill," he said, "with Kay, Sawl, and a good number of the others."

"Sawl?" asked Riderch. "That's surprising."

"He felt left out, I reckon, you know how he gets," said Disma, then assumed the most forlorn expression he could muster and continued in a drowsy baritone: "'I'm not all there when I'm alone.'"

"No, Sawl, you're not all there," Riderch snickered. "You gave Hawen my message?"

"Word for word," said Disma. "She'll find out what she can. A lot of Rhuddri's bucks go to the Sandhill."

"I know they do," said Riderch. "It's why I wanted Hawen here in the first place."

"Did you learn anything yourself?" asked Disma.

"Enough to make me hopeful," said Riderch. "Rhuddri and Osging are chafing to blisters. The Ceinych is looking for riders, horses, and paws to wrangle them. They'll stop being picky real soon."

"Which means we stand to gain from this if we'd only stop being picky ourselves," Disma replied in a lower voice.

"We stand to gain from it now," said Riderch, assuming a warning tone. "A king's ransom."

"At the risk of being hanged," said Disma, "and I'll be a trapper's hat before I let anyone hang you. Riderch, we're good riders – all of us – and you know more about horses than anyone at the Ceinych, and Hawen could live like a queen with all of the gifts folk give her. We could walk right up to Rhuddri tomorrow and volunteer, and he would overlook everything we've ever done – *except* for what we're about to do."

"Then we'll be clever about it," said Riderch. "If we play our cards right, we'll still have something to fall back on."

"Back?" Disma guffawed. "Riderch, there's no going *back* from this. If we fail, Rhuddri will be on us like a pack of dogs."

"Not if we make him reckon he knows who did it," Riderch smirked.

Disma scanned the open doorways in the higher terrace one by one to find them all empty. "You have an idea, I take it?"

"A kernel of one," said Riderch. "I'll tell you about it once they take me on at the Ceinych."

"In that case, this is for you," said Disma; and reaching beneath his poncho, pawed a jangling purse to him. "Silver and copper. Should be enough to keep you fed and bedded for a while; some is going to market tomorrow, then Kay is taking the wagon back home to paw out the rest."

"See?" said Riderch, opening the purse to look inside before tying its strings to his belt. "We didn't even have to tighten our belts."

"That's not the tightening I'm worried about," Disma muttered.

"Thanks, Disma," said Riderch, more earnestly than was his wont, and clapped the raccoon's shoulder. "You look out for me, and I'll look out for you. That's never turned sour before, has it?"

"No," Disma admitted. "No, it hasn't."

"I don't reckon it will now," said Riderch. "Just a little while longer and we'll be free to go wherever we like."

Disma's face crumpled like paper. He stared hard at Riderch, searching his face in the declining light, only to heave his shoulders and sigh. "Damn your ears, Riderch, I wanted to lift with you," he said.

"Not while this is hanging on the line," said Riderch.

"I know, I know," Disma muttered. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Aye," said Riderch. "In the meantime, tell Hawen to keep an eye out for anyone from the stables."

"Will do," said Disma; then pivoting on his heel, he padded up the bank and melted into the leaden shade between two mud brick houses.

Winter days in the Anialdir, though brutally hot by anyone's standard, are mercifully short, and so it was nearly dark when Riderch returned to Islawr. With the last of the light he thought to visit the stable again, to look after Ruddo in his stall and ensure that one of the grooms had turned him out. Being the teetering hours in which the temperature was fair, most folk were out doing all the business they could in the open air. Riderch, therefore, found himself alone behind the inn, save for the scurrying young grooms, and noted the empty stalls where gray riders' mounts had been.

Ruddo was in good spirits when Riderch found him: restless as always, but by no means constrained. His stall had been mucked, and he had fresh water, but there was as yet no fresh hay spread out on the floor or in his trough. Being doorless – Riderch had been very careful of that – he walked in along Ruddo's flank, caressing his neck, then squatted down to check his hooves. They were picked clean, the floor swept of any irritating grit. He clucked his tongue, satisfied, and Ruddo snorted his agreement. Retrieving then a brush from a hook on the wall, he did the tenderest work he knew how to do while he waited for one of the grooms to bring his horse's bedding.

"Watch your temper, Riderch. Catch it now, before it bolts."

Riderch stiffened. Turning to look out, he recognized the face that rounded the corner. It was dark and misshapen, even in the dwindling dusk, but its own recognition betrayed it as surely as sunlight. The little buck carried hay on his back, an admirable amount given his size. He dropped it the moment he saw Riderch, a pair of worn leather straps slipping from his shoulders, and stepped out of

the stall's doorway so as not to box Ruddo in. He turned entirely around, in fact, and would have run off if Riderch had not padded up behind him to grip his shoulder. A yelp escaped, cut short when Riderch spun him around and clapped a paw over his mouth. That yelp was enough, however, to tell the other grooms to vanish.

"Don't make a fuss," Riderch husked, "I'm not going to hit you again."

The groom nodded, whimpering, and Riderch took his paw away.

"What happened to you?" he asked. The groom did not answer, but shook his head almost imperceptibly. One of his eyes was bruised and swollen shut. The other danced in fear, framed by shallow claw-marks, and a split lip had only just begun to heal.

"Are you going to say something?" Riderch snarled, holding his chin to keep the child looking at him. "I'm not making friendly conversation here, boy."

"I g-g-got boxed in b-b-by one of the mounts, Lording," he squeaked, and the sound of his voice told Riderch just how young he truly was. "Not yours!" he added in a panic.

"How fool do you reckon I am?" Riderch pressed, tapping the scrapes along his cheek. The boy flinched; tears welled in the corners of his eyes.

"N-n-no fool at all, Lording," he said, licking his lip.

"You want me to believe a horse did this?" asked Riderch, mindful that his grip on the groom's shoulder was too tight. He loosened it, and the boy sucked in a breath.

"There was a nail in the wall," he said, "just a little one sticking out. He pushed me into it."

"Which horse?" asked Riderch. "Which stall?"

"Not yours," said the boy.

Riderch sighed then, sensing by a cool breeze that his face was sweltering. "What's your name again?" he asked. "Kyntaw, right?"

"A-aye, Lording," the boy nodded.

With his free paw Riderch reached beneath his poncho, and Kyntaw struggled, fighting to get away, until Riderch produced from his purse a familiar sight. "You see this?" he said, holding between two claws a small silver coin. Kyntaw stared at it, expressionless, and nodded.

"He doesn't pay you, does he?" asked Riderch. "You're Anialdir stock and he's not, so it's a safe bet. That's why you wouldn't take it, even in trust. You didn't want him to see you with it."

Kyntaw's open eye widened.

"This here is real silver," said Riderch, biting it before holding it up again. "I shouldn't have offered you gold in the first place, but I knew you wouldn't be able to break it without being picked up for theft. This you can break; and if you're worried about it, there's a shop in the alley by the corn exchange called Utschella that should be able to help you. Speak up if you understand what I'm saying."

"A-a-aye, Lording," said Kyntaw.

"A silver piece can get you a long way if you're clever about it," said Riderch. "I'll bring you more when I make more."

"You don't oughta-"

"You know how to hide money?" Riderch interrupted. "It can't be somewhere Teyrngar goes, or any of the other grooms. It ought to be near enough where you normally walk that you can slip off to get it any time, but not too near. There are any number of old cisterns or loose foundation stones around the pastures. Do you know any of those?"

Kyntaw stared for a long moment, then nodded furtively.

"Speak up if you understand me, boy," Riderch growled.

"A-aye, I understand," he whispered.

"Atta boy," said Riderch. "Now I want you to take this from me, so I know you won't just drop it in the dirt."

Kyntaw jerked around then, and for a moment Riderch thought that he was trying to flee again; but he was only looking up at Islawr, at its doors and windows, and he relaxed when he found them empty. He plucked the coin from Riderch's claws, stuffed it into his pocket, and licked his lip.

"Very good," said Riderch; and after a beat: "He isn't your father, is he?"

Kyntaw gasped, and before Riderch knew it had bitten down on his arm hard enough to draw blood. Riderch drew back, cursing, as the boy disappeared into the black mouth of a barn. Riderch forked out Ruddo's hay himself that night.

8

With his purse full of usable coinage at last, Riderch was able to buy back his gold piece from a very disappointed Teyrngar. He forfeited it willingly, at least, and did not pretend to have never seen it before, as Riderch half expected. That night he spent in his room alone, sprawled out in furtive sleep upon a bed too large for him, but found no peace either in waking or dreaming. For in his dreams he heard a pair of clashing swords, the grunts and howls of two folk fighting desperately over some treasure; and whenever he awoke, the melodious drone of some harefolk praying in the room behind his bed dug into his ears like pins. He pounded the wall with his fist more than once, to no effect.

Early the next morning he returned to the stables of Pedwar Ceinych, fully prepared to be deterred for his second intrusion, or even detained. He experienced neither, however; in fact, the grooms were almost deferential to him, staring with unexpected attentiveness and giving him the widest berth they could. No one wanted to speak with him, it seemed, especially the older grooms. Rhuddri's riders were on parade or out on the roads already, leaving a great many stalls empty, and so Riderch found his path unimpeded a second time.

He found Master Kyllister among the guest stalls, directing a group of youths regarding the proper storage of trappers, barding, and other ostentatious tack that Riderch found personally distasteful. Kyllister beheld him like a phantom from the corner of his eye – trying, it seemed, to pin him to the floor with a look – and when at last he dismissed his grooms, he nearly bowled Riderch over in his haste to be rid of him.

Riderch pleaded his case well, however: much better, in fact, than the first time, for he had had most of the night to think of the many reasons Master Kyllister should want to employ him. Master Kyllister, on the other paw, had had all night to think as well, and had come to the conclusion that Riderch was a snake. In the end, Riderch could only make his last, most desperate offer.

"I'll work here for free," he proposed, inserting himself between the Guilur's increasingly passionate expulsions. "For a few days, or a week, or however long it takes to prove that I can be useful to you."

"If you're so desperate to work with horses, boy-" said Kyllister.

"Riderch," he interrupted. "My name is Riderch."

"Why not work at any of the stables in Ancathair?" Kyllister continued. "Or any along the Fawwyrm? You come from war-band stock, clearly. If you could only get someone to vouch for you, you would have no trouble."

"I'm not war-band stock," Riderch corrected him. "I'm just tall, and my father was just a poor rancher. But Rhudd-er, King Rhuddri has Anialdir hares working for him. They all come here when they want land and a decent living – well so am I."

"I don't believe you understand what you're trying to do," Kyllister retorted, "and that's the only reason I don't have you dragged out by the ears. The grooms here, barring a few rare exceptions,

are sons of My Lord's own household, sons of his Guilurs, or slaves of either. You are none of those – you are no one, in fact, as far as I'm concerned – and are therefore unfit to serve in Pedwar Ceinych."

"You say that now," Riderch smoldered, fighting to keep his composure, "but I know for simple fact that you're short – short on horses, short on riders, short on grooms and horseleeches. You're pulling in mustangs from downriver just so you don't blow your good chargers, and you're a damn fool not to take my help."

"I don't see what that has to do with a miserable tramp from Ancathair," Kyllister barked; "and if you've any sense in that hot head of yours, you won't say another word about it."

"I'm skilled," Riderch barked back, "and I can prove it!"

"You haven't got a leg to stand on," Kyllister whispered, leaning in so close that Riderch could smell the mate on his breath. "You've wasted too much of my time, Riderch. I'm expecting some very important guests to arrive any day now, and if they see someone who looks like you standing here dressed like that, they may get the wrong idea. Now remove yourself, before I remove you."

Riderch sputtered, so hot with rage that Kyllister felt it himself and pulled back. Very nearly he lost his temper, very nearly he struck out at the narrow, wide-eyed face and suffered gravely for it, but in the end spun on his heel and stormed out again through the eastern door, shouldering an older groom out of the way and onto the straw-strewn floor as he passed.

Riderch hunched over Islawr's bar like an armadillo all that afternoon, chewing on his own tongue, silently watching Teyrngar's fat form teeter from patron to patron with venomous contempt. The innkeeper gave up on making conversation when it became clear that he wanted none. The other patrons largely followed suit, leaving empty seats between him and themselves, until the crowd grew too thick and a trio of folk walked into the grotto to find that the only open slots at the bar were on either side of a shabby, sulking drifter.

None of them were harefolk – indeed, none of them were from Gorseth Floyd at all, to hear them speak. They were from Godnu, if Riderch was any judge of such things, or from one of the gwerthons along the Swartway still allied with Godnu. This gave him pause: for while Godnu and Gorseth Floyd did not yet profess to be at war again, visitors from that city were surpassingly rare in those days, and those who did visit were nearly always delegates to Pedwar Ceinych.

These folk, however, seemed to be no such thing. To Riderch's left was a red-headed wolf, to his right a grison in his white tonsure and, where the old coyote usually sat, a black-nosed opossum. All three were dressed in tightly-woven hemp linen, shirts and trousers brightly dyed in typical Godnu style. Buckskin dusters hung loosely from their shoulders; the wolf's longer capelet boasted braided fringes. They were fashions unmistakably of Godnu, and yet with none of the gold or turquoise that would have marked members of Osging's court. They began to chatter around Riderch in Old Talk, drawing uneasy glances from other harefolk in the grotto, but set to drinking readily enough that folk soon forgot about them. What they were doing at Islawr, so close to the Ceinych, Riderch could see Teyrngar troubling over.

"This one isn't so bad after all," the wolf told his friends after a while. Flashing two claws at Teyrngar, he pushed an empty glass across the bar.

"Cooler than a nomad's tent, at least," said the grison, "though the queans at the Sandhill were better."

"They're all does here," the opossum grumbled, packing a pipe between his teeth with the tip of his tail.

"They were all does there too," the grison replied.

"All the same in the dark, I suppose," the opossum tutted, as a veil of smoke enrobed his face.

“They weren’t all does,” said the wolf. “That new girl with the long neck is the reason there weren’t no rooms.”

“I heard she keeps a dagger in her bodice,” the opossum snickered.

“In company like this?” the wolf laughed. “I reckon she does.”

“Oh you reckon so, do you?” said the opossum, beginning to cackle. “Well if you fumble around in the dark with her, tell me if you find it!”

Just then the wolf set a glass of brightwine before Riderch, beating it against the bar hard enough that its clatter startled him. Riderch looked up: the wolf grinned and raised his own glass, then waggled his ears when Riderch did not move.

“For talking around you,” he said. “I’d offer to trade places with you, Lording, but I reckon we’d be just as loud.”

“Much obliged,” said Riderch; and pouring the last of his first glass into the second, he took a performative swallow.

“What do you think of the does around here, Lording?” asked the wolf. “I’d swear it’s the same ones everywhere I go, just like it was when I came here years ago.”

“You know what they say about harefolk, don’t you?” Riderch asked, surprised to find himself slurring. “We never die – we’re ground to dust, only to gather up somewhere else.”

“That’s what the knights say in Godnu,” the wolf replied. “They also say you’re born out of the dunes, or from your horses. I don’t believe that last one, though, for what it’s worth.”

“It’s worth a drink, at least,” Riderch grunted, tilting back the glass. “What brings you to Gorseth Floyd, anyhow?”

“Oh, same thing that brought me here years ago, actually,” the wolf lilted. “Tracking down a stagecoach.”

Riderch smiled; and finishing his drink, sucked his teeth hard. “Is that turkey?” he asked. “You three overshot the market, in that case.”

“No luck at the market, I’m afraid,” said the wolf, clucking his tongue. “We thought to ask around at the castle, but your Guilurs told us to come back tomorrow.”

“You don’t say?” said Riderch. “I was over there today, myself. They rebuffed me too.”

“I find that hard to believe!” the wolf exclaimed. “You look like you belong there.”

“I don’t ride for Rhuddri,” said Riderch, sitting up straight and folding his arms under his poncho.

“Well you don’t wear the gray, I can see that,” said the wolf, inclining his head toward him. “But then again, not all of them do.”

“I’m not from Gorseth Floyd at all, if you can believe it,” said Riderch. “I was born in Ancathair.”

“And yet here you are,” said the wolf, positively growling in his ear. “It was a red mustang, wasn’t it?”

“As red as the rocks,” said Riderch. He saw, at that moment, a thick, black paw reaching over the bar, claws outstretched for the neck of a bottle of brightwine. The opossum had slipped away; Teyrngar was on the far end of the grotto. A great, flushing heat washed over him.

“He’s holding a cudgel, Riderch.”

Riderch draws his deer-knife in the blink of an eye. Lunging to his right, he pins the grison’s paw to the bar’s wooden wing, and none too late. The wind whistles past his ear, culminating in a raucous report of ironwood against stone. The opossum’s cudgel strikes the bar where his head had been. The grison is screaming now, too shocked to pull the knife from his bleeding paw. Seeing his dire peril, Riderch seizes the neck of the bottle himself, then turns around and swings at the opossum with

all his strength. It finds the arm that holds the cudgel, flinging it from his grasp. A savvy backhand catches him across the temple; his own tail betrays him when he steps on it, and down he goes.

All of Islawr is alerted then. Teyrngar rushes over, puffing at such small exertion, but too late to intervene. The wolf is upon Riderch, and together the two tumble across the grotto floor amidst a bloodthirsty din, each attempting to gain a hold upon the other. But Riderch is no soft opponent: his courage does not yellow, neither does his might falter. Many years of hard scrapes have tempered him. The wolf, failing to pin him, lashes out to bite; and Riderch, seeing in him first the murdered stagecoach pilot, then the hateful face of Gwyarc, wishes for a falchion that waits in his room. Very nearly he is bitten a second time, but braces both his paws against his foe's neck, and full of red rage rolls on top of him. Savagely he throttles him, beating the back of his head against the cold stone floor, then jams his claws into his eyes until he howls in agony. Already bruised and bleeding, Riderch pummels him the more, until his injuries prevail and his limbs fall slack. Only then does Riderch think to stand, to scan the grotto and the upper tavern, panting as the blood pounds in his ears.

Half of the folk were gone in the wake of the brawl, those remaining only there to watch. A pair of grinning harefolk held the opossum by the arms; Teyrngar, much less amused, had pulled the knife from the grison's paw and given him a bar mop to staunch the bleeding. Looking down, Riderch saw the wolf curled up on his side, a pill bug red from head to shoulders.

"Get him out of here, both of you," Teyrngar snapped. "Hide nor hair, I don't ever want to see you here again."

The harefolk let the opossum go, and together – with much difficulty from their wounds – the opossum and the grison dragged the moaning wolffolk out. Silence prevailed for a time, as Riderch scrubbed the blood from his paws on a second rag; but sensing that folk were still watching him, he wheeled around on them and bared his teeth.

"Mind your own damn business!" he snarled, and those who did not flee the tavern retreated to the card tables up above.

He reached for his knife then, hoping to wipe its blade clean on the rag, but Teyrngar caught his wrist before he could. "What in Dinistrith's name did you just do?" he husked, pulling him halfway over the bar.

"Saved my own skin," Riderch replied, and with a jerk freed himself from the innkeeper's grasp. "Didn't you see him come after me with that cudgel?"

"I saw you scare off a whole day's business, that's what I saw!" Teyrngar roared. "I saw you make a mess of the bar and the floor. Thank your lucky foot there weren't any riders in here, or you'd be in the stocks."

"They were from Godnu," said Riderch, retrieving his knife. "Riders would have looked the other way."

"Says who?" said Teyrngar.

"Those folk didn't belong at the Ceinych," said Riderch. "That's why they had to find an inn. And even if they did, they clearly didn't want anyone to know it."

"Is that all you've got to say for yourself?" said Teyrngar, wide-set eyes bulging out of his skull.

"I'll pay for new rags," said Riderch, as he wiped clean his deer-knife, "and throw in extra for whoever has to clean the blood. Is that good enough for you?"

"You reckon I'm a dullard, don't you?" Teyrngar smoldered, leaning over the bar so that his belly spilled over the lip. "Just because I know what a piece of gold is worth? Well I'm not – and without the gold under my pillow my patience for you is a whole lot less."

"Are you trying to squeeze more money out of me?" asked Riderch.

"You'd best be mindful of who recognizes you, brother," Teyrngar warned. "You make any more friends, I'll flag down the first gray poncho I see."

"I'd like to see you try," Riderch nearly said; but given the blood and the empty tavern, even his rage bowed to sense. "Fair enough," he growled; and tossing the bloody rag onto the bar, he opened his purse and pulled out his last gold piece, slapping it down on the bar before he sheathed his knife and padded upstairs to his room.

There he stretched and tested his limbs. His knuckles ached again, and the ribs along one side would bruise from where he hit the floor; but finding none more serious, he peeled off poncho and shirt to probe the older bite. His claws found no tenderness there, though the wound had smarted but a day ago. Freed of his clothing, however, he felt heat billow from him like a boardland, and resolved to make a closer examination in front of a mirror.

He brought Ruddo to the riverbank that evening, fed and watered and hung with all his tack, to find more than just Disma standing beneath the palm tree. Kay towered beside him, casting a line again and again into the Rinnea, while Gwyarc leaned against the tree trunk with a pipe in his mouth. He was cackling with Gwesgyr, a member of his own former band of outlaws who, like the rest of them, had pledged himself to Riderch to avoid being slaughtered. Disma eyed Riderch curiously as he approached; the others did the same in their turns, though they kept up the appearance of leisure for the sake of the folk upon the road. When Riderch stopped beside the bridge, however, and Ruddo's lipping of his ears failed to spark joy as it usually did, their queer looks darkened.

"Is there a problem?" asked Disma.

"I should be asking you that," said Riderch. "Kay. Gwesgyr. Gwyarc."

"Howdy, boss," said Gwesgyr. Kay waved a great paw over his shoulder without turning around. Gwyarc only nodded, his mangled face having returned to something resembling its former proportions.

"Why are you here?" asked Riderch sharply, though he stared still at Disma.

"Hawen made us a proposition," said Gwyarc, speaking thickly around his pipe. "Not the kind she usually makes." His voice sounded different between his missing teeth; his breath whistled through the gaps with every sibilation.

"Speak for yourself," Gwesgyr snickered.

"Well I don't see Hawen anywhere," Riderch scowled.

"We wanted it from the horse's mouth, boss," said Kay, who was now engaged with an unlucky fish who had bitten down on his hook. He began to wind the line around his rod, patiently pulling it in.

"Is that so?" Riderch seethed. "What's the matter, don't you trust Hawen?"

"Well it's just that Hawen got it from Disma," said Gwyarc, jerking his head at the raccoon, "and Disma's bound to make you look good if he can."

"Aye, from the horse's mouth," Kay rumbled, as a fat golden dorado broke the surface of the water and flailed desperately upon the reedy bank. Kay pulled it up by the line, admired its brazen yellow luster, then gripped it behind the head with one of his enormous paws. It flailed all the harder when he ripped the hook from its mouth, flailed with all of its might when he sank his great buck teeth into it and began to chew, but in the end fell limp.

"Considering what's at stake, I'm sure you understand," Gwesgyr nodded, paying no attention to the squelching behind him. Riderch felt sick. Disma looked as if he might be.

"In that case, why just the three of you?" asked Riderch, fighting a dry tongue. "Why not bring the whole band? Hell's teeth, why not invite the whole damned city to listen in?"

"Us three is fine," said Gwyarc. "We can take it back to the rest."

"I reckon you should hear them out, Riderch," said Disma in a much lower voice. "They're worried, and they have every right to be worried."

"There's nothing to worry about," said Riderch with a wave of his paw, "and you're sorely mistaken if you reckon I'll say another word about it in the open air."

"We don't need you to lay it out for us again," said Gwyarc, plucking his pipe from his lips to spit on the ground. "We need assurances. What Hawen brought us is hairier than that washout in the Deepwaste, and I for one'll be doubly damned if I stick my neck out for you again without hearing some promises."

"You're a funny one to tug on my ear-" Riderch began, only to be interrupted.

"We all want some promises, boss," said Kay around a mouthful of flesh.

"Aye, this ain't something you can just hang on our shoulders," Gwesgyr seconded. "We're interested, mind you – real interested – we just want you to eat some of the risk with us."

Riderch's face burned so ardently that he feared they would see ribbons of heat rising from him when he nodded. "Say your piece, then," he said.

"We want to be able to walk if this starts looking like a fool's errand," said Gwyarc. "Any one of us. We want to be able to ride back to Mydge without being punished for it. We'll let the pay go, and that'll be that."

"And?" said Riderch, sensing that there was more.

"We do it so that no one sees our faces," said Kay. He was finished with his meal already, and after picking the bones from his teeth tossed the dorado's carcass back into the current. He wiped his mouth with the back of his arm and belched; Disma turned away.

"Not even the princess," said Gwyarc. "Not even once. If it goes haywire, we oughta still be able to do business here."

"I'm ahead of you there," said Riderch. "Anything else?"

"Aye, and this one's for you, boss," said Gwyarc with a venomous tone. "A spur to keep you from doing what you did last time."

Riderch ground his teeth, but said nothing. Disma looked down at his paws.

"If this doesn't pay us out," the bushdog continued, "you're gone. Doesn't matter where you go, but the band won't have you."

Disma sidled between Riderch and Gwyarc, fearing by the hare's coiled sinews that another brawl was imminent, but there was no need. Riderch was constrained, he knew; and while that enraged him beyond words, he kept his wits. "But they'll have you, won't they?" asked Riderch.

"They would have me already if you'd played it back then the way you are now," said Gwyarc. "And now it isn't just my folk who are fed up with you."

"I should have sold you down the river the second I took your camp," Riderch smoldered. "Cyngen would have put rings in my ears for you."

"You were wiser back then," said Gwyarc.

"What if I refuse?" asked Riderch.

"Then we all walk," Kay shrugged.

"You can do the job with Disma if you want," Gwyarc smirked, "but I don't reckon you'll get anyone else."

Riderch's claws dug into the soft earth of the bank. "It sounds like it doesn't matter whether I agree or not," he said, almost too quietly.

"It will matter if we pull it off," said Gwyarc. "I can forgive a lot, given what we stand to gain here, and this is how I know if it's worth running the risk. I reckon I speak for everyone else."

"Aye," said Kay. Gwesgyr nodded. Disma would not even twitch a whisker.

"Fair enough," answered Riderch, after a much shorter pause than any of them expected. "I already promised to buy back your trust, I'll put my money where my mouth is. You can have your

terms. But know that I'll be keeping careful track of who rides out with me when the time comes, and who stays home. Very careful track, Gwyarc."

Now it was Gwyarc's turn to stiffen. He grunted and nodded, glancing at the others, and turned with them to go. "I'll pass that along to the rest," he said.

"Word for word," Riderch cautioned him. They were up the bank in half a minute, leaving only Disma with him as they melted into the unhurried traffic on the road.

"You brought Ruddo," said Disma after a beat.

"Aye," said Riderch, taking a deep, sharp breath. "I reckon I'll be moving on from the inn soon, and it'll be too hard to keep Ruddo with me."

Disma's eyes widened. "Did they take you on at the Ceinych?" he asked.

"Not yet," said Riderch. "But they're more desperate than they let on. I just have to tweak the stablemaster's ear a little."

"Do you…do you need any help?" asked Disma, noticing the gnarled knuckles that pawed Ruddo's reins to him.

"Nope," said Riderch, flashing an unconvincing grin. "We're in a good spot, Disma. Won't be long now."

"We're in the middle of something, that much is true," said Disma, caressing Ruddo's probing nose with his thumb. "Hawen says that the Ceinych has been fielding folk from Gwall and Ancathair almost every day lately."

"What kinds of folk?" asked Riderch.

"Not one of them in a good mood, to hear tell," said Disma. "It takes time to tease these things out, you know how it is."

"Well I do," Riderch nodded. "Anything else?"

"From me?" Disma balked. "We're all waiting for you, Riderch. It shouldn't take us more than a few days to form up wherever we need to, but we'll need at least that much time."

"You'll have it," Riderch assured him. "There's some real fine horses up at the Ceinych, but nothing that looks like a bridal procession."

"Just a host of riders," Disma scowled.

"They can only spread themselves so thin," Riderch smirked. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got ears to tweak." Bracing his paw against Ruddo's snout, he kissed it, then turned to go.

"Riderch, w-wait," said Disma, stumbling over his own tongue.

"Aye?" said Riderch.

"That wasn't my idea," said Disma, canting his head toward the road.

"I know it wasn't," said Riderch, as he began to walk away.

"Please take care of yourself, Riderch," Disma said pleadingly to his back.

"Always have, always will," Riderch called over his shoulder. He waved, then rested his paw against his falchion's handle, envisioning it parting every sinew that stood between him and his goal.

9

Pedwar Ceinych was near enough the Rinnea that the many fisheries and mills along its shallow southern bank looked always up at its walls. A mule carting wagonloads of corn or a panting barge punter hauling catfish to market could see, at any given hour, the wardens upon its battlements, the riders filing in and out, the Guilurs in their turquoise pacing the square terraces. Higher up the banks one might also make out the stables, embraced by crumbling half-walls like so many ground-down teeth, and beyond these the walled steads of Guilurs.

So it was that Riderch found himself above Rinnea's banks that evening, climbing a mud brick corn silo to the very top of its steep – though reasonably accommodating – thatched dome. There he sneezed constantly for over an hour, watching the turning of the Ceinych against the backdrop of the setting sun. Grooms ran in and out: feeding, watering, mucking, forking, turning out to ageless pastures, only to gather in again. A band of riders arrived from the west, their broad-brimmed helmets blinding in a sapote sun, only for another to ride out in its place. If more visitors from Gwall or Ancathair were on their way, they would not arrive until early the next morning, when the dry cold of the Anialdir was eating the mist in their breath. Riderch thought he heard singing while he watched, a chorus of voices against a constant, slowly-progressing drone; and though he knew that it must be an illusion born of some Wheelhouse echoing against the red rocks, his eyes were drawn to the rims of the boardlands nevertheless.

The night market awoke to drown it out soon enough. The Ceinych's horses, however, even after generations in the Deepwaste, still preferred to bed down with the sun, and so the grooms broke their own backs to accommodate them. A time came when there was little left to do, when the Great Rooster was rising over the Greteboga to the east, displaying his many-eyed wings, and then those more fortunate grooms who did not sleep in the hay-loft began to scatter for their houses. Only then did Riderch climb down from his dusty perch, buffeted by the Whirlwind snaking through the canyon between the boardlands and yet not cold in the slightest. A water-mill turned where he reached the ground, but the gears were not engaged. The great millstone did not speak, and so the only sound was the quiet moaning of the unburdened wheel. He donned the hat hanging around his neck, pulling it low over his face, and padded around the Ceinych to its stables.

There he saw the last of the grooms departing together, all of them bucks just leaving the threshold of childhood. They were laughing about something, pattering in Riderch's own breathy tongue on their way south past the barns, past the old walls retaining the soil of the pasture, and across the pasture itself, toward a broad dirt road flanked by lines of noble houses.

The moon was waning by that time, already much dimmer than the cold blue sun which had filled the bowl of Quilla, and yet it was still too bright for Riderch's liking. He could not follow the grooms very closely – could not follow them at all across the pasture, in fact – and so he singled out the buck he deemed the oldest, skulking behind them at a distance along the length of a retaining wall until they found the road. One took a swipe at another's ear. The other retaliated, their friends laughed, and the moment they split up to make for home Riderch set off across the pasture like a stalking jaguar.

The groom he had selected was the slowest, as it turned out; and to make matters easier, was bound westward in the opposite direction of his fellows. Riderch caught up to him beside the pasture wall, where a lonely well stood beside a stone terrace which had once served as the foundation of a vanished house. The coping around the well was intact, if rudimentary, no doubt built of reclaimed stones; Riderch thought it fortunate, supposing that he could simply throw the carcass into it and so delay the discovery of its fate. He thought this even as he drew his falchion, even as he reached out to throw his arm around the groom's neck.

Harefolk naturally have excellent hearing – better, indeed, than most folk in the Anialdir save for catfolk – but they are also gifted with stealth worthy of song. To melt into a pile of stones is nothing for a harefolk, nor to pass as unnoticed as the wind, and it is this very skill which Riderch had spent his life mastering. To both evade Eguin's wrath and watch over Disma required keen ears and fleet feet, and after this to steal and kill without being snared by the knotted noose.

The groom, therefore, does not hear so much as a whisper of a footfall until Riderch has him in a choke-hold, kicking and flailing and gagging as he tries to scream. He is strong with youth and heavy labor, but Riderch is stronger. He kicks the groom's knee with a mighty foot, throwing him off balance,

and takes both of his ears in his paw that he might pull back his head for the falchion's blade; but that blade never parts a single strand of fur.

The sound of a long sword hissing from a scabbard scrapes Riderch's every sinew. Gasping, he drops the youth, then wheels around and throws a desperate cut himself. His blade whistles in the parched air, arcing from shoulder to hip, but never lands, for there is nowhere for it to land. The dirt road stretches before him, as open as the sky; but apart from a few distant lamps flickering in a few distant windows, there is nothing and no one to be seen. Riderch looks frantically about him for the space of a single breath, utterly baffled and inexplicably dizzy, until the sound of stumbling feet behind him jars him to his senses. He spins on his heel; and catching sight of the groom staggering forward, fighting for traction enough to run away, leaps out to grab hold of him again. He catches his heel, and down the two go, falling hard into the dirt. A few kicks find Riderch's face. He drops his falchion to defend himself, and succeeds in grabbing the other ankle, removing the groom's last hope of flight. He thinks to cry out then, but Riderch is on him too soon, pinning him on his belly and straddling his hips. He cannot reach his falchion now; but as in Islawr, he still has his deer-knife, and this he raises above his head, ready to drive it down with force enough to prevent the loudest death throes.

He held it there for too long, however. The youth craned his neck around, desperate to catch a glimpse of his murderer, and seemed – of all things – betrayed. His whole face was consumed by a ghoulish gape, and Riderch hesitated: not at the horror of his victim, but at the face itself. He was blonde, his ears black-tipped, common enough in Gorseth Floyd; but a singular gray strap, nearly white in the waning moonlight, stretched from his chin down into the collar of his hay-strewn poncho. For the briefest of moments Riderch thought that he looked into his own eyes, desperately defiant of death. He smelled the faint reek of horses rising from him, and this proved at last the unraveling of his plan.

"What are you waiting for?" the groom wheezed, struggling to breathe with Riderch on his back. "Do you want me to beg? 'Cause I won't!"

Riderch blinked. The knife in his paw was growing heavy. He had nearly forgotten about it, and now he let his arm fall jerkily to his side.

"What?" the groom demanded, his adolescent tenor cracking hysterically. "What do you want?"

Riderch tore his eyes from the groom's with a mighty effort. Sheathing his knife, he gripped his ears once more, pulling them back so that his eyes bulged identically to Disma's. The sight so struck him that he nearly lost his resolve then and there. "Ears up, boy," he snarled, leaning in so close to his face that he was afraid the youth would bite him as the stagecoach pilot had done – and as the wolf had tried to do at Islawr. "I saved your life just now, you hear me? I could have killed you twice, and I didn't."

"So what?" the boy spat.

"So that means you owe me," Riderch snapped. "You're going to do exactly what I say – *exactly*, mind you, and quit squirming – or I won't be moved to mercy again."

"Are you a cutthroat?" the groom asked. "What do you want? I don't carry no money on me."

"I don't want your money," said Riderch, pulling even harder on his ears until he stopped trying to wriggle out from under him. "I want your job."

The groom was silent for so long that Riderch wondered if he were suffocating him. "W-what?" he said at last.

"You're aiming to go back to the Ceinych tomorrow," said Riderch. "Well don't."

"What?" the groom said for the third time, now as confused as he was alarmed. "Why not?"

"That doesn't matter," said Riderch. "It's none of your business why – all you ought to know is that I'll kill you if you do, and I'll kill your folks if you mention it to anyone."

"You wouldn't dare," the groom sneered. "My father was in the war-band."

Pulling his ears like a puppet's strings, Riderch pointed his face toward the well. "I will, and I'll throw your body down there, and you'll rot until Doomsday – and it sounds to me like your father can't do a lick about it."

Rage inflamed the boy's face until his ears were hot in Riderch's paw. "You'd kill me to go fork hay at the Ceinych?" he huffed. "Just look at yourself: the king would give one of his kittens to have a rider like you."

"I said it's none of your damn business, boy!" Riderch barked, grinding his face into the rough road.

"Well what am I supposed to do for money?" he sputtered. "My father is the only reason they took me on at the Ceinych, and my mother doesn't do anything more than grow corn."

"Go pick pockets for all I care," said Riderch. "But go home. Go home, and if anyone from the Ceinych comes around wondering where you went, make sure you aren't there to tell them."

"They're going to find out eventually!" said the groom. "I can't just quit to go shuck corn with my sisters forever."

"It doesn't have to be forever," said Riderch. "It doesn't have to be long past the beginning of spring, if I'm right. You'll hear news, and you'll know you can go back."

"From you?" asked the groom.

Riderch shook his head. "You'll know."

"You're out of your mind," the groom groaned, struggling to free himself again.

"And you'd be wise to remember it," said Riderch. "Now tell me what you're going to do when I let you go."

The groom heaved a ferocious sigh, kicking up a cloud of dust, then fell limp. "Fine. Fine!" he said. "I'll steer clear of the stables. Folk will never know why. Is that good enough for you?"

"Aye, good enough," said Riderch.

"But if I see you anywhere near my mother or my sisters," he continued unbidden, staring up at Riderch with renewed defiance, "you'll *have* to kill me."

Riderch paused for a beat, then grinned. "Fair enough," he said, and rolled off of the boy. For as long as he had been sitting on his hips, Riderch expected his legs to be useless for some time yet; the boy leaped to his feet like a frog, however, and shot off down the road in such haste that a roadrunner would not have outpaced him.

Riderch remained in the dust a moment longer, then rose himself to retrieve his falchion, only to fall back down onto the road again. He had not even the presence of mind to break his fall: the whole world was turning like a tumbleweed, spinning and lurching. He hit hard, kicking up a cloud of dust, and knew not how long he lay there. The sound of countless passing paws surrounded his ears. Briefly he heard a pair of voices in debate over him: the one fair and reedy, the other sharp and grating.

"What are we going to do with him?" the fair voice tutted.

"He's taken to wearing it," said the harsh voice. "If he won't be convinced, he'll have to be forced."

"I know," said the fair voice. "It worries me. This could kill him, the way things are headed."

"A mercy for everyone else," the harsh voice grumbled.

"But not for him," the fair voice insisted, "and not for her."

"You want to send her into the paws of the mad dog, then?" asked the harsh voice. "I find that unseemly."

"But hopefully not intolerable," answered the fair voice. "It's his duty, after all."

"Aye, the poor thing," the harsh voice sighed.

Then they said no more, and when the spinning sky slowed enough that Riderch could sit up again they were nowhere to be found. He had stripped off his poncho and his shirt, he realized, and was

still so hot that he was loath to put them back on. The winter wind was rising, however, and so he did anyway, leaving his shirt untucked and only halfway buttoned. His paw was shaking when he reached down to retrieve his falchion, to wipe the dust from its blade and slip it back into its scabbard.

It was then, and only then, that Riderch became aware of something just beyond the edge of his senses – or if he had been aware of it, had only found the courage to acknowledge it there on the road. The singing beside the dunes he had thought someone's mere cheek. The directions whispered at his bed could have been a dream, or someone's queer advice delivered from the other side of his tent. Even the warning at Islawr or the voices in the road might have been some sort of misunderstanding. But if there was one sound Riderch never mistook, it was that of a blade; and whether it came from the well of his memory or some stranger source, the accompanying fever spurred him on to even greater haste. There was a wolf hounding his steps, disappearing whenever he turned around, and it was deeply interested in his business. He took a few tentative steps, then sprinted across the pasture toward the river.

It was very late when he returned to Islawr. Most of the tavern's patrons were abed already, resting in anticipation of their early morning business. Those few who remained grew uneasy the moment they spied Riderch walking through the door: all save the old coyote, who sat nursing a glass of brightwine in his usual spot, watching the hare coolly, steadily, and with keen interest. Teyrngar was away from the bar, replaced by one of the barmaids whose name Riderch had not learned. Slipping through a west door past the card tables above the grotto, he searched a few short halls until he found a slumbering kitchen and, beyond it, the locked door of what must have been Teyrngar's home. He tried to push it open twice, succeeding only in rattling a bolt, but pursued it no further. Instead he slithered through the halls again, making for the back of the inn until he came across an exterior door at the far end of a little, recessed mud room. Riderch knew, even without opening it, that it led to the inn's stable. It was, in fact, the very door that Kyntaw had eyed with such dread while Riderch held him in front of the stalls. The little groom might still be sleeping in the barn, he considered; if he was, he would try not to surprise him too badly, or any of his fellows with him. Provided that the boy was willing and could think on his feet, they might retrieve his silver piece and be at the Sandhill within an hour.

These thoughts, so unruly already, fled from him entirely the moment he opened the door. For not ten paces ahead, staggering past the stalls toward him, was an unmistakable figure as broad as the barn from which he had come. He was nursing an aching paw, wringing out bruised knuckles and muttering to himself. The door closed behind Riderch and the drunkard raised his head, but Riderch could not see his face, for the light of the waning moon was too little to show it. He never learned, therefore, whether or not Teyrngar guessed what he was about to do until it was done, or whether drunken idiocy carried the great, fat buck to his grave.

Riderch's falchion is clear of its scabbard before he closes the distance. Teyrngar cries out, and then falls silent. The horses scream and shake the stalls, but Riderch's bloody wrath abides no hesitation. Teyrngar soon lies dead before his feet, hewed half a dozen times, steaming blood seeping into the all-awaiting dust. Riderch wipes his blade clean on Teyrngar's apron, fishes in his pockets to find his gold piece hidden there, then slips between the stalls and up a stony hill toward the barn.

Furtive forms were cowering there as Riderch approached, peering through windows and the cracked roller doors. A child's face, framed by the light of a little tin lamp, stared down at him from a cupola. Only one displayed bravery enough to stand without, however, to grip the barn's door frame and search the stalls for the source of the commotion. It was this one whom Riderch wanted most to see; with a crazed kind of joy he hailed Kyntaw, pulling his purse from his belt and jingling it before his face. Its mouth was open: the boy could see the coins inside, the blood-speckled gold piece, could

see that Riderch was offering them, and yet to his astonishment Kyntaw looked purely horrified. He was trembling, gaping up at the cutthroat, and Riderch resented his own trembling paw.

No words passed between them. Riderch could not speak. To hear his voice from any other mouth than Kyntaw's – Kyntaw who looked nothing like him and yet could have been his son – would have been unbearable. He shook the purse again, trying to press it into the groom's paws, but Kyntaw flinched the moment it touched him. He shook his head violently, pushed the purse away, and with a pitiful whimper slipped between Riderch and the barn, fleeing up the hill among the rocks to be seen no more. The other grooms had hidden themselves. Riderch stood there until the red rage that blazed in his belly folded in on itself, becoming as black as sacrificial glass, and then he spun on his heel and stormed back into Islawr again.

He had little left in his room, for he had packed most of it away with Ruddo and given him to Disma. What little he retained – his compass and fire-striker, as well as a whetstone and a waterskin – fit in his pockets or on his belt, so that he was hardly any more burdened walking out than he was walking in. Panting from his murderous tantrum, though trying hard to stifle himself, he padded down the inn steps and out once more onto the tavern floor.

The pawful of breaths he had allowed himself in his room, he supposed, were enough to steal back his composure so that nothing would seem amiss until the intended moment. Alas, he could not have been more wrong. The barmaid's eyes flashed with alarm the moment she saw him. Those who had not left the tavern already stood up to do so now. The old coyote, singularly puzzled, regarded Riderch the way one regards an adder sunning himself on the Swartway. He spread his paws in cool surrender, then stood up from the bar and walked out without a word.

"Get out," said Riderch to the barmaid. His voice was more tremulous than he liked, but she hardly needed convincing. She rushed out from behind the bar and disappeared through a side door, leaving Riderch alone in the grotto.

Brightwine in the Anialdir is prepared in two ways: first as true wine, fermented and stored in oaken or cedar casks which are tapped and promptly drank; and second, more commonly, as a spirit distilled from the former and housed in glass bottles, very similar to whiskey. Being so much preferred over its weaker brother, this fiery brightwine populated the bar at Islawr in dozens of bottles, all lined up for viewing on palm wood shelves against the back wall.

It was to these shelves Riderch skulked, and for these bottles he reached. His paw was trembling when he raised it; he cursed it, then gripped a bottle by the neck and pulled out its stopper with his teeth. He drank until his eyes watered and his paw felt steady again, until he ceased to envision Teyrngar's horrified face staring blindly into the firmament and began to imagine Kyntaw running away, stealing a horse with Disma and fleeing to some distant gwerthon where they would not be recognized, where they could pick pockets and burgle homes, where they could make a life for themselves. He began to spray brightwine all over the bar, opening bottle after bottle and pouring its contents onto any surface that still looked halfway dry, then throwing each and every bottle as hard as he could at the stone walls so that they burst into a shower of glittering stars. Then at last, when the grotto was drowning in brightwine and its sweet, smoky reek was intoxicating all on its own, Riderch climbed the steps out of the little room and produced his fire-striker.

The first few sparks fizzled impotently out before they caught. Riderch bent down then and struck closer to the ground, and there a spark mingled with the fumes, and with a howling wail the grotto went up in flames. There was no chance, he knew, that the fire would spread very far beyond that stone room, but he hardly cared. He had done what he came back to do, and as he stumbled singed through the scalding front door and into the moaning winter wind he felt drunk enough to fall upon the road a second time. He cupped his paws around his mouth instead, and sucking in a deep breath shouted to the terraces above: "Fire! Fire! Run for your lives, the inn is on fire!" A host of voices

swelled from the rooms within. The doors to the terraces swung open one by one, beating against their opposite walls with the sound of hooves on stone, but by that time Riderch was halfway down the alley leading to the Rinnea.

10

On their first night away from the ranch, Riderch and Disma had squatted at a tiny gwerthon in the rocky foothills of the Greteboga, with a mule they could not possibly feed. No folk lived there, but the coyotes were out in droves; and though they had heard coyotes call a thousand times from the hayloft, they seemed that night to be different beasts entirely: vengeful, bloodthirsty, inevitable.

Those same coyotes were crying for Riderch now, as he lay half-buried in dry corn awaiting the pre-dawn hour when folk would wake and set out to work. Coyotes were common along the Rinnea, for that was where their prey preferred to live; and from time to time, folk said, they would find ways into the city through her hundred ancient crevices, where they would steal ducks and fight each other over scrap heaps. They had never seemed so loud to Riderch before, but that night they were all he could hear.

Come morning, however, when the Opossum Star was painting streaks on the horizon with his tail, Riderch climbed down from his silo again, showering the dust below with the kernels that rolled from his poncho. Islawr was quiet again, half a dozen streets over: the fire was out, and the riders who had come down from the Ceinych to investigate Teyrngar's body at the behest of his hysterical wife had long since ridden away. There was a chance that he would be recognized at the stables, he knew, either that day or one of the next; but there was just as good a chance that he would not be, and he found, upon reflection, that he was not worried about it in the slightest. He had told no one at Islawr his name or his business. No folk save for the grooms had been outside to watch Teyrngar die, and they would not be foolish enough even to suggest that they had seen anything; and even the barmaid, judging by her swift, unquestioning departure, would want nothing do with it.

Crowning all of this, a singleminded purpose had sprouted in Riderch during his night among the corn. Gwyarc, though he was moving to take his place as leader of the band, was strictly correct: Riderch would steal from Rhuddri, or else he would vanish into the wastes. Let Disma castrate himself in service to the king, he thought, Disma and anyone else who liked. He knew what he was, and so did the coyotes.

The sun had nearly risen over the Greteboga when he returned for the third time to the Ceinych's stables. He would have been far too late to arrive if he had been a groom there, for the morning's work was well underway and much of it was likely complete. But Riderch did not want to arrive early that day. Nay, he wanted to arrive late, so as to profit the most from the conspicuous hole he hoped to find among the ranks of the grooms. Knowing that Rhuddri's riders would resent his carrying a sword, he hid his falchion, scabbard and all, at the bottom of a bone-dry well filled in with tumbled rocks, then hopped the Ceinych's retaining walls and padded once more across the wintered lawn to the eastern door.

The commotion within was greater that morning, to his delight. The grooms ran about on their errands with doubled haste, the older bullying the younger. The riders, seeing to their mounts, were more alert than they had been the day before, muttering to each other in twos and threes. Even the horses seemed ill at ease, knowing in their wordless way that the whole stable was off-kilter. It was a promising development, and Riderch had to stifle a smile as he walked the great lane between the stalls.

His pleasure grew all the more delicious when he passed the last of the horses to find Master Kyllister among the mules, pulling a few of the grooms bodily into clumps and jabbing long, thin claws in diverse directions. He was impatient – which, of course, he had been the last two times Riderch had spoken to him – but there was a tenor to his impatience now that smacked of disquiet, even desperation, and the way he pushed his stablepaws away when he was finished with them made Riderch think that he was in very great haste indeed. He decided to meet that haste standing still.

"Morning, Master Kyllister," he said, tipping his hat to the old rider several long moments after he noticed Riderch standing there. "Am I interrupting something? I can wait, if you'd like."

Kyllister regarded him as a figure from a dream, seeming hardly to recognize him as folk at all. In truth, Riderch looked rather worse for wear that morning: dusty and disheveled from a night among the corn, whiskers singed by burning brightwine, and crazed in a way that he could not conceal. It was an unintended effect, but in that moment proved the very thing that swayed Kyllister's impression of the buck. "You look like you slept in a pasture," he said.

"You're not too far off the mark," Riderch smirked.

"Hare's horns, and you smell like a trough," he added, wrinkling his nose.

"Most of us go to bed smelling that way, don't we?" said Riderch.

"What do you want?" Kyllister snapped, remembering his haste when a pair of yellow-clad riders trotted in through the great double doors.

"I want to make my case again, that's all," said Riderch, removing his hat and placing it over his breast. "I know you said you didn't want to hire some fatherless tumbleweed, and I understand why, but I figured I would at least offer to work here for free one more time in case you didn't hear me yester-"

"You want to muck stalls that badly?" Kyllister barked at him.

"Like a coyote wants a duck's eggs," said Riderch. "I can do whatever work you put me to, big or small. I'll prove it to you."

Kyllister's foot pounded the hay-strewn floor like the roll of a snare drum. He deliberated for a moment, weighing the workings of the stables on the scales of his mind, but did not come to a conclusion until several more riders, chinchillafolk clad in the rare green and white of Gwall, entered through the double doors with their attendants and their highbred culpeo hounds. Then he clucked his tongue and, looking about him, snagged by the collar a groom who must have been no younger than fifteen, perhaps five years Riderch's junior. He bore no resemblance to other bucks at the stables, thought Riderch, but was transparently of Anialdir stock, no doubt a slave of the Ceinych or some Guilur attached thereto. His face had lost all kittenish softness, but had not as yet imbibed the airy shimmer that the sun forces upon all harefolk who ride the wastes. He stared at Riderch with knitted brow, then looked up at Kyllister.

"Riderch, was it?" said Kyllister.

"Aye," said Riderch, tipping his hat at the groom.

"Riderch, this is Awdurdodus," said Kyllister, pushing the groom between them. "Calonblaidd is usually over the mules, but I sent him to help with the palfreys since one of the older boys failed to report today. Awdurdodus, therefore, has taken up Calonblaidd's duties. Are you following me?"

"Are you offering me a job?" Riderch ventured.

"The workhorses occupy the western half of this stable," Kyllister continued, making a sweeping gesture in that direction, "which means you will occupy the western half of this stable. East of the double doors are the chargers and palfreys, both My Lord's and his guests': if you touch them, I'll have your ears cut off. Our guests' mules share the western stalls, and are marked by their own arms: if you touch those in a way I dislike, I'll cut your ears off myself. Am I very clear, Riderch?"

"Clear as a gwerthon spring, Kyllister," said Riderch, unable to stifle a grin. "You're making the right choice, I'll have you know."

"That's Master Kyllister to you, boy," the stablemaster snapped. "And because it falls to me to ensure that you're telling the truth, I'm putting you under Awdurdodus. You will do whatever he tells you to do. You will do whatever anyone tells you to do, in fact, and nothing of your own will. I don't permit you even to speak unless spoken to. Tell me you understand."

"Aye, Master Kyllister," said Riderch.

"I won't pay you a copper more than the youngest bucks simply because you're older and stronger than they," said Kyllister. "You muck stalls, Riderch. You carry water. I need you for that, and only that. I certainly don't need a horseleech."

"I don't reckon that's true," Riderch shrugged, "but you're the boss."

"Is he a horseleech, Master Kyllister?" asked Awdurdodus.

"No," said Kyllister, "unless he wants to send to Ancathair to have me proven wrong. Treat him as one of yours."

"But doesn't he have a title, Master Kyllister?" asked Awdurdodus.

"None," said Kyllister. "He's an overgrown kitten, as far as it concerns you."

"Like a Hellknight, then!" Awdurdodus beamed, shooting a sardonic glance at Riderch. "Ought to be useful, having a Hellknight around."

"Watch what you call me, kid," Riderch snapped, jabbing a claw at him.

Kyllister slapped Riderch across the face then; and grabbing hold of one of his ears, twisted it until Riderch was in agony. "I'm going to say this once, and only once," Kyllister hissed. "Half of the Anialdir is at court these days. That is the sole reason I am hiring you. You will comport yourself with the dignity of Pedwar Ceinych, therefore, or I'll have you in the stocks."

"Aye, Master Kyllister," Riderch gasped, then stepped out of the stablemaster's grip and rubbed his ear.

"You may sleep in the hayloft if you've nowhere else," said Kyllister. "A few of the boys do, the ones who don't have beds at home. Either way, you will report to Awdurdodus one constellation before dawn. If you prove yourself trustworthy to him, then perhaps – *perhaps* – when I'm not swimming in dignitaries, I will send to Ancathair for a letter for you."

"Thank you, Master Kyllister," said Riderch.

"Now beat the hoof," said Kyllister with a snap of his claws. "I don't want to hear another word about you today." Already chafing to be rid of them, the stablemaster departed on his long legs, making for the arriving party from Gwall.

"Follow me," Awdurdodus commanded then, making westward with a newfound superiority that inflated his breast like a drake's. "We've got to pick some hooves, then I'll show you the hayloft, the barns, and the well. You know how not to get your head kicked in?"

"I know a hell of a lot more than you do," Riderch grumbled, trailing behind him.

"Master Kyllister says you're from Ancathair?" said Awdurdodus. "You ever meet Cyngen?"

"No," said Riderch.

"His son's at the Ceinych again," said Awdurdodus. "I reckoned you came in with him, but you look too shabby for that."

"I slept in a corn silo last night," said Riderch.

"That sounds like a good way to get fleas," said Awdurdodus, shooting a queer look over his shoulder.

"I've slept in worse," Riderch shrugged. "You're Anialdir stock."

"Was that a question?" asked Awdurdodus.

"I'm just surprised they put you over the mules with all the war-banders around," said Riderch.

"Well Calonblaidd is gone," Awdurdodus explained, "and we're too busy to worry about pecking order. Besides, Master Kyllister is pretty good to us."

"Not too good to put you in the hay loft," Riderch grumbled.

"You want him to put us up in his house?" asked Awdurdodus, raising an eyebrow at him.

"What's Cyngen's son doing at the Ceinych?" asked Riderch, returning to the subject.

"Same thing he's always doing," said Awdurdodus; and stopping before a little palm wood tool rack between a pair of mule stalls, he took a stonepick for himself and tossed one to Riderch.

"Which is?" Riderch pressed.

"Trying to get the king to give him Princess Rhian," said Awdurdodus. "He's only been doing it as long as I can remember. I'd expect someone from Ancathair to know that."

"I don't give a lick about Cyngen's house," said Riderch, so unconvincingly that his voice cracked. A beat of silence passed before he spoke again: "Is that why the rest of these folk are here?"

Awdurdodus shook his head. "They're here because they already know what the king is going to say. Well, and on account of the roads, and I reckon because of what happened at that watering hole down the street."

"Watering hole?" asked Riderch, hoping that his flushing was not noticeable.

"Some folk from Godnu got in a fight there a couple days ago, it sounds like," said Awdurdodus, beating the pick against his palm. "They got licked real good, but one of them must have come back and killed the innkeeper. Set his tavern on fire and everything."

Riderch bit his cheeks to keep from grinning. "But what does that have to do with Cyngen?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Awdurdodus. "It's his son Brockwell who's here, but he's just in the way. Don't tell anyone I said that."

"Aye, of course," said Riderch.

"Anyhow, King Rhuddri is sending Princess Rhian off to Gwall to marry King Sheen," said Awdurdodus. "I reckon Prince Brockwell is trying to convince My Lord to give Rhian to him again, and the rest are here to make sure that nobody's killed or robbed until the wedding's over."

"Fair enough," Riderch nodded, clawing the floor with his toes. "When is the wedding?"

"Beats me," Awdurdodus shrugged. "Now quit jawing and pick. I want fresh water for them after this."

Riderch would have kept him there if he could have. He tried, in fact, stammering after him as he disappeared behind the next stall's half-wall; but mindful of Kyllister's eyes, he set to work at once, thoughts swarming in his skull like so many wasps.

All that day, even through the formidable noontide heat, Riderch spent in the most strenuous, unglamorous labor: picking and brushing, feeding and watering, turning out to pasture and gathering in, forking hay and shoveling muck and sweeping out the incorrigible dust and sand. There was hardly a moment to spare, for the stalls were bursting at the seams with visitors coming and going to and from Gorseth Floyd; and every time one was vacated, the stablepaws could not delay in readying it for the next arrival. Not since childhood had Riderch toiled so hard for so long, when he and Disma would haul bales together, or carry great buckets of water on yokes like oxen. Disma had always been too small to carry heavy burdens himself – this had earned him ire his whole life, and it was only Riderch's constant presence which trampled that ire in the end.

It was the happiest Riderch had been in recent memory. There were horses in his own camp, of course, both their mounts and the odd pilfered steed led off to market wherever it was least likely to be recognized. But each member of his band cared for his own beasts; and being their leader, Riderch knew not to muck like a common groom. He found at the Ceinych, however, that he dearly missed the

work. Horses were easy creatures compared to folk: just as greedy, and often too aware of their own might; but they were anything but duplicitous, and could not have conceived of guile or treachery if someone had undertaken to teach them. Best of all, they rarely spoke; and when they did speak, they did not demand an answer from Riderch. Theirs was the language of action, the only language Riderch trusted. No direction any of the grooms gave him told him anything he did not know already, and the day was not half over when Awdurdodus realized it.

Being by far the strongest of any stablepaw at the Ceinych, Riderch fell shortly to bearing burdens that would otherwise require two. For this reason he found himself running back and forth from the well, through the nearer eastern door, and therefore past the ailing palfrey among the king's own steeds, again and again and again. Its misery vexed him, until late that afternoon he once more fell to compulsion. He stopped before its stall, enthralled by its dull eyes and its fallen noble presence, and imagined the cut that might cure it without killing.

Awdurdodus found him there. "This is for today, Hellknight," he said, grabbing Riderch by the wrist and pressing a few coppers into his paw. "You were late, so it's one short."

"I told you not to call me that," Riderch growled, checking his tone in front of the horse.

"Then don't call me Awdurdodus," he shrugged. "Nobody here does, except for Master Kyllister. Awr is fine."

Riderch dropped the coins into his pocket, not wanting to betray the fatness of his purse; they clicked against his fire-striker, and he saw Teyrngar lying in the dirt beneath him. "Whose horse is this, Awr?" he asked.

"That's one of My Lord's," said Awdurdodus, shaking his head. "His favorite, too. It's a real shame. They're going to have to put him down, though nobody's willing to say it yet."

"He doesn't look that old," said Riderch. "Not by a mile. He's intact?"

"Aye," said Awdurdodus. "But he can't hardly swallow any more, and he doesn't want to be turned out half the time."

"Didn't anyone try to cut it out?" asked Riderch, eyeing Awr intently.

The groom squirmed under his gaze. "It's real close to the big vein, Master Kyllister says. Someone might have tried when it was smaller, but now they can't find a horseleech who isn't afraid of killing it. The king has a red-hot temper, you've probably heard."

"Why don't you cut it out yourself?"

"I beg your pardon?" Riderch snapped.

"I don't mean nothing by it," Awr said in a lower voice. "Everyone knows he's hot-blooded. Just don't tell anyone I said that."

Riderch blinked at him, then looked around to find that they were still well apart from the other grooms. "What's his name?" he asked.

"The king?" said Awdurdodus.

"The king's palfrey," Riderch corrected.

"Oh, it's Carbit," said Awdurdodus.

"Cut him free, Riderch! Were you not born to wield the blade?"

"Would you shut up?" Riderch demanded, turning a perfect circle. Awdurdodus jerked, then took two steps back.

"Well quit asking me questions, then!" he demanded.

"What?" said Riderch, realizing as he looked at Awdurdodus that his eyes were intolerably dry. "Nothing. Forget about it. Do I have time to find something to eat?"

"We…we need to bring the last ones in for the night," Awdurdodus said haltingly. "Then I reckon you can eat. After that it's all tack and tools. Some of the clippers need to be sharpened."

"I can do that," said Riderch; then slipping by Awdurdodus, he stepped out through the rear doors facing the pasture, swaying as he did so.

It was almost dark, in fact, when Riderch at last met Disma on the riverbank. The little raccoon was sitting beside the bridge, having waited so long that he now debated returning to the Sandhill. He nearly wished he had when Riderch found him, looking no less disheveled, no less wild, than if he had just crawled out of an ancient cistern. They stood staring at one another for half a minute before either spoke.

"I know I'm late," said Riderch at last. "And I'm sure I look like hell, but there's a good reason for that."

"Riderch, what are you doing?" asked Disma, eyeing the traffic on the road before lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "I heard what happened at Islawr. They're saying that some folk from Godnu killed the innkeeper?"

"As far as anyone knows," Riderch nodded. "I imagine they went up to the Ceinych?"

"They skipped town, Riderch!" Disma hissed. "*I* nearly went to the Ceinych today, expecting to find you in a noose!"

"You'd have fit right in with all of those little houndmasters from Gwall," Riderch chuckled.

Disma's eyes widened to cover his face. "Did you go back there?" he asked.

"Of course I did," said Riderch, pulling a copper from his pocket to flaunt. "They're desperate for paws, just like I said."

"I can't believe you would do something so rash," Disma marveled. "I can't believe they don't have your face drawn up all over the city."

"The Ceinych is spread too thin to bother with bar fights," said Riderch. "I told you to have faith in me, didn't I? Well it's about to pay off."

"Did you find out when they're giving her away?" asked Disma, almost breathless now.

"Not yet, but it'll be soon, judging by the number of guests," said Riderch. "The grooms at the Ceinych have looser lips than I could have asked for. I reckon I only need to find someone who knows, and I'll have the wedding date for you."

Disma stood gaping for a long moment, then merely shook his head.

"You didn't think I could do it, did you?" Riderch sneered.

"You've been acting like a lunatic ever since we went to the Deepwaste, Riderch," said Disma, dropping his eyes. "You look like one of the nomads."

"I'm happy enough, proving you wrong," said Riderch, and returned the copper to his pocket. "But what about the others?"

"I haven't told them about Islawr, if that's what you're asking," said Disma. "I didn't even tell Hawen, although she guessed it herself. The others are still debating. I reckon they'll do it, Riderch, but…but if it goes sour, I don't expect you'll have a band to go back to. Gwyarc is seeing to that."

Riderch scowled. "I know. And you? Would you go back?"

"They wouldn't let me," said Disma, "they know I'm your second. Besides, I'm still hoping you'll listen to reason."

"There's nothing reasonable about it," said Riderch; and flinging his poncho over his shoulder, he thrust a claw over the roofs toward the pinnacle of Pedwar Ceinych. "I told you I'd steal from Rhuddri, Disma, and that's turkey. I'll steal from Rhuddri, and Sheen, and Cyngen, all in one fell swoop. They've all earned it. You know they have."

"I don't know any such thing," Disma shrilled, "and you'd do better not to see Eguin's face in everyone you dislike."

"You're one to talk," Riderch scoffed. "But you'll come around when I cut us all free. Now if there's nothing else, I ought to get back to the stables before I'm missed. Can we meet at midnight tomorrow? I expect it'll be easier to slip out then."

"Better to do this when only the Stars can see, anyhow," Disma sighed. With a pickpocket's deftness he reached out then and grasped Riderch's wrist, wrapping his long, thin claws around it. "Just be careful, Riderch. I really am looking out for you. If this turns tail up…I don't want them to hang you from the city wall. You know Rhuddri; we wouldn't even get your body back before the birds and the dogs had scattered it."

"We'll look out for each other," said Riderch, and clapped his arm; then turning to go, he paused for a moment. "Oh, see that one more thing makes it back to Mydge, if you would: we'll need red ponchos. Have Hawen buy dye in the market, that will be cheaper than buying new ones."

"Do you want to tell me why?" asked Disma.

"Godnu is fond of picking fights these days," said Riderch, pulling his poncho over his head and pawing it to Disma. "We might as well let them pick ours for us."

11

That night, after the work was done and the stables were asleep, Riderch climbed the ladder to the hayloft and there bedded down in a secluded corner. Without a poncho to cover him, a cocoon to shield him from the dry winter cold, only the bales remained to insulate him. The familiar smell of hay, sweet and dusty and dryly decaying, conjured a charging host of unwelcome memories. He felt around in his pocket for his fire-striker: his paw closed around it, and in this way he threatened the host until it retreated.

As Master Kyllister had said, there were not many grooms who made use of those accommodations, for even the lowest servants of King Rhuddri came largely from landed war-band stock; but there were a few Anialdir folk, and Riderch wondered by their second-paw clothes and mistrustful faces whence they had come to Pedwar Ceinych. They bedded down as far from him as they could, whispering among themselves and throwing furtive glances in his direction when they thought he could not see them. They were universally afraid of him, for he was twice as large as most of them and made every move as if he were throwing the first punch of a brawl, and he had done nothing to allay those fears. They fell asleep in time, however; and Riderch, as weary as he was from the day's work and the previous night's crouching in the corn silo, followed close behind them. He dreamed of fire, of blood and screaming and the heft of an oversized blade gliding through flesh, until a voice woke him in the black hours before dawn.

"Stand aright, Riderch. Why are you sleeping when the time is so short?"

Riderch's eyes snapped open. For a moment he felt that he still dreamed, that the barn was on fire, and that Teyrngar's burning body clung to him like a cloak. He threw off his blanket of hay, however, and sat dizzily up, and by the heat trapped within knew that he was simply feverish. "Who said that?" he asked, but saw no one when he looked around. The hayloft's dormers let in starlight enough to tell him that he was not blind; but if there were someone nearby, he was not at all sure that it would reveal them.

"I did. Won't you help me, Riderch? There's so little time left, and I can make it worth your while."

"Where are you?" Riderch whispered, standing and groping around to find only piles of hay.

"I'm downstairs, Riderch. Just beneath you, as is only meet. Won't you help me?"

"You were at my tent," said Riderch, wishing that he still possessed his falchion. "You told me to look up that fence. Is that you, Disma? Dargan?"

He heard laughter below him: bubbly, braying laughter full of an almost Elfen mischief. “I brought you here so that you could help me. Put that impetuousness of yours to good use for a change: there is profit in it for you.”

The voice truly seemed below Riderch now, in a way that it had not a moment ago. He stood stock still for a pawful of moments, listening to the subtle shifting of the hayloft. None of the grooms were up, as far as he could tell – a few softly snored, but no more. Cursing under his breath, then, he tried to imagine the shape of the hayloft as he remembered it; and sweeping his arms out in front of him, picked his way through the bales toward the ladder. He nearly overstepped the ledge, and would have broken his neck on the floor if he had fallen, but caught himself at the last moment on one of the supporting struts upholding the roof. From there it was an easy climb down to the narrow hall, where he found a lantern hanging from a nail on the wall. This he lit with his fire-striker, a brief shower of stars that gave way to a buttery glow; and no longer blind, he stepped through the door into the cavernous stable.

Some of the horses shifted when they felt him pass, flicking attentive ears or raising whole heads. Riderch could see no more than ten paces in any direction, however, and nothing else seemed to move in the darkness.

“Where are you?” he asked again; and then, after thinking for a moment: “Awr, is that you?”

He heard laughter again, ahead and to his left, a laughter almost a whinny. It taunted Riderch, and this taunt spurred him to follow it faster. He padded toward the double doors in the south wall as well as he could guess, fingering the handle of his deer-knife, but stopped short just shy of them when the glow from his lantern washed over a lean, golden body.

Carbit stood in his stall, miserably awake. The goiter hanging from his neck seemed twice as large in the unsteady light, and yet even now there was a stateliness in the steed that could not be stifled. He stared hard at Riderch, pleading with him, and Riderch stared back. Then laughter erupted again, so near that the buck jumped; he turned a full circle, nearly falling over from dizziness, but only Carbit regarded him in the end.

“Who’s there?” Riderch whispered hoarsely. “What do you want from me?”

“Why, it’s me-hee-hee-hee, Riderch!” the voice whinnied, in a way that Riderch found wholly unconvincing. “Carbit, the king’s own mount. Won’t you help me?”

“Hare’s scut you are,” Riderch growled, raising the lantern over his head. “Are you up in the window?”

More laughter, and this so near his ears that Riderch shivered. “You seem unmoved by your fellow harefolk, and so I thought I would appeal to you as something you truly love. Is it working?”

Riderch watched Carbit’s mouth. It did not move, but the palfrey seemed expectant in a way that Riderch could not explain. “Am I asleep?” he asked after a long pause.

“Does it matter? You can heed me just as easily dreaming as you can waking.”

“What do you want, then?” Riderch demanded, addressing Carbit against his better judgment. “Spit it out!”

“Well I wish to, Riderch. Alas, a wonder like that would kill you, the way you are now. Neigh, I propose we meet in the middle. You have your knife with you, I see.”

Riderch’s spine prickled. “What of it?” he asked.

“Surely you can see which way the wind is blowing – even you, who let your arm think for you. No horseleech can cure me now. None dares try. But you can, Riderch; and if you do, the king himself will deliver what you seek.”

“You want me to cut out the goiter,” said Riderch flatly. Carbit’s eyes widened; a spark of life was in them for a moment, only to fall back into their liquid depths.

“Is that not what you do best, cutthroat?”

"Who are you?" Riderch asked again. "You reckon you've got me pegged, but I'm not fool enough to touch that horse just because some Elf told me to."

More laughter. "And yet fool enough to touch the king's daughter! Did I not lead you to Malmuck? Have I not set you up to profit already? And yet it will be too late if you do not earn the king's admiration now. Today."

"You were talking over me in the road," said Riderch. Silence stretched on, and his thoughts grated against his brains like so many grains of sand, until one single word emerged from the storm: "Dinistrith?"

The laughter that ensued was from many mouths; and though it seemed to Riderch loud enough to shake the stables, the sleeping horses did not stir. "Would you heed me if I were Dinistrith, and not Carbit? Dinistrith loves horses, after all, and this stallion still has life in him – or he will, if you consent to excise what's killing him."

"You love nothing and nobody," Riderch barked, with more passion than he intended. Carbit balked; Riderch felt a cold stone settle in his belly. "You reckon my memory's that short? Too little by a mile, too late by a lifetime. Go find some other poor sucker to con."

"You would rather Carbit drop dead?"

"There must be a dozen horseleeches in Gorseth Floyd," said Riderch. "Why don't you go talk to one of them if you care so much about this palfrey?"

"Because they wouldn't be able to hear me, Riderch, and because their paws would falter in the cutting. You are the only horseleech in the Anialdir bold enough not to hesitate."

"Well I can't just cut him open while he's standing here," said Riderch, and with that feeble protest realized that the voice had turned him around with shocking ease. "I'd have to put him under somehow, and then there's infection to worry about."

"Which is why the time is so short. There is an herbalist in the city, between the Rinnea and the city jail, who will make a sedative for you. See that no one sees you buying it, then hide it until tomorrow night. You must make the cut then, while the rest of the stable is asleep. As for infection, you need not worry about that."

"Tomorrow night?" Riderch balked. "I can't cut open a horse in the middle of the night, I need to be able to see. Hell's teeth, it's a new moon, even."

"There will be no other opportunity. You must do it then, and do it without hesitating. The lamp you now carry will suffice for light, and I will guide you as well as I can."

"I won't do it," Riderch growled, fighting to pull himself out of the debate entirely.

"Why not?"

"I don't owe you a thing!" he insisted.

"Tell the truth, Riderch." Someone else spoke now, a deeper, raspier voice like the one he had heard while he lay in the road. There was a scolding quality to it that terrified him.

"It will blow the whole thing if I kill it," he said. The quaver in his own voice was so obvious that he despised himself for it; but he was simply too hot and too lightheaded to check himself any longer, and something about the voice moved his spirit like a bit in his teeth.

"The failure of your endeavor is guaranteed as things currently stand." It was the fair voice again. "Only force will avail you now – and therein, dear Riderch, lies your skill."

Riderch growled and turned his head to spit on the floor, only to find himself parched. "Folk say that the Stars can't lie," he said. "Halsers say it at least, or they do about the Stars folk can see."

The voice did not answer.

"I never believed that," he continued, "and I especially don't believe it about Dinistrith. If you're telling me that I'll miss the wedding if I don't cut a goiter out of a horse's neck, I reckon it's just as likely I'll blow the whole thing if I do. But since you seem keen to make a deal, I'll make one right

back. I'll do it; but after I do it, if things don't go off without a hitch, I'll come back here and kill this horse myself. You can take that to the bank." Carbit snorted and backed against his trough, sloshing water onto the floor. Riderch licked his lips, unbearably thirsty.

"The tongue is a sword, Riderch. Certainly mine is. You're lucky, however, that I love cutthroats as much as I love horses. I will help you if you will help me."

"You'd better," Riderch warned. "That said, I'm going to pay that herbalist a visit now, even if I have to camp out in front of his door. I won't believe a word of this come morning if I fall asleep and wake up again."

"Don't forget your poncho, Riderch. It's cold outside at this time of year." The tittering voice erupted into laughter again. A wind arose, snaking through some cracked window in some remote part of the stable, and blew out Riderch's lantern. He tried to relight it with his fire-striker, but when the wind proved relentless he simply picked his way along the stalls, watching the stars through the high, square windows, until he was back in the narrow hall again. A pair of eyes blinked at him from the hayloft, then disappeared.

12

The following day was spent no differently than the one before, in strenuous labor over the mules. Riderch, being already awake, was first to begin his tasks, before even Awdurdodus could arrive to direct him. He hardly needed the direction, in any case: stable-work was second nature to him, and short of turning them out to pasture, there was nothing he dared not do himself. Yet Awdurdodus, as it turned out, would scarcely have twitched a whisker if he had. So crowded had the stables been of late, so disrupted the rhythms and unpredictable the demands, that the young groom was only too happy to have one less thing to overwatch. When he had checked his work, and had ensured that the fatherless tumbleweed knew what the beasts required, he left Riderch to care for the mules unsupervised.

This Riderch did, with a diligent ease that proved his experience far better than any forged letter, consulting nobody and yet getting in nobody's way, knowing what each beast desired at every hour of the day by its mere carriage or the object of its attention. Against all expectations – including his own – Riderch proved himself magnetic to every laborer among the workhorses. He made no effort to speak to any of them – he declined to do so entirely, in fact – and yet by the way he roamed the stalls Riderch was always at paw when difficulties arose, when mules or pack horses would fight with one another over the stall walls or when some beast refused to return from pasture. He knew the solution to all of these problems, and both the grooms and the beasts themselves perceived that he knew it, and so they found themselves quite unintentionally deferring to him wherever he stepped. Even the younger grooms, those who slept in the hayloft and feared Riderch as much as any mustang, began to see him as a kind of helpful Ent: fearsome in his might, and yet equal to five of them with a pitchfork. He could not be imposed upon, for in spite of all his burning pride he thought of no stable-work as imposition. He was to play the part of a stablepaw as long as he was at Pedwar Ceinych, and were not these beasts as dependent upon him, a fraud, for their daily needs as they were upon their true masters? Aye, he thought, and more so.

He thought little of this esteem, however. He thought little of anything, in fact, save for the jar of paste in his pocket and the knife hanging from his belt which he had ground to a screaming edge early that morning. Toiling among the workhorses, he saw Carbit very little; but whenever he passed his stall on the way to convey some burden, his whole attention was captured. The stallion stared back at him, miserably expectant, as if he understood already his imminent ordeal.

And imminent it was, for that day passed in a blur of effort, in a succession of comings and goings from all across the Anialdir, until the sun was set and the Evening Star blazed over the far

western peaks of Clegyrau. His work persisted until that star retired; and then, after he had collected his copper from an effusive Awdurdodus, Riderch left the Ceinych to find food, to meet with Disma, and finally to prepare for the impending hour.

This he did according to very specific instructions. For Dinistrith – or so he had taken to calling the reedy voice that haunted him – had directed him to buy a lump of soap from the herbalist, pounded together with jackass bitters, as well as a needle and strong thread. With this soap he washed himself and his clothes in a little earthen bath-house beside the Rinnea. After this he dried all alike over a smoky fire fed with creosote; and smelling thus of herbs and wet soil, he returned to the hayloft, where he pretended to sleep until the tip of the Great Horse's sword had just pierced the eastern horizon. Then he arose to find the stables as silent as they had been the night before, the whole grand house swollen with a single held breath. The grooms were all asleep, curled up atop the bales in their ponchos and woolen caps. Riderch picked his way between them, careful not to wake a single one. The ladder creaked terribly as he climbed down, yet even when he had taken the lantern from its nail and lit it, he saw no eyes peering down at him. Fetching a pail of water and a stack of clean rags, he entered the high hall panting with anticipation and made his way toward the double doors on its southern side.

Carbit awaited him there, standing in his stall with his head held, if not high, at least higher than before. Riderch believed then – for such things are easier to believe in the dead of night – that the palfrey truly did know what awaited him, and that he had roused himself to the same kind of resolve that any folk might have.

"Dinistrith can talk to horses easily enough, I reckon," said Riderch, as he hung his lantern from a hook on the corner of the stall's post and set down his bucket and rags. Carbit made no answer.

"I wouldn't tell you to expect to wake up if I were doing this by daylight," he continued, fishing the fist-sized jar from his pocket and pulling off the lid. It smelled first of honey, for it was honey that bound the paste together and made it in any way palatable, then afterward of the green earth from which its wort had been pulled: yellow aster, huckleberry root, alder bark, poppy seeds, and enough thornapple seeds to kill a full-grown harefolk. "I'd tell you to go see a halser if you were a folk, in fact, since there's a good chance this goes sideways, but I'd say you know that already."

He held the jar under Carbit's nose, half-expecting him to refuse it as picky horses often do. But the palfrey was resolved indeed, and probed his long tongue into its wide mouth, scraping up every drop of the sticky potion. Riderch caressed his face, something he had wanted to do from the first moment he had laid eyes on him, then set the jar down and began to wash his paws anew in the bucket of water with his lump of soap. "Not to say I don't reckon I can do it," he appended. "I've helped a leech cut these out of old horses more than once. You get them sometimes – has something to do with the food around here, I heard. Anyhow, it depends on where it is and what it's pressing on. There are too many things in the neck there that you need, and I don't want to cut any of those."

If Carbit had even a faint idea of what Riderch was saying, he did not show it. The cadence of his voice, it seemed, was all he cared about: a soft, pandering baritone that Riderch only employed for horses. No other folk – save perhaps Disma – even knew that he possessed it. It did its job, nevertheless, for Carbit sighed and closed his eyes before the wort had yet begun to do its work. Riderch continued to ramble, leaning against the stall's pole while the lantern beside his head cast enormous shadows on the wall.

"When it's healthy, the gland sits over the windpipe like a little saddle," he said, suddenly wishing that he had a bottle of brightwine with him. "There's an old saying among harefolk that you give horses goiters when you ride them too hard on one side, or spur them too much. That's not true, mind you – but then again, maybe it's true in its way: you ride a beast too hard for too long and you'll kill it. That's why it's old horses who get them, or so the saying goes."

He fell silent for a time, aware that he was beginning to flush, then spoke again: “Eguin told me that the gland looks the same on harefolk. Funny enough, I’ve never seen one – you’d think I would have, with as many throats as I’ve cut. It holds up, then, doesn’t it? That saying about riding too hard. The same thing happens to folk, and just like you, sometimes we have to cut ourselves free however we can. Listen to me, talking myself into it.”

Carbit lay down then, too inebriated to remain upright. Riderch fortified himself with a deep breath, then rolled up his sleeves, lathered one of the rags in soapy water, and gingerly began to clean Carbit’s swollen neck. He rinsed it thrice before turning his attention to the lantern, removing its chimney and screwing up its wick to make it as bright as possible. Reaching for his belt, he drew his deer-knife, and allowed himself only a brief moment to lament that he had no more fitting implements. He had tested its edge a dozen times, however, and knew that with an exceedingly steady paw – and the heavenly aid he was ostensibly being promised – he would at least be able to reach the lump to cut it out. He held the knife’s blade over the flame, turning it over and over until every inch was too hot to touch, then replaced the chimney, set the lantern on the floor, knelt down himself, and hefted Carbit’s stupefied head into a more favorable position.

“Could it be any darker in here?” he huffed, whispering curses under his breath.

“You’re lucky I allow you this much light.”

The voice was speaking over Riderch’s shoulder, as if it stood just behind him, but he knew that there was no one there. “You going to just talk me through it, then?” he scoffed.

“That’s right.”

“Hare’s horns,” Riderch muttered. “Maybe I caught sunstroke in the Deepwaste after all. Maybe I’m just mad.”

“As mad as a spring hare. Are you ready, Riderch?”

“No,” said Riderch. “But I’ll do it.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Begin, and I will direct your knife whither it must go.”

The voice brooked no delay. Riderch began as he had seen Eguin begin half a dozen times, with a cut just large enough to see where the gland straddled the windpipe in the pitiful light. The herbalist’s potion was doing its work, clearly, for the cut bled very little, and Carbit did not so much as flinch in his senseless, drooling torpor. That little cut grew by increments, and with it a sense of stark horror, as Riderch became more aware of the sheer size of the growth. So turgid now was the right lobe of the gland that he despaired of removing it without cutting clean through a vital vein; if it had been both lobes, he thought, he would have cut the vessel himself and fled Gorseth Floyd.

“Don’t hesitate. We have a great deal of work ahead of us.”

Riderch grunted, and choking up on the knife, persisted. Its blade was beautifully sharp, its tip narrow enough to do the delicate work around the windpipe. The sense of madness returned with every other breath; but Riderch threw it off each time, finding in his stubborn fever the defiance to cut again. Moreover, whenever the light proved insufficient, or wherever in that livid mass he could not tell the tumor from the wholesome flesh, someone would whisper in his ear: “A little to the right,” or “Veer wide, you’re too close to the vein,” or a more urgent “Stop, Riderch.” He bucked against these warnings at first, finding them wholly unsuited for so delicate a task; but when his fever swelled enough that he began to grow dizzy, he found that he had no choice but to obey the voice in every article. His paw became a steed under someone else’s reins, and in this way he cut Carbit free of the saddle which would have slain him.

The goiter, no smaller than a ripe papaya, Riderch discarded on the hay-strewn floor, where it glistened in the lamplight like some mare’s afterbirth. He was exhausted, for the knifework had taken hours of meticulous effort and unwavering focus, and he had not slept a wink after a full day’s labor; but he was only halfway done, for it still remained to sew Carbit’s wound. This final sprint Riderch did

not remember when it was done. He must have fished the needle and thread from his pocket, must have somehow threaded that needle in spite of his delirium, must have sewn in the sutures and tied them off, but he was not aware of having done so when at last he examined them in the lamplight. His only thoughts were of his thirst, of the stagecoach driver spinning through the air, and of the feeling of the halser's ear coming off in his paw. Carbit lay where he lay – breathing, if feebly – and no one would move him until he moved himself.

"What now?" he asked, his mouth so dry that he scarcely understood himself. "Do we need to rub creosote on the thread?"

"No. You need do no more leeching. Only touch the ear to the wound."

"The ear?" asked Riderch. "Which one?"

"The one around your neck."

This answer surprised Riderch, but he was too tired to argue now. Unfastening the top button of his linen shirt, he pulled the ear away from his burning breast and out of his collar, then pressed it against the wound. It was as supple as the day he had severed it, to his astonishment; and though the wound looked no different when he pulled it away, he himself felt cooler and steadier as he hid it once more beneath his shirt. He fell asleep then, slumped against Carbit, and dreamed of the deep, bubbling gwerthon into which he had dropped his sword. It sank to the bottom, waiting for someone else to retrieve it.

13

A shooting pain in Riderch's head awoke him. He was on his feet before he knew it, slipping in the straw while he hung helplessly by the ears. Master Kyllister held him fast in one paw, remarkably strong for how lean he was, while the other landed blows across his face. Riderch raised his arms to protect himself, and noticed Awdurdodus standing just outside the stall, his whiskers as limp as willow wands. Dawn had not yet broken; soft, gray light filtered through the windows. The weakness of a broken fever asserted itself then: Riderch began to pant as he awaited the end of Kyllister's barrage.

"You wretched idiot!" the stablemaster roared. "You butcher! Do you have any idea what you've done? The last grandson of My Late Lady's favorite mare! It will be my neck for this – and I swear by Dinistrith's sword that it will be yours too!"

"W-what?" asked Riderch, so parched that he could hardly speak. "Did he die? He shouldn't have died."

"Of course he died, cur," Kyllister seethed, shaking him so violently by the ears that Riderch saw stars. "You killed him! You slit his throat!"

Riderch's heart plunged into the depths of his guts. "But…but he said he'd be fine," he rasped. "I got the whole thing out, and I didn't nick anything important."

"You cut him open with a buck knife and you expected him to live?" Kyllister balked, his nomad's eyes bulging out of their sockets.

"Where's all the blood?" asked Riderch, fighting to look down at the floor. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, a patch of red-stained hay where Carbit lay, and beside it a smaller one where he had dropped the goiter; but there was by no means a great deal of blood, and the goiter had taken a pile of hay with it when someone had kicked it into the corner, revealing an otherwise clean floor.

"What?" asked Kyllister.

"The wort had some things in it for bleeding," said Riderch, looking at his own paws to find them crimson. "I can't remember what they were, but I don't reckon he bled to death."

Kyllister's mouth moved for half a minute before any words emerged. "You drugged him?" he croaked.

Just then, as if on cue, a mighty groan sounded from the floor. Kyllister's grip tightened on Riderch's ears. Awdurdodus hiccuped, as the slow, laborious movement of a great body began. Carbit stood shakily to his hooves, glassy-eyed and drooling, regarding the harefolk with dull dispassion. Riderch watched him from the corner of his eye, awake enough now to know how momentous the development was, but said nothing. Carbit crowded them both out of the stall, stumbling enough that Kyllister feared being crushed; he turned to his trough then, sniffed last night's water, and began to drink deeply.

Riderch was beside him a moment later, wrenching free of Kyllister's grip and throwing himself at the trough. He submerged his whole head, half to drink, half to cool his febrile brains. It was the most rapturous thing he had ever felt. Carbit, still too stupefied to care, was content enough to share; and Kyllister, stupefied himself, could only stand and stare while Awdurdodus cowered behind him.

This paralysis quickly passed, however. The master's rage returned; and throwing caution to the wind, he entered the stall behind Carbit and grabbed Riderch once more by the ears, fishing him out of the trough and throwing him onto the floor outside the stall. Riderch gasped like a landed trout, overtaken by a grin, and staggered to his feet.

"Is this a joke to you?" Kyllister demanded. "My Lord will have your head for taking a knife to his mount. I've half a mind to take it myself."

"You won't," said Riderch, stifling his grin.

"Why shouldn't I?" Kyllister challenged. "I would be justified."

"You'll need someone to look after Carbit," said Riderch. "It was a clean cut, but he had a real piece of him taken out. I'll want to keep dirt out of the wound, and take the sutures out myself."

"There are other horseleeches in this city who can do that," said Kyllister.

"You'll have to tell him who made the cut, whoever it is," Riderch shrugged. "He'll ask – they always ask – and then he'll know too."

"My Lord is going to ask who did it!" Kyllister barked, pausing as a gaggle of young grooms hurried past with their claws in their ears. "Do you reckon I fear any leech more than him?"

"I told you I was a horseleech," said Riderch. "Tell him I did it."

"I have no proof that you're a horseleech beyond your word," said Kyllister, looming over Riderch, "and that means less to me than straw."

"Oh, but that's not true," said Riderch, batting not a lid. "Carbit is my proof. He can't be five years old yet. He'll live and grow strong again, and the king won't care if I have a letter or not."

"My Lord will come to check on him soon enough," said Kyllister, glancing up at Carbit as the horse smacked its lips and bobbed its head foolishly up and down. "Am I supposed to claw the shabby, lunatic mule-muck as his barber?"

Riderch nearly grinned again. His sopping head was clearer now, and the full force of his newfound leverage was coming into view. "Well you could always send for that letter now, if it bothers you," he gambled. "You won't get it from my father, of course, since he's dead and buried, but I could maybe point you to a few ranchers who might vouch for me."

Kyllister's ears were a deep red now; his teeth ground together, their groaning very near a growl. "Why are you doing this?" he whispered. "I gave you a job. What more do you want?"

He was pleading, thought Riderch; naught was left to do but press his advantage. "I want the credit I deserve," he said, straightening up to his full height and pointing to Awdurdodus. "I'm worth more than ten mucks, and Awr there can back me up. Put it all on me, that's what I wanted from the start."

"If that palfrey dies…" said Kyllister.

Carbit stamped then and shook his mane – feebly, but enough to make his point.

"He won't die," Riderch smirked. "Don't hurry on up to the Ceinych just yet. Give it a few days.

When the king comes to check on him, he'll find him on the mend and you can credit me. If he's dead or dying, I'll own up to what I did by myself."

"You're out of your mind if you reckon I'll believe that," said Kyllister.

"Your other choice is to tell him you hired a horseleech from Ancathair on faith," said Riderch. "And given the folk up at the Ceinych these days, I reckon you won't want to do that."

There was the winning blow. Kyllister stood as stiff as a board. Awdurdodus scowled like a scolded puppy. An unbearable moment passed wherein the stable moved around them, leaving them behind on its thousand errands, but at its end came Kyllister's wordless surrender. "You must reckon you're so clever," he said, glaring at Riderch sidelong. "Well you'd better hope My Lord regards you as highly as you regard yourself; if he does not, I'll make sure you suffer double the pain that I do."

"You drive a hard bargain, Master Kyllister," said Riderch.

"Clean out this stall at once," Kyllister snarled. "I don't want anyone to see it like this. And get that tumor well away from the Ceinych. Burn it for Dinistrith if you like – I know that cheats and cutthroats like you love to do such things." He stormed away then, leaving Awdurdodus behind to shoot Riderch one last culpable glance before he ran off himself in the opposite direction. Riderch allowed himself a grin when they were gone, then went off to fetch a pail and shovel with which to dispose of the flesh and soiled hay.

The rest of that day passed second by second, an uneasy dance in which every move that Riderch or Kyllister made attracted a host of wondering eyes. Riderch did most of his work alone, for the younger grooms had all abandoned him as quickly as he had won them over. Awdurdodus watched him intently at every moment his own work allowed, although he gave him no more than mumbled orders; and Kyllister, while he was far too preoccupied with the Ceinych's visitors to pay Riderch any real mind, watched him always with a second pair of eyes in the back of his head.

For his part, Riderch was no less diligent than before; but now that he held unlikely victory in his iron claws, he moved about the stables with a new boldness. Kyllister did not ask him to look after Carbit. The other grooms, Awdurdodus included, pretended to notice nothing different about the prized palfrey. Riderch, however, cared about none of them. Every hour he tended to Carbit: changing or washing bandages as needed, spreading out new hay for him to lie upon, and later preparing a hot mash of cornmeal when it seemed that he might be persuaded to eat. He asked no permission – for who could have given it to him? – but rather treated Carbit as his own steed, granting him none of the deference that the others afforded the king's mount.

Carbit, in turn, showered Riderch with the first sparks of joy that he had felt in months, speaking wordlessly to him through a throat suddenly unimpeded. He was sluggish from dawn until dusk, for thornapple seeds are slow to wear off; but when he did not drop dead by sunset, and in fact seemed livelier than ever, a dreadful anticipation fell upon the whole stable. Riderch relished it, knowing that the secret could not be kept long. His meeting with Disma that night was the most hopeful yet – due mostly to the fact that he omitted every part of his tale which involved Dinistrith.

The very next day Carbit asked to be put out to pasture. He had expressed no desire to do any such thing in months, and had for the past several weeks forced the grooms to drag him from his stall. Now he would not allow himself to be penned up. He strained against his tether and gnawed the stall posts, berating every hare who passed by until Riderch found him. To see such fire in a beast who had so lately lain under the knife astounded him, and he was inclined at first to cross-tie Carbit so that he would be less likely to pull open his own stitches. But Carbit, far from being reckless, was simply indignant. This Riderch saw when he removed his bandages to find the wound no longer weeping, no

longer swollen, and Carbit staring at him in manifest offense. *See?* He seemed to say. *Did you expect anything less of Dinistrith?*

By this Riderch knew that he was beaten. Sighing, he slipped a bridle onto the horses head, tied a lead to it, and led him out to pasture, walking him gingerly along the fence-line nearest the stables. Someone would tell Kyllister, he knew, and Kyllister would burst in his rage, but what more could he do? He could not explain himself to the stablemaster, for he could not understand it himself. Carbit lipped his ears as they walked, just as Ruddo did.

Kyllister never came out to confront Riderch, and was nowhere to be found when Riderch left Carbit in the pasture to return to his mucking. He soon discovered why; for the stablemaster reappeared just before noon, white-eared and stone-faced, flanked by a pair of gray-clad Guilurs shorter than he by half an ear each. The turquoise tassels of their sashes showed through the sides of their ponchos; the bronze tips of their scabbards were mirror-polished. The three of them made straight for Riderch, who strove to appear preoccupied with his pitchfork until he could no longer pretend not to see them. Then he simply leaned against it, chewing a stalk of hay, and waited for them to approach.

Kyllister's eyes bored holes into Riderch, for he expected the buck to bow. Riderch, however, neither knew nor cared to bow, so he simply nodded to them. "Lordings," he said.

The riders were almost as stone-faced as Kyllister. They glanced at the stablemaster, however, and a moment later began to regard Riderch with something like surprise. "Is this the horseleech, Master Kyllister?" one of them asked.

"Aye," Kyllister said thinly. "This is the one."

"What can I do for you, brothers?" asked Riderch.

"My Lord King Rhuddri summons you to his hall in Pedwar Ceinych," said Kyllister, ensuring that every word was as sharp as he could make it. "He wishes to reward you for saving his best horse."

Riderch grinned at Kyllister. "Is that so?" he purred. "That's awfully good of him. I'll go now, if you'll let me wash up first."

"Guilur Gwyrthlass and Guilur Yeuaf will escort you," said Kyllister, motioning to each respectively.

"Much obliged," said Riderch, pulling one of his ears at them. "Feel free to wait by the doors, brothers. I ought to see that I don't smell like muck first, at least."

"Aye," said Yeuaf; then tugging their ears at him in turn, they spun on their heels and strode over to the double doors facing the parade ground. Riderch turned to walk away himself, but Kyllister had a paw around his arm faster than any adder could strike.

"Listen to me, you unwashed scut," he hissed in Riderch's ear. "You cut that tumor out last week. Last week, do you hear me? Everyone knows it, or will know it, and no one is going to gainsay you."

"My ears are up, Master Kyllister," said Riderch with a wink.

"If I had known that you would turn him out like that, I would have turned us both in to the Ceinych myself," he said. "This is on *your* head now, Riderch, and yours alone. Do not make me regret this any more than I already do."

"We'll both profit from this, Master Kyllister, believe you me," said Riderch; and slipping out of the stablemaster's grip, he made for the well out back and there washed his face and hands, then rejoined the riders at the doors.

14

The farther south one travels from the mighty River King, the redder the rocks become. This is due, of course, to the sun staining the earth when he burned Black Goat's tar away in the Flaming

Dawn. Because of this, stones of other colors are prized for their rarity in that part of the world; and so it was in Gorseth Floyd, whose royal palace was built of pure gray stone quarried in the Anialdir's gorges and the shady northern faces of its boardlands. This stone, in turn, was foiled and embossed by the more colorful sparks the sun seeded into the earth: gold and turquoise, as well as white and yellow paint pounded from other stones. To call Gorseth Floyd the 'Gray Throne,' therefore, seemed a great jest to any folk looking in from without. She was refulgent with many colors; and so Riderch, as he approached the cheerful yellow steps that climbed toward the white roofs of Pedwar Ceinych's battlements, wondered at the name.

"Our Lord awaits you in his hall," Gwyrthlass told Riderch, pointing to an aperture in the battlements at the middle of the campus. "It would be inappropriate to take you up and over the bridge with the other riders, so we'll walk through the garden."

"Was all of this here when the king moved in?" asked Riderch, scanning the battlements' square roofs to find tiny riders striding up and down. Their broad-brimmed helmets, mirror-polished, sent blinding flashes into his eyes now and again, just as they were designed to do. "It looks a lot more put-together than the rest of the city."

"Well, it was *here*, aye," said Yeuaf; "but being one of Godnu's ports, there was nobody on the Gray Throne. Some petty Henadur lived in the house underneath, really turned the place into a scrape. Godnu didn't care much for Gorseth Floyd, and the harefolk who were already here didn't care much for Godnu – but I reckon I don't have to tell you that. Anyhow, it wasn't hard for My Lord to get Osging to part with the south side at least when they came to terms, and of course My Lord killed the Henadur to show that he was serious. He wasn't from Gorseth Floyd to begin with, though, so the harefolk didn't care too much."

Neither was Rhuddri, thought Riderch.

"We've repainted a lot of it since then," said Gwyrthlass, in answer to his question. "We had to replace the gold and the turquoise too – there's still some left to do, mostly inside the walls."

"The raids on Godnu are helping with that," Yeuaf added with a grin. "That's where most of it went, probably, so it's only fair."

"Master Kyllister says you're from Ancathair?" asked Gwyrthlass.

"Aye," said Riderch.

"Well if you haven't already gotten the earful from some old doe yet, let me be the one to tell you," said Gwyrthlass. "Folk around here like to say that Gorseth Floyd was the biggest city in the whole Anialdir once, back in some long-gone Great Hour. That changed when Godnu came in from the north, but Godnu isn't doing so hot these days. Osging's as old as dirt, and all his kittens ever do is fight over their inheritance. Soon enough, things will be back to the way they were."

"Is that true?" asked Riderch.

"That doesn't matter," Yeuaf chuckled. "It'll be our turn next because we'll make it that way, so the story serves."

There was a square doorway in the midst of the steep southern walls, in which two great stone slabs hung open before a protruding corridor. Gray riders guarded it; and these, upon seeing Riderch flanked by two more of their own, tugged at their ears and stepped aside to admit them. In the light of the reflected sun and the lamps that lined the stone hallway, Riderch could see the reliefs on the faces of the doors, ranks of hares who wielded brightbush bolts like spears. Gwyrthlass and Yeuaf converged ahead of Riderch, two such hares themselves, and together the three entered a series of cool and shaded galleries beneath the castle's battlements. Ancient fountains spat water from the Rinnea out of the mouths of feathered serpent heads. Servants in gray linens carried this water even higher, bearing tremendous clay jars on their shoulders or their heads. Maidens in flowing turquoise and veiled sun-hats plucked their banjos from higher windows or upon blankets amidst the well-pruned sagebrush in

the open sunlight, serenading patrolling riders, reclining Guilurs, and visiting dignitaries by the dozen. Each great city of the Anialdir was represented in that garden, as evidenced by the colors of their ponchos and sashes: the jade and white of Gwall, the bright gooseberry yellow of Ancathair, even the tamarillo red of Godnu, all sown amidst the heavenly turquoise of Gorseth Floyd. The palace was bursting at the seams with folk, to the extent that Riderch found paths forward only with difficulty. His solid bulk, however, thrown into a shoulder or an elbow, won him the room he desired.

Trees grew enclosed by the Ceinych's walls, fruit trees all bald at that time of year; yet though it was winter, green abounded in the palace gardens, even the guarded whitish and bluish greens of the desert. Riderch's feet trod plush grass for the first time all winter; he smiled to himself, knowing that he had earned the luxury. In another life, perhaps, he might have abided here, might have left all to become the king's own horseleech and enjoyed the fat of his plunder. Such things held no appeal to him now, however. Not even the Sandhill's garden – a pale imitation of this one, though far more indulgent – had ever captured him the way it captured the other bucks in his band. There was little joy to be found in indulgence, save that it represented victory. Pedwar Ceinych, therefore, came closer than any other place to truly pleasing Riderch; but it was not the palace itself that pleased him, its soft grass or its scented, well-fed does – it was the imminent triumph that it represented, and this triumph was enough to make him salivate.

It was a mere five-minute walk across the wintered garden toward the king's high house; yet even that short walk, taken in full sun without the benefit of a hat, told Riderch that the depths of winter were behind them. The sun was on his way back from the south, and by spring the Anialdir would be unbearable at the height of noon. The sandstorms had started early that year, portending a hard transition – no doubt, he thought, King Rhuddri would want his daughter safe in Gwall before they reached a fever pitch.

There was a white portico on the south side of the king's house, open and shady and footed with brightbushes. The only stairs that Riderch could see, however, were a single flight on the east side, and it was for these the Guilurs led him. They circled the long portico, in which aging war-banders and other members of the king's household enjoyed constant breezes from quetzal-feather fans, until they reached the foot of the steps.

Here Riderch paused, and turned fully around to the east: for between the king's house and the high, spacious walls of the battlements was a second house perched atop a little hill of stone. Every inch of it was red or yellow or white; its round roof was plated in pure gold, and its steep white steps were shaded by turquoise hares holding brightbush flowers overhead. Over the house's open doorway was an enormous architrave, covered in blazing, gilded relief: the single-eyed sun atop a tall cactus, sprouting from the carcass of a turquoise cormorant. A rattlesnake the size of the Swartway was wrapped around that cactus, pierced and bleeding upon its spines. A long line of grimacing Hellknights pulled on the snake's tail, while a line of folk pulled on its head.

"That's My Lord's Wheelhouse," said Gwyrthlass. "It's private, only for folk at the Ceinych, although My Lord invites some others for certain holidays."

"What does it mean?" asked Riderch.

"The relief?" asked Gwyrthlass. "It's something about mastering our beastly impulses, or at least that's what the Shepherd says."

"Now hurry up, don't leave My Lord waiting," said Yeuaf, thumping his foot on the ground to beckon Riderch. "And for Stars' sakes, bow when you meet him. His dogs have better manners than you."

Riderch had to bite his tongue until it bled to keep from snapping at him. Barely succeeding, he started up the steps behind them, searching the impish faces of forty stone hares one by one. These, like

the hares leading to the Wheelhouse, flanked the steps on either side; but while the turquoise hares had held brightbush flowers, these held spears with golden heads.

Notably, the thick crowd in the garden did not continue up these steps. Aside from servants rushing by them on their errands and the odd visiting noble storming discontentedly down from above, scant few folk could be found. Not one of them climbed up. Riderch left the mingled buzz of Old Talk and Hareish behind him, and felt that he could breathe again.

Atop the steps stood a long, white hall, stretching across the better part of the garden. It was open, as are most halls in the Anialdir, upheld at intervals by stout square pillars which boasted the laughing harefolk faces Riderch had glimpsed so many times from below. While they had been mere curiosities at a distance, however, here they were stunning. Each was as large as Riderch or larger, jutting out of its pillar as if a hare the size of a house would step out of the stone at any moment. The brightbushes sprouting from their heads scraped the eaves; and what Riderch had formerly thought flaking turquoise paint was in fact no paint at all, but rather incomplete mosaics of whole turquoises.

"These are proving the hardest to replace," said Gwyrthlass. "Godnu has some, I'm sure, but it's too easy to sell them to the nomads when they pass through."

"We used to mine them out east in the foothills," Yeuaf added, "but we can't keep doing that while things are so tense with Ancathair."

They entered the hall then, passing by the many armored wardens who patrolled the outer terrace, and at once the temperature dropped markedly. Being noon, the sun was almost overhead, bent but a little to the south as he crept toward spring. His rays, therefore, fell mostly upon the thick, white roof of the hall, which shrugged them off entirely – save, that is, for a thin strip of light which ran the length of the hall from east to west. There was an aperture in the ceiling, Riderch found, through which it passed a few feet north of center. It must run straight down the middle, he thought, in the springtime.

This light led them westward, accompanied by scattered does' songs, past a great, round, ironwood table draped in a pair of crossed golden runners. Aged tapestries of woven hemp hung inside the pillars to either paw, clear signs of habitation by folk who had only a short time ago come out of the Deepwaste. Folkish figures were painted on them: warriors one and all, with a few Stars among them. Riderch recognized Dinistrith by his horse's head and his bloody sword – for so a band of riders was wont to depict him – but the rest were strangers to him.

There was a dais beyond the table, against a western wall pierced by a pair of doors but otherwise seamless. Gray riders guarded both the dais and the doors, harefolk taller than their fellows and belted, like Master Kyllister, in turquoise sashes that hung just above the knee. Riderch hardly noticed these, however: for upon the dais was a high gray throne, and upon that throne sat a hare who made even Riderch feel small.

King Rhuddri was no Ent. Indeed, he would have looked up to address Master Kyllister. He was fearsome, however, in the way that warlords are, dwarfing through sheer commanding presence every soul who stands nearby. His countenance was that of a stalking jaguar; in it were the wild, widely-set eyes of a nomad, as deep as frothing chocolate, undiluted by soft life or mixture with the Anialdir stock. His coat was a rich, tawny blonde, interrupted only by the black tips of his ears and the strap of stark gray running from his chin into his collar. Like his riders he wore a poncho, though Riderch supposed that the heavy gold brocade, adorned with a multitude of four-petaled flowers, was not worn into battle. Ringing his ears was a golden circlet beset by a turquoise the size of Riderch's fist, embossed with the figure of a flowering brightbush. In his right paw was one of the thick river canes that grow beside the Rinnea, and hanging at his waist was a long falchion: no mere ornamental blade, encrusted scabbard and hilt with jewels that would break free and fall at the slightest blow, but one of the scarred and bronze-fitted blades which had won the war-band half of the Anialdir.

The throne on which he sat was taller than he was, mounted by four steep steps, and was carved from a single block of polished gray stone. Its seat was draped with a sallow pelt – either a large coyote, thought Riderch, or else one of the red wolves who were found at times in the Anialdir – and every inch of it was covered in relief. Yet while Riderch saw little himself, standing as he was in the very middle of the hall, what he could see affected him far more than even the laughing hare heads. The caps of its armrests boasted hares with dripping fangs and the ubiquitous brightbushes, both of such clear antiquity that he was surprised to find that the Whirlwind had not ground them to dust already. The king himself obscured what must have been a six-rayed sun in the middle of the throne's back; Riderch could see its rays jutting out in all directions, grasped like the spokes of a wheel by a pair of Stars on either side. On its left was a spotted jaguar in a scale hauberk, grasping a long spear; on its right was a blind dog, mouth agape and tongue hanging out. Gwyner and Blinda, thought Riderch, though he had to dig for the names.

A moment of uncharacteristic contemplation came and went, dispelled when Riderch realized that King Rhuddri was staring straight at him. His predatory serenity had fled, driven away by an interest so intense that Riderch half-expected the king to leap down from his throne on top of him. He wished for the hundredth time that day that he still carried his falchion, if only for peace of mind.

Rhuddri, however, was not angry, though the fire of wrath smoldered always in his eyes. He was, if anything, baffled, seized on the one paw by great joy and on the other by pursuit verging on alarm. Remembering how Master Kyllister had instructed him never to speak unless spoken to, Riderch remained silent while this tug-of-war persisted, until at last King Rhuddri seemed to remember the reason for their meeting.

"Are you the horseleech Master Kyllister tells me about?" he asked. "The one I owe for saving Carbit's neck?"

Rhuddri's voice, no less than his spirit, belonged to a folk twice his size. Riderch was entranced by it, drawn like iron to a lodestone, but he nodded sharply enough. "Riderch, Lord," he said; and remembering suddenly to bow, bent jerkily at the waist. "Happy to help."

"Aye, and the only one, it turns out," Rhuddri smoldered. "None of the other leeches would dare take a knife to him, for fear of disappointing me. Even Master Kyllister, it seems, was reluctant to tell me until he knew that Carbit would recover."

King Rhuddri leaned forward on his throne then, narrowing his eyes at Riderch until they cut into his very thoughts. "You, on the other paw, are not so hesitant," he said. "Am I wrong?"

"No, Lord, I reckon you're right," said Riderch. "Never was one to sit and tug my ears until they bled."

"Neither am I," said Rhuddri, sitting up straight again. "In that case, Riderch, I will demand the unqualified truth from you. Will you give it?"

"If I know it, aye," Riderch nodded.

"You aren't afraid you'll incite my anger?" asked Rhuddri.

"I reckon you know horses well enough to understand what I did for you," said Riderch, "and I'd guess you didn't take Gorseth Floyd by abusing the folk who were useful to you."

A new keenness crept into Rhuddri's face. "You guess rightly," he said. "In that case, talk turkey: will Carbit recover? Fully? Will he ever be rideable again? His grandmother Bleddyn belonged to Her Late Majesty, my first wife – she was her favorite mare. Carbit, through a string of ill luck, is the last stallion of her stock; and I will confide in you, Riderch – for I feel like you must understand these things – that the thought of him siring no heirs is intolerable to me."

All the while that Rhuddri talked, the tone of his voice changed. It did not soften, nor could it be mistaken for softening; but rather it seemed that his passion, brandished like a blade thus far, was now directed upwards. Riderch held his peace unwaveringly, hearing the king's every word in stone-faced

silence, while the power he held over him was an army of fire ants marching up and down his spine. “I could lie to you, Lord,” he answered before a single breath had passed. “I could tell you he will, that you’ll be able to ride him soon, that he’ll live a mighty long time and sire a whole herd of foals – but then if he died, I’d have to pack my bags and run back to Ancathair in the night, and I don’t want to do that.”

“Don’t you?” asked Rhuddri. “And why not?”

“Because I’ve a mind to be useful to you, Lord,” said Riderch. “You need better horseleeches, and I need work. One paw washes the other, folk say. So I’ll tell you this much for certain: Carbit’s the cleanest cut I’ve ever made. He’s recovering faster than I’d ever guessed, and I don’t mind admitting that I’ve never seen anything quite like it. But I’m only surprised because he was nearly dead when I got to him. Any other horse you bring me, sick or wounded, won’t be a surprise.”

The faintest shade of a smile teased Rhuddri’s lips. Leaning back on his throne, he lifted the tassel of his turquoise sash and stared at it. “You’re from Ancathair,” he mused. “Your father must have been one of Cyngen’s riders, aye? Maybe from Rhodri’s house?”

“No, Lord,” said Riderch, shaking his head. “My father’s name was Eguin. He was a rancher up on the north side of Barwit Boardland.”

Rhuddri looked at Riderch again, his brow newly furrowed. “Is that so?” he asked. “But he must have been a nomad once, at least.”

Riderch blinked. “No, Lord. He was Anialdir stock, as far as I know. His kinfolk were already in Ancathair when the war-band came.”

“Your mother, then?” Rhuddri asked incredulously.

“He never talked about her,” Riderch shrugged. “I don’t remember her myself.”

“I would have sworn,” Rhuddri muttered, only to shrug himself and wave his reed as if to dispel a fly. “Ah well, it hardly matters. The way you speak of them tells me well enough why you came here when you did. A war-bander’s son would not have had to move abroad to find work – that was the whole venture of the Anialdir, you might say. How did it happen?”

“A fire, Lord,” said Riderch.

“You have my deepest condolences,” said Rhuddri. “And before you thank me, know that I give my servants nothing which cannot be grasped in a paw. You’ve a mind to be useful to me, Riderch, and that’s well – I’ve a mind to reward you for service already rendered. To increase your house, if I may, or what’s left of it.”

“Nothing but an ash heap,” said Riderch, restlessly sucking his teeth in spite of his best efforts. “Eguin had no other natural sons. If you’d like to reward me, however, I do have something in mind.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Rhuddri, almost in admiration. “Name it, Riderch, and it’s yours: for the sake of my dear, departed Lady, I’ll withhold nothing from you.”

“His kingdom, Riderch. Ask for half of his kingdom, and someday he’s bound to give you the other half!” Laughter erupted over Riderch, so near that he startled. Jerking his head to either side, he desperately hoped to find Gwyrthlass or Yeuaf giggling, though he knew full well that he would not. They were as passionless as ever, standing with heads bowed to the Gray Throne.

“Your daughter, Lord, Princess Rhian,” he said, finding himself suddenly parched. “Folk say she’s engaged to be married.”

“I cannot give you Rhian,” said Rhuddri, in a voice that admitted no objection. “She’s no longer mine to give; and knowing now that you would have asked for her, I’m relieved. You may have any of my other daughters, however. Queen Cigfa is beautiful in the fair way of the Anialdir-folk, and her daughters inherited no small portion of that fairness. You’ll understand, I hope, why I wanted none of them at court during this meeting.”

"I don't want to marry any of your daughters, Lord," said Riderch, holding up an open paw. "I don't even want to marry Princess Rhian, although I've heard how badly everyone else does. What I want is work, and the status that my skills have earned me."

More laughter, circling Riderch's head like a screaming quetzal.

"Is that so?" said King Rhuddri. "Go on, then."

"Her…her…your daughter, the princess," Riderch stammered.

"Her Highness," Gwyrthlass hissed.

"Her Highness will make her way to Gwall soon," said Riderch. "Not by herself, I reckon."

"There will be a procession," King Rhuddri answered, "with gifts of her mother's treasures, and as many riders as I can spare."

"Which means as many horses as you can spare," said Riderch. "It would be a real honor to me – and I reckon a real boon to you – if you'd let me oversee all the horses going to Gwall."

"Done," said Rhuddri with a wave of his reed. "You will oversee them with Master Kyllister, who would have hired a less capable horseleech to examine them if not for you. I will, moreover, land you with a house and field in Gorseth Floyd – though it would not be until after the wedding – and you would be welcome at Pedwar Ceinych."

"Much obliged," said Riderch, exercising all of his will to keep from panting. "Lord. Much obliged, Lord. How much time do I have before the procession?"

"Not as long as you would like, I'm sure," said Rhuddri. "My beloved daughter will depart in four days, on the morning of the second of Quetzal, with an escort of five squads of five riders and a few of my own best horses as gifts for King Sheen. None of them are blown, however: I've reserved them especially for the occasion."

"That'll make it easier," said Riderch. "I'll do my best."

"I don't doubt it," said Rhuddri. "Master Kyllister will give you the details – he knows them far better than I, and I would be a fool to pretend otherwise. In the meantime, won't you stay and dine with me? I would like very much to know more about your house, Riderch."

"That's awfully kind of you, Lord," said Riderch, bowing jerkily again, "and I'll do it if you tell me to. But there's hardly any time to do what I still need to do, and I wouldn't want to take up any more of yours."

"What a pity," said the king. "If I retained you an hour longer, that's one less hour of my day eaten up in making peace between war-band wolves and Godnu's incensed thanes. I suppose we would both be slothful to put them off, however, and harefolk should never regard one another as slothful. Don't you agree?"

"Aye," said Riderch.

"Then to your work, Riderch!" said Rhuddri, raising his voice to fill the whole hall. "I bless you as if you were one of my riders in wishing that your blade remain sharp and cut to the quick, though it means something altogether different aimed at you."

"Much obliged, Lord," said Riderch. A moment passed in restless silence, wherein Riderch failed to heed the pointed looks from Gwyrthlass and Yeuaf. He bowed when at last he did, and the wardens turned on their heels, leading Riderch down the hall the way they had come up. Dinistrith's open mouth seemed to laugh as he passed; for one brief moment his sword dripped with blood. Soon after he was upon the stairs, overlooking the garden and the nobles who thronged the king's house as they awaited their turns. The little Wheelhouse beckoned him again, however; and its adder, impaled upon the cactus's spines, was the last thing he noticed at Pedwar Ceinych before his thoughts swelled into a firestorm of triumph and expectation. *Ask for half the kingdom,* he repeated to himself. *I'll ask for it all right, and he'll give it too, if he wants to buy back the daughter he just dropped into my paws.*

15

If Master Kyllister was surprised to learn of Riderch's promotion, he hid it admirably well. There were no ejaculations, no gestures of dismay nor any protests. He only blanched when Riderch told him, disgusted out of principle that such brazen insubordination should earn so great a reward.

"If you only knew how he worshiped Her Late Majesty," he seethed, "or how he adores Her Highness, you would be ashamed of how you've taken advantage of My Lord."

Kyllister, however, would not be found less obedient than the fatherless tumbleweed. He owed Riderch his success, as knavishly as it had been won, and so he took him away from the mules that very hour. Awdurdodus even congratulated him, concluding – now that he was past the risk of punishment himself – that Riderch was as sly as any war-bander he had ever met. The king's own approval could not have swelled Riderch's head as fat as the young buck's did.

Being now so nail-bitingly near the day of departure, the wedding procession was all but assembled. The riders' chargers were chosen, stallions that would be rested in four days but which were fresh from the Swartway that morning, as well as a dozen fine palfreys and half a dozen jennets far more beautiful than they were useful to the Ceinych. There were also twenty white draft horses, five teams of four for the five stagecoaches chosen to bear the dowry to King Sheen. These stagecoaches, empty now, stood ready in a locked barn on the far western side of the stables, their every gilded harness meticulously arranged. To Riderch, at least, they all looked exactly the same: ironwood bodies suspended on leather straps, with tall, wide wheels made for traction in the ever-present sand. There were flat beds on the roofs above the cockpits, rimmed by rails to which cargo could be tied.

"Which of these will the princess ride in?" he asked, opening the door of one to find a pair of opposite ironwood benches. Their arms were gilded, and terminated at their backs with a pair of crow's heads who censured Riderch with their hard eyes. Four folk could sit comfortably within, he thought – six if needful, but a guard of five folk in such a small space would only be self-defeating. "They all look the same from outside."

"Her Highness' carriage will be fitted with curtains and soft cushions, which I will see to myself," said Kyllister impatiently. "It will fly no banner, if that's what you're asking, nor hang any bunting, as if we wanted to signal malevolent eyes."

"Are you worried about that?" asked Riderch, feigning surprise. "I reckoned that's why all of the guests are here: to make sure nobody will do anything rash."

He was toying with the stablemaster, he knew, and resolved then and there not to press his luck; but the blood threatened to burst from his veins already, and every moment he spent at Pedwar Ceinych from now on would prove only more unbearable. "It is," said Master Kyllister. "See to the horses, Riderch. You have enough work to do without combing someone else's fleas."

The rest of that day was spent preparing the procession. Riderch leeched the mounts as he saw need, finding all of them in regrettably good health, and very briefly considered hobbling them somehow before they were ridden out. He saw no way to do so, however, that would not be immediately discovered; and this, though he hated to admit it, relieved him.

He was given a small host of grooms to perform his every whim as well, the poorer, younger grooms who had decided once more that they liked him – just as the members of his band had flocked to him, one by one, as they learned of his prowess and the great success that followed him. These did the mucking and the brushing while Riderch examined teeth and cut manes, and in the few spare moments he seized he left them to these tasks while he saw to Carbit. Even in his brief excursion to the Ceinych the stallion seemed to have healed: he was cheerful and energetic, clearly so relieved to be rid of his slow noose that he could not contain himself. Riderch had all he could do to change his bandages

and scrutinize his sutures: the flesh was still red, but the swelling was gone. He stared at his cut for five minutes at least, remembering the previous night as a dream, and could only be pulled away when one of the grooms approached him to inquire about a splintered bit.

After that the work proceeded horse by horse, stall by stall, rider by rider, establishing and rehearsing the formation of the escort around the stagecoaches. They were to take the road beside the Fawwyrm upstream all the way to Cetelacu, where they would join up with the wardens of Gwall and go together to King Sheen's palace. This was the most direct route, and avoided the Swartway entirely; but it depended, to Master Kyllister's chagrin, upon passage through territory disputed by Ancathair, whom King Rhuddri had so ardently been attempting to placate. He thought it better, at least, than tempting Godnu, though to what extent he could not decide.

Riderch listened patiently to all of this, attempting to prove himself through the skill of his paws a worthy confidant; and it seemed, by the end of the day, that he had succeeded somewhat. Kyllister's wrath toward him had thawed the slightest bit. He could find no criticism to level against his work, no matter how hard he tried, and the day's wages – a far higher sum than before, and a mere stopgap until Riderch came into his land – fell from his claws into Riderch's almost as a sign of reluctant truce. Riderch thanked him, then made straight for the Rinnea, where Disma awaited him with a bright red poncho folded in his arms.

"Here you go," he said, and pawed the bundle over. "Hawen had one of the does dye it. It's the same vermilion they use in Godnu, but I'm afraid it doesn't have the flowers on it. None of them will."

"Don't worry about that," said Riderch. "They'll do just fine for our work." Grabbing the poncho by the shoulders, he let it drape down over the bank, illumined by a lone lantern that Disma carried. The color was perfect, uniform over every inch; the bloodstains along the collar were drowned in a flood of new red. A grin spread across Riderch's face.

"We'll all have to buy new ponchos after this, of course," said Disma. "I reckon that's one more reason not to be caught with a claw in the pocket. Aren't you cold, by the way?"

"Cold?" asked Riderch.

"The last two nights have been frigid," said Disma. "I want to shiver just looking at you."

"Have they?" asked Riderch. He glanced at Disma, and noticed only then that the raccoon's breath fogged in the air. His own did not, strangely enough. He threw on his poncho regardless; and while its woolen folds prevented the relief of the bracing wind, he was glad of its power to conceal his paws.

"What, haven't you noticed?" asked Disma, his own poncho still the same obscuring gray.

"It's been warm enough up in the hayloft," Riderch shrugged.

"Why are you grinning like that?" Disma snapped.

"They're going to do it, aren't they?" he said, letting the grin grow even wider.

Disma paused for a brief moment before nodding. "They're still trying to figure out how to hedge their bets, but aye," he said. "Getting Gwyarc to agree brought the rest around."

"Then we're ready," said Riderch.

Disma fell silent, staring at Riderch while he struggled to parse what his partner meant. Then his wide eyes bulged even wider, and furtively they skipped along the road and over the bridge to find them both alone. "We're ready?" he whispered. "You learned the date of the wedding?"

"Even better," Riderch smoldered, "I learned the very hour the wedding procession will leave Pedwar Ceinych: one constellation before dawn, the morning of the second of Quetzal. Better yet-" Riderch stopped to titter quite unwittingly, a sound that Disma rarely heard. "Better yet, I heard it from the king's own mouth."

"You spoke to him?" Disma hiccuped.

“He gave me a job!” Riderch beamed. “A job, and a house, and a field, and my run of Pedwar Ceinych, all for cutting a goiter out of his favorite palfrey’s neck. Every horse we cross on the second, Disma – every horse we capture – will have been groomed by yours truly.”

Disma’s breathing quickened, evident only by the steam which escaped his nostrils. He seemed to shrink, thought Riderch. It was something he did whenever Riderch’s temper got the better of him; and yet now, in a moment of triumph, the cutthroat could hardly remember him looking more like a child. He put a paw on Disma’s shoulder and caressed it, striving to seem compassionate though he was filled with contempt. “What’s the matter?” he asked, still grinning. “You look sick.”

“Riderch,” Disma squeaked, then stuttered for so long that Riderch guessed what he would say before he said it. “He gave you land? He’s made you one of his retainers, and you went to work in the stables, what, three days ago? I don’t understand how you even managed that.”

“You’ve been with me all this time, Disma, and it still surprises you?” asked Riderch. “Don’t you remember how I had all of Eguin’s grooms – even the older ones – under my foot? How I finally got them all to bend their necks every time they looked at you? You remember Gwyarc too, I’m sure, how his pack of mutts was fixing to strike the camp one minute and kneeling with knives to their own necks in the next.”

“What surprises me, Riderch, is how you can’t see what’s right in front of your face!” said Disma, growing suddenly ferocious. “This…this is our way out. This is how we get everything we ever wanted, and you *still* plan to pilfer Rhuddri’s pride and joy?”

Riderch’s grin fell flat. His grip on Disma’s shoulder tightened. “I thought you wanted to leave the Anialdir,” he said.

“I do!” said Disma. “Or I did. Dinistrith knows that I could never put enough miles between myself and Ancathair. But if we have a chance to live in peace here, with the king’s own favor-”

“I don’t give a damn about Rhuddri’s favor,” Riderch snapped.

“Which is exactly your problem,” Disma bit back, squirming uncomfortably under Riderch’s grip. “Riderch, you wouldn’t even have to become a rider. Rhuddri would never send a horseleech to battle, and you’re the most commanding folk I’ve ever met. He would have you over his stables in a year.”

“I’ve managed to get us this far in a week, and this is still all you can think about?” Riderch growled. His claws were digging into Disma’s shoulder now, but he did not notice. “I got Rhuddri to paw us his own daughter on a silver platter, and you’re trying to convince me to turn yellow now? Why?”

Disma winced. “It’s not about turning yellow, Riderch,” he insisted, trying vainly to brush away his iron grip. “You’re clever, and I’m asking you to be clever. I’m looking out for you, just like you said we should do – now will you please let go of me?”

“So you don’t trust me, then?” Riderch seethed, feeling his pulse pound in his ears.

“Is this how you prove yourself trustworthy?”

“I brought you this far with the might of my own two arms, and you still don’t reckon I can do it?” Riderch pressed, beginning to raise his voice.

“Do *what*, Riderch?” Disma pleaded. “We have a choice between a comfortable life and the hatred of the entire Anialdir. We’ve won!”

“And you have the gall to say that you aren’t turning yellow!” Riderch shouted. He was shaking Disma now, hard enough to make him stumble. “Is that what winning is to you, Disma? Rolling over on our backs to let our masters rub our bellies like dogs?”

“Ah!” Disma cried, then wrenched himself out of Riderch’s grip and staggered back a few paces out of reach.

“You want out of the Anialdir?” Riderch smoldered, rubbing his sore claws. “Good. I want to steal from every soul in this miserable scrape on my way out; and you’ll never get what you want, Disma, until I get what I want.”

Disma could not have looked more horrified if Riderch had drawn his sword. He merely gaped at him, cast in stark shadow by the lantern hanging limply at his side, every bit as small as he had been on the night of their flight from Eguin’s ranch. “Three days,” he whispered at last. “We only have three days to prepare.”

“Plenty of time,” said Riderch, “if we get word back to camp soon. Have Hawen send the bucks; I want all of them ready. Everyone knows the plan?”

Disma nodded feebly.

“We’ll have to come down from the dunes,” said Riderch, “then get the girl back across to Mydge. It should be easy enough for us – all of Rhuddri’s riders are on chargers, we’ll have them outpaced in the sand.”

“And then?” asked Disma, barely audible.

“And then we auction her off,” said Riderch. “Now get ahold of yourself and go find Hawen. Pull her out of bed if you have to, I don’t care. This needs to go off without a hitch, and I won’t be back to camp in time to see to it myself.”

Riderch had not pronounced the last word before Disma was running back down the Rinnea, his lantern trailing uselessly behind him.

The moon was still new that night, as Riderch wound his way back up the riverbank toward Pedwar Ceinych. He had ceased to spew curses by the time he passed the corn silo in which he had slept but three nights ago, had given up spitting into the Rinnea’s slaten stream. He merely stared at his feet, clenching and unclenching his fists beneath his bright red poncho, wishing that he could pull his own ears out at the roots if only it meant that he would not have to remember Disma’s pained cry. That cry had been a blow, he thought, a back-pawed swing from someone who knew he had no other leverage. It was not this that bothered him, however – or so he told himself for the dozenth time – but rather Disma’s lack of faith in him. He had been the first member of Riderch’s band. They two had been together when there was no band, when each would steal or beat for the other’s sake alone. Disma was formidable when he wanted to be: that he was looking for a way out now, while Riderch was putting his own neck on the line for the whole band, struck him as a bitter betrayal.

“Why did you do that, Riderch?”

“Oh, what the hell do you care?” Riderch husked, knowing only too well now the reedy tenor that flitted around his head.

“I care that you’ve scared away the only folk who might be persuaded to help you. Now this will be even harder, and may cost you both a great deal of unnecessary pain.”

“I gave you what you wanted, didn’t I?” Riderch challenged, throwing his paws up into the empty air. “That horse will be fine, as I’m sure you know. I’m not giving you any more.”

“I’m not asking for more. I’m trying to give you something myself, as a matter of fact.”

“You’re fifteen years too late,” Riderch scoffed. “I’m taking it for myself.”

“Not for Disma?”

“Chew pellets!” Riderch roared, wheeling around in all directions as he searched the sky for Dinistrith’s face in the firmament. He felt foolish for it at once, and resumed his slouched skulking along an empty street between two stone houses.

“If you would only acknowledge the position you’ve put yourself in, Riderch, you would be begging help from anyone willing to hear you.”

“Aye?” said Riderch. “And why’s that?”

There was no answer for a time; but Riderch, full of vitriol, was not keen to let Dinistrith have the final word. He had just sucked in the breath to challenge him again, in fact, when he stopped dead in his tracks. The street in which he walked, a mere alley tucked between the hulking walls of the houses, was empty but for him. So it seemed, at least, until the unmistakable sensation of watchful eyes trailed like melting mountain ice down his spine. He glanced up at the roof to his right, then to his left: both were as empty as the road, if the unobstructed stars were any indication. Even so, the sense of presence only swelled, no differently than it did when he hunted wolves in the Greteboga and felt some wild beast's eyes at his back through the sagebrush of some high gwerthon. He reached for his falchion, then cursed himself when he saw it lying at the bottom of a well. Blunt claws rapped the dusty road behind him.

Riderch wheels around, but only too late. A great mass, framed half-transparently against the never-setting stars, bears down on him, and with the force of a mule bowls him over. They tumble together, just as Riderch tumbles with the coyote in Islawr's burning grotto, just has he tumbles through the gold-spangled sky with the stagecoach pilot's corpse. His opponent, however, is prepared as those were not: he throws his leaden weight on top of Riderch with too much skill, grappling with long limbs to turn him where he wishes him to go. By his long, curved claws Riderch knows him for no hare, but there is little light in the alley by which to see. They wrestle furiously in darkness for far too long, Riderch struggling to escape his hold, his foe as capable as any he has ever known.

He does not move to throttle Riderch, however; neither does he draw a blade, when well he might. He seeks to retain him, to tire him out in his struggling, and by this Riderch guesses that he seeks gain without bloodshed. Finding there leverage of his own, he pulls his opponent's shaggy arm across his chest and rolls to his inner side, pinning it to the ground. There he fumbles for his wrist, then his paw, and makes to sever claws with his formidable teeth. He cannot find them, however: his eyes cannot see them against the tar-black street, his paws cannot touch them, his teeth cannot bite them. Riderch reels, feeling feverish, and cannot tell which way is up.

His opponent, recovering his grip, turns Riderch onto his back, and once more pins him with a bison's weight. His round, buffoonish head obscures the heavens: earless, it seems, or else his ears are plastered against his skull. An ungraceful paw pins his right arm, while the other throws his poncho over his face and begins to tear at the front of his shirt. The claws press against his fur, searching in all directions. Desperate now unto bestial rage, Riderch remembers the deer-knife strapped to his belt, still keen for killing after cutting Carbit's throat. He fumbles with his left paw, finds its handle, and draws it with a jerk; and screaming at the top of his lungs, lashes out with all his might, stabbing and slashing until he no longer feels his foe's leaden weight upon his lungs. Riderch scrambles through the dust then, coughing and mewling on all fours, until at last he staggers to his feet and turns around, brandishing his knife at the empty southern sky.

There is no body in the street. He hears no moaning, nor any sound of fleeing steps. Riderch pulls the knife's blade through a pair of claws, then rubs them together, but feels no blood. The blade is cold, in fact, such a welcome sensation that he presses it to his burning forehead and slumps sideways against a house's stone wall, sinking down until he sits in silence with his knees pulled up. Riderch weeps then – not sobbing, but panting and quaking – until the Great Wolf is in the middle of the Sunneweg, staring at him over the rim of the haunted boardland.

In truth, Riderch could have remained in that alley until morning; but knowing that he must rise early, he dragged himself trembling back to the hay loft. The other grooms were asleep. He slipped past them on his padded feet, disturbing their dreams with his own churning thoughts, and lay down in his wonted corner away from the rest. There he tried in vain to sleep for an hour or more; but when it was clear that he would not, he propped himself up against a bale and pulled the fire-striker from his pocket.

Again and again he struck it, idly watching sparks scatter in the air. Most fizzled out before they hit the floor. Those that survived smoldered; and yet Riderch, who well knew the frenzy of a burning barn, only stared at them, expressionless.

"Self-immolation is a poor penance for you, Riderch, and I won't be pleased by a dozen burning children."

Riderch scowled. "Won't you? I reckoned that was the kind of thing you liked."

"I wish you would remember who your friends are. You haven't many."

"And I wish you'd quit jawing and leave me alone," said Riderch, shoving the fire-striker into his pocket.

"I mean to help you, Riderch."

Riderch shook his head. "You mean to make a fool out of me. Pull me up and then drop me, like the Stars love to do. I've been waiting for it since I first realized it was you. At least I know why now."

There was no answer.

"It's because I robbed those halsers, isn't it? That's when you took a shine to me. Folk always say it's bad luck to steal from halsers, but I didn't reckon this is what they meant."

Again there was only silence, and so Riderch continued, pulling his knife from its sheath and thumbing the tip. "You've got the guts to sit up there and rattle my cage as if I did something to earn it, but I know better. I've heard my fair share of old tales. You *killed* a halser, folk say, and you're down on me for robbing a few."

"He wasn't a halser, and I didn't kill him."

"But you know what I'm talking about," Riderch smirked. "What was he, then?"

"He was what you will be if you won't accept my help."

"So you do want something else from me," Riderch nodded.

"Someone else does too, clearly."

"Well it's not like you ran in to help!" Riderch barked, then glanced around to make sure he had not woken the stablepaws. "Doughty Dinistrith my scut," he added under his breath.

"You didn't ask."

"I'm asking now," said Riderch. "Who was he? Someone from Islawr?"

"He was not one of your friends, and therefore not within the scope of this conversation."

"What is, then?" Riderch demanded, motioning with his knife at the empty darkness. "Spit it out, why don't you? You're supposed to be brazen, but you titter like an old doe."

"You speak of yourself as if you were a wolf caught in a snare, ready to chew off your own leg to free yourself. Have you ever considered, even once, what you will do when you're free?" The Elfen levity had vanished. The voice took a warning tone.

"We'll leave the Anialdir, like I said," Riderch replied, "weighed down with as much gold as our mules can carry."

"No, Riderch, *you* will leave the Anialdir, as you very well should, and you'll drag Disma behind you by the neck."

"He's been telling me for years that he wants to leave the Anialdir," Riderch protested with unexpected savagery. "It's not my fault that he's scared to go when my paw's on the doorknob."

"He has every reason to be afraid of you."

"Disma would be dead without me!" Riderch snapped. "Dead or worse. You reckon I don't know how to look after my own friends?"

"If you won't attend to them enough to know what they really want, I suppose you don't."

"Oh, and you do?" Riderch sneered. "Go ahead and tell me, then, if you reckon you can learn me."

"He doesn't want to leave the Anialdir, Riderch. He wants to leave your band."

“He can leave any time he wants to,” Riderch grumbled, looking at the floor to hide his downcast face from eyes he could not see.

“He wants to leave it with you. That’s the only reason he stays.”

“And how do you know that?” asked Riderch.

“Do you suppose that you’re the only one who talks to Dinistrith?”

“Since when do you care to mend fences, anyhow?” Riderch challenged. “That’s not much like the Dinistrith I know.”

Laughter erupted so suddenly, so boisterously, that Riderch jumped up in surprise. “Do you think you know Dinistrith, Riderch? Why, because you’ve spilled blood? You know nothing. You are a blind ram charging the edge of a canyon, unaware of the fall that awaits you.”

Riderch felt himself flush again. His paw, gripping its knife too hard, ached and spasmed. He opened his mouth to reply; but finding his tongue thick in his mouth, closed it again.

“Cut him loose, Riderch. Let him go where he likes. Someday, perhaps, you will come to your senses and follow him.”

16

That day was brutally busy, with more to do than there was any hope of finishing. Visitors who had lingered at Pedwar Ceinych were departing in detachments for home, their horses hung with a thousand extravagant banners that the stablepaws raced to raise. Ancathair’s black tapir rode out upon its yellow field, a long tongue sticking out between its fangs. Gwall’s swift messengers bore with them their white-bellied stag upon the green, a red sun blazing over his head. Even Godnu – austere, implacable Godnu – carried itself with dignity out of the palace it had lately lost, bringing with it on a red flag its four-petaled flower imposed upon a cross. Master Kyllister oversaw this work himself; and owing to the exodus, commandeered no small portion of Riderch’s grooms for the task.

Riderch, therefore, labored to prepare the wedding procession with little help. He counted this a blessing, however: for so burdensome were his thoughts, and so dour his mood, that to exchange words with anyone would more than likely have resulted in the loss of his temper. It contented him enough to put his head down and attend to the horses, one by one by one, and by this labor dam the flood of doubt and second-guessing that Dinistrith had so sinisterly sown in his soul. Whatever he had done to earn his ire, Riderch vowed that he would not allow heaven to stop him from seizing the profit already in his grasp. The voice, at least, did not pester him all day, and by this he guessed that Dinistrith knew it.

Carbit, additionally, continued to mend at a marvelous pace, to the extent that whispers began to spread throughout the stables that Riderch was possessed of virtue beyond the skill of a simple horseleech. He had blown in from nowhere, after all, and had earned the king’s favor as swiftly and decidedly as no living war-bander ever had. He was queer as well; and queerness, in those sun-stricken lands beneath the Sunneweg, is the sign of a wonder-worker.

Riderch paid no heed to these rumors. Indeed, he paid no heed to anything outside of the horses until the day was done, and only then because Awdurdodus forced him to.

“Are you a halser?” he asked, as Riderch snipped the sutures threaded through Carbit’s neck – too early by anyone’s judgment, and yet the palfrey’s scar was already so far healed that to wait any longer would be unwise. “Is that why you sleep in the hayloft? Are you one of those halsers who stand up on the boardlands to pray?”

“What are you talking about?” Riderch snapped.

“I can see them standing up on Tin sometimes,” he said more eagerly. “Usually they’ve got the lamp lit, and that helps, but when it’s clear you can see them staring at the sun sometimes. It makes their eyes all crazy.”

"I've never been on top of the boardlands," Riderch husked.

"You can tell me if you have, I won't mention it to anyone," Awdurdodus pleaded; then leaning in and lowering his voice: "Can you really go inside them like folk say?"

Riderch stiffened. "What do you mean, 'like folk say?'" he hissed.

"Well there are all those old Coyote tales where he holes up in his forts inside the boardlands, like the rabbitfolk used to do," said Awdurdodus. "You're supposed to be able to get in if you know the magic words, but everyone who knew them died. The Lord sent Pryderi out with a bunch of bucks to try to get in, but I don't reckon anyone expects him to do it."

Riderch stared open-mouthed at Awdurdodus for a moment, scissors still held at the ready, then shook his head. "I'm not a halser, kid," he said.

"But you like to talk in the middle of the night," Awdurdodus protested, standing up straight with arms akimbo. "You keep your voice down – sometimes – but the sound travels up there in the rafters. You keep talking to Dinistrith."

"Sounds like you have fleas in your ears, Awr," Riderch scowled, pulling the loose thread out of Carbit's skin. He snorted and rippled, but otherwise contented himself with lipping Riderch's ears.

"I didn't hear you talking?" asked Awdurdodus.

"I was talking to myself," said Riderch.

Awdurdodus's whole face seemed to twist a few degrees to the left. "Aye, aye, whatever you say, Dinistrith," he snickered, then darted away to avoid being cuffed.

Disma was not on the riverbank when Riderch arrived that night. Hawen was there instead, wrapped in a cocoon of flowing blue robes that helped to hide her unladylike height only because they gave the eye no single thing on which to rest. That night was colder than the last, full of the chill that settles in late winter because the sun is in the Abyss; and yet neither Hawen in her sumptuous wool nor Riderch with his stubborn fever felt it much at all. She was smoking her meerschaum pipe as he approached, exhaling toward the water, and did not bother to look at him. There was rumination etched into her face, so that Riderch supposed she had not noticed him until he was close enough to touch her.

"Where's Disma?" he asked. She did not flinch. She merely pulled again from her pipe and blew the smoke from her nose.

"He went with the other bucks," she said without turning. "I'm not far behind them myself, thank Gwyner; so whatever you want to pass on, you'd better do it now."

Riderch blinked. "Oh. I reckoned we were riding out together."

Hawen's laugh was full of smoke, low and hoarse. "Funny how that works, eh?"

"What did he tell you?" asked Riderch.

Only then did Hawen look at him: first from the corner of her eye, then turning when his face betrayed no contrition. "Far be it from me to get between you two," she said, "but you scared him right off. Don't pretend you don't understand why."

"He's letting his sinews get knit too tight," Riderch scoffed. "Turning yellow now will only put the plan in danger."

"Riderch, Disma's been sticking his neck out for you since you *laid* this goose-egg of a plan," said Hawen, jabbing the ear around his neck with the stem of her pipe. "He's been passing everything you say off to me, and I've been spinning it for the rest of the band to make you sound a lot less hare-brained than I reckon you really are. You have two friends in this town, and you sent one of them running off with his tail between his legs."

"I've been wildly success so far and you know it," Riderch snapped. Hawen might have flinched beneath her robes, but Riderch could not be sure.

“You have,” Hawen conceded, sipping from her pipe, “which is why I didn’t come here to scold you.”

“You want payment for the Sandhill?” asked Riderch, reaching for his purse. “It’ll be what, seven nights? Eight?”

Hawen held up a thick-nailed hand and shook her head, rattling an arsenal of golden earrings. “I don’t want any of the Ceinych’s money until we get rid of the girl,” she said. “Call me superstitious if you want.”

“Then why are you here?” Riderch grunted.

“Beyond wanting to get away from the Sandhill while all the riders are leaving the Ceinych angry?” she smirked. “I wanted to ask you what I should do with Ruddo.”

“Leave him at the Sandhill,” said Riderch, “I’ll ride him out when I go. That sounds like a good chance for you to learn some things, though.”

“I know everything I need to know now,” said Hawen.

“You have news?” asked Riderch.

“I wish I did,” Hawen frowned, and spat into the black Rinnea. “It’s more like a hunch; and judging by the way you treated Disma, I reckon you won’t care for it.”

“Try me,” said Riderch. “It couldn’t make me any angrier than those riders, could it?”

Hawen’s expression approached disdain. “Do you know that Cyngen’s son was up at the Ceinych?” she asked.

“Aye, I did,” Riderch nodded. “He rode out today, with the rest of those peccaries from Ancathair.”

“Did you know that he was at the Ceinych for a whole month, making the same petition of Rhuddri every single day?” she asked. “Or that he was rebuffed every single day, in the same words?”

“He wants to marry the princess,” Riderch shrugged. “A lot of folk do, to hear tell.”

“He’s wanted that doe since he was old enough to want does,” said Hawen, “and has been up at the Ceinych a number of times asking for her. Cyngen promised her to him, if you didn’t know, and says that Rhuddri promised her to him, so I’m sure he feels entitled to her. Certainly he acts like it.”

“He promised her to Sheen,” said Riderch, furrowing his brow. “He’s giving her to him, at least, whatever Cyngen says.”

Hawen nodded slowly, taking a long sip from her pipe before answering. “The riders at the Sandhill see it in two very different ways, and both are dead sure that the other is lying. Ancathair says that Princess Rhian belongs to Prince Brockwell; Gwall says that she belongs to Sheen. Godnu only cares that the raids stop, or at least they say they do.”

“You reckon otherwise?” asked Riderch.

Hawen glanced at the bridge, then up and down the street, before answering. “Dedrys and Dargan sold the stagecoach,” she said. “They got back two days ago, and Dargan came by the Sandhill this morning to talk to me about it.”

Riderch fingered the ear under his shirt, grateful for his concealing poncho. “How much did they get for it?”

“A good stack of gold,” she answered. “I didn’t ask how much exactly, but that was one of the best stagecoaches I’ve ever seen. And that only reinforces what Dargan told me-”

“Did they give it to Sawl?” Riderch interrupted.

Hawen leered at him. “No. Or they might have now, I suppose. He went home last night. Why are you asking?”

“No reason,” said Riderch. “You were saying something?”

“Aye, nice of you to notice,” she grumbled, slapping the stem of her pipe impatiently against her palm. “Dedrys and Dargan were sniffing around in Ancathair, Riderch, talking to their fences and one of the crooked sheriffs. Things are precarious.”

“Precarious how?” asked Riderch.

“Cyngen’s mad,” she answered, dropping some measure of her usual airy affectation. “Mad as a cat in a sack. It sounds like things have never been more frayed between him and Rhuddri, and this whole tangle about the princess is only making it worse.”

“So?” said Riderch.

Hawen sighed. “I don’t have to tell you the way things stand in the Anialdir, Riderch. You’re all high and mighty up at the Ceinych now, you should know that the war-band isn’t happy squatting in their little corners forever.”

“Don’t have to go to the Ceinych to learn that,” Riderch chuckled. “They couldn’t take Godnu the first time. They were fresh out of the Deepwaste, with no forts, no towns. I always assumed they’d get established, then make a second stab at it.”

Hawen nodded. “So did I, and so did Godnu. It’s why Osging took the loss of Gorseth Floyd so hard. He has three kings breathing down his neck, and he knows that the three of them together will crack Godnu open like an egg someday. What would you do in his position?”

“What I’m doing now,” said Riderch. “Cheat. Find some leverage, then pit them against each other.”

“Cyngen and Osging have been talking to each other, Riderch,” said Hawen, almost whispering now. “They’ve been talking a lot, while Brockwell has been down here keeping Rhuddri’s attention. Haven’t you wondered what that wagon train was doing, carrying so much gold to Gwall?”

“So he’s trying to tickle their whiskers,” said Riderch, beginning to thump his foot. “So what? I’d be doing the same thing.”

“How much leverage do you think Rhuddri has compared to Osging?” asked Hawen, pulling at her pipe and scowling to find that it was spent. “It’s no secret that Rhuddri’s friendship with Sheen is about as strained as it is with Cyngen. He has one single chip to bargain with, it seems to me, and whoever gets it is sure to be his friend. But the other…” She trailed off, shrugging so that her long neck retreated ever so slightly into the folds of her robe.

“He’s giving the princess away to the one he reckons will be more useful against Godnu,” Riderch nodded. “Sheen always did have the better riders, and Gwall is as good a fort as any in the Anialdir, up on top of that mountain.”

“The sides would be better balanced, at least, if things went south,” Hawen nodded. “What I can’t help wondering, however, is what will happen if nobody gets the princess.”

Riderch was silent for a long while. He stared at Hawen, motionless save for the wind stirring his poncho, utterly expressionless, and yet boiling so ardently with unforeseen delight below the surface that his foot drummed like a rolling bodhran upon the riverbank.

“We’re playing with fire, Riderch,” Hawen warned. “If we auction that girl off to the highest bidder, I reckon it doesn’t matter who gets her. It would be the end of the war-band.”

Their standoff persisted, each probing the other to see who would sway; but Hawen was too supple to topple, and Riderch might as well have been a draft horse. “Are you going to say something?” she barked.

“Are you going to tell me not to do it?” Riderch smoldered.

Hawen scoffed loudly and shot Riderch the same look that Awdurdodus had that afternoon, a twisting of the face that contained a positively acidic incredulity. “You know, Riderch, ever since Cair Cunning it’s been on my mind to tell you and Disma to cut and run,” she said. “Gwyner knows I’m the only one who cares enough to say it, and I know you keep some money squirreled away for it – don’t

say a word either way, I don't need you to tell me I'm right." And then, after a beat: "I should have told you to slip out before you decided to rob the Ceinych; but I didn't, and that's mine to swallow."

"It wouldn't have mattered," said Riderch.

"Not to you," Hawen agreed. "I know why you do what you do. I meant it when I said that we understand each other, you and I. We are what we are, and nothing will change that. It's why I left Selmacca to fall in with you. I won't ask you not to do it – for what it's worth, I still reckon you can pull it off better than anyone else I know. But this seems like a good way to cut the one thread tying the Anialdir together."

"Good," Riderch answered, so promptly and with such conviction that Hawen could only gape at him. "We'll come out on top, then, and the others can fight for scraps. Spin that to the band however you like. I'll catch up with them at the dunes."

With that he turned and walked away, leaving Hawen alone to listen to the waters of the Rinnea flow irretrievably by: out of Gorseth Floyd, out of Godnu, bearing the dust of countless ages out of the Anialdir entirely. She shivered, then turned and walked back to the Sandhill to collect her things.

17

The next two days sufficed to finish preparing the wedding procession. With nearly all of the visitors to Pedwar Ceinych gone now, more of the grooms were freed up for the task – grooms who assisted Riderch all the more willingly when they saw that he had not yet bitten anyone's head off. He was not exactly friendly to them – in fact he was anything but – and yet his respect for horsecraft was so high that he found himself growing more and more agreeable toward them for the beasts' sakes. He knew the craft as well as anyone there, and better than most; they deferred to him more and more, swayed by his skill and the favor he had found with the king.

"He's as easy to love as a cactus when you're standing on it," he heard Awdurdodus boast as he crouched behind the stall wall to trim Carbit's hooves, "but so is My Lord, and we can all see what he was able to do with it."

This left Master Kyllister to oversee, a role he had shelved for weeks on account of the sheer excess of unfamiliar horses. The stables settled into a steady rhythm, a rhythm which Riderch had not yet been able to enjoy and could not enjoy now. He worked as a whippoorwill clock works, turning on foreordained circuits while his every thought was ablaze with what was soon to come. He forgot to eat until evening on the first of Quetzal, when Master Kyllister approached him after all the rest had gone. In his wiry paw were wages Riderch could scarcely imagine how to spend by himself.

"It feels queer now, paying you out like a common stablepaw when there's a house in the city with your name on it," said Kyllister. His tone was almost humorous, though nothing in his face showed the slightest amusement. "Ah well, your corn will come from Our Lord's own paw soon enough. All the better for me."

"I hope you don't resent me, Master Kyllister," said Riderch, dropping the coins into his fattening purse. "I only did what I had to do, given the circumstances."

Kyllister slipped an end of his sash through a pair of claws, its noontide turquoise almost rosy in the light of the lantern he carried. He regarded Riderch then in a way he had not before, a way that made Riderch wonder if he was not regarding someone else entirely. His eyes rested on him; his ears were trained on him alone, and yet they seemed to pass through him to someone who stood behind his back. "There's a saying among the war-banders," he crooned: "'The opossum is a fool to hunt the adder, unless he kills it.'"

Riderch grinned. "That's turkey," he said. "I'm going to steal that."

“You’ve stolen a great deal more, Riderch,” said Kyllister. “But then again, so has every soul in the war-band, Our Lord included.”

“Folk like to reckon themselves better than thieves,” said Riderch, “but most of the time they’re just making excuses for the things they aren’t clever enough to get away with.”

“Thank Dinistrith for excuses, in that case,” Kyllister snorted. “Both of us, I hope, are zealous servants of Our Lord. I would do well to remember myself that My Lord is such a hunter, and that by dealing as deftly in the Anialdir as you have he has gained a throne. You, on the other paw, would do well to restrict your hunting to the adders from now on.”

“Of course, Master Kyllister,” said Riderch, and bowed to him.

“The procession will depart one constellation before sunrise tomorrow,” Kyllister reminded him. “Our Lord will accompany My Lady to the Gwyner Gate, where he will relinquish her to a pair of King Sheen’s wardens. Our work ends there. Then they, with our own riders, will take My Lady up the Fawwyrm to Cetelacu and to Gwall, and you will have both My Lord’s thanks and mine.”

“You’re welcome, of course,” said Riderch. “Is there anything else you need from me?”

“Not as it pertains to My Lady,” said Kyllister. “Is there somewhere else you have to be? You seem rather restless.”

“I’m just hungry, Master Kyllister,” said Riderch, who in truth fidgeted under a swarm of biting ants. “I reckon I’ll go find food and drink, and sleep somewhere that isn’t the hayloft.”

“I daresay you’ve earned that much,” said Kyllister, chuckling for the first time that Riderch could remember. “Rouse yourself enough to look after Carbit tomorrow; beyond that, I reckon you could get away with stealing a bath and a rest. Goodnight, Riderch.”

“Much obliged, Master Kyllister,” said Riderch.

With that the pair parted; and while Master Kyllister went home, as he always did, Riderch did not in fact rush to find food. He tarried at the stalls until he was alone, then took up a lantern and made his way along the outer wall until he arrived at a locked barn. Climbing in through a window proved easy enough, for the locks served merely to guard the stagecoaches inside. They, like the barn itself, were empty, and as Riderch searched them one by one he grew more keenly aware of an almost ghostly loneliness born of so many cavernous echoes. There were no horses here to interrupt the silence. There was only his breathing and the rustling of his footsteps on the scattered hay; yet at times, if he attended closely, even these seemed to multiply.

He found what he sought in the end: a stagecoach indistinguishable from without, yet lined with fine woolen cushions and lace curtains within. The cushions were turquoise, marking well enough the body who would rest thereupon; the curtains were bridal white, woven with a multitude of Gwyner’s rosettes. Shutting its door, he clambered up onto the roof by way of its surrounding rail, then turned and knelt before that rail when he was certain he had chosen the right side. Rhuddri’s hall lay east to west, he thought: in winter the sun ran his course on its southern side, in summer the northern side, and thus the sunny slit admitted by the aperture in its ceiling swung slowly back and forth like the golden pendulum of a grandfather clock. He tried to imagine the road along the Fawwyrm running through the very middle of that hall: if they were to ride down the wedding procession from the dunes, at mid-morning in all likelihood, he must affix his reflector to the coach’s right front side.

Setting down his lantern, Riderch opened his purse, and from it pulled the gold piece he had so briefly relinquished to Teyrngar. It glinted already in the flickering firelight, for he had polished it the night before. From around his ear he loosed as well a braid of long hairs plucked from Carbit’s tail, glorious strands of corn silk with which he lashed the coin to the roof’s railing. He jumped down onto the floor then; and holding up his lantern, walked halfway around the stagecoach in both directions. The coin caught the light as he hoped. Dearly he wished that he could hang his lamp where the sun would be, but the crude test would have to suffice. Riderch laughed to himself, only to stop a moment

later when the barn walls returned echoes too high to be his own. He did not linger there, but left the barn the way he came and skirted the stables' southern side until he passed the double doors.

"Wait, Riderch."

Riderch stopped cold. His paw shot to his belt, but no blade hung there. He cursed, then wheeled around, swinging his lantern to catch the unfortunate sap who had seen him, but his lantern made an unobstructed arc across the sky. On every side there were only the stables and the pasture, the barns and the old retaining walls. No folk stood near to mark his skulking; Riderch was alone.

"In here, Riderch. You wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, would you?"

Riderch's gaze traveled up the stable wall, following the capering voice until he saw that his lantern's light glinted upon the glass of an awning window. It was ajar, and he stood just under it. Minutes passed in which he strained to catch any hint of stirring in the low light, but nothing moved. "Dinistrith?" he whispered at last.

Laughter emerged from the window. "Does Dinistrith sleep in a stable like a low beast? Come here, Riderch, so that I may speak with you face to face."

"You won't get me to change my mind," said Riderch. "I'm leaving tonight."

"I wouldn't try to stop you. I would like to help you, in fact. Come in here."

Riderch was silent again. "I'll have to go around," he said at length.

"Open the doors. It will be faster for both of us."

"I'll wake the grooms," Riderch warned.

"Not if you're careful."

Riderch scowled and spat in the dirt, drumming his foot on the trampled earth. "Is this going to be worth my while?" he growled.

"I told you I would help you, didn't I? The time is at paw for me to do just that."

"Do you even know…" Riderch began, only to think better of it and start over. "Wait there."

"I can hardly go anywhere else."

He was several minutes opening one of the great double doors – not for weight, for Riderch was surpassingly mighty and the doors were well-oiled on their rollers, but merely out of fear that the noise would bring down a small flock of inquisitive stablepaws. He had little doubt that he could explain himself to them, for by now he was positively esteemed by each and every one of the indentured urchins; but when they awoke in the morning and realized – perhaps after an hour, perhaps after two – that he was nowhere to be found, they would remember the queer exchange and pass it along to Master Kyllister, and suspicion would fall immediately upon all the work that he had done.

Fortunately, no one came down, and when one of the two doors hung open Riderch slipped inside. A cool southerly breeze stirred the straw on the floor, pasting his poncho to his back as he turned aside to skirt Rhuddri's own stalls. The voice had come through one of their windows, after all, or had seemed to; and Riderch, so knit in the sinews at the hour of his departure, walked with a paw gripping his knife.

He did not have to walk far. Indeed, he knew where he was going before he arrived, though he refused to admit it. He would not give Dinistrith the satisfaction of looking. He made to pass by Carbit's stall entirely, until the sharp kick of a hoof against the wall sent the hare leaping three feet in the air.

"Of all the folk you hope to fool, you'll never fool the one your blade has already bitten!"

The voice was jolly and bombastic, so loud in Riderch's ears that he would have feared being overheard if he did not know better. He turned to face Carbit, willing his heartbeat to slow, and found in him an expression no less bombastic. The palfrey, so fair and so handsome at every other time, seemed then in the low lantern light a charger, looming many paws taller, with bloodthirst hiding in the shadowy troughs of his corded muscles. A white scar stood out across his neck, thick and wrinkled like

a great bolt of lightning; beyond this, there was no hint that ill health had ever come near him. He stamped hard and snorted, tossed his white mane in a shower of meal, and pranced to the end of his tether, fixing his eyes and ears on Riderch over the low door with singleminded resolve that would not have seemed out of place in a prowling wolf. Riderch could only stare back, feeling a familiar heat wash over him.

"How did you do it?" he whispered, offering a fist to the palfrey's nose. Carbit balked when it touched him, then strained even harder against his tether, so that Riderch stepped forward to keep him from rattling the door. He caressed Carbit's face, and felt almost incredulous at the serenity which visited him.

"I knew that you were leaving tonight, and I wanted you to have a swift mount. But to heal him all at once might have killed you, so I did what I could with the time I had."

Riderch's eyes widened. His breaths came faster. Carbit's hide pricked him with a thousand pins, but he did not pull away. "I can't ride him," he said. "It's too soon by a mile. It would kill him."

But Carbit, it seemed, believed this even less than he. He protested, whinnying so loudly that Riderch vaulted over the stall door and hid against the wall to avoid being seen by any stirring stablepaws. "Fine, fine!" Riderch husked. "Hare's horns, do you want me to be caught on my way out?"

"Would I instruct you to leech Carbit, only to make you ride him to death?"

Riderch declined to admit aloud that he thought such a command perfectly consistent with what he knew about Dinistrith.

"Besides, I expected that you would be chomping at the bit to have one of the king's horses. Surely you haven't come to love him, given what you go to do."

"I didn't want to be caught taking any of them out of the stables," said Riderch. "I still don't."

"They fear to come between you and Carbit now. Haven't you noticed? Even Kyllister knows a wonder when he sees it."

"Why do you want me to take this horse so badly?" Riderch challenged.

"You've needed no heavenly sanction to steal previously, but if you're going to drag your feet now, I'll give him to you outright. Carbit is yours. He belongs to you. Take him from King Rhuddri and ride him where you please; he will not grow weary, though he will not carry as much as you think he ought to." The voice was impatient now, a mood hitherto unknown.

"I don't need your permission to steal a horse," Riderch shot back, with his paw already on Carbit's tether. "But if you're still so keen to help me, I'll take any advice you're willing to give."

"The princess will have a sword too. She will kill you with it if you let her."

Riderch snorted. "I reckon that's good to know."

Never in his life had Riderch tacked a horse as quickly or as quietly as he tacked Carbit that night. Saddle blanket and saddle went on, a supple, gilded leather affair worth as much as some mares. Front and back cinches he buckled in the dark, fastened the fender hobble to the stirrups without even looking, knowing the business with his eyes closed. The bridle he slipped on easily, though Carbit nearly gnawed off Riderch's paw at the mere suggestion of a bit. The tie down he hooked to the breast collar, and when all was buckled flush to the beast and the saddlebags hung from his sides, Riderch opened the stall door and peered up at the hayloft. No eyes regarded him. The stables were asleep, disturbed only by the furious pounding of his heart and Carbit's unendurable restlessness. They kicked sparks off of one another, and for the first time Riderch wondered why Carbit was so eager to go. For he had been so eager ever since he had awoken from his leeching – indeed, had seemed even in his decumbiture to long to leave the stable.

Many of the horses at Pedwar Ceinych, he remembered then, were mingled with mustangs. It made them tougher, more resilient in the inhospitable wastes of the Anialdir. It also made them

intractable; from time to time a self-willed steed would escape to live among the gwerthons in the Greteboga, and would as often as not be recaptured. And he, thought Riderch, was enabling that very escape. He swore to himself then that he would never pen Carbit, just as the nomads never penned their own steeds, and swung himself into the saddle, riding his stolen palfrey out of the stables. He rolled the door shut behind him, then made straight north to cross the Rinnea so that he could leave Gorseth Floyd through the ill-guarded gaps still left in her wall. Someone would return for Ruddo later; until then, the does at the Sandhill could look after him. Riderch let his hat hang over his back all night, permitting the lusty Whirlwind to whip between his ears. It was soothing to his fever, and he was certain to exert himself a great deal in the coming days. He heard laughter in the air, and he laughed with it.

18

Riderch did not realize that he had forgotten his falchion until he was halfway up the Fawwyrm. It lay still at the bottom of the well; and he, in his half-crazed haste to quit Gorseth Floyd, had only a vague awareness that he had lost it forever in a dream. He cursed himself for it, for that falchion had won him a great deal of gold, but there was no going back for it. Indeed, the time was so short that he did not even ride to Mydge to resupply: he made Carbit carry him straight into the dunes, through the scrub and sagebrush that stubbornly survived in sandy soil, to the place where he was to rendezvous with the rest of his band come morning. And carry him Carbit did, swiftly and tirelessly, skating the dunes with a mustang's finesse. Riderch hardly had to nudge him to the left or to the right. He threaded the yuccas as if following a star, up the crest of the bald, windswept mountain of sand which Riderch had foreordained; then framed against the firmament, the two looked down its southern slope into a basin full of brittlebushes crowded around an ancient well, and there found the band waiting.

He thought no more of his missing sword after that, for each face that greeted him as he rode into the camp was more delicious than the last. All were dressed in red, a red identical to the red of Godnu, and Riderch's first thought was that the very rocks of Mydge had doubted his dependability, only to be utterly shamed. Dargan was on watch with Disma; these ran up to meet him ahead of the others, and Riderch regarded them with the most self-assured expression he could conjure. The effect of his new mount was not lost on him. Carbit's scar was in full view as soon as their fires revealed him, and the palfrey seemed almost to flaunt it. Riderch counted the bodies, counted their horses, and failed to account for only three.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

"Everything you gave to Hawen, at least," said Dargan. "I'll admit it, boss, I didn't reckon you'd be back. Didn't sound real, none of it."

Riderch scowled. He had forgotten how much he hated the little hare's sniveling. "I'll bet you won't make that mistake again, will you?" he asked, loudly enough to benefit the rest of the band gathering around him. He saw Gwyarc among them, bile boiling behind his mangled face, and smiled again. "Where's Sawl?"

"Your guess is as good as ours," said Dedrys, his eyes fixed on Carbit's throat. A red riding veil lay folded atop the brim of his hat, and Riderch was pleased – from a distance it would passably resemble a knight's veiled helmet, and those who wandered near enough to know better would not survive to gainsay it. "Kay went to his tent last night to tell him to saddle up, but he wasn't there. Haven't seen hide nor hair of him since."

"Reckoned he stayed back at the Sandhill," Kay grunted, seen and heard easily enough though he stood at the back of the crowd. "Was hoping he'd come back with you, boss."

“Well he didn’t,” said Riderch, “but he’d better find his way here before morning if he wants to be paid with the rest of us. Did he say anything to you, Disma?”

Disma shook his head, but would not meet Riderch’s eyes. “I reckoned he went home with the others. I was as surprised as you when I learned he wasn’t there.”

“Damn dirty coward,” said Riderch. “I’m about to pay you out, and he can’t even be bothered to show up?”

“More for us, aye?” Dargan tittered.

Riderch opened his mouth to silence Dargan, but Gwyarc piped up from the middle of the band before he could speak: “How’d you do it?” The stifled amazement in his delivery nearly made Riderch sing for pleasure.

“That’s a tale to tell when the girl’s bagged,” Riderch answered, remaining stonefaced.

“Hawen says you got the king to tell you everything himself,” said Gwesgyr, dressed as if he had just rolled out of bed.

“He’s pawing me his daughter on a silver platter,” Riderch confirmed. An awed murmur swept through the camp; he kept his face as wild as any nomad’s, as he always did when he wanted to press his presence. “Now everyone saddle up. It’s almost morning, which means they’re already on the road.”

They obeyed him with auspicious eagerness, as they had before the growing strife along the Swartway and the winter’s misfortunes. What food hung spit over the fires they ate in seconds. None slept in tents, for tents were too heavy to carry on their impending errands; but their bedrolls they tied and hung behind their horses’ cantles, and their long spears, half-buried in sand to frame simple wind-breaks, they fastened to their straps. Only Disma did not scatter with them. He remained beside Carbit, cheerlessly watching the camp.

“Where’s Ruddo?” he asked, almost sighing.

“Back at the Sandhill,” said Riderch. “This one was calling to me on my way out.”

Disma furrowed his brow tightly. “How did he get that wound?” he asked. “He’s too small for a charger.”

“He isn’t a charger,” Riderch grunted, swinging himself down from the saddle. “He’s Rhuddri’s favorite palfrey.”

Disma could only gape at him, a thin wand of dogwood in his dyed poncho. When at length he recovered himself, he was more morose than ever. “He would kill you for that alone,” he said.

“He’ll have to catch me first,” Riderch smirked. “Hare’s horns, by the way everyone was looking at me when I rode in, I reckon I should have stolen his crown too.”

“Will you need to change horses?” asked Disma. “I brought one from Mydge, thinking you would end up riding straight here. I’m glad I did now.”

Carbit answered for Riderch, shaking his mane so violently that Disma startled and stepped back. Riderch laughed at him, joining more laughter that only he could hear. “I reckon this one would start a fight if you tried to pass me off to another horse,” he said. “He got by on short rests all the way here. I had to make him stop.”

“I see,” said Disma, standing now at an uncomfortable distance. “There’s just one more thing, then.”

“Aye?” said Riderch.

“How will I know which coach is the right one?” he asked. “Hawen said they all look the same.”

“I marked the princess’,” said Riderch. “It’s clear as a gwerthon spring out here, so you won’t miss it if you keep your eyes open. Did you color the arrows like I told you?”

“Big red fletching, aye,” Disma nodded. “Had to use goose feathers for it, but you can see them a mile away.”

“Good enough,” said Riderch. “Have you got a veil for me?”

“In my saddlebag,” said Disma. “I’ll go fetch it.”

“Much obliged,” said Riderch. “Oh, and find me a spare sword if you can. I couldn’t stop to fetch mine on the way out.”

Disma shot him a queer look, only to divert his eyes again. “You’ll be hard pressed to find a spare sword here, since we’re only carrying what we need, but I’ll do what I can.”

“Dandy,” said Riderch. “I reckon we’re ready, in that case,”

“I reckon so,” said Disma, so limply that he could barely be heard over the wind in the bushes.

“Who knotted your whiskers?” Riderch asked. “This will go off without a hitch, and then we’ll be home free.”

“Nearly,” Disma added, looking down at his paws.

“You can hang back if you want,” said Riderch, taking a step toward him. “So long as you hit the girl’s coach and keep the riders off us, you’ll have earned your share.”

“Oh I’ll hang, all right,” said Disma, already turning to walk away from him. “But I’m riding with you first, so let’s get this over with. We’re well past arguing now.”

Even draped in red, the little raccoon fairly melted into the bustle of camp, disappearing from sight before Riderch could retort. He led Carbit away to drink at the ancient well and crouched there himself for a while, staring over its crumbling sandstone curb into its deep, inscrutable waters, so full of feverish anticipation that he was scarcely cognizant he had not slept. Each time he pulled up the ladle on its rope he fancied that he might haul up a sword with it, but he never did.

He fished up something else, however, as he was skimming the top of the well to purge its film of dust: a little skull no larger than his paw, with a bottom jaw that resembled a mantis’s legs. It was a snake’s skull, he realized, one of the deadly winged adders who feasted upon the desert scorpions. The bone was clean, though livid from being so long waterlogged; and because the water itself was clear and smelled sweet, Riderch supposed that it must have fallen in some time ago. He wondered if snakes often fell into wells in search of water, or if they knew the cracks and crevices that harbored slumbering pools so well that they did not need the work of folkish paws. He stared at it for a moment, then flicked it away into a patch of brown grass and pulled up a fresh ladleful of water.

Morning arrived soon after, waving a banner as red as Riderch’s band. Towering scarlet clouds clustered against the southern horizon, driven north by a wind that foreboded another early sandstorm. It would pummel the outer wall of the Greteboga, then fall more gently into the Anialdir; but the blowing sand would slow pursuits and searches nonetheless, and with any luck immobilize a scattered wedding procession.

Riderch lay flat atop the great dune overlooking the road, nestled in the sand between Disma and Dargan, the most keen-eyed of the band. Their red ponchos lay below, waiting to be donned, and to even the eyes of the circling buzzards they were no more than rocks. From here they could see clear to the Fawwyrm, its steep bank descending in terraced cornfields to the hidden water below. Spring would drench the Greteboga with its precious few storms, whose waters would flow down to swell the Fawwyrm and soak its soil. The same would happen to the Rinnea, though its stream was more consistent, and so would begin the early planting. For now, however, the Fawwyrm’s flow was low and sluggish.

Above its southern bank were a few more scattered dunes, lower and greener than the greater hills of the southern Anialdir. They completed the trough that held the road, a much less impressive thing than the straight, smooth Swartway. Low sandstone walls flanked it on either side, so neglected

along this remote stretch that they did practically nothing to forbid the sand from obscuring its surface. No folk traveled it that morning. The delegation from Gwall waited at the foot of Cetelacu to receive the princess. It was too early in the year for farmers to be combing the riverbanks. The band was alone, waiting in frenetic silence for the first sign of their quarry.

That sign came when the sun was just over the Greteboga, at Riderch's right shoulder and a little behind. A cloud of dust arose behind the shimmering ribbons upon the road, a cloud that grew and blew away northward until the hooves and wheels that made it could be heard even over the Whirlwind. The gray of Gorseth Floyd does not stand out from the palette of the Anialdir, and so they could not tell for a time how near it truly was. Then from that gray emerged flashes of turquoise beside great masses of ironwood and a pair of green riders with their hounds, and they knew that the hour had arrived. Riderch cuffed Dargan; the little hare shot down the southern slope, flailing his arms to signal the others to mount up. They were ready with reins in paw in half a minute, split once again into two companies: the one led by Kay, the other to be led by Riderch himself. Kay's company rode eastward behind the dunes, toward a saddle through which they would spill onto the road. Riderch's rode a little westward, huddled just out of sight of the road beside the great dune. All of them awaited the call to charge, even Carbit and Disma's horse Lithrig held by Gwesgyr at the foot of the dune, while Riderch and Disma awaited the wedding procession, a pair of serpents buried in the sand. Disma whispered to himself at intervals, short, desperate prayers to Dinistrith that he could not bring himself to utter silently.

Master Kyllister had told Riderch nothing less than the full truth, to his indescribable thrill. The wagon train met and passed them broadside, wary yet unaware: five gilded stagecoaches and a passel of fine steeds, surrounded by five squads of five gray riders and two of King Sheen's green wardens. All were in battle regalia, that being much lighter than parade array to account for the heat, and all bore spears and falchions. They were some fifty yards from the dune, a stone's throw and more, and yet Riderch heard them as if they were close enough to touch: the horses' lusty breathing, the clattering hooves and the rattling wagon wheels, the uneasy chatter among the escort. It was already growing warmer beneath the sun – Riderch paid it no mind, but looked from stagecoach to stagecoach, one by one, back and forth, just as the sun moved back and forth between the Greteboga's peaks every year.

"They're getting ahead of us, Riderch," Disma whispered, having strung his bow while the hare was not looking. "Which one is it?"

But Riderch did not hear Disma, for a queer song had arisen from the wedding procession. He supposed it to be among the procession, at least, for it echoed between the dunes from somewhere far away. A moment later he knew differently: it was just over his head, flying around his ears. Once he had mistaken that singer for one of his own band, and had made himself seem mad by railing against it. Now he knew it for what it was: an endorsement of his heist by the heavenly prince of cutthroats. He found he did not understand the words, however – indeed, they seemed to have nothing to do with what was about to unfold:

"He shall rebuild her ruined walls
And mount her long-neglected throne,
A spring in every parchéd well
And walls of uncut stone

While yet without the lone wolf lies
His head was hauled within,
He sighs in sand, well satisfied
And his long work begins"

“Riderch!” Disma hissed, prodding his side with an arrow. “They’ll get too far ahead if I don’t shoot soon.”

“Just wait,” Riderch panted, a little dreamily. “It’s just like the slit in the king’s hall: it will hit the gold piece and-”

A bright flash blinded them as he spoke, splitting the wagon train into four corners. The sun struck a fleck atop the foremost stagecoach, and from his southerly house cast a perfect ray upon the peak of the great dune. Disma gasped. They had moved the princess up front, thought Riderch, as was only fitting for her station. It would require him to ride up farther from the rear, but by the time he did Kay would surely have secured the stagecoach. He cursed himself again, dearly wishing he had not forgotten his sword, and strung the spare bow Disma had found for him while Disma rose to take his shot.

Out of every member of Riderch’s band, Disma was the best mark by a country mile. He had been the better hunter of the pair as a child, though Riderch enjoyed hunting more; and while contests in archery were a favorite diversion in the camp, Disma had long been excluded from them, just as he was excluded from many other things for much less reason. Little else in the world, however, made him prouder than to be entrusted with a vital shot. His sinews, so tightly knit at all other times, unwound as he stood and knocked a red-feathered arrow. His face, so full of concern, was as placid as a pool. He took a breath, then drew, then let fly, and had the second arrow drawn by the time the first struck its mark.

Riderch watched this while the queer song played about his head. It ended abruptly when the first arrow’s report against the stagecoach reached his ears; the second wrested his attention from a feverish haze. He leaped to his feet and found himself dizzy, and in a swelling chorus of shouts looked down at the wedding procession to see two red flags sprouting from the flank of the foremost stagecoach. The gray riders were fanning out now, searching for the archer who had made the shots, while the pilots urged their carriages forward. Riderch glanced at Disma, expecting him to look pleased with himself; but Disma only seemed disappointed, as if he had missed the mark entirely. There was no time to question him, however: Riderch flung himself down the dune toward Gwesgyr and their horses, whistling as loudly as he possibly could. He did not even use the stirrups to mount his stolen steed, but sprang into the saddle from above and threw on his red poncho and veiled hat. He plucked the reins from Gwesgyr and dug in his spurs, joining his company below, with Disma and Gwesgyr following behind.

They burst out between the dunes then, a wedge driven into the road. The searching gray riders, seeing the pursuing band, wheel around to form a wall about the stagecoaches, but only too late to forbid them. Their cries to one another are drowned by the raucous shouts of the red host. They rush in to defend the rear, only to find the fore confronted by a giant and his second host. Kay’s spear runs a green warden through, his falling body staining the road red. There are no threats, neither any demands; the heist must be done quickly and cleanly, Riderch told them, for they will fare better under pursuit than under fevered fighting.

They leave no room for flight this time. Out of the saddlebags come leather sacks, heavy and rattling within. They pull their mouths open, then behind them to the east and west the red band flings their contents, iron caltrops made of twisted nails that strew the road. It embitters Riderch to so mistreat the horses he himself had leeched mere days ago, but the effect is instant and decisive. There is now a lane in which the hosts may fight, a corridor bounded by the Fawwyrm and the treacherous dunes. A few gray riders are caught without and cannot stop in time, their horses hobbled in a field of spikes.

The rest ride in with fearsome wrath, a stream of curses on their lips, but by now the band is almost to the crowded coaches. Their wedge walls a few red riders in the center, Riderch among them,

and checks the Ceinych's spears with practiced deftness. Hugging Carbit with his knees, Riderch knocks an arrow and searches the right flank of the wagon train, seeing the red feathers and Rhuddri's harried host. Kay has pulled his weight as usual, sending his riders in circling passes to occupy the vanguard's full attention. There are archers atop the stagecoaches, however, and it is these who bar Riderch's way forward. They cast their bolts at all who come too close, showing no preference for folk or steed. A horse screams and stumbles; the wedge buckles inward. Riderch blinks and breathes, a familiar fever spreading outward from his chest. He takes aim, accounting for Carbit's gait as well as he can, and lets fly, but the arrow only buries itself in the rearmost stagecoach at the archer's feet. The archer wheels around and draws on Riderch, buck teeth bared in a beastly grimace, only to sprout a red-feathered arrow from the neck a moment later. His limbs jerk with such violence that his bowstring breaks. He stumbles and falls from the stagecoach. Riderch looks over his shoulder to find Disma just behind, as grim as the Great Badger. He jabs a thin, black claw ahead and Riderch nods his frantic thanks, then barks and spurs Carbit free of the narrowing wedge.

Carbit takes his order as a challenge, showing courage only chargers are bred to show. He strives ahead with mad joy, as if a thousand lancers are behind him, skirting the right flank of the wedding procession so closely that the archers can find no shot. There is a clear path to the fore now, where the grooms who lead the gifted horses fight with Kay's red flock. The gold-marked coach is turned askew, having tried and failed to ride around the fray; its door faces Riderch, and its pilot whips his panicked horses toward the dunes to no avail. His opportunity will not last long, Riderch thinks: the Ceinych is forming up again, and Gwall's one green warden is a match for even Kay in a skirmish. If Riderch is to claim his prize, he must do it now, and so he rides up alongside the pilot's bench with an arrow at the ready.

The pilot is a sun-yellowed Anialdir hare hung with turquoise earrings, one of those born of the river basin's endlessly accruing dust. He notices Riderch only too late; at such a distance he can hardly miss. Riderch draws his bow and casts its shaft at the pilot's heart. The pilot winces, but Riderch's triumph is short-lived. He does not fall, but the arrow does, clinging briefly to his gray poncho before clattering on the floor. The pilot is armored beneath his wool. Riderch curses himself, but has no time to knock another arrow. He sees the pilot's paw retreat into his poncho and knows that he cannot afford a lengthy fight. The wreckage of his last robbery fills his mind afresh, the pilot's body tumbling against the sky in a shower of gold. He has no time to hesitate, to pit himself against a foe and come away with only blood to show for it. Tugging at the reins, he makes to fall back toward the stagecoach door, only to halt a moment later.

A queer lull fell upon the fray. The riders, locked in desperate battle a moment ago, drew back and turned away from one another. All eyes looked northward. The pilot, staring still at Riderch with a dagger halfway out of his poncho, nevertheless flicked his ears behind him when he heard a dull roar in the distance.

"Who's that?" a gray rider shouted.

"Cutthroats!" cried the green warden.

Riderch grew baffled then. Casting a quick glance over his shoulder, he found the rearguard drawing restlessly near him, then turned back to find the stagecoach pilot halfway to him with a sax upraised. The dull roar beyond the wagon train was swelling; each and every rider was shouting, re-forming, preparing for a new development that Riderch could not fathom. Caught blind, he wanted even less to engage with the golden hare, and so he did the only thing he could: standing in the saddle, Riderch leaped onto to the stagecoach roof, pulling himself up by its railing beside the gold piece and its braid of horsehair. The pilot shouted a warning. There was a dead hare upon the roof, lying in a pool of blood with a look of horror burned into his face. Beside him lay a bow; from his bloodied belt hung a falchion in a gray scabbard.

Slipping in his blood, Riderch scrambled across the roof to its farther side, threw wide his veil, and looked out over the Fawwyrm. Up from its wintered banks flew a cloud of dust. Within it was a host of riders galloping toward them, forty and more, unarmored and unmarked by any characteristic color. The well of Riderch's confidence ran dry, leaving behind his burning rage and a shock of betrayal so keen that he believed heaven itself had cast the killing bolt into his heart.

A hail of arrows fittingly ensues; Riderch hits the deck and listens to the buzzing hornets. Screams rise into the air as the first fight falls into confusion on the cusp of the second. Crawling to the roof's right flank, Riderch pulls the falchion, scabbard and all, from the dead archer's belt, slips it into his own, then heaves his body out of his way and peers over the edge. He calls out for Disma, who is nowhere to be found; and seeing that the fight has moved northward, finds the stagecoach door undefended. Feverish and panting, then, he decides his course. Heaven has given him no aid, but a snare: the might of his arm will avail, or nothing will. Carbit is watching him among the southern dunes. Other horses are scattered or scattering, the gifted steeds and as many riderless mounts. Pulling himself over the railing, Riderch climbs past the lashed coin, down the carriage's side and onto its running board. He tries the door and finds it fast, then jerks his deer knife from its sheath and wedges it between the door and jamb, prying upwards until the latch is thrown. He hears a scramble within, the sound of tearing fabric and splintering wood as the door swings open. With a gasp he ducks behind it, just in time to see a polished blade swing out where he was standing. It sweeps with fair finesse, a stroke, and then a second for good measure, before its tip retreats. Riderch wonders then how many are the guards within the stagecoach, wishing for Disma at his side, or Kay, or even Gwyarc. The escort is too skilled, however; he must do the deed himself before his band is forced to flee, or else be overwhelmed.

Kicking off of the running board, Riderch slams the door on the protruding sword, pinning its blade between the door and frame. He hears a sharp complaint before the blade begins to wriggle, as its wielder tries to pull it free. Riderch waits for a mighty jerk, then deftly throws open the door again, putting all the unimpeded pulling force upon the wielder. He hears another crash, a cry both fierce and unexpectedly fair; then drawing his own stolen falchion, leaps boldly up into the stagecoach and makes to strike himself.

The clamor in the road died away. The roaring, which Riderch realized had been in his own skull as much as without, fell strangely still. He heard harefolk voices shouting behind him, retreating into the dunes, but hardly knew that they were there. It smelled of copal and vanilla, of rich wood breathing in the heat; the reek of blood and sweat and horses was mercifully absent. Riderch's upraised paw, stained with the blood coating the falchion's hilt, fell not in a blow, but an easy parry. There were no wardens in the stagecoach. One folk alone indwelt its cabin, and this folk now flailed in a mass of lace curtains and shattered curtain rods. The right arm still swung its sword, seeking the intruder but succeeding only in gashing wood and slashing cushions. The left, to Riderch's surprise, was wrapped in a makeshift shield of broken curtain rods and lace. It clutched at the fallen curtains, seeking to disentangle them from a voluminous, many-colored dress, but Riderch would not allow the attempt.

Locking blades with the captive, he pinned her tawny paw and wrenched the handle free, meeting more resistance than he expected. He made then to toss the second sword into the road behind him; but catching a glimpse of gold upon its hilt, he raised it before his eyes and gasped. Its handle was wrapped in golden wire; its gold-chased guard, a feathered serpent's coils, culminated in a pommel which was the serpent's head. Its eyes were bloodstone, its teeth as keen as the falchion's long blade.

Here was a parade sword fit for the war-band, thought Riderch. Harefolk nomads had no room in their tents for weapons which did not hold up in battle, so that even their warlords, at the height of their pomp, would not be encumbered with anything less than true brands. Riderch held one such true brand. Its balance was peerless; it leaped like a hart in his paw at the merest swing. Ensuring that it fit

his blood-stained scabbard, he threw the beaten falchion out of the stagecoach and claimed the Ceinych's blade then and there.

After this he took hold of the tangled curtains and pulled with all his might. Their coils slipped free of his prisoner, leaving a panting mass of brightly-colored skins and feathers lying on the floor. A bridal veil, bedewed with turquoise beads, hung halfway over a grimacing face; Riderch grasped its hem and pulled it off, removing a spray of quetzal feathers with it. The head was bald now, the face unobscured. In it was rage to mirror that which Riderch had left outside the stagecoach. It too fell away, and for a breath that felt like ten they stared at one another, flabbergasted.

Princess Rhian was the tallest doe he had ever seen, nearly matching him for height. Her face, sharp and full of determination, was beautiful in that coarse, powerful, almost buckish way that only nomad faces can be. Her cheeks were as red as tamarillos; her chin, much like her father's, was starkly gray against the cornmeal color of her coat. Widely-set eyes like frothing chocolate danced across Riderch's body, as puzzled as they were terrified. She scrambled to standing against the farther door, holding her makeshift shield in front of her, and the folds of her long mantle, gold brocade trimmed with a multitude of vibrant feathers, fell flatteringly over no frail frame. Riderch himself might have fit in her clothes.

The cutthroat could not discern the cause of her bewilderment, however. He was too busy with his own, born of delirious fever and a growing certainty in something he could not name. It was as if a pestering bird had just alighted on his shoulder after buffeting him ceaselessly for weeks. All of the indignation he had lately thrown back at his band, all of the desperate insecurity he had striven so recklessly to outrun, had been only anxious anticipation for this moment. He had joined the path that led him here the moment he had struck the rabbitfolk's fraudulent bargain. He did not understand why it was so, but the voice that filled his ears then was only a confirmation of something he already knew beyond all power of words to describe:

"For this you were born, Riderch. With this I entrust you. Do not leave her side!"

Riderch stood stock straight, balking at the princess like a horse before an adder. His head was on fire, just as it had been when he passed out in Carbit's stall. He saw her pawing the door behind her, searching for the handle, only to jerk away when another arrow struck the stagecoach. The brief lull dissolved; in its wake came fresh shouts, the clashing of swords, and the sound of retreating hooves. He glanced over his shoulder to find his band routed, then looked back at her with renewed panic.

"You're not from Ancathair," she said. Her voice, likewise panicked, was nevertheless as decisive as her face.

Understanding crashed over Riderch's head. The princess might have plucked the falchion from his paw and slain him with it then, but she only let the question linger. And Riderch, to his credit, knew at once the words that would sway her. "I'm from the Ceinych," he said. "There was an ambush. I'm here to rescue you…My Lady." It was only half a lie, but it burned his lips as no brazen lie had ever done.

"Your poncho," she said with a sharp nod.

"It's blood," said Riderch, almost before she had finished. That was even less of a lie, and the true blood smeared into his fur and clothes sold it enough that the princess dropped her guard. Riderch held out his paw. She flinched, then clasped it tightly; and lingering not a moment longer, Riderch pulled her from the stagecoach and onto the road.

He led her south at first, toward Carbit where he stood at the waist of the dune, but a moment later she resisted. "Wait!" she cried, wrenching free of his grip. "My mare! My mare! Newidol!"

"What?" Riderch barked. He wheeled around and grasped for her again, but she was swift of foot, bending down to scoop up Riderch's discarded falchion before running over to the team of horses still bound miserably to the stagecoach. A few of the gifted horses were beside them, knotted by their

leads to the front brake lever. A groom must have tied them there, now nowhere to be found; Riderch saw the pilot slumped over the bench and blanched at the arrows sprouting from him. Rhian must have seen him too, but nothing could dissuade her then from running headlong among the panicked horses, finding there a pure white jennet with a braided mane. She was tacked, to Riderch's surprise, no doubt to display her fine array to King Sheen's entourage.

"What are you doing?" Riderch shouted at her, but Rhian was not listening. With one deft stroke she cut the knotted lead away, then swung herself into the saddle, mastering the mare's distress with savvy Riderch had no time to admire. She turned her from the stagecoach and clapped heels to her, and southward across the road they flew, passing Riderch without a word. "Hey!" Riderch screamed, and started after her; but seeing that she stopped beside the dune to look back at him, he made for Carbit instead, slipping once in the sand before pulling himself up.

He looked briefly past the wedding procession one last time, searching for red riders upon the road. None of the living remained, though a few lay dead. Only the gray hares of Pedwar Ceinych and the unmarked mob remained. The robbery was a disaster, he finally realized. It could hardly have gone worse if he had failed to take the princess; and yet he knew, though it branded him a lunatic, that he was about to make it even worse. Disma had been right all along, but it was too late to tell him so – with any luck he would finally leave the Anialdir for good, when he realized that Riderch was not coming back. Riderch spurred Carbit on toward Princess Rhian, and together they disappeared among the dunes as the stagecoaches swarmed with folk.

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An hour later the storm was in the Anialdir, kicking up one of the dry, grating winds that sows little bolts of lightning into fur and tells folk to pull their shutters and bolt their doors. Riderch and Princess Rhian, however, had neither shutters nor doors; they were among the rolling dunes, tramping through scrub, uneasily skirting the stormfront to the southwest. The clouds were not yet overhead, but the wind trumpeted the arrival of peril more forcefully every minute.

It is more precisely said, rather, that Rhian rode southwest, and that Riderch followed her. At first the maiden chose her bearing so confidently that Riderch thought she must know her destination and her course already; but when she began to drift too close to Mydge he knew that they must turn around or risk discovery. Their ears had been up since they had left the road. Once or twice Riderch had seen signs of horse-passage: droppings, broken branches, folded shrubs. They had seen no other folk, however, neither from Gorseth Floyd nor from the queer mob, and he was determined that it should remain so.

Catching up to Rhian proved more challenging than it should have, given that the maiden, draped in her sparkling brocade, never pushed her jennet Newidol harder than a canter; and yet that jennet, unladen and light of hoof, threaded the dunes with such graceful speed that Carbit was forced in the end to adopt a half-gallop in order to catch up. They were in a low wash between dunes now, sheltered somewhat from the wind. Riderch thought to wedge himself between the bank and Rhian's left; but Rhian, on hearing his approach, crowded him out so that he was forced to ride up on her right. There he saw the naked falchion still in her paw, and after it the steely glare in her eyes. Those eyes darted first to his belt, where they found the golden falchion in its scabbard, then to the reins in his left paw and his free right. Looking up and down the wash, she dug her heels into Newidol's flanks a little harder, but Riderch would no longer let himself fall behind. He kept pace with her, and together the pair rode down the narrow bed in silent tug-of-war.

"There are some big rocks coming up on either side of the wash," Riderch said at last. "We'll want to get on the north side of them before the storm hits, or else we'll risk being flooded out."

Rhian said nothing, however. She simply scanned him up and down, holding her falchion at her side.

“Are you sizing me up?” asked Riderch, nearly laughing before the twitching of her blade bid him bite his tongue.

“Why are you following me?” Rhian demanded. “What do you want?”

“Are you going to take that tack with me?” Riderch balked. “The dunes are crawling with folk, all of them looking for you. I’m hardly going to leave you alone out here.”

“And who are you?” she asked. “I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“I told you, I came to rescue you from that ambush on the road,” said Riderch; and then, after a moment’s thought: “Your father sent me.”

“You stole my father’s favorite horse!” Rhian snapped, pointing the tip of her blade at Carbit.

“That’s a mighty grave thing to accuse me of, Your Highness,” said Riderch, turning up his nose. “I didn’t steal Carbit. He was given to me fair and square.”

“That’s a damnable lie!” Rhian shouted, so loudly that Riderch risked the loss of his paw to grip her arm and shush her. A shock passed between them when they touched, causing both to flinch.

“Are you trying to wake up the dune-ghosts?” he hissed. “You shut your lily-white mouth.”

“Don’t touch me,” Rhian husked, and cuffed him so hard with the hilt of her sword that he nearly spun out of the saddle. “Do you believe me a kitten? Carbit is the last thing my father has to remind him of my mother. As if he would simply give him away to a shabby waif like you.” Her manner of speech was unlike any Riderch had ever heard: every word was sharp and clear, delivered with bookish enunciation, yet surging underneath with anger Riderch would have found dangerous in Gwyarc.

“I’m the only reason Carbit’s still alive,” Riderch retorted. He sniffed hard and spat into the wash, seething for how defensive the maiden made him.

A gust of warm wind howled overhead and fell again before Rhian spoke. “You’re that leech he told me about,” she said in a much lower voice. “The one who cut out the tumor?”

“I told you I was from the Ceinych,” said Riderch.

“You’re not,” said Rhian. “That’s a lie. You’re dressed like one of Osging’s, but even that’s a lie. Where are the flowers? The helmet? Did you think a red poncho would fool me, or did you not expect to come so close?”

“It’s blood,” Riderch repeated, looking straight down the wash for the rocks. “I know it doesn’t look like it, but it is. I’m not lying.”

“Yes you are,” Rhian nodded. “You’re only telling me enough to evade me. You won’t look me in the eye. You’re lying to me, and I imagine you must have lied to my father as well if he let you take Carbit. Who are you, really?”

For the first time since he had pulled back her veil Riderch dared to look in Rhian’s eyes. What he found there puzzled him so deeply, however, and threw his heart so unbearably high, that he was forced at once to look away. He opened his mouth to answer, then closed it for ten of Carbit’s strides. “I’m nobody,” he said at last. “Not any more.”

“Then I beg you, whatever you do, return Carbit to my father,” said Rhian, as they rounded a bend in the wash and twin heaps of great red stones appeared behind the dunes. “Beyond that, leave me alone.”

“I'm not leaving you alone,” said Riderch. “I'm taking you to Gwall, and we’re going the wrong way for that.”

“Gwall?” Rhian balked. “I'm not going to Gwall.”

Riderch reined up Carbit so suddenly that Rhian halted herself and looked back. “I beg your pardon?” he said.

“I’m not going to Gwall,” Rhian repeated more firmly; “and if you intend to take me there, you’ll be sorely disappointed.”

“But…but…why?” Riderch stammered.

“Is that any business of yours?” asked Rhian. “My father didn’t send you, no matter what you’d have me believe.”

“Don't tell me you wanted to marry Brockwell instead,” Riderch replied breathlessly. It was all he could think to say, and yet he knew it was off the mark even before he heard Rhian scoff.

“Hardly!” she said. “I can't stand the sight of him, the overfed snake. I don't want to marry either of them.”

“But why not?” asked Riderch.

“Are you going to tell me what happened on the road?” said Rhian, narrowing bottomless eyes at him.

“Tell the truth, Riderch. Tell her you had a change of heart. She will believe you.”

Riderch shifted in the saddle, unsure how to answer her, then shook his head.

“I didn’t think so,” she smoldered, then straightened herself and rode up the northern bank toward the shattered rocks.

“Well hey now,” said Riderch, directing Carbit up the bank behind her. “There are folk in my…folk I can't stand the sight of myself, but they're good for making gold and making things happen when I need them. I reckon you’ll stand Sheen all right when you see how fat his purse is. Gwall's a big city, real fine, real clean, and that palace on the lake is the best I ever seen. He’d give you everything you ever wanted, if anyone could.”

“Are you trying to convince me to marry King Sheen?” asked Rhian, shooting another incredulous glance at him from the top of the bank.

“No,” Riderch admitted, as he led her through cacti among the uneven stones. She followed, to his relief, and none too soon; for the Whirlwind was almost upon them, and they were forced to don their veils again lest the sand blow in their faces. “I reckoned I would have to convince you the other way, to talk turkey.”

“You won’t convince me of anything,” said Rhian. “But you’re wrong, in any case. He would give me everything, perhaps, but nothing worth having.”

Riderch whistled. “You must have high standards if the king of Gwall isn't good enough for you. I reckon he spends more gold in one day than I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“What good is gold when you're miserable?” asked Rhian.

“You're asking me?” said Riderch. “I’ve only ever been miserable when I didn't have enough.”

“I don't believe that,” said Rhian.

“Nor do you.”

“Said the rat with his head in the adder hole,” Riderch shrugged.

“I don't want gold,” said Rhian more forcefully. “I don't want turquoise, or brightwine, or scents, or banquets, or litters, or scores of maids fawning over me. I don’t want to be a part of this war-band racket; and now I may finally cut myself free, and I thank you for it, whoever you are, but I don't need anything else from you.”

“You don't reckon it's your duty to your pa to marry into Gwall?” asked Riderch, knowing that the question was a transparent bait to them both.

They rounded the northern side of the stone-heap then, and found there what Riderch had hoped for: a hollow, sheltered on one side by rocks and on the other by a hill of sagebrush. There would be scorpions to contend with, he thought, but they would be able to pass the storm there in safety.

“You’re a footpad, aren’t you?” asked Rhian. “One of those who rob folk on the Swartway?”

Riderch made a silent show of dismounting, of pulling Carbit’s blindfold from his saddlebag.

“I knew it,” Rhian whispered; then dismounting herself, she stormed over to Riderch and jabbed a claw into the ear around his neck. “I don't need a thief and a cutthroat to tell me my duty!” she barked.

“She’s afraid of you, Riderch. You should have told her yourself.”

“Sorry,” Riderch shrugged.

“And while you wear my father's sword, at that!” she continued. “I ought to pull it out and cut your ears off just for touching it.”

Riderch pulled it out for her. She leaped back and raised her own blade to guard, but Riderch only lay the golden falchion across his paws and admired it. “This nail was your pa’s?” he asked. “It's real fine. Finest I’ve ever seen, maybe.”

Rhian dropped her guard an inch and furrowed her brow. “It hung over the mantel in his bedroom,” she said. “He said it was intended for my brother, but just before I left he decided to send it with me as a gift for King Sheen.”

“Your brother?” asked Riderch, and sheathed his sword.

“Dead,” said Rhian. “He wouldn’t let any of my half-brothers have it.”

The wind whipped around the pitted stones, forbidding conversation for a score of moments. Biting her lip, Rhian slipped the naked falchion into her belt and hastened to blindfold Newidol, who welcomed a shield from the grit. The sky overhead was a sickly, livid red; Riderch chased what scorpions he saw out of the overhanging heap, and the two pulled their steeds in as far as they could. They lay down, tucking their proud heads into each other’s necks against the raging gale. Riderch and Rhian sat down after them, facing each other from crooks in the rocks. Neither could see the other’s face, but the tautness of their sinews could not have been more obvious. Rhian’s paw remained at her sword.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” said Riderch.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you,” said Rhian.

“Is there anything I can do?” asked Riderch.

“Leave,” said Rhian.

“Not until the storm is over, I can’t,” said Riderch.

“I knew the stagecoach driver,” said Rhian. “His name was Awen. He was a friend of mine.”

“I didn’t hurt Awen,” said Riderch, as the wind moaned around them.

“This will only make it harder to confess to her later, Riderch.”

“I didn’t!” Riderch insisted.

“I don’t believe you,” Rhian whispered, gripping her falchion harder.

Riderch rubbed his face under his veil and listened as the hissing sand pelted the earth. “This should stop folk from moving around the dunes, at least,” he said. “If they were smart they rode for cover.”

“Is this not cover enough?” asked Rhian, peering through her veil at the growing darkness.

“Depends,” said Riderch. “If it’s a dry one, it should do all right. But if there’s rain behind it, there’s still the risk of flood down here.”

“It’s too early for floods,” said Rhian.

“That’s what I figured,” Riderch nodded, “but there was one out in the Deepwaste last month that…” He trailed off, listening to a thin voice singing from within the Whirlwind. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” asked Rhian.

Riderch shook his head. “Forget it. I don’t reckon this’ll be too bad, actually.”

“What were you doing in the Deepwaste?” asked Rhian.

“Did the sword belong to her?” Riderch asked, having not heard her. “Your mother, I mean.”

Rhian scowled behind her veil. “Why do you care from whom you steal?”

“That’s just about all I care about,” Riderch chuckled. “But I like hearing you talk more than I like hearing you snap at me.”

“If you want to talk so badly, tell me what you want with me,” said Rhian. “You’re clearly not from Godnu, so who sent you? Cyngen? I won’t go to Ancathair. I would rather die than go to Ancathair.”

“All right then, where are we going?” asked Riderch, running a paw along Carbit’s flank. “I’ll take you anywhere you like.”

Rhian sat stunned again, as the scalding wind flattened the sagebrush against the slope before them. “*We* aren't going anywhere,” she insisted. “*I'm* going, and you can go back to your cutthroats.”

“If you want my shrift, Your Highness, I’m afraid I can’t do that, considering I don’t plan to take you back with me,” said Riderch.

“You want all of the profit for yourself,” Rhian sighed, hammering her foot hard on a flat stone. “I see how it is now. No honor among thieves, I suppose.”

“I confess that's a tempting offer, Your Highness, but no, I'm not going to do that,” said Riderch.

“Well you can't come with me!” she protested.

“Can't come with you where?” Riderch taunted; but Rhian did not answer him, and for a time they watched the Whirlwind sand down a little more of the Anialdir’s ageless stones.

“I've thought about this, you know,” she ventured at last. “Leaving, I mean. I’ve thought deeply, and taken counsel with the old Shepherd who stewards our Wheelhouse. I’ve even dreamed about it. There's a city over the Clegyrau west of here – do you know Clegyrau?”

“It’s part of the Greteboga, isn’t it?” asked Riderch, pulling his poncho tightly around him to keep out the roaring blast.

Rhian shook her head. “The Greteboga runs into it,” she said, “but I’m told they’re different mountain ranges. The rocks are different, at least, and they trail off farther south into the Deepwaste. It’s why the Anialdir is shaped so strangely.”

“So they’re different mountains,” said Riderch. “Does it matter?”

She shook her head again, and Riderch wished that he could see her expression behind her veil. “What matters is Gromstall, the city behind it,” she said, “a secluded city around a deep gwerthon in a valley. I've thought of disappearing there. It would be easy to do – they don't have much commerce with the Anialdir.”

“You really hate the thought of marrying those bucks that badly?” asked Riderch.

“That’s not why I want to go to Gromstall,” said Rhian, nearly silenced by the wind. “I love my father. I do, and I don't doubt that he loves me. I never have. He has Gorseth Floyd to think about, and he promised King Sheen that he would give him his firstborn daughter as a wife back when he and King Cyngen were helping him conquer the Anialdir. But he has a firstborn son by the queen now, and that's the line that will take the throne after him, so it hardly matters if I marry Sheen or Brockwell or anyone else beyond their own petty squabbling.”

“You going to become a footpad, then?” Riderch proposed. “You’re strong for a doe. I could teach you a thing or two.”

“I suppose I deserve that for telling you anything about myself,” Rhian grumbled.

“Why tell me at all, in that case?” asked Riderch.

“Because the wind is positively screaming,” said Rhian, nestling herself more tightly against the bulk of the rocks, “and I’m frightened, and the sound of a folkish voice is comforting.”

“Even mine?” Riderch smirked.

“I won’t become a thief,” she said.

“Then you'll get hungry and cold your dress will wear out,” said Riderch. “And it won’t matter that you ever said you didn’t care about gold, you'll find you need some eventually.”

She sniffed. “I'm not some puerile runaway, I know I must work to eat.”

“You'll scrub floors, most likely, or muck stables like I did, or wear out your knees and your back digging in someone else's garden,” Riderch went on, trying to carry more of the conversation to make up for the haunted laughter in the sky. “Maybe all three, or maybe something worse. I know someone who settled for worse and found she liked it, but you don’t seem like that kind of doe. If you're lucky you might get to teach some rich folk's kittens how to read, but that might just get you noticed by the wrong eyes. You reckon you're miserable now, just wait until you get what you want. That's why I took to thieving.”

“To make yourself miserable?”

“You think you have me pegged, don’t you?” asked Rhian.

“Am I wrong?” asked Riderch.

“Entirely,” said Rhian. “I could do any one of those things and be happier than I would being married to King Sheen or Prince Brockwell. None of those were on my mind.”

“Well if you won't do donkey work and you won't steal, what's left?” asked Riderch.

Rhian was quiet for a long time. The blowing feathers beneath her mantle were all that moved, and Riderch might have thought that she had fallen asleep if her head were not upright.

“Haven’t you thought about it?” he asked. “This sort of thing was all I thought about when I was planning to leave home.”

“I shouldn’t have told you everything I’ve told you already,” said Rhian more guardedly. “I don’t know why I did. I feel I may be sick.”

“It’s catching up to you,” Riderch nodded. “That happens, at least at first. Make sure you pull your veil back.”

A blast of wind forced them to turn their faces to the black stone wall; when he looked back, Riderch caught the end of a violent shiver in Rhian’s shoulders. He sighed. “I’m not going to tell you the truth right now,” he said. “You’re not in any shape for it. But I’m not going to hurt you, and I never planned to. I reckon I’d like to help you, as a matter of fact.”

“But on the road-” Rhian began.

“What happened on the road…shouldn’t have happened,” Riderch interrupted. “I don’t understand it myself, and I sure as hell can’t explain it to you.”

“No, you don’t understand,” said Rhian, speaking through a tight throat. “How could you? I prayed for this.”

“I…I beg your pardon?” said Riderch.

“On the road this morning, I prayed for this,” she repeated. “I prayed to every Star I could name that something would happen to the wagon train – a broken axle, or a horse rolling his ankle, or harassment from some of the folk who left the Ceinych angry – I didn’t care, as long as it gave me enough time to mount Newidol and ride away.” Her voice cracked. “It’s wretched enough that I planned to betray my father, but this? Why this? Why the bloodshed? Why you?”

She began to sob then: bitter, heaving sobs that climbed Riderch’s spine like a ladder. She wept for a long time, still gripping her sword, and Riderch could not bring himself to look at her. At length she calmed herself, however, and Riderch felt compelled to offer up what little knowledge he thought he possessed.

“It was Dinistrith,” he said. “I don’t know if you prayed to him – I don’t know if he’s the sort that good folk pray to – but if you did, it was him.”

Rhian sniffed and wiped her nose under her veil. “What makes you say that?” she asked.

“Dinistrith likes thieves and cutthroats,” Riderch shrugged. “You sure ended up with one, and I don’t know who else would have sent me.”

Rhian sobbed again, almost a scoff. “He could have sent a knight instead.”

“He could have helped you before now, too,” Riderch mumbled, fingering the ear under his shirt. “Who knows why heaven does anything?”

“There’s a fold of halsers in Gromstall, did you know that?” asked Rhian. “Nannygat, I believe it’s called.”

Riderch winced.

“I’m not confident that I could be a halser, in truth,” Rhian admitted. “It sounds worse than being in the war-band. But the big folds always take in Gifts.”

“What have you got to give?” asked Riderch. “You just said you didn't care about money.”

“Not that kind of gift,” said Rhian. “There are folk who aren't halsers who live and pray with the folds, who garden and cook and clean – donkey work, as you call it – when the wayfarers are gone or someone is sick. My mother was a Gift for a fold when she was my age, far to the south where the sand turns to glass, until my father came through with his warlords on their way to the Anialdir. He fell in love with her there.”

“You sure they'll take you?” asked Riderch.

“I'm sure I'll find out,” said Rhian.

“Good enough for me,” said Riderch. “We'll go to Gromstall, then.”

“Are you deaf?” said Rhian, loudly enough to attract the horses’ ears. “I told you already that I'm going by myself. I won’t have you following me.”

“I'm afraid I don't rightly care, Your Highness,” said Riderch. “War-bander or not, you are a runaway, and a princess from Gorseth Floyd is bound to have hounds after her. Someone recognizes you, best thing is you'd be sent back home, then back to Gwall. I can think of plenty of worse things too, but I don't wanna spook you.”

“You can't come with me,” Rhian warned.

“You can't outrun me,” Riderch replied.

“Why are you doing this?” she snapped, springing to her feet. “You won’t kill me, you won’t rob me, you won’t sell me. Why don’t you just go home?”

“Someone told me to stick to you, Your Highness, and I reckon he won't leave me alone unless I do,” said Riderch. “I’ll take you to Gromstall at least, then we can talk about it.”

“What?” Rhian fumed. “Who told you that?”

Riderch shrugged.

“You're crazed, is that it?” asked Rhian. “Your brains were boiled in the sun?”

“I’m starting to reckon so,” Riderch nodded. “But I’ve got to do this, boiled or not. Say whatever you like: I’m taking you to Gromstall, and you’ll be glad of it before long.”

“What makes you so sure?” Rhian smoldered.

“Well for one thing,” said Riderch, “you were veering too close to Mydge, and half the folk who’d want to bag you are there now, as likely as not. For another, you’re not dressed to cross the Western Waste. You don’t have half of the supplies you’ll need.”

“I was going to sell my clothes,” said Rhian, lifting the hem of her golden brocade. A cascade of sand fell from it.

“Aye, you were going to sell them somewhere your father’s riders would see them,” said Riderch, “and be picked up like the damn fool you are. The whole southern half of the Swartway is all Rhuddri’s now.”

“And you’ve a better idea?” asked Rhian.

“I know a better place to sell your things,” Riderch nodded, “and I know a better place to cross the Swartway.”

Rhian stood in restless thought for a moment, then sat down upon her rock again. “Godnu?” she ventured.

"Osging's the only one in the Anialdir who doesn't want you," said Riderch. "I know some folks who will happily buy everything you've got on, and we can use the money to get us to Gromstall. The whole Swartway north of Elksand should be safe to cross."

"You're proposing we go north," said Rhian; "but if we avoid Gorseth Floyd, we'll have to go through Ancathair."

Riderch shook his head and chuckled, flushing as he began to believe his own words about Dinistrith. "We'll go around Ancathair," he corrected her. "I used to hunt up in the mountains that way all the time, I know where all the little gwerthons are. It'll be by the blacks of our tails, but we'll survive until we get to Godnu."

Even through her veil, Rhian's cutting gaze was palpable. She sized him up for several minutes more; lightning flashed in the red haze, thunder shook the dunes to their very foundations, and she gasped. "You're wrong about Dinistrith," she almost shouted, wanting to be heard above the din. "He hates cutthroats – and yet he may have sent you after all."

They spoke no more after that, for the storm demanded that they lie flat and cover their heads with their arms; but in the lulls between gale and thunderbolt, Riderch caught snatches of song from Rhian's trembling lips, echoed by a multitude of voices that rode upon the Whirlwind:

"With thee lies the lightning,
The firmament's fire flashing
Where glints the sacrificial glass;
Holy Quetzal, cast it not at me
But where my courage must needs be
And yet is not, my craven's desolate crevasse"

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It was indeed a dry storm: father to its own miseries, but without the peril of flood. The Whirlwind sowed a film of dust and sand over every irritated surface, leaving all parched and stinging and full of hidden lightning, then departed without washing the world. It hid their tracks, in any case, and so when it had moved on to batter itself to pieces against the northern Greteboga, Riderch was careful to lead Rhian along the rockiest terrain he could find. They were perpetually thirsty, having only Riderch's water to share between folk and steed; but winter's coolness came soon after the storm, and in this they rode until by early twilight they found the road again.

They were much nearer Gwall now, for Riderch knew that no surviving riders would expect their fugitives to flee upstream. He wanted also to ensure that Rhian could not return to the wrack of the wedding procession; she wept twice more while they rode, and by the way she gazed down the sand-strewn road when they made to cross, he deemed the decision a wise one.

After this they forded the Fawwyrm, afraid to brave any bridge. It was a simple task at that time of year, its stream being scant compared to its lusty flow during the inundation. The water was clean, however; they paused to drink deeply, to fill Riderch's few waterskins, and to wash the sand from their eyes and ears, then waded across and climbed the steep northern bank to find themselves immediately among the stony foothills of the mountains. Brambles were more numerous here, especially the wicked goat-heads that were as cruel to horses' hooves as the iron caltrops Riderch had strewn across the road. He was savvy enough to lead them farther up to where they grew thinner, and so they picked their way along the higher clefts until the Ram emerged over the eastern peaks and it grew too dark to see. Then they bedded down out of the wind upon more merciful brush, hungry, exhausted, and miserable; but

Rhian, to Riderch's chagrin, would not close her eyes. She sat facing Riderch instead, her sword in her lap and her skins pulled in close, watching him as if he might pounce on her at any moment.

"Go to sleep," Riderch grunted from a patch of trampled rue. "We're going on before sunrise tomorrow."

"No," said Rhian.

Riderch sat up. "What do you mean, no?" he asked. "The next gwerthon is still a ways up. We can't stay here."

"I'm not going to sleep," she said, her teeth set in hareish determination. "Not with you anywhere nearby."

Riderch's face burned. "So you're afraid of me," he said. "You reckon I brought you all the way up here, without food or water, stepping on double-damn caltrops, so I could…what?"

"I saw the bodies on the road," said Rhian. "I don't know what you want from me, but I don't believe for one twitch of a whisker that it's good." Her face was admirably stony, what little of it Riderch could discern beneath the waxing moon, yet there was no hiding the thin quaver in her voice. She was bristling like a cornered scorpion, and like the scorpion was deeply frightened.

"We have three days of hard walking *at least* before we reach Godnu," said Riderch in a hoarse whisper. "Are you going to stay awake the whole time?"

"What if I do?" Rhian snapped.

"Then you'll stumble off a cliff and break your neck," Riderch growled.

"That only means you won't have to do it for me," Rhian shrugged.

"Hare's bleeding horns, I'm trying to help you!" Riderch shouted, pounding a fist against his breast.

"Prove it!" Rhian shouted back. "Give me a reason…" She sputtered and fell silent, too enraged to speak. Sparks sprayed from her eyes as if from Riderch's fire-striker, and with a lunge that startled even him she stood and thrust her falchion's tip so hard at him that he feared she would run him through. "Give me one good reason to believe a word you say, in Taranwr's name, or I swear I'll murder you."

"Like what?" Riderch roared, throwing up his paws. "I'm sticking my neck out for you-"

"You killed Awen!" she screamed, and that scream bounded up the jagged mountain rocks. A host of coyotes began to whine in reply. Rhian stiffened, but would not look away from Riderch.

"I did not kill-" Riderch began.

"Then one of your other butchers did," she hissed, "and that makes you no less a murderer than they. Have you ever told the truth in your life? Even once?"

"Everything I've told you has been turkey," said Riderch, rising to his paws. "I told you plainly that I left things out so I wouldn't scare you, but that's not the same thing."

"It's still a lie," said Rhian.

"Not bald-faced!" Riderch protested.

Rhian's mouth fell open. She stared at him for a long moment, speechless, then dropped the tip of her falchion half an inch. "Holy Stars in heaven," she whispered. "You can't help yourself, can you?"

"Don't you talk down to me, you fattened cavy," Riderch snarled, "you ungrateful-"

"Give me a reason now," Rhian warned, "right this minute, or I swear upon the sun that I will turn around tomorrow morning and give myself to Sheen."

Now it was Riderch's turn to be stunned. "You will not," he breathed, and hated how transparently it sounded like begging.

"I prefer it over being ravaged by a cutthroat in the mountains," said Rhian.

"Then what?" asked Riderch. "What do you want from me?"

Rhian thought for a moment. “Your name,” she said. “You haven’t even told me your name.”

“Riderch,” he said, without a moment’s hesitation.

“Your father’s name,” Rhian pressed.

“Eguin,” said Riderch.

“Eguin?” Rhian balked. “That’s not a war-band name.”

“He wasn’t a war-bander,” said Riderch, “and neither am I.”

“But he was a nomad,” Rhian ventured.

Riderch shook his head. “Anialdir stock. My mother might have been, but I never met her.”

“What does he do?” she asked.

“Rancher,” said Riderch. “Rancher and a horseleech.”

“Does he know you’re a thief, Riderch?” asked Rhian.

“He’s dead,” said Riderch.

“Did you…” Rhian began, only to bite her lip.

“Is any of this making me sound more trustworthy?” Riderch jabbed.

“It’s making you sound like a hare,” said Rhian, “which is more than I thought of you an hour ago.”

Riderch sighed and scratched his face, finding that the blowing sand had made it itch. “You’ve got to sleep, Your Highness,” he muttered through his paws. “Tomorrow we’re walking and digging for roots, and even if we’re lucky we’ll be dead on our feet by the time we get to Godnu. It’s a hard thing to live up in the mountains like this, especially in winter.”

A wind rattled the brush upon the hillside all around them. Rhian shivered and screwed up her face, then heaved a great sigh. “Fair enough, Riderch,” she conceded. “In that case, give me my father’s sword.”

“What?” Riderch barked. “Why?”

“If I’m going to sleep, you’ll have to pry it from my arms to murder me with it,” she said, motioning toward the hilt with her blade. “Take it off.”

“There are wild animals up here!” said Riderch. “Wolves and catamounts! Hungry ones, too, this time of year. What if one of them comes around?”

“Then I will have two swords, and you will have none,” said Rhian. “Take it off. The buck knife too – I saw it on your belt.”

Riderch fumed, grinding his foot against the brittle brush until it bit into his skin; but seeing no alternative, he removed his belt entirely and held it out to her. “I’ll take it back tomorrow morning,” he warned. “I’ve got no qualms, stealing it a hundred times.”

“I believe you,” said Rhian, and plucked it from his paw.

“Hell’s teeth, who’s ravaging who?” he grumbled, then sank down onto his rueful bed once more.

“Pray to Dinistrith, Riderch,” said Rhian, as she rounded the mass of their sleeping steeds and propped herself up against Newidol’s flank, “if you think he likes cutthroats so much.”

Riderch was naturally wakeful that night. The mountainside was bitterly cold, even in his thick poncho in the shelter of the rocks; and Rhian’s scoldings, a thing that would have caused him less than no consternation yesterday, rang in his skull like a thousand bells. That she had called him a liar and a murderer was of little consequence – that she feared him herself was almost more than he could bear. He did not understand why, though he scoured his thoughts to a depth he never had before. Indeed, he was on the verge of asking Dinistrith what form of madness the Star had inflicted upon him when Rhian’s restrained alto rose into the air behind the sleeping horses. He heard the words and shuddered, then resolved to sleep:

“Doughty Dinistrith, cast down a kindly shaft upon my pate,
And pith and power of war, with which to wake
The yellow bile in my yellow heart”

That alto, louder and stronger, woke Riderch in the morning. Carbit had risen to pick through the brown grasses in the impoverished soil, straining against his hobble, and it struck Riderch how much he hated fettering the creature even gently. Newidol still lay in the brush; and when Riderch walked around her, he expected to Find Rhian lying against her flank. She was kneeling instead, having draped her golden mantle across the ground. The light was scarcely enough to see by, and yet a little book bound in red leather was fairly pressed against her nose. She read from it, half from memory:

“Rooster, Master of the Morning Star,
Rouse me to do deeds of righteousness
And like the maize-white Gwyner
Cling not to my meal, but unsparingly dispense”

Riderch stood to her right and a little behind. The swords were beside her, his still belted with his knife. Briefly he thought to snatch it up while she prayed, but something within him rose to restrain his arm: there was a steadiness in her voice, buzzing and breathy as all nomads’ are, that he could have rested in as securely as any bed. Her song ended, however, and he was thrust once more beneath the cold firmament by an answering voice he had never heard before:

“And to the Sun take I thy song,
That in the heaven’s hearth its smoke may rise
Along the ladder on which throng
The holy hosts of higher skies”

“Are you done?” he hiccuped. “There’s a gwerthon I want to reach before noon.”

Rhian pulled the book away from her face and looked up at Riderch. Her eyes were puffy, her nose was wet, and there was that queer distance in her gaze that comes to folk who have very recently wept. She slipped the book into the folds of her skin dress. Taking up her falchion, she rose, and Newidol rose with her. “Aye,” she said.

“Are you going to give back my sword?” asked Riderch, pointing to the belt at her feet.

“It isn’t *your* sword,” she answered.

“It’s mine as many times as I take it,” said Riderch, and bravely – for he felt brave doing it – bent down to pick it up. “Cut off my head if you want, I’m sure you’ll have a mighty good time wandering the rocks by yourself.”

She did no such thing. Riderch buckled on his belt again; and when he had retrieved Carbit, the pair climbed out of their little rocky nest and onto the barren slopes of the Greteboga once more. Rhian no longer wore her golden mantle, but draped it in front of her saddle. In her disheveled state, the feathers fringing her long, loose dress made her look not unlike a quetzal caught by a cat, but her carriage was no less confident for it.

They did not ride at all that morning, but led their mounts by the leads up precipitous scarps and along inhospitable ridges, aiming for a more level shelf where thin soil hosted grasses and a few hardy trees. The brambles still groped at their legs in the lower climbs, and afterward the clinging cacti which threatened them on every side; but by the time the sun had driven away the cold and brought his own threats to bear against the mountainside, they found themselves waist deep in bear grass beneath

gnarled junipers and naked mesquite trees. A rattlesnake was sunning himself upon a rock a mere ten paces away. They heard cries, whistling cries like children taunting one another, and knew by them that they might have supper that night.

"Quail," said Rhian, coming nearer to smiling than she yet had.

"Which means there's water," Riderch nodded. "Thank my lucky foot that Disma found me this bow – I might be able to bag us something."

"Who's Disma?" asked Rhian.

"A friend," said Riderch, retrieving his bow from Carbit and stringing it. "Or he was."

The water, at least, was easy enough to find. On the northern side of the little shelf, where the mountain stood as a red wall, a thin stream fell down into a little pool: a gwerthon, at least in name, around which milled a flock of quail. They perched in the branches of a few pinyon pines shading the water, and waddled among cattails where hid chattering sparrows. Leaving the horses with Rhian, Riderch stalked as close as he dared and took aim into the boughs of the pine from under a fruiting juniper. His first arrow struck no bird, but bit into the tree trunk with a loud report. He cursed, and these two sounds together swept both quail and sparrow up into a frantic cloud. Hardly aiming, he loosed a second arrow that was lost among the higher rocks, and before he could nock a third their supper had dispersed.

They found no other meat that day. When they had hobbled their horses, therefore, they set to work digging roots and cutting cattails, chewing the resinous juniper berries while they worked. Deadfall was plentiful, and by means of Riderch's flint they had a fire, over which they roasted cattail greens and a few brightbush hearts which Rhian harvested mostly by herself. The skill with which her falchion stripped the leaves away astonished Riderch, the ease by which her two bare paws dug them from the dusty soil. She was covered in dirt and sap by the time they had enough to eat, her feathers more wilted than ever, and yet she seemed scarcely out of breath.

"I've seen brightwiners take longer to pull those up than you did," said Riderch, as they ate beneath the pinyon and waited for the sun to cease his daily exorcism.

"I like to dig up brightbushes," said Rhian. "I used to dig holes all over the garden as a girl – someone would fall in every now and then, and folk would tell my father that I was digging scrapes for their kittens."

"I used to set fires," said Riderch. "Folk don't laugh as much when you burn up their pastures."

"No, I imagine they don't," said Rhian pensively.

What little of their famine food remained they packed into their saddlebags that afternoon. They filled their bellies halfway to bursting from the pool, and after Riderch filled his waterskins to the brim they removed their horses' hobbles. "There's one more good gwerthon closer to Godnu, up the range a ways," he said. "Besides that, it's the luck of the draw whether we'll find much water or not. I can tell you right now that we won't find much food, unless I bag some game. Do you understand me?"

"It will be dangerous," Rhian nodded, "I know."

"The going will get harder from here," said Riderch, "especially with horses in tow. If you want to turn tail and run to Gwall, now is the time to tell me. I won't abide it later."

Rhian refrained from answering for over a minute, staring toward the westering sun through the pinyon branches. "I'll only go forward now," she said at last. "Unless I go back to bury Awen, I have nothing to go back to."

"Someone else will bury Awen," Riderch grunted, and led them on without another word.

It took them three days merely to reach the eastern edge of Riderch's old hunting grounds. Late winter, before the spring floods, is no time for folk to be wandering the heights of the Greteboga. There is little water, for there is no rain, and with little water there are few herbs and few mouths to eat those herbs. What water is to be found comes only from permanent springs, and these are so precious in the Anialdir that every one large enough to feed folk is meticulously mapped.

Riderch's and Rhian's mouths, therefore, went almost wholly empty those three days. Their rationed stores were gone too fast; and while their horses could at times eat the wintered grasses clinging to the rocks, they themselves could not. Hunger, in turn, gave way to thirst, as the greedy dryness of the high desert sapped the water from their ears and their greedy mounts took the catamount's share of Riderch's waterskins.

Harefolk are good at holding their water, however, even under the most punishing drought. This virtue has enabled them to live even in the Deepwaste, riding from gwerthon to gwerthon on eternal pilgrimage. They are also living dowsing rods, able to find water where no water was formerly to be found. By this, and this alone, Riderch and Rhian survived their detour through the Greteboga, threading the shattered pillars and gaping gorges toward faint whiffs of water. Often their relief was no more than a trickle, achingly cold in the shade and half-stagnant where it pooled, but it was always – if barely – enough.

Another danger found them on the third night, when they were exhausted and sore from a climb they knew they could not retrace. Coyotes had screamed around them every night so far, and at the undertaking of their clamor Rhian had always begun Nightsong, the litanies to all the Stars of heaven. Unable to read from her book, she sang what she remembered and repeated broken passages when she did not. It made her less frightened, Riderch knew, and so he did not complain of the choirs who answered her in antiphon; but their voices stoked his stubborn fever no less vigorously than a mountain of dry pinyon needles, and at points he could only curl up on the ground with his poncho over him, his ears pulled tightly against his head, panting and delirious.

That night, however, the tenor of the howling changed while Rhian prayed. Coyotes shut their mouths, outranked by deeper, throatier calls. The prayer stopped. Throwing off his poncho, Riderch shot to his feet and nearly fell over, too dizzy to see straight. They had made a meager fire of dry brush, but it was almost out. Its light, however, was still enough to fill a host of eyes with sickly green venom, and the waxing moon made ghosts of six gray wolves who padded down the slope on either side to cut them off.

A few dry creosote branches remained beside the fire. Riderch kicked these into the flames; they flared, but only briefly. The nearest wolf retreated, awestruck, while one on Riderch's left was suddenly revealed. He reached for his belt, then cursed to find it missing.

"Give me my sword, Rhian!" he shouts, braving a glance at her over his shoulder. She stands beyond the fire, red-stained sword in paw, athwart a crouching wolf. Another lies dead beside it. Carbit and Newidol stand farther down, stamping and screaming. Riderch's bleary eyes converge; burning clarity chases away confusion. He feels open rage for the first time in days, and swordless leaps across the fire upon the wolf. Rhian screams. They roll, and Riderch feels the same teeth sink into the same shoulder's flesh. The stars above him rise in gold, then sink into the sand. He hears a struggle, hears the crack of hoof against unlucky head. Frantic to protect his prize, he musters all his might and seizes the wolf's snapping jaws, one in each paw, then pulls apart as hard as he can. The wolf yelps and flails, abandoning his assault in favor of flight, but Riderch grants him no retreat. With shocking might he rends the jaws in twain, tearing the lower from the upper in a spray of blood. The beast falls limp. Riderch rises panting, wiping his blood-soaked face with the back of one paw, while the other holds the dripping jaw by the teeth.

The whole mountain was silent when he gained his wits again. For a moment he feared, almost to the point of despair, that the wolves had somehow slain both Rhian and their horses, when they had in truth fallen back. They stood higher up the slope now, and stared singly, each and every one of them, at Riderch. Their tails were limp. Their heads were hunched beneath their shoulders. Riderch looked to Rhian and found her sword dripping blood, but she herself was unstained. The horses behind him were cautious, yet whole; a wolf's carcass lay stomped to mash under Carbit's hooves.

Looking down, Riderch found his shirt bunched up. His shoulder felt unexpectedly fine; blood had sprayed the linen, but none of it was his. The ear had fallen out of his collar in the struggle. He tucked it back in, and the wolves turned tail and ran.

Tossing the jaw atop the carcass then, Riderch wheeled around on Rhian and scooped his belt up off the ground. "I'm not going to savage you," he told her, knowing that the filth of blood might hurt his case, "but him?" He pointed to the carcass. "He would have ripped your throat out."

Rhian nodded thinly, too terrified to speak.

"I'm taking this sword," he said.

She nodded again.

"Good enough," said Riderch. "How hungry are you?"

Rhian's pale ears turned paler still. "Please don't," she whispered.

"We'll reach the big gwerthon tomorrow," said Riderch. "I'm going to cook it. Are you going to eat some?"

She shook her head violently.

"Then you'd better hope there are brightbushes to dig," he said, turning to spit blood into the dirt, "because I'm not carrying you to Godnu."

Carbit was reluctant to carry the gutted beast, but with some coaxing obliged. They made one final climb, and on the evening of the fifth of Quetzal arrived at the gwerthon Riderch had been aiming for: a spring gushing out of the mountain, cascading down in falls until it reached the basin of the Anialdir and fed the city of Ancathair. From a windswept promontory they could see it far below, a square mote of dust tucked into the leeward hollow of Barwit Boardland. It was less impressive than Gorseth Floyd, and far less impressive than Godnu, being after all a humble gwerthon town that King Cyngen had commandeered on the warpath. Rhian looked at it with disgust when they arrived, then went to search for food.

There was none to be found. What little soil surrounded the spring was stony and poor, supporting little more than desert scrub. The brightbushes, small and unimpressive, yielded only insubstantial fibers. A few small fish wintered in the channel where the spring flowed out, but they had no way of catching them. It was much too high for cattails.

"It was lucky we bagged that wolf," said Riderch, and went to carve the carcass. "Damn shame I can't tan the hide. I reckon I'll never get my old one back."

"Must you eat it?" Rhian begged. "Surely there must be something else."

"While Quetzal's staring daggers at Black Goat?" Riderch grunted. "We're lucky to have what we have. Go build the fire."

"But there must be something else," Rhian insisted. "How can we be left only with this?"

"Listen, princess," said Riderch, wheeling around on her. "This isn't the Ceinych. This is the open Anialdir. You don't get your choice of supper. You get what you get, and you're lucky to get anything at all."

"This has nothing to do with preference!" Rhian answered. "Folk aren't meant to eat wolves. There are tales about those who do – you must have heard them."

"Never set one furred foot in a Wheelhouse," said Riderch, "so I don't care. I'm hungry, and you're hungry, and we've still got the climb down to Godnu. Go build the fire."

Rhian's pleading calcified into defiance. "You won't make me eat it," she said.

"You'll change your tune when you smell it cooking," said Riderch, brushing her off as he walked away. "Go build the fire."

Riderch roasted the wolf that night, all of the stringy and sinuous flesh he could flay from its bones. It smelled better in the flames than Rhian expected; but Riderch, who was no stranger to queer meals from his hard days fresh out of Ancathair, knew that it would. She would eat none of it, however: he had his fill, then wrapped what remained in brightbush leaves for later.

"You're going to eat this before we leave tomorrow," he warned.

"I'll find something else," said Rhian, hugging her knees before the dwindling brush fire.

"And how do you reckon you'll do that?" asked Riderch. "There's nothing here, and there won't be until we get down lower."

"I'll pray," Rhian shrugged. "What more can I do?" There was a hardness in the maiden's face that Riderch felt he could beat his head against and come away senseless. It was something he had never felt from another living soul: he could not look long into her eyes without suffering a hail of blows, and so avoided them altogether.

"I'm not carrying you to Godnu," he repeated.

"You won't have to," she assured him. "If it comes to starving, I can always eat Newidol."

Newidol could not be bothered to look up from her grazing; but Carbit beside her seemed to attend, staring with a doubtful eye.

Riderch frowned. "You won't eat a wolf, but you'll eat your own horse?"

"Horses don't eat the souls of folk," said Rhian.

"Neither do wolves, if you eat them first," Riderch replied.

"I won't eat beasts of prey while I have a choice," said Rhian, "and that's the end of the matter."

Riderch snickered then, throwing a bundle of thin deadfall onto the fire. "You'd better pray mighty hard that you're given the choice, Your Highness. Some of us never got one."

"Is that what you tell yourself?" asked Rhian. "Is that how you shield yourself from the things you do?"

"Don't talk down to me, you spoiled hutch doe!" Riderch positively snarled. Rhian jumped, and he could have run himself through with his golden sword then and there.

"You murdered Awen!" she snarled back. "You murdered him, and heaven knows how many more. And for what? Gold? Who was holding the sword, Riderch?"

"I plucked you clean out of that stagecoach when you were begging heaven for someone to rescue you," Riderch seethed. "Nobody ever did that for me. I had to do it myself. I had to stay alive by myself, and that's how I did it."

Rhian fell silent, staring hard at him, probing for understanding he refused to give her. "But look at yourself," she said at last, in a much lower voice. "You're tall and hale and strong – Hare's horns, Riderch, I don't believe I've ever met a buck as strong as you. You almost wrenched my arm from its socket when you pulled me out of the stagecoach, and that wolf…you could have been one of my father's riders if you wanted to wield the sword so badly. He needs more, and you would have surpassed every war-bander I know."

Now it was Riderch's turn to fall silent. His anger dissolved in a blare of echoes; he rubbed his feverish face. "You sound like someone else I know," he muttered at length.

"And you clearly didn't listen to him either," said Rhian.

"Why don't you go back to marry Sheen?" asked Riderch. It was a challenge, and apparently an unexpected one, for Rhian did not answer him.

“See?” he sneered. “You know as well as I do that some folk are born to be alone.”

“But you said you had friends,” said Rhian.

“I did,” Riderch nodded, and pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes. “I had one friend. He didn’t have none, though.”

She pursued him no farther down that path, but let them both stew for a while, until the last of their gathered brush was burning down. “What would you do if you could do anything else?” she asked.

“I can’t do anything else,” said Riderch. “I am what I am. Nothing will change that.”

“Another lie,” said Rhian; and knowing not what else to say, she left the fire to pray. For a while the air was full of searing voices only Riderch could hear, while the Great Ram climbed over the mountain peaks once more. Dinistrith was with him, he noticed, staring severely down with his marred red face. The spinning heavens grew too nauseous to behold as his fever swelled, until Nightsong was over and Rhian was asleep against Newidol’s flank.

“She will not eat the wolf, Riderch. You’ll have to find her other food.”

“Are you still telling me what to do?” Riderch snapped at the sky. “After what you did to me on the road, you’ve still got the guts to order me around?”

“What did I do to you on the road?”

Dinistrith was a ripe tamarillo hanging in the sky; Riderch longed to pluck him then, to throw him on the ground and stomp him underfoot. “The nag’s blown on account of you,” he seethed. “The whole band scattered. Who knows how many of them died under those riders? And you didn’t do a damn thing, didn’t say a double-damn thing. Did you reckon they would kill me? Is that what you wanted?”

“No, Riderch, quite the contrary.”

“Who were they?” Riderch demanded. “Did you tell them we’d be there?”

“You could have taken Rhian back to Mydge. Why didn’t you?”

Riderch’s jaw fell open. He stood dumbfounded, grasping for a retort he could not seize, until in the end he gave up trying. “No, I couldn’t have,” he said. “And I reckon you know that.”

“Then all of your railing against me is posturing. But there is no one here to impress, Riderch: only you, and me, and Rhian, and Rhian is hungry.”

“There’s no other food,” said Riderch.

“She must eat.”

“Well how do you reckon I should make her?” Riderch hissed, wrapped in his poncho before a smattering of embers. “Pull her mouth open like I did with that wolf?”

“Rise and go to the spring.”

“Why?” Riderch demanded. There came no answer, however, and after a lengthy silence he rose and followed the channel upstream, muttering curses all the while.

The pale moon rimmed the misting pool in silver, unfrozen and yet as cold as any ice. “What?” Riderch husked. “What do you want?”

“I want what you want, Riderch: to see that doe where she must go. But she must eat.”

“Well there’s nothing to eat here,” he said.

“Do you remember what I told you after you cut out Carbit’s goiter?”

The memory was slow in coming, to his surprise; the fever had buried it, but a brief excavation turned it up anew. “You made me lay the ear on it,” he said.

“And now I bid you dip it in the water.”

Riderch pulled the ear out of his collar and rubbed it between his claws, astonished once again by its velvet softness. The cartilaginous flesh at its root was still pink, as if the head which had borne it might still accept it. “Is this because he was a halser?” he asked.

"Aye."

"Is he dead?" asked Riderch.

"Why do you wish to know?"

Riderch paused for a moment. "I don't care," he said, then knelt down and dipped the ear into the frigid pool. It trailed like river-grass, and was still warm when he pulled it up. He pulled himself up after, turning to walk back to their little brush-bordered brake; but dizziness as furious as that which he had felt after Carbit's cutting overcame him all at once, and like a sack of meal he fell into the coarse grass beside the spring. There he lay until morning; and if he slept, he dreamed also of a spring, high upon a mountain where heaven bent down to drink of its waters.

22

Riderch awoke in the Ceinych gardens, or so he thought. The Opossum's painted stripes were already stretched over his head, reaching for the distant summer. Wrens were singing upon stalks of golden grass. Brown crickets were chirping in the scrub. He believed for a moment that he heard some speechless dignitary bawling for one of the does to serenade him on her banjo, then shot to his feet a moment later when a bighorn sheep bent down to sniff him. The sheep fell over itself and scrambled away a dozen paces, but would not depart completely. Riderch contemplated killing it for its meat, until the thought was driven from his head by a resplendent cry.

"There you are!" said Rhian, following the channel upstream with a great bundle in her arms. Her voice, more full of life and cheer than anything he could remember, woke Riderch to the transformation which had occurred in the blind hours of the night. The grass had grown to twice its height. Little yuccas, stunted at such a height, stood proud and fat now. The leaves of the brightbushes were glutted with sweet sap; and even the cacti, greedily holding their winter water at the edges of the promontory, were deep green and blooming with splendid pink flowers. It was the fruits of this unexpected invigoration that Rhian carried in her arms: cactus flowers and brightbush leaves and dirty wild potatoes. Riderch was transported to a different gwerthon then, sitting in the middle of the blood-red Deepwaste, and heard the sound of flesh parting again, the sound of hot blood dripping onto the plush grass. He wanted to tremble, but forced himself to remain still.

"Look at this!" Rhian beamed, joining him at the edge of the pool and holding up her spoils. She herself was trembling from sheer, gladsome thrill; she was not smiling, but to see the misery gone from her face made Riderch feel that he had just been born into the world that very hour.

"I see it," he said.

"Then act like it!" Rhian scolded, pawing him a stalk of white yucca flowers. "I prayed for this, didn't I tell you? Heaven hears us, Riderch."

"Don't get used to it," Riderch mumbled, his nose buried in the fragrant yucca flowers. "It picks you up just to drop you."

"Do you pray often?" asked Rhian. "You didn't strike me that way."

"More than I like, these days," said Riderch, who began to pull the bitter flowers from the stalk with his teeth and eat them.

"To Dinistrith?" she asked.

"I reckon so," said Riderch with his mouth full.

"Then I owe him my thanks," said Rhian. "I would never think to petition him for so fair a favor, but he seems to attend to you. I wonder why."

"I made him mad," said Riderch, then left her to ready the horses.

That harvest fed them until they were down in the basin again. For two more days they picked through the rocks of the Greteboga, descending from gwerthon to gwerthon, while Rhian marked the hours with her prayers and Riderch fought to stand upright. The paths were no less perilous going down, but Riderch knew this portion of the Greteboga far better than the last, and so the going was easier. On the evening of the seventh of Quetzal they set foot upon the sands again, in full view of the Rinnea and the red city wall on its farther bank, then made camp beside a little well in some farmer's field and ate the last of their stores.

"You can't go into Godnu dressed like that," said Riderch, nodding at her colored, feathered skins which, though much shabbier after their climb through the mountains, betrayed her as something more than a simple traveler. "Folk will have heard rumors now, at least, and they'll be imagining you just like that – if they don't reckon you're dead, at least."

"I've been thinking about that myself," Rhian sighed, running a paw over the scuffed, dusty folds of her dress. "I could pluck the rest of the feathers, I suppose, but the dress is still a bride's."

"You'd only have to pass until we got to market and bought you something," said Riderch. "What are you wearing under those?"

Rhian's eyes widened. She looked at her feet and clasped her paws together, trying to seem merely sheepish, but Riderch knew only too well how a folk carried himself when he was keenly aware of the blade at his belt.

"Dinistrith's dogs, I'm not going to tear them off to check," Riderch barked. "Don't flatter yourself."

"I thought you would try to, at first," said Rhian, in a voice so low that the crackling of their fire nearly overwhelmed it. "I thought that that was why you'd followed me. More than once up in the rocks I saw you lying there when I finished praying, muttering in that fever you have, and thought… and almost…" She stammered a few times, making herself seem smaller than Riderch had ever seen her, then sniffed and straightened her back. "'It will dawn on him any moment, how alone we are and how strong he is, and I'll have to kill him.' It's what my father would have told me to do."

"I'm glad you didn't," said Riderch.

"So am I," Rhian nodded. "Forgive me for saying that I'm still surprised."

Riderch fingered the ear beneath his shirt, scowling as his guts tied themselves into knots. "I'm not a good buck," he said at length. "No matter how bad you reckon I am, I'm worse. I know that, and I'm not begging your pardon, so I don't want you begging mine – it doesn't mean a thing. I won't explain myself either, except to say that I aim to get you to Gromstall in one piece, and acting like a starving wolf won't serve. I'm doing what I've got to do, and so are you, and that's all that matters now."

"Aye," she said thinly; then a moment later whispered: "Not enough."

"Pardon?" asked Riderch.

"I'm not wearing enough under the skins to pass for anything but one of the Sandhill's queens," she said. "And I brought nothing else."

"Well Fox's brush, if only Hawen were here, you could be one of hers!" said Riderch, laughing so unexpectedly that Rhian startled. He stood up and threw off his poncho, letting it fall onto the wintered cornfield, then after it his belt, linen shirt, leather chaps and pants, leaving nothing but the broad linen cloth wrapped around his waist. He made sure to throw the ear over his shoulder first, letting it hang down over his back where she could not see it.

"What in Gwyner's name are you doing?" Rhian balked.

"We're about the same size," said Riderch, and laid the shirt and pants in the maiden's lap. "I've got more bulk than a Ceinych princess, but your frame's hardly any smaller."

"You're…you're not giving me your clothes," said Rhian, staring at the bundle as if it were a nest of skittering scorpions.

"They're rags next to yours, fair enough," Riderch shrugged. "I'm sorry to make you wear them when they've been on me, but they'll let you pass just fine in Godnu."

"But what are you going to wear?" asked Rhian, pressing the shirt to her nose only to pull it away with a jolt of shock.

"This," said Riderch, throwing on his belt and poncho and holding out his arms. Aside from his naked calves, he seemed unremarkable enough from the front and back; his unclad flanks, on the other paw, cut a knavish figure. "I'll look like a farmer from some little gwerthon up the Rinnea if I move the sword forward a little, and you'll still look better off than me."

"You're too tall to be a gwerthon farmer," Rhian scoffed.

"So are you," said Riderch, "and so was someone else in my band, and he was Anialdir stock. Looking a little queer is better than looking like a runaway bride, don't you reckon?"

"You're right, I'm afraid," she muttered.

"You ought to burn that dress," said Riderch, "or at least dump it here. I know someone in Godnu who will buy your gold mantle, but I don't want anyone to see us with a bride's dress."

The thinnest hint of a smile graced Rhian's lips. "I suppose I have no use for it now," she said. "It's a terrible pity, though."

"Aye, it would be worth a penny or two," Riderch agreed.

Rhian shook her head. "It belonged to my mother," she said, and the smile quivered. "She was married in it."

"Ah," Riderch almost wheezed.

"I'm half tempted to make you return it to him with Carbit," she said; "but given that we're both going to Gromstall, I deem it best to burn the bridge."

It was only then – for he had been too preoccupied in the Greteboga to think of very much – that Riderch realized he would be leaving the Anialdir. Disma's face was before him in the very next breath, looking at first betrayed and frightened as it had beside the Rinnea, then resigned and mournful as it had among the dunes. Riderch sat down hard in the dirt, unable to hold himself up; and as he watched their little fire burn up the dry brush, he found his eyes wet with tears he had not known he still possessed.

"Stars, are you all right?" asked Rhian, standing up and yet too reticent to touch him. But Riderch did not answer her, and after a few more failed attempts she padded off into a nearby juniper thicket to change, leaving him alone. He had recovered himself by the time she returned, and without a word he burned the feathered dress for her.

23

Amidst profuse apologies they rubbed their horses down with dust the following morning, matting their manes and tails as much as possible. They were shabby already after their climb over the rocks, and not even this would stand up to scrutiny; but it would be worth it, thought Riderch, if only it saved them from scrutiny in the first place. They were clearly fresh from a hard journey, as many traveling harefolk were in the Anialdir. As a pair, however, so ill-stocked and ill-clad, they found they could not agree upon a believable lie that would explain their presence in Godnu. Rhian's borrowed shirt was speckled with wolf's blood. Riderch's paws were more than speckled. Their horses, even at their worst, were too fine for pack animals and likely too fine for merchants' mounts. In the end they decided that the sandstorm would be their scapegoat: it had arisen unseasonably in the night, carrying away their camp, and they had hardly escaped the Deepwaste with their lives. Rhian, if anyone asked,

was named Morgwynn, a name she claimed to pull from the litanies in her little red book; Riderch chose to go by Dinistriol. They were pilgrims on their way to Sunstone far to the south, the holiest place south of the River King, and spoke only Hareish.

All of this they settled while they walked the trampled paths through cornfields toward the Rinnea. The basin was lower here, so far from the heaving red spires of the southern Greteboga. Caper trees and sapotes clung to the richer soil, and the scrub was a lusher green, until by sweltering noon they found the riverbank and all the earth awaiting spring sowing.

There too lay the Swartway, as straight as any rider's spear, the broad black band that cut the Anialdir in half north to south. It was the oldest thing in that part of the world, as far as Riderch knew, built in the unremembered past when folk possessed the arts that created the boardlands and many of the gwerthons around which folk still plowed and sowed and gathered. Neither sand nor dust would cling to it, and in spite of its color it was never too hot underfoot. A few brave folk walked it now, while the rest sheltered in the shade of roadside booths. None of them seemed to be riders, to their relief. They could see the flat bridge spanning the Rinnea, its three arches churning up the water beneath; and on the farther bank, half-hidden against the red mass of Elksand Boardland, were the square-toothed red walls of Godnu. Rafts punted around the harbor on her northern side, while her great gate, facing the Swartway to the west, remained hidden from them.

Steeling themselves, Riderch and Rhian led their horses across the bridge, then continued south. On their left was the Anialdir they both knew, the child of the Rinnea that fed the corn which in turn fed them. On their right was the vast Western Waste, the unpeopled graveyard over which they must cross to reach Gromstall. Riderch had never ridden far into the Western Waste; indeed, few in the Anialdir dared to. The Swartway, which in some bygone Day must have run through a tunnel beneath Elksand, now lay buried under fallen, immovable stone. Godnu had made a road around it out of necessity after the loss of Gorseth Floyd, and patrolled it diligently; but it remained the most dreaded stretch along the Swartway, for to be caught on the western side of Elksand during sandstorm season was a harrowing prospect.

"I don't suppose we'll be able to hire a guide," Rhian sighed, gazing longingly into the baking, ribbon-strewn wilderness. "We should have a look at a map, at the very least. I know the Rinnea has its headwaters above Iwan Gwerthon, but the pass is some distance north."

"I will lead you."

"I know the way," said Riderch, clumsily and – he thought – unconvincingly.

"Do you really?" asked Rhian.

Riderch paused for a moment, then nodded. "It'll be easy once we reach the Rinnea – there are gwerthons up and down the whole thing. And I have a compass: one of those old ones with the Wheel of Time on its face."

"Do you know, Riderch, I've been awaiting what you told me," said Rhian, still staring hard into the desert, "for heaven to drop me. I feel I deserve it, given what I'm doing, and yet…"

"You're cutting yourself free with your own paw," said Riderch, taking advantage of her hesitation. "We do what we've got to do, just like I said."

"And yet more and more I feel that Dinistrith has sent you, of all folk, to ensure my success," she finished, almost seeming not to have heard him.

Although Gorseth Floyd was lately more prosperous in the Anialdir, Godnu was more well-established, a trusted kingdom known even to gwerthons distantly beyond the Greteboga. Her walls were of thick boardland stone, stained red with the cinnabar found within and around it. Her western gate, with its high, narrow doors, was gilt both portal and frame with the city's braided tree. Feathered red wardens patrolled the covered battlements and guarded its doors, a myriad of birds in its branches,

and scores of sun-veiled folk filtered into and out of the city among its roots. To enter now, after his visit to the Ceinych, Riderch felt himself one of many folk tugging on the length of a serpent as long as the world.

"When I was at the Ceinych-" he said to Rhian.

"You mean when you lied in order to see my father?" she asked.

"I earned that invitation fair and square," Riderch snapped. "And don't call him that when there are other folk around."

"Fair enough," she grumbled. "Go ahead."

"I saw that big engraving over the Wheelhouse door," Riderch continued, framing the tall roof with his paws. "The one with the folk tugging on that saguaro."

"I know the one," Rhian nodded.

"Do you know what it means?" asked Riderch. "One of the Guilurs – Gwyrthlass, if I'm remembering the name – told me that it showed folk 'mastering their beastly impulses,' but that tweaked my whiskers."

"How so?" asked Rhian, as they came among the thicker crowds filtering into the city and stepped closer together in order to hear each other.

"Well it…doesn't rightly sound like enough," Riderch shrugged. "It sounds like something folk tell you when they don't know the real answer."

Rhian smiled, thinly and sarcastically, and yet her smile filled Riderch with a thrill he could not understand and found that he resented. "That's exactly what it is," she said. "It's what my f-what King Rhuddri tells his riders when they ask about it, because the full truth would sound unflattering coming down from the Gray Throne."

"Then what's the turkey?" asked Riderch, feeling Carbit lip at his ears behind him.

"They're fighting over it, the folk and the Hellknights," said Rhian. "That adder is pinned to the cactus by its spines, and they're pulling back and forth. The cactus tilts one way when one side gains the advantage, then tilts the other when they tire. Trying to pull it up by the roots, the Shepherd tells me."

"Why are they doing that?" asked Riderch.

"The world is a mortar full of stones," Rhian lilted, closing her eyes as if she struggled to remember something, "and time grinds us all to sand. Do you think Gorseth Floyd will conquer Godnu in the end, Riderch? For how long?"

Riderch took in breath to shush her then, incensed by her indiscretion, only for the words to catch in his throat. A shadow he had not noticed passed overhead, admitting the angry noon once more. He looked around, and found that they were past the gate. Godnu was before them. They had not been stopped at all.

Red clay houses rose in formidable tiers on either side of a paw-polished street, grand steps by which the Hellknights of old might have mounted their workshops upon the boardland. The terraces scattered so haphazardly across Gorseth Floyd were the rule of thumb here, broad squares surrounding skeletal flower gardens and reeking capybara pens. There were turkeys on the roof parapets, Riderch noticed, and wondered how they kept them from flying away.

Here too, as in Gorseth Floyd, the newer construction was interrupted at intervals by survivors from distant Days of the World. Stepped stone foundations of clear antiquity, sprung up with relentless grass at every corner, undergirded fresher stone forts, storehouses with their conical silos, guild halls and Wheelhouses. A few of these ancient works remained complete, most notably the Wheelhouses and the tombs behind them. Both of these were immaculately kept, even the low crypts whose stone mounds were gilded and inlaid with the Badger's armed crypt-keepers in a style that the living folk of the Anialdir imitated in their own works. Riderch could not tell if these adornments were original, or if

they had been restored just as King Rhuddri was restoring the Ceinych; but if it was the latter, it was skillfully done.

They were a long time crossing the city. The sun was malevolent, even in the shade of the terraces' square colonnades. Crowds of mingled bodies were packed around them, smelling of oil and musk and dirt and meal: a few harefolk, mostly of Anialdir stock, but otherwise of diverse patronage. They dressed more dandily in Godnu, wearing tightly-woven hemp linen shirts and coats beneath their ponchos. The wealthy were in cotton, dyed a tremendous assortment of colors. A mother coyote carried a pair of pups on her back, slung from a single length of four-colored buckskin adorned with the white shells of river snails. Many others that they passed were shabby, though few were as shabby as they; if Riderch had been paying attention, he might have noticed queer glances from myriad suspicious eyes. But Riderch, in an unusual turn, was lost in his own thoughts, and noticed nothing until they stepped onto Godnu's open central terrace.

It had always bothered him, how open that terrace was. There were no buildings on its four-petaled stone flower – for even Osging's palace stood on its eastern side – save for a single, grand Wheelhouse in the very middle. It, like many of the oldest places in Godnu, was a second addition completing a lost ancestor; and its ancestor, almost as tall as the city's encircling walls, was an ancestor in every sense. Scarcely different from any Wheelhouse Riderch had ever seen, it rested upon the stump of a golden copal tree, and that stump sprouted vigorously with a forest of upstarts that flashed in the early afternoon sun like a hail of lightning bolts. The Wheelhouse was surrounded by them, and upheld by a single pair of braided shoots amidst the thicket. Its own facade, marvelously red and gold, completed the motif on all sides, so that to look at it from any of the flower's petals showed the looker the full braided tree of Godnu. Riderch had seen it many times since he had left Ancathair; but now, in the wake of his last conversation, he could see it only as the saguaro upon which hung the serpent.

There were beggars crouching at the shaded edges of the terrace. One of them was chattering something at Riderch, reaching for him with an open paw, black-clawed and thick with blonde scruff. He batted it away and turned about looking for Rhian, only to find her dropping a golden buckle from Newidol's saddlebag into a one-armed opossum's paw. He fondled it with thin, pink claws, then held it to his nose as if to test its temperature, then promptly burst into tears. Riderch took Rhian by the arm and led her away before the beggar could speak; she wrenched free of his grip, but did not go back.

"They'll follow you if they know you've got more," said Riderch. "Disma likes to pick pockets here: he's seen folk stripped clean."

"He'll find only your compass and fire-striker if he picks my pockets," Rhian answered. "Where are we going?"

"Rusty's place," said Riderch. "Trusty Rusty's got a pawn shop on the north side, deals in a little bit of everything. I've sold to him before. I reckon I'll set you up in an inn, then see if he'd be willing to buy your gold."

"Do you know Rusty very well?" asked Rhian, casting a glance over her shoulder, then looking ashamed.

"He's a friend," Riderch nodded.

"A close friend?" asked Rhian.

"Closest I have now," said Riderch. "He'll look the other way, if he wants to make a profit. He has before."

Little else passed between them until they reached the narrow streets on the north side of the city. The sun was sinking now, casting even the open thoroughfares in merciful shade; and while the scents soured, owing to the dense stacks of houses and the nearer river, the crowds grew thinner. Riderch led them to a terrace halfway to the wall, dingier and more slouched than those near the gate,

though mercifully open. Its whole western side was a red clay inn, square-roofed and cedar framed, whose well-trafficked open door was overhung with a sign bearing a fat, crested bird.

"The Kinglet," said Rhian, reading the letters underneath. "I can smell the tobacco from here."

"Godnu tobacco," said Riderch with a satisfied grunt. "Do you smoke?"

"When I pray, occasionally," said Rhian.

"Figures," said Riderch. "I'll buy you a cigar when we get the horses boarded."

"I would prefer a meal and a bath first," said Rhian, subtly patting the hilt of her falchion. Its blade was streaked and dull without a scabbard, rust-spotted where she had drawn the wolf's blood. It would need to be oiled, thought Riderch, and probably sharpened.

"I'll get you both," he said, "but leave your sword in the stable. You can't have that swinging from your hip inside."

No Wheelhouse was ever so full of smoke, even on the holiest days of the year, as the Kinglet. Close and crowded, bursting with chatter, its tiny windows did so little to ventilate its tavern that it seemed a kiln from the moment the pair walked in. It sweltered, to the point that its cedar posts and beams sweated fragrance that stood up even to the sun-cured tobacco and brightwine. Soot-darkened lamps hung from these posts, casting the dim watering hole in a greasy, inconstant blush. Bets were already piling up over games of backgammon, a thing considered unlucky in Gorseth Floyd while the sun still watched.

Riderch fully expected – indeed, knew for cold fact – that Rhian would be profoundly uncomfortable in the Kinglet. It rubbed the crust of ages onto its every drunken patron, a crust that seeped into the fibers of one's poncho and lingered long after he left; Disma had picked many a pocket here, and even he found it uncomfortable. But Rhian, to Riderch's great amazement, seemed utterly unfazed by it. Her sword was hanging in an empty terrace stable that Riderch had reserved from a reluctant groom for Carbit, while Carbit himself – in accordance with Riderch's vow – was hobbled and allowed to remain in the terrace under the open air. Rhian wore nothing save for Riderch's gray-green shirt and pants; and yet she stood amidst the roiling mass with a hard-shelled coolness that Riderch realized at once was born of her life among the war-band. "*And now they're fighting over the girl,"* he heard Teyrngar say. His empty face, framed in a pool of blood, visited him; he waved it away and flagged down one of the bartenders.

"What you want?" the bartender chittered, pointing a decisive claw at Riderch. He was a weaselfolk, with a black face ringed in sullied white. Riderch had always found their faces serpentine; and being now the first pair of strange eyes to meet his since the disaster on the road, he saw only an adder there. Suspicion coiled up his spine, but there seemed to be no recognition in those eyes, and so he cleared his throat and leaned across the bar.

"A room," he said. "A room, and two suppers, and two baths."

"Baths are full up 'til tonight," said the bartender, fielding coppers and filling glasses without looking away from him, "but you can take 'em after you eat if you want."

"Good enough," said Riderch with a sharp nod.

"Wait, that won't do at all," Rhian interjected. "I'm not sharing a room with you."

"What?" Riderch snapped. "We've been sleeping outside together all week."

"That's hardly the same thing," Rhian pressed; then addressing the bartender: "May we have two rooms?"

"Two?" the bartender balked. "You're going to pay for two rooms?"

"Hare's horns, I'm not aiming to share a bed with you," Riderch growled.

"Then you may have the room, and I'll sleep with Newidol in the stable," Rhian growled back.

"I'm not letting you do that," said Riderch through gritted teeth.

"And I'm not sharing a room with you," said Rhian. "So which will it be?"

Riderch sucked his teeth, then muttered a string of curses at the ceiling. "Do you have two rooms?" he asked. "Right next to each other?"

The bartender stared at them briefly, melting into a kind of humiliating pity, then nodded. "Somewhere up top, maybe. I'll ask the innkeeper."

"Much obliged," Riderch seethed, pushing an insensate drunkard down the bench to make room for himself and Rhian. "We'll take our suppers here, in that case. Run our baths as soon as you can."

"You'll have to let me put your sword behind the bar, Lording," said the bartender, pointing to the protruding tip of his scabbard, "or else you'll have to stow it in your room before you take a load off."

Riderch ground his teeth. "I'll put it in my room," he said. "Don't want anyone else touching it."

"I've never lost a sword in the nigh ten years I've worked here," said the bartender, proudly prodding his own chest. "We can stash a hundred here and get each of them back to the right pair of paws."

"I lost one last month," said Riderch. "I'll keep it where I can get at it, thank you."

"Said the opossum to the nursemaid," the bartender smirked, then screamed across the tavern for the innkeeper. The drunkard straightened, only to wilt again.

Riderch leaned in then and hissed to Rhian: "We need money to get us to Gromstall, do you realize that?"

"There's enough gold in Newidol's tack alone to supply us all the way to Clegyrau," Rhian whispered back, her whiskers fencing with Riderch's. "And don't think I haven't seen the size of your purse – stuffed with my father's own coins, I don't doubt."

Riderch scowled, and with a start Rhian pulled away. "Gwyner's spots, you're warm," she marveled. "I can feel it from here. Are you well?"

"It's hot in here," Riderch grumbled, secretly glad to be out of his shirt.

"You were feverish in the hills too," she said. "Perhaps you should see a healer before we-"

"I feel dandy," said Riderch. "I don't need you fussing over me like an old maid."

"Two rooms on the top floor, last on the right," the bartender interjected, sliding a pair of keys to them across the bar. "That's four coppers a night for each. Food's included, so are baths. Settle drinks before you leave."

"Fair enough," said Riderch; and snatching them both in one paw, he stormed across the tavern floor toward the stairs.

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Rhian removed herself from Riderch after they ate. Riderch did not intend to abide it at first, afraid of both the folk who might recognize her and the folk who would not. He had intended to take her to Rusty's between the meal and their baths, that they might inquire after the supplies they would need to reach Gromstall; but she, who for nearly a week had been forced to endure his company ceaselessly, could endure it no more. *"Do not leave her side,"* was his command – only for her own command to supersede it.

"Go yourself," she said from the other side of her locked door. "Surely it isn't an errand for two. Give me a single hour, by all the Stars in heaven."

He pounded on the door, giving what he imagined to be very reasonable, very loud excuses for not wanting her to be alone at the Kinglet; but when he heard some heavy piece of furniture slide

against the door frame, he cursed her and stormed off, stopping at the stables to fetch her falchion on his way out.

The Rusty Axle was one street north of the Kinglet, beside a green grocer in a little string of shops at which no folk from two streets away must have shopped. It looked no different than the surrounding houses from without, save that its sign hung from a post by the door; within, however, it was a whole world unto itself.

Eguin's little pole barn had been a mess, full to bursting with tools and tack and rat traps organized by no sane mind. Ancestral hoes and furrows ground to stumps by use hung from rotting hafts. A pair of plows crowded the middle of the floor. Damaged saddles sat always in rotation upon a row of sawhorses, waiting for the grooms to repair them. Rat droppings were everywhere, and their stench had become to Riderch the smell of murder.

The Rusty Axle, on the other paw, was appealing in all of the ways the pole barn had not been. Its multitude of pawned pieces were clean, dusted, and polished, displayed at eye or paw level. Shabby tools, newly hafted, hung from the rafters or from nails in the walls. Bolts of hemp linen were stacked on tables too high for rats. A long wooden axle fixed with hopelessly rusted brackets, the shop's namesake, leaned against the corner to Riderch's left. Nails had been driven into it, from which hung several ponchos, a length of rope, and a long boar spear whose polished head was much too broad to avail against steel scale. The floors were swept; and upon a long, glass-fronted, palm-wood counter were jewelry and hats and painted playing cards and pipes and a hundred other things small enough to be smuggled out in someone's pocket. The most valuable of these were behind the glass; through it Riderch saw Rusty's paw shoot to the handle of his war-knife.

"Riderch! Mighty fine of you to stop in," he sang around a smoking pipe. "And before sunset, too. Them ears of yours cast some long shadows."

Rusty was an armored rat a full head shorter than Riderch and at least twenty years older, whose two brown marbles stared hard from an unkempt face at the naked sword in Riderch's paw. The spines trapped beneath his dull orange shirt bristled, testing the gussets along its seams. He glanced across the shop floor to Riderch's right, where an armadillofolk scurried past him out the door, then scanned the empty room.

"What do you want?" he demanded in a much less cheerful voice.

Only then did Riderch realize how he must have looked. Pulling the tip of his ear down, he laid the falchion gingerly upon the counter, then stepped back and raised conciliatory paws.

"Better," Rusty growled. "You look like one of them bug-eyed gorge-dwellers out in the Deepwaste. What happened to your clothes?"

"Someone else has them," said Riderch. "That's one of the things I came to buy, as a matter of fact."

"Oh, you came to buy!" said Rusty, splitting into a crooked grin. "Good to hear you're doing better for yourself."

"Came to sell too," said Riderch, struck by the silence in the shop. By night, when he usually made his visits, he found the quiet a comfort; but even by twilight it seemed eerie, as if some unseen folk were roosting among the rafters. He glanced up, but saw so such thing. "I've got a few things on both ends, so I figured we could trade."

"Depends what you have to trade," said Rusty. "One beaten falchion won't buy you much."

"I'm not selling the falchion," said Riderch. "I need a scabbard for it – anything that'll fit, really – and a scour, and some oil."

"Most of mine will fit this shape," said Rusty, scowling down at the blade. He sucked at his pipe until it billowed, then blew the smoke in Riderch's face. "It's seen some action, or my pa's a mouse. Didn't it have one already?"

"It did," said Riderch, but made a point of saying nothing more.

"And now it don't," Rusty chuckled. "What else do you need? A shirt and pants, I hope."

"Not for me," said Riderch, shaking his head. "I'm with someone else who needs a whole kit: shirt, pants, undergarments, a good poncho. I want a hat and veil, too."

"Is it Disma?" asked Rusty, leaning slightly over the counter. "Where are you two holed up?"

"Doesn't matter," said Riderch.

Rusty frowned and looked past Riderch at the door. "Well I'll need him to come by so I can make sure the things fit," he said.

"We're about the same size," said Riderch. "I'll try everything on. Oh, and give me a horse's kerchief, if you've got some."

"For…for his horse?" asked Rusty.

"Two of them, actually," said Riderch, tightly knitting his brow.

"I got some lying around," Rusty nodded. "Is that all?"

"No," said Riderch. "I want some new buckles and fittings for tack, or just some new tack – doesn't have to be anything fine – a pair of bedrolls, a length of rope, a stonepick, a stiff brush, and water-skins for a week."

Rusty blinked twice, then cleared his throat. "Is that a week for a hare, or a week for anyone else?" he asked.

"A week for me," said Riderch. "Do you have all that?"

"Most of it," said Rusty. "I can get the rest for you by tomorrow morning, if you want; but whoever you're with, he'll have to swing by tomorrow for the hat. I don't care if you're the same size everywhere else, I reckon his head's a different shape at least."

Riderch ground his teeth, then nodded sharply. "Fine," he said, "we'll be by just before dawn. But I'll warn you not to call me Riderch if there are other folks around."

"Keeping your ears down, eh?" Rusty winked. "What should I call you?"

"Nothing," said Riderch. "But if you can't avoid it, Dinistriol."

"That's a better name for you than Riderch, all right," Rusty smirked. "Now what have you got for me?"

"Some gold buckles and chains, mostly," said Riderch, "and a lady's mantle in gold brocade."

The discretion that Rusty habitually displayed kept him stone-faced now. He blew smoke over Riderch's head, then set down his pipe and scratched his muzzle. "Bring it by tomorrow," he said. "If it's pure gold, I'll end up owing you."

"Wouldn't mind that," said Riderch.

"Are you going somewhere?" asked Rusty.

"Since when are you so nosy?" Riderch snarled, fiercely enough to make the rat bristle again.

"Since you walked in here naked with a rider's nail," Rusty snapped. "But I reckon I know better than to ask, so I won't a second time. Come on back and let me fit you – but I won't let you leave with nothing until you pay."

"I've got the coin for it," said Riderch, and rounded the counter to follow Rusty into his familiar, cavernous storeroom.

It was dark by the time he left the Rusty Axle, bearing in his arms Rhian's newly-clad sword and its accouterments wrapped in a bundle of secondpaw clothes. They were of rich brown linen mostly, though the woolen poncho was a pale green dotted with white orchids.

The short walk back to the Kinglet brought him around the terrace this time, not across, for he had no need to visit the stables again. There were fewer lamps to light his way as a result, and so he did not see until they nearly collided the short, hunched, bottle-brush form that hurried past him down the

street. It too bore garments in its arms, stiff garments which it eyed with an almost divine reverence. So singular was its attention to its burden, in fact, that Riderch stopped in the street to stare, and so realized in the end what it was.

He was upon the beggar before he recognized Riderch, pulling him hard by his long, silken tail, then prying Rhian's brocade mantle from the same black paws that had reached out to him earlier. The wretch screamed, and for a moment Riderch thought he intended to bite him; his mouth hung open not to snap shut, however, but rather to weep and wail like a child in a grown folk's voice.

"Where did you get this?" Riderch shouted over him, digging his knee into a belly helpless against his weight. "Where did you get it? You dirty little cockroach, if you touched either one of our horses-"

"She gave it to me! She gave it to me!" shrieked the beggar, trying vainly to clutch the mantle to his chest.

"You reckon you can rob me and lie to my face about it?" Riderch snapped, digging his knee in deeper. The beggar's witless face, a naked anteater's bald and burned with repugnant scars all the way down his chest, contorted in pain; he let go of the mantle and curled up, wailing in unmitigated anguish.

"She gave it to me, Lording," he wheezed, rolling in the dust. "She gave it to me. Help me, please."

"He's telling the truth, Riderch."

Riderch startled and dropped the mantle, supposing that someone had run out of the Kinglet to intervene before he realized who was speaking.

"Will you steal it back for her? Do you suppose she'll thank you?"

Faces were beginning to appear in the Kinglet's little windows. He knew better than to think that its patrons would volunteer to break up a fight, especially one in the street, and yet to feel their eyes on him in that moment was positively unbearable. The scarred little anteater squirmed under him, begging breathlessly for aid. He saw Rhian's new clothes scattered across the street where he had left them, then traced the higher windows to ensure that she was not looking down at him.

"Will you also be Eguin, Riderch?"

Riderch fairly fell off of the beggar, panting as desperately as he. "Get out of here," he husked, waving him off; and the beggar, happy to oblige, scooped up his precious mantle and ran headlong into the night. The faces had disappeared from the windows by the time Riderch had gathered up his things again. He took a few deep breaths, struggling to stop his paws from trembling, then walked through the newly closed tavern door into the sound and stench.

"Didn't I tell you not to bring your sword in here?" the bartender shrilled, pointing a claw to the hilt protruding from his bundled garments.

"This is a different one," said Riderch, stopping before the bar.

"Do you reckon that makes a lick of difference?" said the bartender. "Give it to me or get out of here."

"I'm taking it upstairs," said Riderch, cursing the broken quaver in his voice. "Give me a bottle of corn whiskey first."

"If it'll stop you scrapping and get you out of here, dandy," said the bartender. "How much?"

"A bottle," Riderch repeated.

The bartender's eyes widened. "You want a whole bottle to yourself?"

"Aye," said Riderch.

"Do you want a glass, at least?" he asked.

"No," said Riderch. "Just put the bottle on my tab, I'll settle in the morning."

"I'll send someone up to wake you with a cup of mate tomorrow," he said, fetching a bottle of pale yellow spirit from the lowest shelf behind the bar and pawing it to him.

"Much obliged," said Riderch, accepting it with an uneasy paw.

The bartender leaned in, then, and lowered his voice as much as he could in the clamor. "Is this about the girl, Lording?" he asked.

"Stick your nose in someone else's scut," Riderch growled, then stormed up the tiered flights of stairs to their rooms. He had given Rhian the corner; for it, unlike the other, boasted a second window. He left her clothes outside her door and knocked, but was shut inside his own before she opened.

"Riderch?" came her muffled voice. "Riderch, what are these? Are they supposed to be mine?" There was a long pause, followed by a voice just beyond his own door: "Don't you want your clothes back?"

"Give them back tomorrow," Riderch barked, slumped against the north wall opposite his bed.

A shorter pause ended in a shuffling of furred feet. "Thank you," she said, and a moment later her door closed.

Riderch set to work restoring her sword then, working by inadequate lamplight to scour off the rust. His paws were still trembling; the work occupied his mind enough to stop them from trembling more, but when he heard a familiar intonation from the other side of the wall he knew that work alone would not suffice. He pulled the cork out of the whiskey bottle with his teeth and spat it, then drank enough to drown his tremors before moving onto sharpening and oiling. It was a dangerous, foolish thing to do – he knew it, but did not care. Somehow he still had all of his claws when the falchion was as good as new, though he could hardly see straight; he slid it back into its scabbard, pricking his thumb once with the tip, then poured a little whiskey over the cut and sucked on it.

"…Did dire deeds full many, Dinistrith, and many more endured,
Yet dwells in merriest delight amidst a gwerthon's e'er-enduring verdure…"

"Why do you like her so much, anyhow?" asked Riderch, inhibited by his thick tongue. No one answered; Rhian continued to pray in the next room.

"Because it's not me you're looking after, I can see that now," he continued, knowing at least that he was heard. He belched, then hiccuped, then drank more, watching the lamplit outline of his own ears dance across the wall. "I saw it when you made that gwerthon bloom. I know when I'm being conned."

He received no answer, however. No third voice whispered in his ear – indeed, even the laughter which had hounded him to the decisive moment on the road had fallen silent, as if the punchline to a joke had been delivered before the setup. Riderch stewed in his bitterness for ten minutes and more, waiting for Dinistrith to speak while his head swam from the drink and his fever, but heard only the words beyond the wall until they too ended and he was left in silence:

"But peering in the polished paten spied the vital spot
And with a skillful stroke made free the maiden, parting ear from stalk"

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"But they're for bucks, Riderch," Rhian repeated, pawing him back his own clothes. She had washed them, it seemed, while he was out; he threw them on in the middle of the hallway before donning his poncho. "Why did you buy them without me?"

“Because I knew they would fit,” said Riderch, sucking a vile film off of his tongue as he tucked the golden handle of his falchion underneath his poncho, “and because folk will be less likely to recognize you. I’m buying you a buck’s hat, too.”

“And then I’ll open my mouth and it will all be for nothing,” said Rhian. Her clothes did fit – remarkably well, in fact, despite her slighter figure.

“Well then you’d best not do that,” said Riderch. “Especially at Rusty’s. You ought to let me talk to Rusty.”

“And what if he talks to me?” asked Rhian. “You’re setting me up to look like your hostage.”

Riderch narrowed his eyes at her. “Rusty’s bound to ask less questions of my hostage than any free folk willing to ride with me,” he smoldered. “I didn’t want to take you there at all, but you need a hat and veil for the waste and the ears have to fit.”

“Do you think he would know my face?” asked Rhian, a little less guardedly.

“I haven’t seen any posters yet,” said Riderch. “I don’t know how much Osging cares that you’re missing – depends on whether Rhuddri fingers him, I reckon. We won’t give Rusty a reason to care either.”

“What does the word ‘trusty’ mean to folk like you, if not that he can be trusted?” Rhian scowled.

“I’d trust him a lot more if I had something to give him that was worth half as much as you,” Riderch grumbled, then turned and padded down the hall.

They passed through the tavern on their way to the stables, and there Riderch settled for their stay. The sun was not yet up, and a few folk still drank, scarcely able to hold their heads up. Riderch’s own head pounded, but he knew after long practice how to conceal a hangover. A few crimson specks bordered a patch of the newly-wet dirt floor; one of the patrons at the bar drank through a split and swollen lip, staring with incorrigible curiosity at Rhian. Riderch made sure to flash the hilt of his sword at him when he pulled aside his poncho to open his purse, and with a hard look into his bloodshot eyes he led Rhian out the back door and onto the grassy terrace.

He had been waiting for her to confess since she had knocked on his door that morning. Stiff after passing out on the floor and wretchedly sick, he nearly chewed her out then and there; but she had cut such a severe figure in her rider’s garments and plain falchion, a figure so much like her father, that he could not dig the words out of the thick mud of his thoughts. The stark, wild beauty she had displayed in her feathered dress, even in the harsh marches of the Greteboga, was still alive, but was now subsumed in war-band iron, as if a quetzal hid within a scorpion’s armor. And now, as she pulled every golden buckle and filigreed fixture from Newidol’s tack in the gray half-light, Riderch saw her as one of the witless thieves who had lived to regret stealing from his band. He stared at her and seethed, and she said nothing until a saddlebag full of gold hung from a strap in her paw.

“That should be everything,” she said. “I wore no rings, or I would sell those too.”

“The brocade,” Riderch almost whispered, trying to pin her to the floor with his eyes. Carbit watched her over his shoulder, still hobbled, mindful of their unease. Riderch expected her to look ashamed, at least, to adopt some sort of childish meekness that might persuade him out of his anger. She did not. She looked instead the way she had looked when Riderch followed her through the wash: defiant, even bellicose. She made no motion toward her sword, and yet Riderch inched back as if she had.

“It’s gone,” she said simply.

“I know,” said Riderch. “I met the little puler on my way back to the inn.”

Rhian’s eyes widened. “Tell me you didn’t-”

“I didn’t take it from him,” Riderch snapped. “But I should have.”

“You would have no right!” Rhian snapped back.

"We need money if we're going to cross Clegyrau, damn you!" Riderch roared. "I wanted to buy an ass, and that mantle would have bought a mule!" His rage caused his headache to swell; he took it out on the stable wall, pounding its boards so hard that one of them buckled. Newidol screamed and cringed, and Carbit watching from the brown grass voiced his own protest. Wheeling around, then, Riderch stormed out onto the terrace, past a tall chimenea that smoldered from the night's fire. Rhian was right on his heels.

"I will not be treated like a kitten who doesn't know the price of a pound of corn," she insisted, taking him by the wrist and spinning him around. Riderch nearly fell over from his lingering dizziness, then was nearly sick. "The amount of gold on Newidol alone will buy us an ass – two of them, if we want, and supply them both."

"Then you ought to know how much that mantle would have gone for," said Riderch.

"And what business is it of yours to whom I give my things?" Rhian challenged him. "He's a father, Riderch. He has a mad wife at home, and a daughter who will never marry if they have no means, and he himself nearly died when their rafters caught fire. But you would have had your paws around his neck before he could tell you a word of that."

"And you're going to preach to me all the way back to Gorseth Floyd," Riderch growled, pulling in close to her face. "You don't understand how any of this works. You don't understand what Rusty'll do if he feels he didn't get a good deal. You don't understand what could come back around to us if the wrong folk see that beggar with your mantle. What do you plan to do when you get to Gromstall and find you can't afford to buy supper?"

"I'm going to donate myself to the halsers," said Rhian. "Do you think they'll ask me to pay my way in? I am the payment, Riderch. That's my plan, and clutching a purse full of gold will only weigh me down."

Riderch's face curdled like sour milk.

"And what do you plan to do?" she continued. "Or will you simply take up thievery again in Gromstall, where they don't know to hang you yet? If you wanted my mantle so badly, you should have stolen it while you could."

Riderch opened his mouth to answer her, then closed it again. He could not bring himself to say *'I don't know,'* for it was the truth; and what frightened him, almost out of answering, he could not imagine parting from her no matter how hard he tried.

"Why are you trying to help me at all, Riderch?" she finally asked, after a lengthy silence.

"That's my business," said Riderch.

"Then I won't be obliged to tell you mine," said Rhian, shaking her head. "Take me to see your friend. I would like to be out of Godnu while it's still cool enough to cross the Swartway."

"That's one thing we have in common," said Riderch.

The Rusty Axle was much fuller when Riderch returned. Half a dozen folk waited to do business within, buying and selling behind the cover of the blind door. A few of these Riderch recognized, either as regular customers or – as Riderch once was – suppliers. All of them were flint-faced folk, the universal silhouettes of burglars and pickpockets who would melt back into the alleys before dawn, and yet none were as young as he and Disma had been. A great marsh deerfolk stood before the counter, in fact, head and shoulders taller than Rusty even without his antlers; a capybara examined the boar spear leaning against the axle, and a giant otter glanced at Riderch from the opposite corner. Coins jangled into the buck's hand as Riderch shut the door behind Rhian; he flicked his ears at the pair on his way out, and they found Rusty already grinning behind the counter.

"Welcome back, partner!" he chirped. "And a warm welcome to you, darling. Don't tell me you're the head I'll be fitting for a hat?"

Rhian nodded stiffly but declined to answer him, being suddenly preoccupied with the other folk in the shop. The light was low, no more than oil lamps scattered about the room, and yet she strained as if their milling faces might remind her of something she had forgotten.

Rusty gave a low whistle. “Well I’ll be doubly damned,” he lilted. “You’re a jungle bird to be riding with a wolf like him. What do you call yourself?”

Riderch bristled, but Rhian tugged at the tip of her ear and answered before he could interject: “Morgwynn, Lording,” she said.

“Do you powder those cheeks, Morgwynn?” Rusty asked.

“I’ve never had to,” said Rhian.

“A lot of does say that,” Rusty smirked. “Maybe you should let me test it?”

“You’re not the only one here with a barb,” she smoldered.

Rusty snickered, and was accompanied in chorus by several others. “You got that in common with Hawen, in that case,” he said, winking at Riderch.

“Did you find everything I asked for?” said Riderch.

“It’s all in the back,” Rusty nodded, hooking a thumb toward the storeroom door.

“Fine then,” said Riderch. “We’ll wait for you to finish up with these Lordings.”

“No you won’t,” said Rusty. “You were here first, and I’ve got more than haggling to do with them.” He motioned the pair around the counter, then made for the storeroom door himself.

Riderch did not follow him at first; for Rhian, he noticed, was still scanning the room, rooted like a cactus to the floor. “What?” he muttered. Her ears darted in all directions as she glanced at him; she shook her head uncertainly, but followed him to the storeroom all the same. The front door opened and closed behind them. A pair of hooves clattered casually across the floor.

“Begging your pardon for the dark,” said Rusty, as the door creaked open and he strode through. “I’ve got a few lanterns I can light.”

Riderch was in the storeroom before he finished speaking. Rhian was in the threshold a step behind; she stopped dead, and sucked in a gasp so dreadful that Riderch’s paw shot straight to his sword. “Riderch, that capybara,” she hissed. “He was at the Ceinych.”

A chill ran up Riderch’s spine. Half a dozen gray skin mantles fell, revealing as many burning lanterns in as many grim paws. The storeroom was illumined, its high palm shelves stacked with pilfered goods. A side door stood closed behind the line of folk. All of them, he thought at first, were strangers, dressed in no telling colors or singular designs. A black face leaped out in silhouette, however, staring at him with eyes that burned like suns, and what had been a persistent trickle of suspicion swelled into a cascade that crashed over his head. Malmuck’s paw was at his falchion, relaxed and yet ready. The old coyote he had met at Islawr, recognized only in light of Malmuck, was beside him. Two more carried war-knives, the rest cudgels. Only one other wore a sword: a great, fat tapirfolk with a cruel face and flat, grinning mule teeth; and Riderch, though he had never seen him, knew him at once.

His blade was not yet loose in its scabbard when Rusty raised a forbidding paw. “I wouldn’t draw that if I were you.”

Rhian cried out then, only to be suddenly silenced. Riderch spun around to see her pushed into the storeroom by the deer who had just departed, one arm pinioning her wrists behind her back and a thick-nailed hand against her mouth. Her eyes brimmed with rage; there was fear mingled therein, Riderch knew, but it was drowned in the hatred she cast like darts at the tapir standing across the room. Five more armed folk filed in behind her, the capybara shouldering the boar spear, and shut the storeroom door.

Riderch himself was full of rage, and in a better position might have given himself to blind fury. He held no position, however: all of his leverage had been used against him, every choice undercut. He

had been steered by a bit he did not know he gnawed, and now he could only quake with murderous impulse that found no outlet, cursing heaven over and over again.

"You attacked us on the road," he said. "You pack of vultures. This whole time, it was you."

"I was trying to rescue My Lady from the cutthroats who would so knavishly make away with her," Prince Brockwell sneered, "as I'm doing now." His voice was as cruel as his face, nasal and sour, a petulant child who delighted in throwing cacti down his peers' shirts.

"You can't honestly reckon that Rhuddri will give her to you just because you brought her back," said Riderch, "not after you shot at her wagon train."

"Bring her back?" Brockwell balked. "Whyever would I bring her back?"

Rhian began to scream through the buck's hand then, straining against his grip with admirable might. "How are the doors here?" Brockwell asked.

"Thick enough," Rusty shrugged. "I reckon you can let her-"

The buck bleated and shook a bleeding hand before he could finish. Rhian spat red on the dirt floor, then screamed again: "Snake! Dog! Overfed peccary! Choke on your own fat trunk!"

"No wife of mine is to have so coarse a tongue," Brockwell snapped at her, his stiff mane bristling against the back of his head.

"You killed them!" she continued with tears in her eyes. "You murdered Awen! I'll cut your throat the moment you try to touch me!"

Brockwell scowled. "As the heir of His Majesty's oath, I'd hoped you would if nothing else respect me," he trumpeted. "Surely you will, but arrangements can be made in the meantime." A queer look came into Rusty's eyes then, a doubtful expression that Riderch could not read, though he desperately tried.

"You gill them all?" asked Riderch.

"Gill whom?" asked Brockwell. "My Lady's wardens, or your own mutts? They're both equally red now, I can tell you that much."

Rhian hurled a stream of curses that turned even Riderch's ears red, but Brockwell continued over it. "A single warden slipped away to Gwall, alas, but what do you suppose he reported? Godnu on one side, and a pack of bandits on the other. Those red ponchos of yours muddied the waters, I'll admit, but I don't mind a little bit of mud. No one will find her in Godnu, and they certainly won't find her in Ancathair – not until My Lady has borne me sons, at least."

"I'll eat them," Rhian hissed, "every single one of them. I'll become a wild hare before I give you a single filthy piglet."

"Am I really so bad?" Brockwell shouted, full of such earnest indignation that Riderch half believed the prince did not understand Rhian's rage. "Have I not promised your father everything you could ever desire? It was not I who broke troth with him, nor my father. I've been nothing but kind to you, Rhian, and I shall continue to be kind – kinder, surely, than the slavering wolf who pilfered you."

Riderch gripped his sword tightly; he could no longer help himself. He saw others move to grasp their own, and almost welcomed the excuse to shed blood, but wrestled his arm with a great exercise of will. "Rusty," he said.

Rusty shook his head. "They were paying us real well to keep an eye out for you, Riderch, me and the boys," he said. "Even better to bring her back here."

"How well?" asked Riderch more urgently. "I have a purse full of silver from the Ceinych, and…" He paused, remembering what Rhian had told him about the brocade, then decided to simply steal it. "And a saddlebag full of pure gold fittings from a horse's tack."

"Are you bargaining for Her Highness, or for your own life?" asked Brockwell. "You can't afford either. I'll simply let them take whatever they find on you."

Seeing then the abyssal depths of his desperation, Riderch made to draw his falchion, if only to part Brockwell's head from his neck before he himself was slain. He was stopped, however, by Rhian shouting behind him: "And my horse! My mare Newidol is scarcely five years old, from the finest line in the Anialdir."

Riderch looked at Rhian as if she had just sprouted wings.

"Who belongs, with you, to my house," Brockwell snorted. "You may make free with your things when you've accompanied me to Ancathair, if you like."

"They'll belong to you, Rusty, and to your friends," said Rhian, speaking as fast as a carnival barker and with no less confidence. "And what's more, I will personally see that my father grants you each a boon: anything you ask in my name for delivering me from this murderous pig. I swear it on my dead mother's ears."

It surprised Riderch that Rhian did not offer Carbit too. He thought to do so himself, but could not form the words no matter how hard he tried.

"He'll offer you nothing that my own royal father cannot," Brockwell scoffed.

"You know well, Brockwell, what my father is willing to do for the sake of his late queen," she smoldered.

Rusty's eyes fairly popped out of his head. "'Late' queen?" he breathed.

"Indeed," said Rhian.

"You told me she was some Guilur's kitten," Rusty snapped at Brockwell. A few other folk shifted on their feet, jarred no less than he. Malmuck glanced harshly at Brockwell and inched back to make room to draw.

"Does it matter?" Brockwell shrilled. "The gold glitters regardless."

"My mother was Queen Morgwynn, my father's first wife," said Rhian. "Surely even Osging knows how much he prized her."

"Idle Ceinych patter," Brockwell huffed. "It will do you no good bidding against me for a few petty thieves while you stand there looking as shabby as a gray rider. I had hoped to establish friendly terms before we left, but we've no time to wait until your blood cools. I'm taking you to Ancathair. Rusty, my retainers will do for the cutthroat if you don't, and it will be on this very floor."

Brockwell strode forward then on his unimpressive legs, making to brush by Riderch on his way to Rhian. He made it to neither; for Rusty, with a furtiveness Riderch well knew, lifted his leg and kicked the back of Brockwell's knee. It buckled, and the prince stumbled forward, a prodigious gut pulling him hard onto the dirt floor not three paces in front of Riderch. A jolt shot through the room. A single moment hung suspended in the air, and both Rusty and Riderch knew not to waste it. A grison on Rusty's right bent down to help Brockwell: Rusty stomped hard on his paw, then pulled the war-knife from his scabbard when he lurched forward, bringing its pommel down against the back of his head. He folded like a withered leaf of corn, and the sound of steel against his skull became the starting bell of a brawl.

Trusting that Rusty's folk know Brockwell's on sight, Riderch wheels around and grabs the haft of the capybara's spear. He holds fast to it, but this is only to Riderch's advantage. With a mighty heave the hare pulls him across the floor, choking up on the haft and swinging him into the opposite crowd. He collides with a chinchilla, letting go the spear; and finding its head behind him, Riderch breaks its haft between the marsh deer's ears. Rhian wriggles free in the wake of the blow, drawing her newly sharpened sword as the full fighting begins. Brockwell is almost to his hooves; but Riderch, rabid in his rage, plans to pin him to the ground. Like a beast he turns upon him, half-spear at the ready. He coils to leap, until Rhian's voice rises over the din: "Don't kill him, Riderch!"

Riderch stiffened in spite of himself. His limbs seized like drawn bowstrings, and he stood in the midst of the battle as he had done at both of his late robberies: burning with fever, compelled to

obey by a weighty voice. The delay brought Brockwell to standing. His fat hand reached for the sword at his side. Snarling then in fierce frustration, Riderch cast away the spear and tackled Brockwell's legs, rolling with him as he had done with the wolf at Islawr. The prince fell a second time; but less surprised, fumbled for his sword. Riderch climbed atop his hips and drew it for him, then turned to throw it into the far corner. There he saw Malmuck slipping out the storeroom's side door, his serpentine tail slithering between the slit skirt of a black duster coat. Riderch aimed the sword at him, but only too late.

The scrape was already turning in Rusty's favor. His friends were more numerous to begin with, and all of them had chosen to fight, meanwhile two of Brockwell's six lay writhing on the floor before the fighting had even started. Two more followed Malmuck out the door soon after; and while the others strove to aid their fallen prince, too many more strove against them. Riderch, therefore, was free to vent his wrath against Brockwell, beating his head savagely with his fists. The tapir proved no great opponent, in spite of his weight. He was unskilled in wrestling and did not know how to keep Riderch off of him, and so in short order he was as bloody as Gwyarc had been, trying senselessly to crawl away.

There were great sacks of deer corn stacked against one of the nearby shelves: poor seed reserved for livestock and for hunters' bait. Riderch pulls one of these sacks down from its pile; and cutting the twine around its neck with his teeth, scatters the corn across the floor. He shakes out the empty sack, then, and springs back to the bellying Brockwell, who finds no time to beg before his head and shoulders are within it, followed swiftly by the rest of him. His thick legs, formidable with their kicking hooves, Riderch subdues with kicks of his own, until Brockwell curls up around his own battered guts and he can pin the sack's mouth closed with his foot.

"Dinistriol."

Riderch kicks and kicks again, taking every moan and jerk for an invitation; but when this does not satisfy his bloodthirst, he takes the sack's mouth in both paws and heaves with a beastly roar, hefting Brockwell over his shoulder.

"Dinistriol."

He makes to swing him at the ground, to break him as one breaks an unwanted kitten upon a rock, but the spell is broken before he can follow through.

"Riderch, stop!" Rhian cried.

The blood rushing in Riderch's ears, so much like a roaring crowd, proved false the moment that it faltered. He looked out from within his wrath and found the battle over: Rusty's folk had driven Brockwell's from the storeroom and barred the door. Not one lay dead, though there were several smarting wounds. Rhian's sword was tipped once more in blood, though she herself stood by with white ears and limp whiskers, with a nomad's crazed eyes. She was panting with the rest of them; and Riderch, standing in their midst with the prince of Ancathair hanging from a sack, panted the most raggedly of all.

They stared at him, one and all, as if a bison were before them, brandishing his deadly horns. The fear in which Riderch found safety was sown among them; he let Brockwell fall to the ground and knotted shut the sack.

"I'll cleave your head from your shoulders," the prince moaned. Riderch kicked the sack again, and Brockwell said no more.

"Anhaga, Forrynel, make a loop around the shop," Rusty snapped, holding his stolen, bloodied war-knife while his own lay still in its scabbard. "Lock the front door."

A pair of folk slipped out of the storeroom while the rest began to dust themselves off, producing cheap rags wherever they could find them to wipe the blood from their faces and their weapons. Rusty, disheveled and yet unscathed, padded over to Rhian, his stiff spines once again testing

the integrity of his shirt. Riderch thought to interpose himself, but the rat saw clearly enough how readily she gripped her sword. He stopped just out of reach, narrowing his eyes at her. “Your dead mother’s ears?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Rhian, then slipped her saddlebag from her shoulder and held it out to him. Rusty took it, looked inside, and nodded sharply.

“Where’s the mare?” he asked.

“Boarded at the Kinglet,” said Rhian, accepting a rag from him and wiping her sword clean. “You may follow us there, if you like.”

“Be a fool not to,” said Rusty. “And your pa’s boon? What about that?”

“If you bring Newidol to him,” said Rhian, sheathing her sword, “all of you here, and beg boons by Rhian, daughter of Morgwynn, he’s sure to give them to you. Tell him the truth: that you intervened when Brockwell tried to steal me away, but that I wouldn’t return with you. Tell him also that Carbit is alive and well: he’ll know to believe you then.”

“Why won’t you come with us?” asked Rusty.

“Because I’m not returning to Gorseth Floyd at all,” said Rhian.

“What?” said Rusty. “You’re just going to skip town?”

“I’ve given you my word,” said Rhian, “although I realize now how little that must mean to folk like you. If it means any more, I swear by all the Stars in heaven that I will send someone to ensure that you were rewarded when I may.”

“Where are you going?” asked Rusty.

“Did I offer to satisfy your curiosity?” Rhian snapped, to the surprise of everyone in the storeroom. “No. I’ve offered you everything else to my name; if it still isn’t enough, Brockwell is over there in that bag.”

Rusty’s hard face softened somewhat. He snickered bitterly, then snapped his claws at Riderch. “Your purse, Dinistriol,” he demanded. “Not another word before your purse.”

Riderch ground his teeth as he slipped it from his belt. The moment of passage was tense, and no small part of him desired to punish the rat for his first betrayal; but knowing the precariousness of their position, he restrained himself. Rusty looked within. His whole brow flew up, and with somewhat less chagrin he tucked it into Rhian’s saddlebag. “I was already grown when Rhuddri took Gorseth Floyd,” he offered. “I remember the parades. The knights hanging from the walls.”

“I was nursed on those tales,” Rhian nodded.

“Brockwell told me you were some Guilur’s girl,” said Rusty, spitting on the writhing sack. “Wish I’d have guessed better – if it's a choice between being on Rhuddri's good side or his bad side when he comes knocking on Godnu’s door again, that’s an easy choice.”

“And Cyngen?” said Rhian.

“To hell with Cyngen,” Rusty snarled. “Osging snogs him because he hates Rhuddri, but he’s got no love for war-banders. I don’t reckon he even knew that Brockwell was in the city.” A distant look entered his eyes then. He deflated somewhat, and looked around his storeroom as if he would never see it again. “It’ll come down on one side or the other sooner or later. Only wish I’d kept out of it.”

“Good,” said Riderch, and with a grunt slung Brockwell’s sack over his shoulder again. Without another word he padded across the storeroom floor, then kicked open the door.

“What are you doing?” Rusty shrilled. “Where are you taking him?”

“I want food and water, Rusty,” said Riderch, already past the threshold and into a narrow alley, “as much as will hang on a palfrey. I won’t bother you for anything else.”

“Or what?” Rusty scoffed, pushing past his fellows to ride Riderch’s heels. The others were reticent to go near Riderch; Rusty did not stop to make them.

“Or I’m taking him straight to Osging,” said Riderch. “He’ll have a tale to tell if I didn’t ring his bell too hard.”

The rest stood swaying in the storeroom for a moment, glancing furtively at each other. They settled on Rhian eventually, who had already dug her claws into the dirt floor.

“How’d you fall in with him, anyhow?” one of them asked.

“Did you kill someone?” asked another. “That’s how most folk end up with Riderch.”

She started after Riderch then, bounding out the door and following him south a few paces behind. Rusty was haggling – haggling, rather, was his intention, until it became clear that Riderch was in no mood to make a bargain. They were in sight of the king’s palace, burnished by early morning sunlight, when Rusty finally capitulated. Riderch stopped, then nodded, then turned around and marched back the way he had come, passing the Rusty Axle entirely.

“Now where are you going?” Rusty rasped, following him down a series of filthy alleys.

“Food, Rusty!” Riderch roared, wheeling on him with such ferocity that the old rat cringed. “You’ll get your horse. You’ll get everything you asked for. I want stores waiting for me when I get back – we’re leaving town this morning, and it’ll go easier for us both if we can leave quick.”

Rusty frowned, weighing some response he decided in the end not to give, then put his head down and scurried back to his shop. Rhian remained with Riderch, and for a time they walked the shaded alleys in silence but for Brockwell’s pitiful struggling.

“I wasn't expecting you to give him Newidol,” said Riderch at length.

“You say that as if it upsets you,” said Rhian.

“No harefolk worth his water gives up his horse so easily,” said Riderch.

“Giving her up in exchange for our lives is hardly easy, Riderch,” said Rhian. “What kind of complaint is that?”

“He wouldn’t have killed you,” said Riderch.

“But he would have killed you,” said Rhian, “you ungrateful dog.”

“You could have offered Carbit too,” said Riderch, leveling it as an accusation.

Rhian stared at him as they walked, feeling more keenly than ever that she stared at an iron shell, behind which lay a folk invisible and unfathomable. “Newidol at least belonged to me,” she said. “Carbit belongs to my father, and you stole him. He isn’t mine to give.”

“Not even to buy our lives?” asked Riderch.

Rhian paused, then shook her head. “I don't know.”

“What is it that's so important to you that you’d strip naked on your way to…to where we’re headed?” asked Riderch. This, to the maiden’s surprise, was not an accusation. There was a ragged desperation at the edges of his voice that seemed unexpectedly childlike, so unfitting from the broad-chested buck that she imagined it filtering through a crack in his iron shell.

“Someday Newidol will die, Riderch,” she said more gently. “So will Carbit, and so will you, and so will I. My father will conquer Godnu if he can, and then he will die and pass it onto my oldest step-brother, and the war-band will melt into the Anialdir, and the Anialdir will be ground to sand and rise up again, and the tug-of-war will go on and on. The dominion my father fights for will be gone tomorrow, Riderch. All of the things you steal and kill for. Only the Stars will remain, and all I’ve ever wanted was a life as lasting as theirs.”

“They’re gone now,” Riderch growled. The fleeting softness was gone.

There was a smaller gate in the northern wall of Godnu, where the Rinnea’s banks began to fall in earnest and the anglers and punters came and went from the harbor. It was open at that time of day, revealing the muddy river and the Greteboga dyed amaranth beyond. Riderch waited in the shade between two houses for a modest crowd of folk to enter, and when they were out of sight he padded over to the threshold. There he dropped Brockwell; and drawing his golden sword, cut the knot from

the sack's mouth. It fell open around him. Brockwell lay limp, groaning pathetically as his folded limbs straightened, until the light that met his swelling eyes told him that he was free. No tortoise ever had so much trouble righting itself, but Brockwell returned to his hooves in the end. His short-lived relief was dashed, however, by the sight of Riderch standing by with bared falchion, and by Rhian beside him.

"I have no purse," he said, the teeth chattering behind his fat cheeks. "I left it at the inn."

"Run," said Riderch.

He did not have to say it twice. Brockwell hiccuped, staggering back a few steps toward the gate, then turned and limped beneath the open sky. He puffed and blew, and Riderch watched him bear eastward toward Ancathair until he was out of sight; only then did he put away his sword. A few punters who had watched him from the road, weighing the wisdom of taking the gate, slipped by him now with bowed heads.

"Hurry up, I want to be across the Swartway before it gets too hot," said Riderch, turning to lead Rhian away from the gate and back to the alley.

But Rhian only began to weep, so sharply that Riderch thought her hurt. She stood sobbing in the middle of the street, sodden with tears while passing strangers watched, and hugged her own arms like a kitten trying to comfort itself.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Riderch.

Rhian failed twice to speak, managing only to gasp, but succeeded on the third. "Why you?" she asked. "Why must it be you?"

26

"Rather, ruddy rider, grant me boldness,
So to break the beastly steed that is my heart
With saddle of serenity, benignity its bit and bridle
And restraint its ready reins,
Riding wide the stroke of the requiting sword"

Riderch returned to their fire with his arms full of brush and deposited it with the rest on the bottom step of the sunken staircase that sheltered the western side of the little gwerthon. Rhian knelt in her veiled hat before the fire on the overturned soil, facing east as she always did, chanting toward the rising moon whose waxing figure had not yet crested the lip of the uneven crater. Her voice, and the voices that accompanied her from the space just over Riderch's ears, had been less bothersome to him since they had left Godnu – by no means welcome, but perhaps reluctantly peaceful, as are strangers on the Swartway who sit beneath the same booth to pass the sweltering heat of afternoon.

That night, however, those peaceful voices abraded his whole body, scraping against his sinews like fiddlebows. He had used the moonlight to excuse himself from the fire, and spent as long as he could wandering among the sunken stones gathering deadfall from the cedars and mesquite trees whose roots had chewed the ancient foundations to meal. She was still praying when he returned, and so he took a restless seat on the highest step just under the wasteland floor, where he could look down thirty feet and see all but the moon-shadow on the cold spring's western side. Carbit grazed nearby, happily free of his fetters – he had consistently refused to be hobbled ever since leaving Godnu, but showed no interest in striking off on his own. This was well, for he carried all of their meager supplies, the cornmeal they had won from Rusty, and every one of their waterskins.

It was less water, indeed, than Riderch had hoped to bring into the Western Waste. With Newidol gone, their labor was halved; and Carbit, though he made a noble effort, could carry less than a palfrey of his age and build should have. He was no pack horse, thought Riderch – and owing to his

barbing, he might never be as sound as he had been before falling ill. His lot was severed from that of King Rhuddri's steeds, just as Riderch's was. It was the price he had paid for his own life, and Riderch found – with an irony so rich that he laughed – that he envied him.

Pulling his ears against his head in a vain attempt to muffle the echoing chorus, he traced the skeletal shapes of the gwerthon. If it had sunk at some point in the distant past – as the sloping slabs and staircases terminating in ten-foot drops suggested – then the crumbling corners jutting up from the crater might conceal whole towers beneath the desert floor, towers which had once belonged to folk now wholly forgotten by the Anialdir. The spring itself was unfathomably deep: he had realized that by daylight, when while bathing he had swam down as far as his lungs would allow to find only bitter cold and miniature stone promontories studding the earthen walls. It reminded him of his sword, the sword he had owned and forgotten in the old dry well, the sword he was not merely leasing from Rhian. This in turn reminded him of Disma, and what tenuous peace he enjoyed fled away like a startled deer. He stood up and climbed down the stairs, rejoining Rhian by the fire just as she was removing her hat and closing her little red book:

"So fare your full-sped steeds across the firmament,
And from your laver Fortune's fickle rays deliver;
Deliver me this night from fiendish slavery
And then tomorrow from the spirits of the air"

"Do you pray those every day, or only when you're scared?" asked Riderch, stacking branches on the fire.

Rhian scoffed at him as she sought to catch her footing, stumbling and slumping on her seat when she realized, as she often did, that her legs had fallen asleep. "Do I give the impression of being afraid?" she asked.

"I would be, if I were you," Riderch shrugged.

"Is there no impetus to pray beyond fear?" she asked.

"You tell me, halser," said Riderch.

"Please don't call me that," she said, beginning to rub her legs. "I would never think to pray when I'm afraid if I didn't make a habit of it otherwise. I rarely think at all when I'm afraid, to tell you the truth; I simply do, like a dumb beast. I can't imagine you can relate."

"You've got a sharp tongue on you, Your Highness," Riderch chuckled.

"Don't call me that either," said Rhian. "I should have stopped you from doing it when we were up in the Greteboga, but even then I didn't know if I had the will to…" She struggled to choose her words. "Certainly the Ceinych's honorifics belong on the other side of the Swartway. Let me leave them there."

"One ear's as green as another," said Riderch, and scooted himself back against the high first step of the staircase. "I only wondered why you prayed to Dinistrith. It always confused me, why decent folk did that, until I heard you doing it. Sometimes it pays to have a Hellknight looking out for you, aye?"

Rhian had been stretching while he spoke; she stopped and twisted around to look at him now, an unwelcome disgust on her face. "Are you calling yourself a Hellknight?" she asked.

"I reckon that's what I am to you," Riderch nodded. "Are you going to tell me I'm wrong?"

"Yes!" Rhian barked. "Vehemently. Just because you cutthroats want to see a cutthroat in Dinistrith doesn't make him one. Do you believe that having a monster in heaven will excuse your own monstrous deeds?"

"You said yourself that he likes me," said Riderch. "You want to take that back?" The high,

reedy laughter, so rare since he had left the Ceinych, circled his head again.

"No," said Rhian, standing to pace before the fire. "He does favor you, clearly, in a way I can scarcely believe – but not because you're a Hellknight, and not because he is. Dinistrith doesn't resemble you at all, Riderch. You only think he does, because you think everyone resembles you."

"Then what's he like?" asked Riderch.

Rhian stood between him and the fire, gazing up into the sky. Lit so starkly, she resembled her father to a startling degree: tall and fierce, every thought adding to the cutting edge of her expression, her paw never more comfortable than when it rested upon her sword. Her shadow, splashing against the high stone steps, was thrice her size. "Dinistrith is the roaming knight, fearless in the face of any battle into which the Stars send him, even when he's all alone – especially when he's all alone."

It sounded fanciful to Riderch. He imagined himself charging the gate of Godnu on Carbit's back, and nearly laughed when he was dashed against its doors, but wondered a moment later how large the Stars were. They seemed so tiny against the firmament, yet was the sky not terribly far away? How great must their shadows loom? "Folk offer animals to him sometimes, anyone ever tell you that?" he asked. "Scorpions usually, or wolves if they can bag them. It's outlaws, mostly, praying for good luck. They say it works, too."

Rhian scowled. "Who says it?" she asked. "The ones not hanging from the end of a rope?"

Riderch laughed then, surprising her, and a startled opossum fled from a bush nearer the spring. "Mighty sharp tongue," he snickered.

She stared at him briefly, incredulous, then padded over to the steps and sat down on the lowest one between him and Carbit. "Does it work?" she asked.

"Beats me," Riderch shrugged. "What would you say if it did?"

"That there are ten thousand fiends who crave gifts from folk, each waiting in line to make you believe that it's the real Dinistrith," she said. The answer was so prompt, so obviously rehearsed, and yet Riderch found he did not doubt that she believed it. He opened his mouth to undercut it nevertheless; but when he did not know how, he merely threw more brush onto the fire and teased his whiskers with his claws.

"I went into the Deepwaste this winter," he said after a long time, "and I met two rabbitfolk there."

A pair of roadrunners shot out of a creosote bush on the shaded southern side of the spring. Riderch scanned the dry growth, but nothing stirred. "Rabbitfolk?" said Rhian. "I didn't know they lived in this part of the world."

"They don't," said Riderch. "The second one was real – I know because I cut his ear off – but the first one, even though I saw him twice, I've never quite believed he was a rabbitfolk at all. Is that anything like what you're talking about?"

"Why did you cut his ear off?" asked Rhian.

"Because he was nothing like I was led to believe," said Riderch.

"And neither is Dinistrith," Rhian nodded.

"Can I see your book?" asked Riderch, looking up at her.

"My book?" Rhian balked. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Eat it," he said.

"Riderch!" Rhian huffed.

"I'll give it right back," Riderch promised. "Won't put a crease in a single page."

Rhian shifted doubtfully, then with buck teeth pressing against her bottom lip she fished it out of her pocket and pawed it down to him. "Have I somehow convinced you to pray?" she asked.

"Wouldn't use the book if I was," said Riderch, thumbing without thought from page to page. The red leather was hard and stiff, chapped from heavy use in the middle of the desert, and yet the

binding was strong and supple. He scanned its tiny script, the long litanies and antiphonal odes, until the sound of parting flesh and a sharp cry intruded upon his memory. He snapped it shut and pawed it back. “Never did learn to read,” he said.

Rhian slipped the book back into her pocket. She said nothing for over a minute, and yet her probing stare never left him, so that Riderch grew more and more galled until he nearly screamed at her. A glint in the darkness beside the spring stopped him cold.

“Riderch, what happened on the road?” Rhian whispered. “Will you ever tell me? I know why Brockwell was there, but why you? Why help me in the first place?”

He saw the eyes first, as yellow as suns, hanging in the thick night between the spring and a steep stone ramp. The fire had failed entirely to tease him out, and failed still until he stood just opposite the blaze, where its meager light could outline a long duster coat and hint at the rosettes which covered his raven fur. Then Riderch stood, with Rhian gasping after him, and Malmuck’s paw fell to the grip of his falchion. Carbit snorted a warning, stamping hard at the soft earth; Malmuck glanced at him, then flitted from falchion to falchion, calculating in his severity.

“I reckon I can tell you that, Your Highness,” he purred to Rhian. “He didn’t come to help you at all.”

“And neither did you, or I’m a rabbit,” said Rhian coldly.

“And I don’t expect he wants to help you now,” Malmuck continued, “leading you out into the middle of nowhere like this.”

“And Brockwell would only help himself to me,” Rhian smoldered.

Malmuck held up an open paw and shook his head. “Brockwell doesn’t hold my reins any more,” he said. “The tomfool’s lucky if he hasn’t blown his pa’s whole endeavor with what he did in Godnu. But you two are the most wanted folk in the Anialdir by a country mile – King Sheen has the prince outbid, and I’m happy enough taking you to Gwall over Ancathair.”

“Over my bleeding corpse,” said Riderch.

“That was part of the offer,” Malmuck nodded. “Of course, you could always walk away from the cutthroat now, Your Highness, and we could leave him here: I’d get less, but it would be less risk.”

“I’m not going to Gwall,” said Rhian.

“No, you’re going into the middle of the Western Waste with this drooling dog,” said Malmuck, permitting the slightest hint of a sneer. “What did you tell her to get her out here, Riderch?”

Riderch took a step around the fire toward Malmuck. Malmuck stepped around in turn, putting the spring at his back.

“Do you live out here?” asked the jaguar, thrusting his muzzle up and over the lip of the crater. “I reckoned you were sun-stricken at first, trying to follow the adder’s path you were winding, but you kept on finding gwerthons. You must know the Western Waste like the back of your paw.”

Riderch shook his head for Rhian’s sake, but said nothing. There was no purpose in explaining that he hardly knew where he was, that a small, reedy voice had directed him from gwerthon to gwerthon every day since their departure. She already believed that he was mad; and while it was a madness inflicted by heaven, Riderch believed it no less.

“Is this where you planned to hold her?” Malmuck pressed, flexing his velvet claws. “You and the rest of your band?”

For a moment Riderch wondered if he could leverage the lie, if he could make Malmuck believe that other folk lay in wait nearby, but in the end he decided against it. He would have to kill him, and convincing him to flee would only complicate the effort. “I don’t know where the band is,” he admitted. “I reckon I’ll never find out now.”

“You want her all to yourself,” said Malmuck, spitting into the fire. “Not so different from me, in that case.”

Riderch watched the spittle hit a burning branch, heard it hiss, and made to draw his sword; but before he could, a raven footpaw swung with sudden force into the fire, scattering a hail of embers and flaming branches into his unguarded face.

"Riderch!" Rhian screamed, as searing pain peppered the hare's whole body. He clenched his eyes shut, sweeping burning coals from his face amidst the smell of singed fur, and would have beaten out the rest of himself if in that moment he had not heard the sweep of a blade clearing its scabbard.

Riderch was no greenhorn. He had lately lived his life in constant conflict, and knew, more certainly than he knew anything else, how to survive in a fight. The sound of Malmuck's rattling scabbard made him draw his own sword; and the pain he felt, in his head, his paws, and his feet, filled him with a rage that overwhelmed the shock. He brushes whatever ash remains from his eyes and charges through the remains of the fire, spittle flying as he snarls, and sets Malmuck on his rear paw before he can deliver the first stroke. Rhian draws her sword as well, rushing in to aid him; but Carbit, without a word of command from any mouth, prevents her. His whole immovable bulk he places in her way, pressing her against the high stone steps; and she, no matter how she maneuvers, cannot get around him. In a gesture that takes her breath away, Carbit goes so far as to curl his neck around her sword, his great, jagged scar hugging the honed blade. She cries out in rage herself, as Riderch falls upon Malmuck.

But Malmuck is no sluggard. He is as cool as Riderch is hot, and handles himself with the mastery of a rider, stepping out of the cutthroat's savage sweep with help from a skilled parry. He holds his unladen arm behind his back and returns several strokes of his own. The barking of steel fills the low gwerthon, returning echoes that carry birds away in their fear. Riderch is roaring, yet Malmuck is utterly silent, moved to singleminded focus by might belonging to someone twice his foe's size. His blows fall like mule kicks, sharp and heavy, with no lack of like skill behind them, and only through clever stepping can Malmuck match him. Riderch strains, singed bald in spots, to close the gap and grapple; his foe prevents him, but knows before a dozen cuts that he can do this only through retreat.

Riderch drives him away from Rhian, clockwise around the spring. Only the moonlight betrays their blades, Fortune's rays flashing in their polished edges. Riderch's bullish charging earns him a quarter of the spring's shoreline; but Malmuck, recovered from his first shock, sees a pivot that will gain him the advantage. They come upon a fallen pillar, pitted stone overhanging the frigid pool. With the haste of a treed cat he scrambles up its scalloped side, then rains blows down on Riderch's head from the higher ground. But harefolk are light on their feet, and Riderch is no exception; shrugging away the cuts, he leaps atop the pillar in a single bound, and with a second he is driving his foe toward the water.

Malmuck had intended to jump down the pillar's farther side as soon as he was up, but found at once that it would avail him little. The moon-shadow was stark and inky there, cast by broad, swaying palms, and Riderch's relentless speed would find him before he was securely on his paws. Aye, the pillar was the surest ground in sight, but it was ground that he was already losing. Malmuck cursed and dared a reckless thrust, foining for Riderch's neck, yet not even this deterred him. Riderch was a badger, savage teeth clamped around the jaguar's neck, and nothing would dislodge them now save death. The cutthroat's golden sword slithers around Malmuck's tip, locking with its guard. All the force of the mighty hare's weight bears down on him. Malmuck shuffles back a paw to gain the leverage to shake him off, but finds only the edge of the pillar. A sinuous leg hooks the back of his knee; Riderch tackles him, and down they both tumble into the gwerthon.

The fall, as it happened, surprised Riderch. He knew that they were near the water, and that he was trying to push Malmuck into it, but his every thought was so bent upon his opponent that he never guessed that they were standing over it. Malmuck could see better in the dark than he could; this advantage lent itself to calculation, but the thoughtless memory of Riderch's sinews defied all strategy.

He gasped as he fell. Stars streaked his vision, a shower of stolen gold, before the shock of frigid water jarred him to his senses. He sank like a lodestone, knowing not which way was up; and aware that Malmuck was in the water with him, lashed out in all directions with his sword. His grip on the jaguar had failed from the high fall. Even with eyes open and bulging he could see nothing, not even the moon above the surface. He supposed that Malmuck was similarly blind, but held onto his sword nevertheless, pointing it in front of him as he darted to and fro like a frog.

Shortly he hit his head on a protruding stone and nearly expended his breath. Feeling it with his free paw, he found it one of the many little ledges studding the gwerthon walls, and used it to guide himself along – up or down, he could not tell – to the next little ledge. Each was as coarse and slimy as the last, suggesting nothing of his orientation; but he would reach the surface eventually, he thought, or else the murky bottom, and if his lungs held out he might yet survive.

The climb took longer than he expected. This told him, at a certain point, that he was going the wrong way; and fearful of drowning, he spun upside down, hoping to push off of the latest ledge and propel himself upward. His feet sank into its surface, however: not as it would in mud, or even in sand, but as it were in a pile of brush. His furred soles trod lengths of some hard material strewn across what he guessed to be the gwerthon floor. Now and then his toes would slip between grated gaps, as if half of a basket's weave lay at the top of a neglected mound of firewood. Paddling down, he took hold of one of these baskets, dislodging it from the pile, and ran his claws blindly over it. It was hard, a cage anchored to two parallel lengths opposite one another, and did not bend like wood. There were knobs along the outer edge of one of these lengths; he ran his paw down them, chasing of a creeping sense of familiarity, but did not understand what he held until he stepped on a smooth, overturned bowl.

It struck him then that he had not felt the urge to breathe yet. He felt it now, for he was compelled to pant, but with an effort resisted. His paws let go of the rib cage of their own volition. He heard it clatter against the carpet of bones, far more clearly than he should have, and that clattering awoke something in the gwerthon with him. For a moment he thought it Malmuck, a black hunter stalking in the black depths, but knew better when a mass of incomprehensible size impressed itself upon his mind. The water swayed, pushing him up and back; Riderch held out his sword again, but it struck one of the bones. He began to tremble, fearing that he had perished and that this was the Abyss.

"Do they offer me their Holy Ones again? Did they learn nothing from their first ruin?"

Riderch whirled about, swinging his sword, but the speaker was out of reach. Its voice was unlike those he had formerly heard, both in quality and delivery. It was hideously cold, less folkish by far than even the accompanying choir of Rhian's prayers, and it filled his skull instead of flitting around his ears.

"But no. This one is well-bloodied, yet I may not eat it while it wears the relic."

The mention of eating made Riderch almost mad with panic. He thought to swim away, to kick off of the bone-strewn floor and flee for the surface, but could not make his legs obey. He shut his eyes instead, and yet the sensation – not sight, but no less keen – of a great, winged beast with a long neck remained.

"What storm has arisen, Destroyer, that they send you down to me? Speak."

It was speaking to him. He knew it then, and the knowledge reduced him to a whimpering kitten, but he dared not open his mouth to answer lest his lungs remember themselves.

"You will not drown."

For all of his fear, Riderch believed it; and what was more, his desire to answer was irresistible. "I fell in here scrapping with that tomcat," he said.

"A faultless deed, and not admissible. Tell me what you have done."

"Nothing I didn't have to do," said Riderch without pausing to think.

"Perjury."

"Pardon?" asked Riderch.

"That is a lie."

The mere words cowed Riderch. "I've killed some folks," he confessed, mumbling like a scolded child.

"Whom?"

"Lately?" asked Riderch. "Well there was the innkeeper, and then the stagecoach driver. I'll go on if you want, but I reckon I'll forget some."

"Perjury. Tell me what you have done."

Riderch set his jaw then, guessing at the spot for which the hunter was probing. "I killed my pa to help my friend," he announced, "but I'm not sorry for it." He might have been one of the skulls making shrift from the floor.

"Manifest error. That too is a lie, but a blameless one as far as it concerns you."

"That's no lie!" Riderch objected. "What part of that was a lie?"

"*You fell in with a lodestone around your neck. Where did you get it?"*

Riderch's paw felt beneath his shirt until it grabbed the ear. It was still supple, and deliciously warm in the frigid water. "I cut off a halser's ear," he said.

"And now you face retribution. Will you remove it, so that I may eat you?"

Riderch shook his head violently, not knowing if he was even facing the creature. "Rhian will be stranded in the waste if I don't go back," he said, "or else Malmuck will take her to Gwall. Do you know Rhian?"

"If you go back, it will be to die."

"So long as it's after I bring Rhian to Gromstall," said Riderch.

"You must wear this. Take it with you."

The water swayed again, moving in currents as one great limb on the beast's flank drifted toward him. Riderch held out his sword again; but when the limb stopped short of him he let it fall to his side, and reached out reluctantly to feel something floating before his face. His claws brushed the gargantuan limb first. He shivered, for nothing in its touch suggested wings at all, but rather a catfish's smooth, clammy tail. Dangling from it was a bundle of straps and buckles – leather, it seemed, and unskillful iron – with a single, short length of iron ringed to one end.

"This is a bit and bridle," said Riderch. "I can't wear this."

"Then you may not return to the sunlit world."

Still frightened, but now more confused, Riderch reluctantly took hold of the bit. It and the bridle fell away from the great limb, more substantial in its bulk than he expected, and he feared at first that it would impede his ascent. It did no such thing. He pushed off of the floor of corpses, and was at once swimming faster than he thought himself capable – so fast, indeed, that he feared he would dash his brains against one of the protruding ledges. He never did; but borne up on currents from a pair of beating wings, he felt the pressure lessen in his ears just before he broke the surface.

The moonlight was as blinding as noon in the wake of that sepulchral darkness. Dragging the bridle behind him, he crawled up onto the gwerthon's southern shore, then heaved his heavy burden into the grass. He was soaked to the skin. His burns, soothed by the cold water, still whispered with pain in the breeze. He coughed and spluttered, drinking in the air faster than his lungs could accept it. The bridle shifted in his paws.

"Riderch!" cried Rhian.

Riderch shook the water from his head and looked up to find the maiden bounding through the undergrowth, sword in paw, with Carbit trailing cautiously behind. He no longer impeded her, though he snorted a warning when she drew near, a warning directed – judging by his eyes and ears – at the bridle trying to wriggle free of Riderch's grip.

His grip tightened on his sword. His claws, aching from the cold and long clenching, were shot with pain. Looking back at what he held in his other paw, the rage he had forgotten in the spring flared to life again; for Malmuck lay retching in the long grass, trying breathlessly to crawl away, while Riderch held him by the tail. The cutthroat raised his sword to land an uncontested blow.

"Riderch, no! Stop!" Rhian shouted just beside his ear. Breathless himself, he nearly fell over backwards when she gripped his arm, preventing him from slashing at the wheezing wretch.

"He lost his sword, Riderch, look at him," she pleaded. "Let him go, please."

Riderch tried twice to wrench his arm free, but when this did not avail he turned to cuff her with the back of his arm. It was not a heavy blow, but Rhian clearly did not expect it, for she squeaked in anguish as she staggered back. That sob seared Riderch more painfully than the bonfire had; but lost in a white rage now, he would not be deterred. He raised his sword again, this time to stab.

"Stop it, Riderch!" Rhian screamed. The flat of her blade beat hard against Riderch's side several times, desperate blows meant to persuade; but a mad badger cannot be persuaded by mere blows, and Riderch batted her aside so that she would not be injured by his own. The tip of his falchion found Malmuck's neck.

"Stop!" she roared: no longer as a plea, but as a threat. The determination in her voice gave even Riderch pause. He glanced at her again, then blanched. The tip of his falchion retreated, for her blade was pressed against her own throat, ready to be drawn across the jugular. Tears were in her eyes, tears and grim resolve. She stared at Riderch without blinking.

"What are you doing?" Riderch breathed.

"Let him go, Riderch," she insisted.

"Or what?" Riderch snarled.

"I swear on my mother's ears that I'll do it," she said, and pressed the blade more firmly against her neck. "I will not kill to be rid of the Anialdir, do you understand me? I won't climb out of here on a mountain of corpses, and neither will you."

Riderch began to tremble again: not in fear, as he had at the bottom of the gwerthon, but in confounded, impotent ire. He ground his teeth at her. Malmuck rolled over, beginning to catch his breath, only to find Riderch's sword once more pricking his throat. "He'll do it, Your Highness, whether you like it or not," the jaguar gasped. "This one's been a killer from the start."

"Shut your mouth!" Riderch howled, and pulled at Malmuck's tail until he screamed.

"Let him go, Riderch," Rhian ordered once again. "I'll do it; and if you think me false, know that when I was in the stagecoach I planned to make the cut with the sword you're holding right now."

The admission was too much for Riderch. Still gripping Malmuck's tail, he wheeled around on her and jabbed the air with his sword, filling the gesture with a visceral accusation whose provenance he did not understand. "Do you want to know what I was doing on the road?" he shouted. "Do you really want to know what I wanted with your wagon train?"

A measure of Rhian's resolve flickered. She did not answer him, and she was so still for so long that Riderch realized she was holding her breath.

"I was going to sell you!" Riderch screamed. "Me and my band, we were going to take you back home and auction you off to the highest bidder – didn't matter if it was Sheen, or Cyngen, or Rhuddri again – even if we had to slaughter the whole double-damn wedding procession. And it was my idea!"

Then Riderch turned his sword upon Malmuck again, and panting, hissed: "And this snake here put it in my head. Didn't you?" Malmuck would not answer, so Riderch prodded him with his sword, eliciting a wince. "Well? Great Cat got your tongue?" he mocked. "You were chomping at the bit to sing a minute ago. Tell her all about it!"

"Brockwell could see that Rhuddri wasn't going to give you to him," Malmuck answered hastily, stretching his neck away from the blade. "He knew he'd have to take you for himself, but Rhuddri would have clawed him right away if there were no one else to pin it on. He put some of his father's spies in Gorseth Floyd to cast hooks, hoping we could snag the bandits who'd been robbing stagecoaches along the Fawwyrm. I wrangled the rest of them – I worked for Cyngen for most of my career, and they trusted me. I played the fence, and a broker for gossip."

"Well you snagged one," said Riderch.

"He was going to hire your band to do it anonymously through me," said Malmuck, turning his head to cough and spit again. "I expected you to come back asking for details. Never reckoned you'd go to the double-damn Ceinych to get them yourself."

"Glad to know I put him in a bind," said Riderch.

"Well see now, that's just the knot," said Malmuck, lowering his voice to a queer murmur. "You never came back, but a couple of your fellows came knocking a few days later."

Riderch stiffened. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I said," Malmuck answered. "Two of your band members came to Utschella, made it as clear as glass that you weren't to be trusted, and that I should tell them everything I told you. I reckon the big one would have tried to kill me if I'd refused."

Riderch's blood ran cold. "And what did you tell them?" he whispered.

"Same as I told you, more or less," said Malmuck. "That my benefactor was looking to hire some riders. That I'd come by to pick up Her Highness after the robbery, and pay them off so handsomely that they could live large for the rest of their lives."

The sword felt heavy in Riderch's paw. He wanted to fall upon it, to sit down, to slay Malmuck. He licked his lips instead, fighting with his own dry tongue. "Who did you talk to?" he rasped.

"The one was a bushdog," said Malmuck, "shy a few teeth and looking worse for wear. The other was the biggest damn hare I've ever seen. Didn't ask for their names, I'm sure you understand."

"Gwyarc," said Riderch, remembering his triumphant grin upon the riverbank. "Gwyarc was the bushdog, and Kay was the hare. What did they say?"

"That they would do it," said Malmuck. "That there would be a few folk who'd object, but that most would come around to his side, and that you'd be under the dunes before we came to collect the doe. I wasn't to tell you a word if you came back."

"But you didn't have to tell me," said Riderch.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard," said Malmuck, shaking his head. "I still can't. We were going to give your band some extra riders to pad out their company. We had to work around you instead, and you were making choices Brockwell didn't like. Dressing up like Godnu's knights, Cat's claws. You made the whole thing so damn sloppy."

"You ambushed the procession with us," said Riderch.

"We had to get the witnesses under the dunes," said Malmuck, clucking his tongue. "If Osging ever learned that Brockwell's riders were posing as his knights, he'd have burned Ancathair to cinders. He'd have seen red regardless if he knew what we were doing. We had to pivot."

"You were out to bury us too," said Riderch.

"That was Brockwell's doing," said Malmuck hastily. "I'm sorry to let the cat out of the bag, Riderch, but you were played. You were played, and Gwyarc was played – but if it makes you feel any better, you played Brockwell mighty well yourself. That bushdog had you pegged: someone should have gilled you before you ever went to the Ceinych."

"Someone tried," said Riderch, pulling back his sword an inch. "What happened to the rest of my band?"

"Scattered to the four winds, for all I know," said Malmuck. "Some halfwit sloth let us into your boardland hideaway, hoping we were you, but he was the only one left. We never rode one of them down."

"You didn't see a raccoon?" asked Riderch more urgently. "Little gray thing? Or a vicuna? She would have been back at the boardland."

"I just told you we didn't find a single one save for that sloth," Malmuck insisted. "There's nothing left for me to do but make shrift if you're going to kill me."

Riderch stood over Malmuck for a long time after that, looking from him to Rhian over and over and over again. His resignation, and Rhian's fatal resolve, were as solid as the boardland walls. In the end he snarled and lifted his sword; Malmuck flinched, but Riderch did not strike him. He sheathed it instead, then stomped southward through the knee-high growth and threw up his paws toward the Sunneweg. "Why didn't you warn me?" he screamed to the sky. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"Riderch, you are my warning."

Malmuck was gone when he turned around. Rhian still held her sword, now at her side, and there was a new sorrow in her face. It ran Riderch through as soon as she looked at him. Pity heretofore unknown reached out to touch him; he spat on the ground to ward it off.

"Do you want to know why I helped you?" he asked, stopping just as he was passing her.

Rhian nodded silently.

"When I realized what Rhuddri was doing to you, selling you off to one of his warlords for a few extra swords, I couldn't abide it," he said. "I'd sell you back to him, and he'd do the same thing again, and I wouldn't be there to stop him."

"But you didn't know that Gwyarc was planning to betray you," Rhian whispered.

"Does that matter?" asked Riderch.

"Was I really a worthy exchange for your whole band?" asked Rhian.

"I didn't get to have a say in what happened to me," said Riderch. "But I killed to give someone else his say, and I'll do it again if I have to."

"I don't want you to kill for me," Rhian breathed.

"Well thank your lucky Stars, I haven't had to yet," he growled. "But I would."

"What happened to you, Riderch?" asked Rhian; but Riderch was already walking away from her, collecting brush with which to rebuild their fire.

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The voice led them south after that. Like wild hares they darted from gwerthon to little gwerthon, always vigilant, scrounging for what paltry food was to be found to supplement their dry stores. They were three days at this, and for those three days Riderch did not say a single word. Time and again Rhian would try to coax conversation out of him, venturing gentle questions or overbaked encouragements, but to no avail. Riderch would not even look at her. He looked only ahead, or at the low peaks of Clegyrau rising nearer to their right, white anger hardening on his face like a clay mask. Tension mounted between them until it stood higher than the mountains themselves; but owing to Riderch's wordless wrath and a gnawing guilt in Rhian's own guts, the wall never fell.

On the sixteenth day of Quetzal they found the Rinnea again, running swift and low amidst a succor of river cane. So near the mountains, its bed cut through the very stones – not as deeply as the gorges of the Deepwaste, but deep enough that its green banks received more shade than any other place in the Western Waste. There were folk along these banks as well: countless little villages of ancient, undiluted Anialdir stock, folk whose forefathers had cut the titanic stones that made up the ruins over which Riderch and Rhian had crawled. They shot the treacherous waters in long canoes,

carrying what they could under hide straps and shouldering their burdens, boat and all, on their way upstream. In the shade they planted more delicate crops that could not endure the unmitigated sunshine, tomatoes and peppers and chaya and amaranth. None of these were found fresh at that time of year, though all could be found as pickles or preserves beside the tiny salted river fish; and yet at none of these villages could Riderch or Rhian do more than stare and drool. Rusty had claimed all of their money. They had nothing with which to trade. They could only pick their way upstream, foraging and hunting meager herbs and stringy rodents on the borders of the desert, entering Clegyrau as one enters a cloud: seeing it as a distant mass until they lifted their eyes to find it all around them.

Riderch thought at first to solve the problem of their thinning stores through force. The folk along the upper Rinnea were short, even when compared to the Anialdir stock in Gorseth Floyd, and both Riderch and Rhian were unusually tall. Both bore war-band swords, rare weapons so far upstream, and poor Carbit could not help his princely stature, even laden like a humble mule. The western Rinnea still belonged technically to Godnu, though mostly – to judge by the absence of red – in name.

To see Riderch padding up the street in his bright red poncho, therefore, golden sword at his hip, was an unwelcome omen. Beyond this, both of the harefolk wore their sun-veils wherever they went; and at her height, dressed as she was, Rhian easily passed for a buck as long as she did not speak. Riderch, knowing all of this, tried thrice to bully market vendors out of their food, and would have succeeded if Rhian had not intervened every time. She feared at each that Riderch's cold rage would at last turn hot, that he would fly into the same beastly rage which had nearly killed Brockwell; but to her surprise, Riderch wordlessly obeyed her censures as often as she delivered them. He came to heel as if he were her dog, standing at her shoulder with strained agony in the line of his mouth, but would not reply to her even in complaint. He had been scourged, she thought, by his duel with Malmuck, and she had rubbed sand in the wounds. They were more miserable climbing the green riverbanks than they had been at any time in the sweltering wastes. The villagers avoided them whenever possible. Even together, they were hideously lonely.

There was a gwerthon not quite the size of a town at the mouth of a pass high up in the rocks of Clegyrau, perched atop the first short cataract that began the climb to the Rinnea's headwaters. They could see it over them as they entered a smaller gwerthon beneath the cataract, clusters of thatched huts shaded by palm trees whose broken fruits still so late in the year drifted by them on the current. And not only the palm fruits: river traffic was high and urgent there, almost frantic. It was Ironsday, just before sunset, and what pilots were not brave enough to send their canoes over the cataract fairly ran down the winding banks, sweeping past other folk who hurried up toward the pass. Many of the canoes, Riderch noticed, were unladen, and many of the climbing folk better dressed than the hemp-clad wastelanders. He stood at the edge of the water and watched their comings and goings while Rhian chatted with a ringtailed catfolk, the first folk who had not shrank from them all day. He was angling with a new, springy rod, snagging the bass who lived in the deeper waters of the pool beneath the waterfall.

"And up past Iwan Gwerthon there, up behind it you'll find some booths on the road," he was saying through missing front teeth. "Some palm booths, nothing to write home about, up in the rocks. That's there for all of Osging's folks, for his knights and his mark-wardens, and for the folk crossing Clegyrau, you know? It isn't marked so great, but if you bear too far left, too far south, you'll hit Met Heafod, and the climb back down isn't so bad."

Riderch had said nothing to him. Rhian had begged him not to. The folk had only grown more uneasy the farther upstream they went, and the squat doors of the huts at this latest gwerthon had been universally shut when they arrived. There were no sheriffs here, no wardens possessing any weapons more sophisticated than billhooks and fishing spears – and yet there were hoofprints in the dirt as large as Carbit's, too large to belong to asses or mules.

"Lots of canoes coming through Iwan lately, lots of rafts," the ringtail continued, "now that Gorseth Floyd's got a decent port. Osging don't much like it, but he can't hardly turn folk away from the Anialdir since Gorseth Floyd's on the way. You can just tell 'em you're headed to Godnu, headed straight past Gorseth Floyd, but you can go to Gorseth Floyd instead since it's on the way. Hauling corn and steel and horses – hauling anything you can think of, I'll tell you – where the Swartway don't run. Well I can remember when everything, Swartway or Rinnea, I can remember when it all went through Godnu."

Riderch could hear those hooves now, stamping above and below him, hear the teeth champing at their bits. They were driving folk up and down the Rinnea like teams of cowboys and their bison, and the sound was no different than the clash of his own band mingling with that of Brockwell's. His whiskers twitched like so many banjo strings; his paw drifted toward his sword.

"Go north, Riderch. Get her away from the river."

"We ought to go north, Morgwynn," said Riderch, turning to Rhian. The angler was gone now – they were alone on the bank.

"Oh, are you finally talking to me again?" asked Rhian. He could not see her face behind her veil, but her voice was sharp enough.

"Aye, and I'm telling you we ought to go north," said Riderch.

Rhian was quiet for a moment, failing to grasp the significance of the words. "North of Met Heafod?" she ventured. "Certainly we should. We would have to cross the river to go south, and there's no road that way."

"I mean that we shouldn't be so close to the river at all," said Riderch, shifting anxiously on his feet. "We ought to get far away from it, and quick."

"And go back the way we came?" Rhian balked. "Would you like to tell me why?"

"Don't you hear that?" asked Riderch, lifting his veil to look downstream as far as he could. River cane and overhanging palms infringed where it bent southward, but he could not see them.

"Hear what?" asked Rhian, lifting her own veil.

The pattering of hooves still itched in Riderch's ears, faint yet unmistakable. He wracked his brains for some believable lie that he might tell her, some excuse good enough to persuade her to divert from her intended course, but he himself could not fathom why they must turn north now, here, having received no warning in their four days along the river. Urgency drove what cleverness he might have conjured from his head entirely, and in the end he told the truth out of brute necessity. "There are riders coming up the river," he said, "and more waiting in the pass."

Shock overshadowed Rhian's face, only to make way for deep suspicion a moment later. "No, Riderch, I don't hear them," she almost whispered. "Do you?"

Riderch did not answer.

"Riders from where?" she asked more forcefully. "From Godnu?"

"Up at the pass, probably," Riderch nodded, flicking his ears downstream. "I don't know who's behind us." The panting and snuffling of dogs emerged from the hurrying riders a moment later, and he amended: "Gwall. They're from Gwall. We ought to go right now."

Riderch was practically dancing with disquiet now, but Rhian remained unmoved. Indeed, she planted her feet all the more firmly; and reaching out, took Riderch by the chin and forced him to look at her. "How do you know that, Riderch?" she demanded. "How do you *know* that?"

"It doesn't matter," said Riderch, finding that he could not meet her eyes. "They're going to recognize us the minute they see us, and-"

"Yes it does!" Rhian barked. "It does matter! How do you know that there are riders behind us? Where did you learn it? When? Speak up!" She thumped her foot hard upon the ground. Riderch

flinched and squirmed, but felt powerless to break away from her grip. He only shook his head, desperately gripping the ear beneath his shirt as if it might coax a solution from heaven.

"Are you going to button your lips even now?" asked Rhian. "After you confessed that you planned to sell me to the highest bidder like some common whore, you're still going to keep secrets from me?"

"I'm talking turkey!" Riderch shouted. He had not known that he could sound so wounded; to hear his own voice so shrill was enough to make him sick. "Dinistrith take my head, I'm telling you the truth. But I need you to trust me, and some time later we can-"

Rhian let go of his chin and frowned. "Trust you?" she said. "Riderch, I would be a fool to trust you. Anyone would. Every soul you do business with is waiting in line to cut someone else's throat, and the only reassurance you've given me is that you felt sorry for me. You have no right to my blind faith. You're going to tell me now – right now – why you think there are riders behind us: if you won't, I'm going to Gromstall."

"Why do you care so much about a fold of double-damn halsers?" Riderch snapped. His clay mask had cracked at the mention of blind faith; red began to seep through his white rage. "You've got a steel spine to stand there and tell me I haven't done a thing to earn your trust when you've never even met those bug-eyed, limp-whiskered, sungazing ponces once in your life. I cut myself clean out of everything I knew for you, while that Shepherd of yours was helping you plan to slit your own throat!"

Now it was Rhian's turn to look wounded. She slipped her arms into her poncho, and it seemed to Riderch that she was gripping her own shoulders. For several moments they held their standoff; then shaking her head, Rhian began to climb the bank toward the road again. "I'm going to Gromstall," she repeated. "If you want to follow me like a lost dog the way you did in the dunes, very well, but you'll have to drag me by the ears if you want me to follow you."

Riderch pulled at his own ears as if he thought he might lift himself into the air. "What do you want from me?" he hissed at the sky, then hurried Carbit along after Rhian.

"What's this? Are you going to pretend to be helpless now, after all of this time?"

"You know damn well I can't explain myself to her," Riderch husked. "Why don't you do it? She wants to hear from you. Hell's teeth, I'll give her the ear if you want me to."

"Do you expect that she would take it if you offered it?"

Riderch had no answer for that.

"You've two strong arms, barring all else, and you've consented to let them be used."

"So what, am I just going to drag her by the ears?" He received no reply, save for a restless whicker from Carbit.

He caught up with Rhian toward the top of the waterfall path, which wound up a veritable gorge through rocks far yellower than those of the eastern Greteboga. Pinyon pines began to replace the lower palms, and the tended canebrake gave way to coarser reeds and grasses. Both the crickets and their hunters, the frogs, were deafening so near the water. Riderch looked ahead as far as he could; framed against the red-streaked sky were hosts of birds circling Rhian's head.

"Ears up," he said, coming up beside her. "I can't tell you how I know. I can't, and I wish I could, but we shouldn't be here."

"Riderch, if there are riders behind us like you say there are, what does it matter?" Rhian sighed. "Godnu holds the garrison at the pass, and Osging doesn't care about me at all. Why would Sheen provoke him?"

"You heard Brockwell," Riderch pressed. "Sheen must reckon that Osging attacked you on the road, and I'll bet my lucky foot that he cares a might about that."

This, at least, gave Rhian pause, yet in her stubbornness she brushed him off. "There will be nothing to discuss in a few hours, when we've reached the garrison."

“I don’t reckon we have a few hours,” Riderch warned.

“Are you trying to stop me from going to Gromstall?” she asked plainly.

“No,” said Riderch. “No, I’ll help you get there if I can.”

“Then tell me the truth,” she demanded. “You’ve only just begun to do that. Taranwr’s troth, don’t stop now, not if we’re in danger.”

They crested the top of the waterfall path then, side by side, and watched Iwan Gwerthon spread out before them north and west. Here was no great watering hole, no desert triumph like Godnu or the cities of the war-band. A few of the larger homes near the water were of blonde stone, misted by the galloping Rinnea that fell down its jagged course from high above. All else was of palm wood, clay, and thatch, round huts with their doors facing east. It was growing cooler now as the sun rolled down Clegyrau’s farther slopes. The rocks gave up their gathered heat without a fight, and the sensation was not unpleasant. Most folk at that hour would still have kept their doors open, gathering cool breezes to drive out the persistent, stifling heat. Riderch needed only a moment, however, to notice that every door was closed – every door, indeed, and every window, shuttered as if against a sandstorm he could not see. The skies were clear, save for high streaks of cloud. The road too was clear, the riverbank empty; even the birds had ceased to sing, hanging in the air as if afraid to alight.

“They can’t have all gone to bed,” said Rhian.

“Under their beds, if they haven’t already run downstream,” Riderch muttered.

Rhian’s resolve faltered, yet still she walked on. Her eyes drilled into Riderch, daring him to remain silent; and Riderch, wrestling furiously with himself, did just that. She knew now as well as he that something was terribly amiss. They kept their paws upon their swords, climbing the dusty road toward the bald rocks, but neither afforded the other an inch of ground until the baying of hounds filled the air. Every strand of fur stood on end. Rhian spun around to look down the waterfall path, and found there what seemed a swarm of fireflies moving toward them. A similar swarm awoke at the same moment from the rocks above, and with a swelling cry stirred.

The dogs were the first to enter Iwan: sleek, thick-jawed culpeo mixes bred by the mountain hunters of Gwall to tear the throats out of horses. Their howls whipped Carbit into screaming, defiant and yet terrified. Riderch would have mounted him then and there, but he knew already that the scarred steed could not carry both him and Rhian laden down with their supplies. There was no time to unload. There was no time for discussion. Drawing his golden sword, he braced his arm against Rhian’s back and pushed her down a narrow street lined with prickly pears, pulling Carbit along by the lead as long as he was manageable.

That lead was ripped from his paw when the dogs found them. Drawn by Carbit’s cries, they crowded the shoulder-wide lane. Two ran up from behind; one slipped between the cacti in front of them, and another leaped down beside it from the roof of a low hut. Stark white coats and snarling teeth stood out in the guttering gloam. Rhian’s sword was clear of its scabbard in half a breath. Riderch remembered then, in a flash of red, the torn wolf at her feet and his own drenched arms. He held his own falchion now, however, and she – to his great relief – was not fearful that he held it. She was at his shoulder when the first dog lunged; with a heavy, voiceless breath she split its pointed snout in half, filling its mouth with a cascade of blood. Riderch removed the other’s head when it thought to flank him. He hoped to retrieve Carbit then, and wheeled around to grasp for his lead, but the steed was already hotly engaged with a pair of dogs himself. He bit and stamped with incautious fury, knowing that he had already once survived the evisceration of his throat. Even so, Riderch would have helped him if he could have, if in that moment his hope of a clean escape was stolen from him.

The galloping hooves he had heard beside the river were all around them now, converging from east and west. They collided with cries and clashing steel, red knights and green skirmishers, lit by so many smoking torches. One of these torches fell among the thatch of a nearby hut, and in a few short

moments the whole street was full of light and drifting embers. Riderch heard the cracking of a dog's skull under Carbit's hoof. He called out for his steed, but Carbit ran the other way, into the fray along the riverside road.

"Run, Riderch!"

The voice was a spur, long and sharp against his flank. He had heard it once before, that harsh, grating grunt; there was command in it that could not be denied. Seeing the consequences of his hesitation, he did all that he could think to do: he hooked his arm under Rhian's knees and hoisted her over his shoulder, then sped north with all of the speed his legs possessed.

"Riderch!" Rhian screamed. "Riderch, let go of me!"

But Riderch did not heed her. Twice he ran through the midst of the battle. Many more times he braved great blazes, making the straightest line he could toward the star that does not move. Once even he was met with ill-aimed arrows, but at no point was he pursued more than a single street. This baffled him, and yet he had no time to contemplate it.

Shortly he burst out through the last line of houses and landed among piled rocks and unlucky cacti, but not even here would he slow down. Lit for a hundred yards or so by burning thatch, he bounded down the slopes of Clegyrau with Rhian pounding at his back, cursing him with a creativity he himself could never hope to attain, and then no slower when the light failed.

"Damn you," he panted. "Damn you, damn your eyes, damn your ears, damn your mother's antlers, if you let me fall and snap my neck here…"

Harefolk are sure of foot among the rocks, and Riderch was no exception. But carrying Rhian blindly through the trackless waste, sprinting to put the battle far behind them, he would surely have sent them both tumbling to their doom if a little voice had not been whispering ahead of him at every fraught step: "Here, here, step here." Riderch obeyed, and in this way he bore Rhian safely down the mountainside.

Half an hour later he fell to his knees, breathless, letting his unhappy passenger down with him. She stood up at once and began to buffet his head, railing at him; he looked up to find tears streaking her face. "You knew!" she snarled. "You knew they were coming and you didn't tell me, you fiend! You Hellknight!"

"I didn't," Riderch gasped. "I didn't know until I told you."

"Then how?" Rhian seethed, taking him by the ears and shaking his head. "Tell me how, or so help me Dinistrith I'll pull these out of your head!"

"Good!" Riderch shrieked, startling her into letting go. "Do it! Maybe then I'll have made up for it and he'll leave me alone!"

Iwan was still burning. Riderch could see the flames and smoke rising into the air some distance above them, blotting out the stars. Southerly winds brought the smell to his nostrils, the char of a whole season's worth of ruined corn. "Who will leave you alone, Riderch?" asked Rhian, sheathing her sword when she found it still in her paw. "Sheen?"

Riderch shook his head, still struggling to catch his breath. "That wasn't for us," he said. "I don't reckon that Sheen has the first clue where we are. That was the war-band, that's what that was. That was Sheen getting even with Godnu for taking you."

"Which means that this happened because of me," said Rhian, with a simple frankness that struck Riderch sideways.

"No. No it doesn't," said Riderch, spitting on the jagged rocks before staggering to his feet.

"I always knew that it would," Rhian continued, seeming not to hear him. "I knew that the war-band would fall to pieces as soon as one of them didn't get me. Until your band attacked us on the road, I thought that the only way to prevent it was to…" She trailed off, staring up at Iwan.

"You don't know the first thing about cutthroats," said Riderch.

"And you do?" Rhian snapped. "You would have let yourself be double-crossed if you hadn't run away with me."

"Gwyarc was the leader of some cutthroats who ran up around Ancathair," said Riderch, rubbing the pitted burns on his face that the heat had irritated. "They liked to horn in on my turf sometimes, just to test the waters. Well one night I rode into their camp with some of my folk, rounded them all up and hog-tied them. Then I picked a few of the smallest ones – to show I wanted the biggest alive – and gilled them in front of the rest. Sprayed their blood all over them. Then I left their bodies right in front of them and made them watch for a full day: no food, no water, no shade. By the next night they were willing enough to follow me."

Riderch sighed then, leaving the silence to hang between them for a moment. "I reckoned that would do it. I reckoned Gwyarc would take the hint, and that would be the pecking order from then on. But he was only nursing a grudge the whole time; and no matter what you did or didn't do, the war-band would have been the same. You don't make these things happen, Rhian. I bring them on myself, and I have to swallow them, and you just got swept up in them. I wouldn't have let that happen, except…except…"

"My father has done things no less cruel," said Rhian, stonefaced. "I know well what's at stake – so if you're trying to scare me into leaving sleeping dogs lie, I won't oblige you." She leaned in then, brushing whiskers with him, and Riderch's guts melted in his belly.

"How did you know about the riders?" she asked again. "Tell me the truth, Riderch."

They were alone. Not even Carbit was there to overhear them, Carbit who carried their supplies, the water they needed to live. What did it matter now if she did not believe him? He had stranded her in the Anialdir, just as he had stranded Carbit in a fray that would see him captured or killed. Heaving a mighty shrug, he rubbed his aching ears and sighed. "I told you at the gwerthon that I couldn't abide the thought of Rhuddri selling you off to one of his warlords," he said. "That I changed my mind about doing it myself."

"Aye, you did," Rhian nodded.

"That was turkey," said Riderch, "but it wasn't the whole turkey."

Rhian's nod could have been a mere twitch.

"The whole plan – robbing the stagecoaches, kidnapping you, even stealing Carbit – I didn't come up with it myself. Someone else put me in the way of it, and he told me when I was about to make off with you…" Riderch clutched the ear through his shirt and swallowed hard. "After I'd already made up my mind not to sell you, he told me not to leave your side."

"Disma?" asked Rhian.

Riderch flinched as if slapped. "No. No, but I wish he was here now. Stars! He was always talking to him, too, even when the others made fun of him for it."

Rhian furrowed her brow. "Talking to whom?" she asked.

"Dinistrith," said Riderch, straightening as if he had just slumped off a heavy burden. "Dinistrith told me to look after you. He made sure I found out about the wedding in the first place, and made me believe you were my prize for doing him a favor, when all along I reckon he was using me to get you away from the war-band. He's been talking to me, ever since I…ever since…" He choked and shook his head.

"Ever since when?" Rhian whispered.

"Ever since I cut off that halser's ear." He forced the words out, knowing that they were true only as he said them. "Speaking of revenge, I reckon this must be his."

"And it was Dinistrith who told you about the riders?" asked Rhian.

"Aye," said Riderch. "He gives me warnings sometimes. Most often he doesn't. He's the only reason I knew where those gwerthons were – I've never been out in the Western Waste in my life."

Although he knew it to be foolish, Riderch sincerely expected Rhian to laugh at him – to laugh, or at least to scoff. She did neither. She only stood there upon the uneven stones, as still as a statue, hugging her arms while the Whirlwind stirred her green poncho. Whatever she felt, the starlight was not enough to reveal it.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," said Riderch at length, trying with all of his might to conceal his disappointment. "My own band said I was sun-stricken. I reckon I am, too, but it's his fault. The fevers, the reeling, they get worse whenever he talks to me."

Rhian reached out a paw and pressed it to his muzzle, silently begging him to stop talking. He realized then that she was trembling, and that her wide eyes were full of something like fear. "You don't understand," she quavered. "When your band rode down from the dunes, I was praying to Dinistrith for help – for an opportunity to run, or else the courage to…to…"

She was weeping again. She pulled her poncho tightly around herself and sobbed, but Riderch was afraid to touch her lest he begin to weep himself. He dug his claws into his side as hard as he could instead. "But you're the help," Rhian managed. "I don't understand how that can be true, but it is. I prayed for help, and he sent you."

"Then he has it out for both of us," said Riderch through clenched teeth. "Carbit's gone. We can't go back to Iwan. I don't know what to do now, except die in the desert."

He could just see the shade of a smile grace Rhian's face, and he found it so unfitting that his anger was kindled again. "Is that what Dinistrith wants?" she sniffed. "That we die in the desert?"

"I don't know," said Riderch. Laughter long missed flitted about his ears. "Maybe not."

"But hasn't he told you what to do?" she asked. "You would have me believe that he led you from gwerthon to gwerthon, but that he's given up on that now. If that's so, you must be mad."

"He said to go north," Riderch shrugged.

"Then there must be another pass over Clegyrau," said Rhian, "or else he wants us to go around."

"Around, aye," Riderch scoffed, "with no food, no water, and no horse."

"Can you think of a better plan?" asked Rhian. "Because I'm well past despair myself."

Riderch looked eastward to find the Ram rising over the distant Greteboga, and felt himself one such lonely beast. "I can't say as I do," he admitted. "Let's get down off the mountainside, at least. We can decide what to do from there."

"I don't know if I can see well enough for that," said Rhian, "and I won't have you carrying me again."

"You don't reckon I'm sun-stricken?" asked Riderch.

"One ear is as green as another," said Rhian. "If I decided to give up and return home now, I would die on the way. Heaven has chained me to you, at least for now."

"Then take my paw," said Riderch, offering the one he felt was less scarred. "I'll know where to step when we get there, and you can walk where I do."

She took it without hesitation, and together they began to pick their way down the rocks, through the merciless goat-heads and cacti, conducted by a tiny voice in Riderch's ear: "Step here. Now here. Now here."

28

They stepped down onto the dusty floor in the wee hours of the morning, thirsty, hungry, and pitifully exhausted. Picking their way through innumerable hazards for hours without rest had been agonizing work, even with someone to hold Riderch's reins; and so, when they stumbled upon a great

brown broomsage overhanging a dry gully, the first living thing without thorns they had seen all night, they promptly fell down beneath it and fell asleep back to back.

A thin trickle of water ran down the middle of the gully when they awoke. The sun was already over the Greteboga – returning from his exile, thought Riderch, he must have freed some hidden hoard of ice in Clegyrau's high clefts. It was clear, in any case, and just wide enough to drink from. They drank long, not knowing when they might drink next, and bathed their scraped and battered feet, then rose to cover what distance they could before the heat grew merciless.

The high cliffs over Ancathair were hardly as treacherous as the scrub they traversed that day. They could hardly have taken Carbit with them if he had been there, and certainly he would have slowed them down. For while they were on the lower, greener hillsides of the range, the mountain roots had dug down deeply there, upheaving the softer soil to create hidden gulches, prohibiting scarps, and ankle-breaking craters. Seas of sagebrush and sapphire tower with its recurved thorns hid sudden falls from view until they were upon them, falls that were more often than not filled with adders and scorpions who savored the shade. Even so, they bore ever westward, hugging the mountains as closely as they could; for to the east, the march of days between them and the Swartway was naught but open desert. Here, at least, they found at times tiny gwerthons: now and then at the direction of Riderch's confidant, but most often by themselves.

Food and water were wretchedly scarce, and they had no means of carrying either with them. Very quickly they fell into the habit of drinking until they felt sick at every meager runnel, and eating the very adders and scorpions that they had so recently dreaded to find. Rhian, formerly opposed to such fare, now accepted it with grim ease, without a word of complaint. Riderch had no bow, nor any rope with which to rig snares: Carbit had run away with both. They had their swords, however, and these sufficed for both their roadrunners' prey and the dry herbs they cut to make them palatable. On his belt Riderch also carried his knife, his fire-striker, his whetstone, and his compass, which confirmed with the sun that they curved a little farther west each day. Without these they might have perished in the Western Waste – indeed, they nearly perished with them – yet through a gift of good fortune and their own hareish hardiness they found themselves at each successive patch of shade unexpectedly, triumphantly alive. Back to back they would collapse after hard marches, too tired even to think of keeping watch, only to rise from dreamless sleep and move on again.

For four days the scrub persisted. On the fifth it failed, giving way to windswept sand where Clegyrau began to turn dramatically west. "Go north" was the only direction Riderch had been given: no heavenly voice had deigned to elaborate since they had left Iwan Gwerthon. They had found no second pass – indeed, neither knew where to look for one. What they did find was a wide salt flat, alive with ribbons of heat even in the early morning; and jutting up from its midst, as far as their stinging eyes could see, a vast army of pillars stabbing the sky. They were flat and forked at the top, the petrified tongues of serpents the size of cities. Each was of a different stone, and all were covered in an effusive variety of carvings: fearsome kings with grand, feathered headdresses; armored warlords holding spears that ran the whole pillar's length; scrolling scenes of war and conquest, of enormous constructions found nowhere in the Anialdir, of farmers shouldering fruits larger than their own bodies. Most of these reliefs were illegible now, expunged by the scouring wind according to the Great Dragon's design. More than a few were fallen entirely, shattered into myriad pieces against the cracked salt floor. Those that remained were of such clear antiquity that Riderch dreaded to imagine the arms that had erected them.

No pillar was less than fifty yards from another in any direction; and while they varied in size, none seemed to be shorter than fifty yards itself. Moving from one to the next, Riderch and Rhian found squat, broad plinths at the feet of each, foundations upon which were placed stone tables, chests,

or braziers. A few of these showed signs of char upon their surfaces. They dared not open the chests, and could not have without crowbars.

"Your Shepherd ever tell you about these?" asked Riderch through scabbed lips, and motioned to a particularly tall pillar with a feathered serpent coiling up its length. It was a light, cloudy green, like scum on a stagnant, sunlit pond. A second pillar had fallen against its side long ago, wedging itself in place between its curved horns. High above the plain it loomed now, though its angle was hardly steep: mingled masses of folk covered its underside, climbing toward the standing stone like ants on a log.

"Only in passing," rasped Rhian, who squatted upon the plinth below the standing pillar to examine what appeared to be an enormous urn set flush into the stone. It was covered by a conical cap of the same granite, with a carven mashua root at its apex. "I knew they were in the Western Waste, but he never told me what they were for – I don't believe he knew himself. They're supposed to be haunted."

"So is everywhere else in the Anialdir," said Riderch. "But ghosts don't need water, and I reckon we won't find any here. I'm going to climb up and look for something green." A moment later he added, under his breath: "Some help would be nice."

"Would you like me to help you up?" asked Rhian.

"Wasn't talking to you," said Riderch, and made his way to the base of the fallen pillar.

To mount its broken stump was harder than scrambling onto its inclined face. The pillar was no thicker than the span of Riderch's arms, though its width was twice his height. He managed it with hungry paws, in any case, and proceeded up the slope – at times on two feet and at others on all fours – toward the west, where the proud green tower awaited him. The underside of the fallen pillar had displayed masses of folk, all gazing upward as if they knew they beheld the coiled serpent. The sunward side, however, showed with its ascent the construction of a fabulous palace. Countless wings and dizzying tiers, flanked one and all by regal statues, went up stone by stone, rolled on treads by folk and hoisted aloft by ents with the heads of scarabs and spiders and kestrels. Near its pinnacle, but a few feet from the green pillar, the whole palace was shown from above: an eight-pointed star. It was not the uppermost carving, however. A bust had once overlooked the scene, tucked between the pillar's tines – neck and shoulders and cascading feathers proved it – but the head had broken away when this pillar fell against the other. Nothing remained to supply the identity of the missing lord, save for an inscription which Riderch could not read.

Bracing himself against the green pillar, Riderch first looked east, for no other reason than to measure the breadth of the salt flat. It might once have been a lake tucked against the base of Clegyrau, for it was lower than the rest of the basin; now there was naught but salt and sand, stretching on until both melted into the horizon. When he had finished panting he turned around to look west, to scan the range up and down as far as the haze allowed. Clegyrau came to a corner here at the field of pillars, dull yellow teeth jutting out into inhospitable whiteness. Its grade, he found, was much gentler at the corner, bending down so perfectly that it seemed from where he stood an invitation. Greenery dotted its slopes as well, gwerthons produced by rainwater funneled down so many hollers otherwise bald. An especially promising round of green rested at the top of one such holler, nestled between two stark, shattered peaks a day or two distant. If there was a pass anywhere north of Iwan Gwerthon, he thought, it must be there – if not, it may be Dinistrith's will that they die in the desert after all.

"Riderch! Riderch! Ho! Ho!"

Riderch looked down over the edge of the pillar and regretted it at once. Rhian was shouting at him, jumping up and down and waving her arms. He could not make out most of what she said, but she seemed whole and untroubled from that height, and so he did not run back down. He walked, and yet she was still jumping when he returned to the green pillar, dancing from one foot to the other. Thinking

it another nest of scorpions, he opened his mouth to hurl some jest, only to find it full of water. His whole head was damp, in fact, dripping with water cool and clean. Briefly he thought it saltwater, but a second inundation proved it merely the salt crusted in his fur. It was sweet, and might have been the sweetest thing he had ever tasted. The third inundation came transparently from Rhian's paws; she was reaching down into a hole in the pillar's plinth and scooping up as much as she could into the air. The heavy stone lid lay beside it, revealing no urn, but a well.

"It's fresh, Riderch! All the way out here, a fresh well!" Rhian laughed as she spoke. Removing her broad leather hat, she filled its crown with water and poured it over Riderch's head before it could leak out through the ear holes. Riderch did not laugh himself; but throwing off his poncho, did the same with his own hat, again and again and again until he was soaked to the skin.

They drank long and deep from that well, and bathed when both were satisfied. Rhian demanded that Riderch wait for her behind the pillar, and so he did, cooling his feverish body in the morning shade. He did not care enough to demand the same when he bathed himself, but wanted only to know why she had opened the well in the first place.

"You pulled off the lid by yourself?" he asked, pouring hatful after hatful of water over himself. He might have jumped in entirely – the water was high enough for him to easily climb out – and yet he found now that he could not bear the thought of entering any water whose bottom he could not see.

"It wasn't as heavy as I expected it to be," she said, holding her damp poncho up to the sweltering wind. "And to tell you the truth, my thirst carried it the rest of the way when I first smelled the water."

"But what made you think to open it in the first place?" asked Riderch, scrubbing his scar-pitted face. "This could be a graveyard for all you know. There could have been bones in there."

"And we would shortly have been bones if I hadn't," said Rhian, clucking her tongue. "But I was sitting in the shade while you were climbing, and I couldn't stop thinking about the little mashua on top of the lid. Mashua need a lot of water in order to grow, and out here in the Western Waste – in a salt flat, especially – a fat mashua tuber like that could only grow if someone watered it. It made me think of that old tale, too, about the Star's wife who pulled up the mashua root and found a hole to the Otherworld. Do you know that one?"

"Those weren't the sort of Elf tales we told where I grew up," said Riderch. "I remember plenty about Coyote, though. I always liked the ones of him killing Hellknights."

Rhian grinned, then stifled herself. "I like those too," she said. "In any case, I thought it worth a try, and I'm glad I did. What did you see from the pillar?"

"Green," said Riderch. He shook the water from his coat and stretched his sculpted sinews, and Rhian turned politely away. "Green, and some hills we might just be able to climb over. There's no terrain that friendly on either side of the flat, as far as I can see."

"Then we may as well try," said Rhian, draping her poncho over her shoulders. "Unless Dinistrith advises against it, that is."

"Dinistrith hasn't said a double-damn word since yesterday," Riderch grumbled. "Of course, I reckon he hardly needs to if you can dig up wells like this yourself."

"I've nomad blood in me, Riderch," said Rhian. "And seeing you the way you are now, I believe you're a fool to deny it yourself."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Riderch; but Rhian had already struck off for the corner of the range, and he was forced to dress swiftly to keep up with her.

The next two days were more miserable than all of their wanderings thus far. They made fine progress, aye, but it was progress at the head of a spear. For the shallow gorge up which they walked had no soil to speak of, and therefore no trees, and therefore no shade. The river which had once carved its course was now less than a memory, marked only by the liquid bands in its rocky walls. The sun now filled its bed, filled and overflowed it, so that Riderch and Rhian walked in a fired oven. They had no time to rest through the heat of the day if they wanted to reach the higher gwerthons before thirst overcame them; and indeed, they would have found nowhere to do so if they had tried. Only their hats availed them any shelter. Only their ears served to cool their boiling blood – and these ineffectually, for the breezes upon those slopes stole more than they bestowed. Harefolk are built for the desert; yet even Riderch, as hardy as he was, feared unto trembling that he was leading Rhian to her grave. He begged Dinistrith incessantly on the first day – clumsily, and more mindful than ever of the unsuitable elegance with which Rhian beseeched him – not to kill him until Rhian had made it over Clegyrau. He resented himself for doing so, and resented Dinistrith even more; but the first day passed, and the first night, and the sun rose on the second to find them both still alive.

The second day, in one sense, was easier. The apparent path bore northward. There was more shade from the rocks. Scrub returned, and starved little trees, so that they trod fewer burning stones. In another sense, however, it was even more punishing. They had marched for a full day without water, and expected to march two. By noon their lips were cracked, their tongues thick and unwieldy. Riderch, dazed to the point of drunkenness, could not stop watching a gang of buzzards that circled overhead, imagining that they followed the circuits of the Stars who in turn looked down on him with so much contempt. They too waited to pick the grizzled flesh from his bones when at last he succumbed to his heavenly retribution; when all was said and done, a stranger would not be able to tell him and the stagecoach pilot apart. He picked up a stone to suck on, hoping to coax some moisture into his mouth: it was salty, and he spat it out.

The sun was just dipping behind the polished peaks when they shuffled onto a modest shelf just below the crest of the holler. Riderch was limping, having stepped on a little cactus hidden in the brush, but there were no cacti here. He sat down hard upon a flat rock and looked about him. Seven arthritic nance trees stood in a little grove upon coarse grass and plush moss, the cavities in their trunks providing scaffolds for as many large birds' nests. A green thick-billed parrot that Riderch mistook at first for a quetzal watched from one such cleft, voicing its chattering call. Sheltered entirely from the Whirlwind, that call thundered, and Riderch was not halfway done pulling quills from his foot before he wanted to throw something at it.

A second call put him on his feet again, his paw at his sword. "It's a well, Riderch! Another well!" Rhian was so parched that her shout was no more than a bleat. The words were clear enough, however; scrambling over the flat rock, he found her amidst the nance trees, crouching over a crumbling curb. It was a modest thing compared to the well beneath the green pillar, its surface coated in a thin film of dust and nance seeds, but it was not the well itself that attracted Riderch's attention. There was a palm wood bucket attached to a hemp rope lying beside the well's stone curb: both were dry enough, but neither were rotten. The grass immediately around it was shorter as well, thoroughly trampled if not outright cut, and this swath of lawn led in a straight line up and over the crest of the holler. Riderch traced it, then drew his falchion when his eyes met a shape framed against the sky.

"Rhian!" he barked, then proceeded to hack when his throat caught. Rhian stood bolt upright, following his gaze until she drew her own sword.

A standoff ensued; for looking down over the grove, flanked by a pair of impassable cliffs, was a short folk in a dark robe, a bulky mass upon one shoulder. Riderch gasped and stiffened, supposing it Disma until he realized the absurdity of the thought. That gasp must have startled the spy, for it melted away in a moment, leaving behind a silence so fraught that even the parrot dared not open its beak.

“Do folk live so high up?” Rhian whispered, circling the well toward him.

“No,” said Riderch. “How could they? Now drink: I want to get up as high as I can and look around before the light’s gone.”

“She was carrying an urn, Riderch,” said Rhian.

“She?” asked Riderch.

“You didn’t notice her figure?” asked Rhian.

“I was too busy looking for a sword,” Riderch grunted.

They both drank then, and rested just long enough for Riderch to dig the last of the quills from his foot. A few required his knife; he cursed when his blood began to wet the fur, but decided to ignore it when he found that he could walk with only slight pain.

They might have rested longer, if only they could have. Sitting down had proven perilous; and despite Riderch’s desire to espy the holler from higher up, hunger and heat exhaustion had sapped the strength from both of their limbs. He chose to conceal that particular privation, however, when another figure appeared over the crest of the grove. It, like the first, was dressed in a long, gray gown draped by a loose robe, though that slaten gray was darker than Gorseth Floyd’s. The figure was taller than the first as well – much taller. Riderch placed himself on the trampled path between it and the well, making sure to bare his blade in full view while he squinted to search for its arms. For the briefest of moments he thought them crossed behind its head, jutting up into the air, only to realize that they were doubtlessly tucked into the folds of the robe. He knew then at what he looked, but could not decide whether to be relieved or to prepare for a fight.

“That one is a doe, Riderch,” said Rhian behind him.

“I know,” Riderch snapped. “Now keep your mouth shut.” She was wearing her sun-veil again; at least to him, she cut the figure of a buck convincingly enough in her thick rider’s clothes.

The doe was descending the path when Riderch looked back. He aimed the point of his falchion at her, and yet she would not even break her stride. Indeed, she was fairly storming toward them, on nothing like a martial guard, more like a schoolteacher than an assailant. It was a posture with which Riderch was wholly unfamiliar; Rhian, on the other paw, saw in it a matronly wrath, and dropped the point of her own sword to the ground.

Wrath indeed it was. The face that regarded them from beneath its thick hempen wimple was mature, though not aged, infinitely severe, the bunching of her brows overshadowing a pair of sun-mad chocolate eyes. Her coat was a ruddy, sandy blonde a shade lighter than amaranth, the vermiculate veins in her prodigious ears a deep burgundy. She was a harefolk, only a little shorter than Riderch, though at that moment he thought her a full foot taller.

“Are you the caitiff who threatened Sister Imona?” she demanded, mere inches from the end of his blade. She did not even glance at it – indeed, Riderch was so afraid he would spit her that he stepped back and pulled it across his own chest.

“Who?” asked Riderch.

“Or was that your accomplice here?” she asked, producing a thick nomad’s paw from her robe and leveling a claw at her. “Speak up!”

“We didn’t threaten anybody,” Riderch growled.

“You drew your swords against her when she came to fetch water,” said the doe, noticing for the first time the falchion’s golden handle. Her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly; the change made Riderch uncomfortable in a manner he did not understand. “We have nothing worth taking,” she husked. “Certainly nothing worth bloodshed.”

Rhian began to squirm, and Riderch thumped his foot on the ground to dissuade her from speaking. The exchange only deepened the doe’s curiosity, however, and now Riderch wanted to squirm himself. “We?” he asked. “Who’s we?”

“I won’t feel obliged to give you my name as long as you brandish your barbs,” she said, throwing wide her arms to display empty paws in voluminous gray sleeves. “You’ll see I carry none myself. Will you kill me? I won’t fight you.”

Now Riderch did begin to squirm. Every word she spoke was a scolding, and he had never been scolded for wielding a sword: assaulted, aye, or else threatened, but never scolded. Rhian, to his dismay, returned her own blade to its scabbard.

“That’s one,” said the doe, tilting her chin up. Her great eyes, so prominent in her skull that they seemed almost cow’s eyes, overmastered his own. Spitting to the side, Riderch sheathed his sword and spread wide his palms.

“Dinistriol,” he offered. “We didn’t come here to take anything. We didn’t even know you were here.”

“Dinistriol?” she exclaimed, after a sudden, significant hiccup. “Your father couldn’t possibly have named you that.”

“My pa wasn’t too fond of me,” Riderch smirked. “But it’s fitting enough.”

“You’re as gouged as the mountainside, Dinistriol, and you’ll have me believe that you haven’t come here to plunder?” the doe challenged. “Look me in the eye and tell me that you’re no cutthroats. Today belongs to Taranwr, the lover of truth, and he does not take kindly to liars.”

Riderch’s whiskers twitched madly. Something about the tenor of her voice seemed terribly familiar now, an evenness that defied the danger she must have known she was in. He found that he admired it. “Well I wouldn’t give a whisker to Taranwr,” he said, “but I’ll swear by Dinistrith that we don’t mean you any harm. His anger’s the one I’m worried about.”

The doe blinked twice, then seemed to soften a little. “You chose the name yourself,” she observed, “not unlike we do.”

“Who’s we?” Riderch repeated.

“Mother Melangell, my son,” said the doe, laying a paw over her breast. “I live here with my sisters.”

“You *live* here?” Riderch balked. “In the holler?”

“At the top of it, aye,” said Mother Melangell, “just below the peak. We must come here to fetch water.”

“I didn’t reckon folk could live in the Western Waste,” Riderch marveled. “No wonder you’re so tough.”

“And you?” asked Melangell. “It’s hardly an easy climb up here, unless you’re hiding a whole caravan of asses somewhere.”

“Well we had a horse until a few days ago,” said Riderch, “but he ran off at Iwan Gwerthon. You’re looking at what we have left.” The thought pricked him that he was making himself sound more vulnerable than he liked, and he wondered if hunger had eroded his defenses.

“You walked all the way here from Iwan Gwerthon?” Melangell marveled. “With nothing but the clothes on your backs? Why in heaven’s name would you do that?”

“We were looking for a pass over Clegyrau,” said Riderch, “and I reckoned there might be one here, since it isn’t as steep.”

“But why not take the pass over Iwan?” asked Melangell, furrowing her brow.

Riderch could feel Rhian’s eyes on him, though her veil concealed them. “Iwan was burning when we left it, that’s why not,” he answered plainly.

The evenness that held Melangell was shaken then. She looked sick with dread, though it was only a suggestion of what lay beneath. Several moments dragged on, marked by no movement. “Burning with whose flame?” she whispered.

"Gwall's," said Riderch. "They were torching the houses. It looked like Godnu had some knights there, but I couldn't tell you how it shook out. There was a swarm of them on either side."

Melangell pressed the back of her paw to her lips and let her gaze fall to the earth, and there she remained for several moments more. Her ears, which could not fall, desired to fall nonetheless.

It was then that Rhian found she could contain herself no longer. "Did you say Mother Melangell?" she blurted out, in her fair, articulate alto.

This seemed to startle Melangell even more than Riderch's sword. She jolted upright to look at Rhian, regarding her as if for the first time, until baffled awe spread her wide features even wider. "Aye, daughter," she said, "and who might you be?"

Rhian threw up her veil in reply, then staggered over and fell to her knees at Melangell's feet, taking the doe's right paw in both of hers and kissing it. "Morgwynn," she said, her already dry voice cracking. "My name is Morgwynn. Bless me, Mother, I…I…I'm so tired."

A tender smile fought with the leaden weight on Melangell's face. "I daresay you are, Morgwynn," she nodded; and placing her paw between Rhian's ears, muttered: "May the sun shine upon your head."

Now it was Riderch's turn to be baffled. "Are you and your sisters halsers?" he asked, suddenly mindful of the ear against his chest. It itched him, but he feared to scratch.

Melangell looked to him while Rhian continued to kneel. "No," she said. "I am myself, but my sisters are not."

"So that's what you're doing up here," said Riderch, feeling that he must do something to hide his discomfort, yet knowing not what. He decided to continue talking, lest he turn tail and run back down the holler. "But why not the others? Are they…" He paused, struggling to remember the word that Rhian had used. "Gifts?"

Melangell's perplexity mounted unto comedy. To Riderch she seemed not without understanding – indeed, there was a queer clarity in her regard for him – but rather confounded, as he felt he must have looked himself when he discovered that the bridle he had dragged out of the gwerthon was in fact Malmuck. "Are you a lover of the Stars, Dinistriol?" she asked.

"No," said Riderch, and pointed to Rhian. "But she is."

Rhian was weeping now, spending the tears she had just won from the well on Melangell's paw. "I only wanted to go to Gromstall," she sobbed. "Oh Mother, I've overturned the whole Anialdir. All of the blood-"

"Hush, daughter," said Melangell, with a firmness which surprised Riderch. "Weep when you have tears to spare."

"So how about it?" Riderch interjected. "Is there a pass through here, or not?"

"Aye," Melangell nodded reluctantly. "There is, but neither of you are in any condition to take it."

"We made it this far," Riderch shrugged. "The climb down should be easier, anyhow."

"The climb down would kill you," Melangell warned, smoldering now with the anger of a parent whose child has almost died of its own foolishness. "What will you win by deceiving me, Dinistriol? Do you think I didn't see the way your arm trembled as you held that sword? Do you think I can't see your lips? Your eyes? Both of you are dead on your feet, I can hear it in your voices. What was the last thing you ate?"

Riderch grimaced. "A couple of adders," he said, "and some old prickly pear ears."

"When?" she pressed.

"Yesterday morning," said Rhian. "Nothing would grow in the salt."

"And nothing will grow on the western side of the pass until the early rains," said Melangell, helping Rhian back to her feet. Her severity returned; she closed the distance to Riderch, and he found

that she smelled strongly of sage. “Don’t suppose for one blessed moment that I can’t recognize a warlord’s sword when I see one,” she warned him. “Or that I believe that you two wandered all the way here from Iwan – a journey of five days for even the well-equipped – simply to avoid the pass. Tell me why you’ve come here. By Taranwr, I’ll have the truth out of you, or you will climb no higher than this well save over my corpse.”

“Shouldn’t a halser have a staff?” asked Riderch.

“I had no time to fetch it from my cell after Sister Imona found me,” said Melangell. “What does that have to do with it?”

“It’s just that you’re talking mighty big for someone who says she won’t fight back,” Riderch shrugged.

“Riderch!” Rhian snapped. Riderch hissed at her, but she only flushed.

“What?” said Melangell.

“You might not have guessed it,” said Riderch, “but I don’t much like feeling cornered. Still, I meant what I said, that we don’t mean to hurt you – you can tell Sister Imona that too, if you like. But it would be mighty perilous for all of us if we said too much, and it won’t matter a lick once we’ve moved on.”

“You cannot move on from here without rest,” said Melangell, “but neither will I allow you near my sisters until I see that you’ve told me the truth. So unless you intend to remain at this well for the rest of your lives-”

“I’m fleeing from the war-band, Mother,” said Rhian desperately. “I’m being pursued, and Dinistriol has been guarding me.” Riderch groaned and rubbed his face.

Melangell stared hard at her. “Fleeing the noose?” she asked.

“No, Mother,” said Rhian.

“Then what?” Melangell demanded. “Speak up!”

“Aye, speak up, Riderch!”

“That would be me, if you really want to know,” Riderch supplied with a great sigh. “I’ve done a few things worthy of the noose lately, the worst of which was smuggling Morgwynn out of the Anialdir. This halserling here just wanted to give herself to some fold over in Gromstall.”

“And you’re guarding her?” asked Melangell. “Of your own free will?”

Riderch heard laughter over his ears.

“Dinistriol has saved me from capture three times, Mother,” said Rhian. “At least three, and quite possibly four. He’s been as stouthearted as a steed; and if he is coarse, it’s for my sake. I owe him a great deal more than I can ever give him.”

Riderch’s whole face burned. He gaped at Rhian, but the conviction with which she spoke forbade reply.

“Will you endorse him, then?” asked Melangell. “Will you guarantee his good behavior? There are no other bucks here, I’ll have you know – no he-folk at all. That is by design, and I would hesitate to make exception even for another halser.”

“Are you inviting us to rest with you?” asked Rhian, suddenly full of cautious hope.

“You, at least, my daughter,” said Melangell. “I’ve yet to decide about your bodyguard. Perhaps a tent can be erected here at the well.”

“I’m not letting her out of my sight,” Riderch growled.

“Dinistriol, please,” Rhian pleaded with him. “You aren’t helping.”

“All I do now is help you!” Riderch snapped. “I told you I was going to look after you, and that’s what I intend to do, halser or no halser.”

“Then I’ll vouch for him,” said Rhian to Melangell, with a hot frustration she intended for Riderch himself. “On my ear, I’ll see that he behaves himself. I know he’s capable of it.”

“May Taranwr prove it,” said Melangell with a terse nod. “Still, the problem of where to put you remains, Dinistriol. I can’t let you anywhere near the sisters’ cells.”

“Never seen the inside of a cell in my life, Mother,” said Riderch proudly, “and I don’t reckon I’ll let you put me in one now. Do you have a barn?”

“A barn?” Melangell blinked. “Aye, a small one, beside the garden.”

“Could I see the sisters’ cells from there?” asked Riderch.

“The hayloft window faces north,” said Melangell. “Aye, you could see them, but you couldn’t see into them.”

“Better for them, I reckon,” said Riderch, “and good enough for me.”

Melangell heaved her own sigh then, and in a fit of consternation drummed the ground with her foot. “Give me half an hour to speak with my sisters,” she said. “If none of them object, I will invite you both to Evensong, then to supper. Afterward I’ll conduct you both to your scrapes. I will, however, expect a sincere apology out of you both for Sister Imona.”

“I’ve paid more for a room,” said Riderch. “Much obliged, Mother Melangell.”

“You will be, if I discover I’ve let a wolf into Nawddfa,” said Melangell, then spun on her heel and began to climb the hill to its crest. Her ears disappeared over the rim without another word.

“Did you mean that?” asked Riderch when she was out of earshot.

“I beg your pardon?” said Rhian, pressing the last of the tears from her cheeks with her sleeve.

“What you just said about me,” said Riderch. “Did you mean it? You wouldn’t lie to a halser, would you?”

“I was prepared to,” answered Rhian with a rueful smile. “But aye, I meant it. Forgive me for not saying so sooner.”

“Thank you,” said Riderch, pulling his ear to her. “I won’t forget that.”

“I won’t let you,” Rhian chuckled, “as long as we’re here.”

“That halser was hiding something,” said Riderch after a moment’s pause. “Did you notice?”

“I did,” she nodded. “She wanted to say it the whole time we were speaking, but she never did. What do you reckon it was?”

“I couldn’t tell you,” said Riderch, shaking his head. “But I’ll warn you right now: if anyone wants me to give up my sword, they can try to take it from me. I’ll carry you back down the holler first, Hare hear me.”

Rhian only sighed again and sat against the roots of the nance tree, watching up the holler for the halser to return.

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The light was failing when Melangell returned, alone once more, to fetch them. She carried her staff with her now, a gnarled thing capped with a carven ram’s head and hung with a little red lamp as yet unlit, a lamp that Riderch had hoped to never see again. With the curl of a grim claw she invited them up the hill, and they obeyed.

Their rest at the well had given weariness ample time to catch up with them. Not a full hundred yards was their climb, and yet by the end their legs were quaking with weakness. They panted, bracing paws against the jagged yellow rocks, until at last they crested the steep rise of the holler and found themselves looking down into a modest saddle not a quarter mile wide between two high, thin peaks to the left and right. The northern peak on their right, so near that it seemed always to be falling on top of them, was footed by cliffs in which yawned a smattering of rough black mouths – doors, Riderch supposed, though in the low light he could not tell if they were open or closed. Directly across from it was a shorter stump of a peak, one of those snapped and scattered across the range in the unmeasured

past. Crouching likewise at its foot were a few more doors, wider and farther apart, shaded from the sinking sun.

Between the peaks, the saddle could only generously be called green. One small part of it, at least, was well and truly verdant: a ring of carefully tended garden between the cliffs, surrounding a deep, dry crater. Squat palms and broad calabash trees suffered in the beggared soil, pleading help from above with their upraised limbs. On the garden's southern side was the barn of which Melangell had spoken, a humble, square box of rough-cut stone with stripes of whitewashed wood. A smaller stable and coop peeked out behind the barn's southwest corner.

The rest of the saddle was covered in scrub, populated especially by prickly pears, all of which had at one time or another been harvested. A drumming arose as they descended into the sea of whispering grass, a sharp cracking of wood on wood that could be mistaken for nothing less than music. It doubled and redoubled against the rocks until the whole valley was full of it, a round of rhythms tightly interlocked. Gray forms began to filter out of the cracks in the northern cliffs, floating southward through the knee-high grass. Rhian gasped. Riderch's paw brushed his sword; but Melangell only continued to lead them, and so they followed.

"Welcome to Nawddfa, children," she announced above the drumming with a sweep of her arm. "It's only a crack in the rocks, unworthy of being called a gwerthon, but you'll find no place closer to heaven."

"It's gwerthon enough after the salt flats," said Rhian.

"Does that pond fill up with the rains?" asked Riderch, pointing to the empty crater.

"No," said Melangell. "A spring fed it once, but no longer."

Riderch could see now where the water had once flowed. A deep ditch ran westward down the far slope of the saddle, separating its northern and southern sides. The gray forms, two dozen at a glance, trod a shoddy plank bridge to cross it. A few forewent it entirely, choosing instead to scramble into and out of the ditch. One and all they hiked to some destination against the southern mountainside. Melangell led them in the same direction, and it seemed to Riderch that they would arrive first.

"Evensong will begin soon," said Melangell. "I thought it the best time to let the sisters see you, when we're all going to the same place."

"Sister Imona didn't ruffle their feathers?" asked Riderch.

"I told them you were on death's door," said Melangell, "which you are. We who live in the mountains are no strangers to desperation, and a desperate beast will bare his teeth when frightened. I'll ask you not to bare them again."

"Aye, Mother," said Rhian.

"You want us to join your sisters at Evensong, is that it?" asked Riderch.

"Can you wait an hour to eat?" asked Melangell. "We will go straight from Evensong to supper, but I can fetch something from the kitchen if need be. I won't ask either of you to stand, of course."

"I can wait an hour," said Rhian. "I stopped feeling hungry this morning."

"I've gone hungry plenty of times," said Riderch.

"In that case, I want you to wait outside the Wheelhouse door as the others go in, and to bow as low as you can," said Melangell, pointing to a low, square portal opposite the barn. A single lamp burned already over its lintel, surpassingly bright in the dwindling light. "It will put them at ease. You may enter yourselves afterward, if you like."

"I would like nothing more, Mother," said Rhian. Riderch only grunted.

They indeed reached the Wheelhouse door before the others and found it propped open with a wedge, a weathered leaf of simple palm wood with a childish rendition of the Shepherd Star carved into its face. The smell of copal filtered out of it, meeting the windswept sage, and Riderch would have looked inside if Melangell had not been standing in his way. He looked up instead, finding that the

drumming was louder just overhead. It ceased abruptly, and a gray hem disappeared behind the higher cliffs.

Melangell's sisters began to approach then, making for the Wheelhouse in twos and threes, only to slow down or stop altogether when they noticed the pair of strangers standing beside the door. Melangell shot them a look, and Rhian at once fell to her knees, bending to press her face to the trodden dirt. Riderch only removed his hat, then pulled down his ear when the little crowd did not move. Melangell was staring daggers at him, but he paid her no mind.

The sisters moved on nevertheless a few moments later, seeing by the halser's serenity that there was nothing to fear. In single file they passed the hares, folk of every kind native to the Anialdir dressed alike in billowing gray. Every head was wrapped in its wimple; and every face, like Melangell's, was hopelessly sun-stricken. To Riderch there was no mistaking their craze, for at Riderch alone they stared, each one of them as they entered the Wheelhouse. He tried not to scowl, but only half succeeded.

"Sister Nemetona, Sister Tlachta, meet Morgwynn and Dinistriol," said Melangell to the first of them, a cavy and a mouse half her size. "They will be staying with us for a little while."

"Thank you for your hospitality," said Rhian from the ground.

"Howdy," said Riderch.

"May the Stars keep you," the sisters muttered, then with greater haste ducked into the Wheelhouse.

"Sister Andrasta here is our stonemason," said Melangell of a broad-shouldered armadillo. She seemed less frightened of Riderch than the last two, though no less wary. Riderch and Rhian greeted her the same way: "May the Stars keep you" was her reply.

"This is Sister Aine, our choir director," Melangell continued, gesturing to a bighorn ewe.

"Thank you for letting us stay," said Rhian.

"May the sun shine upon your heads," she told them – striving to smile, but seeming only more perturbed for it.

The introductions continued in this way until all of the sisters save one had filed into the Wheelhouse. That one was Sister Imona, a raccoonfolk far portlier than any of her fellows and unhelped by the rawhide belt that cinched her robe. Her resemblance to Disma remained up close, though only vaguely; for while her eyes were not as impressively sized as his, they were alive with an expansiveness that Riderch found he quite liked. She had lingered behind the others, and now drew close to Mother Melangell – ostensibly out of unease, although her lack of regard for Riderch was as intentional as any sword-stroke.

"And this is our dear Sister Imona," said Melangell warmly, hooking an arm through hers. "She cooks for Nawddfa – she was fetching water for supper, in fact, when she found you."

"I pulled it from one of the cisterns instead," said Sister Imona with the slightest wrinkling of her nose, "in case you were worried about it."

"Please forgive us, Sister," said Rhian, rising just enough to look her in the eye. "We didn't mean to startle you, I swear."

"Aye, you startled us yourself, that's all," said Riderch. "We weren't looking to snatch your stripes."

At this, Sister Imona reached out and took one of Rhian's paws in both of her own, squeezing it and bending over until they were nearly touching noses. "I forgive you," she said with the most theatrical sincerity, then brushed past Riderch and entered the Wheelhouse without another word.

The sharp thumping of Melangell's foot stopped Riderch grinding his teeth. "Is it really so intolerable a thing to bow?" she chided.

"Why, so she could step on me?" asked Riderch.

“I won’t have you speaking ill of Sister Imona,” Melangell warned.

“Dinistriol, for heaven’s sake, she’s going to feed us,” said Rhian, standing and swiping the dust from her knees. “We practically invited ourselves.”

Melangell sighed and tugged at her ear, looking intently through the Wheelhouse door. “I invited you,” she corrected, “and I’m pleased to have gotten an apology out of the both of you. Sister Imona is sensitive, you might have noticed, and I would have spared us all her wrath.”

“Don’t chew your claws off on my account,” Riderch shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

“I believe that, Dinistriol,” said Melangell, the faintest shade of a smirk alighting on the corner of her mouth. “And now I must go in myself to begin the hour. You may follow me, but you must leave your swords out here, and Riderch must stand well away from the door.”

“As you wish, Mother,” said Rhian with another bow.

“Nothing against you, Mother, but I’m not going to do that,” said Riderch.

Melangell looked at him sharply. “Well then you may not enter,” she said.

“No shaving my scut,” said Riderch, resuming his hat again.

“Dinistriol!” Rhian snapped, more mortified by the second.

“I’m here for Morgwynn, Mother,” Riderch continued, tipping his hat to her, “not for Sister Imona, or for you, or for the Stars. As long as she’s anywhere near the war-band, this blade isn’t coming off, and I’ll defy you to take it from me. Now I’m not keen to scrap with a bunch of does – there’s not much I like less, in fact – but it’s all the same to me if I have to wait out here.”

“Dinistriol,” Rhian groaned, tugging at both of her ears.

“It ought to put the sisters more at ease, anyhow,” Riderch offered.

Melangell pursed her lips, leaning her head against her staff so that she butted the ram’s horns. “Do you want to know what I think, Dinistriol?” she asked.

“I reckon you’ll tell me no matter what,” said Riderch.

“I think you’re more thoughtful than you would have me believe,” she said.

“That makes two of us, then, doesn’t it?” said Riderch.

Melangell stood erect, then frowned. “Discretion is not the same as secrecy,” she said. “Would you like me to bring you a chair?”

“I’m used to the ground, thank you,” said Riderch.

“Will you come in with me, at least?” Melangell asked of Rhian.

“Aye, Mother,” said Rhian miserably. She unbelted her own sword, left it with Riderch, and together the two ducked into the Wheelhouse.

Still too chafed by Sister Imona to sit down, Riderch leaned against the cool cliff face beside the door, one foot braced against the rock, and looked up into the sky. The first stars were just coming out over the valley, a loose halo crowning the farther peak in the never-setting north. He thought he saw movement in the shadow of some high cleft, a deeper black against the lighter, but it was gone the moment the singing began.

At first Riderch assumed that Rhian had begun her prayers again. The accompanying choir sounded just the same, sublimely beautiful, as high and stark as the heavenly voices that had dogged him all across the Anialdir. Those voices were not above him now, however, but rather beside him, filtering out through the Wheelhouse door. Finding his heart pounding, he peeled himself from the cliff face and peered around the door frame, casting a single eye within.

Riderch had never entered a Wheelhouse before. That was for Disma to do on his behalf, when the little pickpocket needed someplace to hide and Riderch was running interference with his often much larger marks. He had looked into many, however, and this resembled none of them. There was no dome to be found, no pillars or vaults. It was a single, long room with a low ceiling and a multitude of burning lamps to light crude frescoes on the walls. A boxy Quetzal Star ran the length of the eastern

wall, his open beak and flashing eyes smoking in a cloud of incense raised by Melangell's tiny censer. She stood before a pair of great saloon doors, intoning a hymn to the Evening Star that Rhian had by that time almost forced him to memorize:

"Now fare we to the farther eyemark, westering lord,
And seek the shelter of the sunset's shaded booth
Wherein we wait at watch, aright until the morn
When sunken sun springs up again in glorious youth"

It was the Quetzal's month, thought Riderch, that time when he, preparing for spring, cast bolts of lightning from his eyes across the whole firmament and into the black depths of the Abyss. Riderch felt himself the target of those bolts now; for in their unease the gray-clad singers glanced over their shoulders at him every few moments, unsure what to make of the shabby, scowling, scarred and pitted ghoul who loomed at the door. Rhian was seated in a chair toward the front, snugly in amongst them. Her weary humility, and the paradoxical ardor of her song, had disarmed them already. Riderch knew then which way the wind was blowing; and while he knew that it should be a comfort to him, it proved instead a burning brand in his breast. He sat in the dirt beside the door for the remainder of Evensong, watching stars too distant to touch blink to life overhead.

Supper proceeded much the same, at Riderch's own insistence. The refectory was in a cave beside the Wheelhouse, attached to the kitchen and several supply rooms by honeycombed halls. Both he and Rhian were invited to dine with the sisters, at Melangell's table no less; but Riderch, still unwilling to be parted from his sword, could not go in. He negotiated with Melangell – or rather contended – in the midst of setting table, until in the end she let him eat on a beaten stool in a little antechamber beside the refectory while Rhian ate within. The dumbfounded looks he received from the sisters on their way in and out, while he devoured whole mountainous bowls of flat cornbread and beans, would have withered the living plants that supplied his supper. There was more singing before and after; and as the sisters brought their dishes into the kitchen to be washed, Melangell and Rhian met Riderch in the antechamber. Melangell was carrying a sheepskin blanket over one shoulder, tawny and covered in seven-pointed red stars. The lit lamp hanging from her staff was no less red. Rhian smiled, though it looked as if she had been weeping again.

"Thank you for your patience," said Melangell. "If you have it in you to walk a little farther, Dinistriol, I'll take you to the barn. We're going that way ourselves."

"Aye," said Riderch, placing his own bowl and spoon upon a high stack that Sister Imona was carrying to the kitchen. He grinned at her; she scowled murderously. "Do you want your sword back, Morgwynn?" he asked, holding out the belted blade to her.

Rhian looked to Melangell, who petted her arm. "Keep it in your cell if you like, daughter," she said. Rhian accepted the sword with a firm paw.

"Thank you, Dinistriol," she said with a bow. Riderch's brow crept up – it was the first time she had ever bowed to him.

Even in the shelter of the mountain saddle, where there was soil enough to support trees, the heat fled fast. It was positively chilly when they emerged from the cave, for the Whirlwind fell down from the broken southern peak and drove the sun's fire away. The odd lamp burned here and there against the valley walls, marking doors and windows into roosts for so many gray quail. The moon was nearly new, and so the clean stars alone could be seen beyond the earth's ragged silhouette. Melangell led them confidently northward in the light of her lamp, and they followed as faithfully as they dared.

"You called these girls your sisters," said Riderch as they walked, "but that isn't turkey, is it Mother?"

"What makes you say that?" asked Melangell.

"Well you can't have the same father, anyhow," he said.

"Must we have the same father to share sisterhood?" asked Melangell, her staff thumping against the dry soil with every other step. "Have you never shared brotherhood with anyone, my son?"

Riderch thought for a moment, until the bitterness which gnawed him proved too vicious. "Once, aye," he answered. "It didn't turn out so well."

"I pray you share it again, in that case," said Melangell.

"But if you aren't all halsers, what are you?" asked Riderch, hearing by the wailing crickets that they were very near the garden.

"I was going to ask you the same question, Mother," said Rhian. "I've been dying to all evening."

"The folk at Iwan Gwerthon call us the Little Gray Ones," said Melangell; there was a smile in her voice that Riderch wished he could see. "I myself lived in Nannygat once upon a time, the fold of halsers in Gromstall to which you two fare. Many of my sisters came out of Gromstall as well, others out of the Anialdir."

She paused for one long moment, drawing a deep breath, then continued. "There are folk for whom the city is intolerable – and the town and the village too – who, for one reason or another, have been pushed out of the land of the living. We find no peace there, and cannot find it until we find the peace of the world that does not change." She raised her staff into the air then, high enough that her lamp came to rest upon the mountain peak. "We seek to imitate the life of the Stars as nearly as we can, through prayer and fasting and long nights in lonely vigil. Am I making any sense?"

"Aye, Mother," Rhian whispered, so quietly that Riderch would have been surprised if the halser had heard her.

"I was backed into the gallows for listening to the Stars," Riderch muttered, "but I reckon I was on my way there already."

"Are you on your way there now?" she asked.

"I hope not," said Riderch.

"But have you no Shepherd?" asked Rhian after a lull.

"Iwan Gwerthon sends a Shepherd once a year," said Melangell, "to hear shrift and to perform his other duties…or at least they did. It remains to be seen what will pass hereafter."

A burning lantern hung from a peg in the open barn door when they approached it, alongside a full waterskin. Aside from a coven of milking ewes along one wall, the barn appeared empty of livestock. "It's cold tonight," said Melangell, pawing Riderch the thick blanket. "I hope the hayloft is amenable to you. If not, I can try to convince Sister Imona to let you sleep on the kitchen floor for one night."

"I'll prefer the barn," said Riderch, shouldering the blanket before taking up the lantern and the waterskin. "I don't catch cold easily."

"There is a cistern in the kitchen that you may use if you're thirsty," said Melangell. "The two of you were so parched that I would recommend it, in fact."

"Much obliged," Riderch nodded.

"We keep a great silence after Nightsong," she went on, glancing up at the sky. "That will be in an hour, and I ask that you not speak afterward unless you must. You and I, Morgwynn, will speak in my cell until then."

"Aye, Mother," said Rhian.

"But before we part, I must beg forgiveness from the both of you," said Melangell, bowing low at the waist. "This is how I am to greet guests, and I should have done so before I ever made you bow yourselves. I was afraid on behalf of my sisters, as I confess I still am."

"Water off a duck's back," said Riderch, pulling his ear to her. "I don't do much to earn bows, truth be told."

"Nor do I," said Melangell, unable to stifle a smirk. "Mornsong will begin early tomorrow morning – you'll hear the strike-board, I'm sure. You may join us, if you like."

"Thanks," said Riderch, "but don't wait up for me."

"Goodnight, Dinistriol," said Melangell. "May the Stars keep you."

"Goodnight to you both," said Riderch.

"Goodnight, Dinistriol," said Rhian, almost as a hiccup. She seemed only then to realize that she was about to walk away from him, the wolf who had dogged her every step for a whole month. A moment's hesitation came and went, then with a bow of her own she turned to follow Melangell through the garden toward the northern cliffs.

Riderch was padding across the barn floor only a breath later, taking stock of the sleeping ewes and the gardening tools hung on every wall. The hayloft was only at its northern end, reachable by a single ladder propped against its edge. Even laden, he took its rungs with a monkey's swiftness, practiced ease carrying him onto the creaking boards and through the stacked bales to a shuttered window. He threw its shutters wide and thrust his head out, overlooking the dead pond and its languishing shore. The sisters' cells were just visible through the trees, their little lamps blazing in imitation of the effulgent firmament. He saw Melangell's lamp bobbing toward it, trailed by Rhian, and let free a breath he had not realized he was holding in. He sat down hard on the windowsill, letting his legs dangle over, and watched them until the halser's lamp disappeared through an unseen door. Only then did he set down his burdens, letting them lie on the hay-strewn floor while he looked up at heaven's endless revolutions.

The Twin Dogs were overhead, they who had once brought down a burning brand from the heaven above the sun that they might light a bonfire at which to tell tales. Back and forth they passed their brand, neither holding it too long lest either one be burned. They succeeded at this, but folk beat them for setting the bonfire nevertheless. The Little Gray Ones were mad, he thought, to imitate such things – mad in just the same way that he was mad.

"Will you beat me too, when you're finished with me?" Riderch muttered. He clutched the ear through his shirt, suspecting that such a time would come soon, but received no answer.

31

Riderch dreamed that he perched upon the barn's windowsill like a cat, his paws between his feet, leaning precariously out over a deadly fall. The sisters were singing again, this time a harsh, sanguinary battle-hymn that filled Nawddfa with the thundering of hooves. His mouth too was open, but no sound emerged; he only grimaced, unable to hide the festering agony that overflowed from the wellspring of his heart. He looked up, wondering if he might again see movement toward the mountain peak, but the peak was gone. Only the southern stars could be seen, stars at all other times invisible who crowded in to fill the void of the disintegrating Anialdir. Looking down instead, he beheld from afar the barn in which he slept, beheld his own horned head resting in Dinistrith's lap – yet it was not Dinistrith, but rather the halser whose ear he had severed, his stump still bleeding down his face. Riderch himself perched on the mountain peak. Within a cleft below him were the sisters, singing of a wolf and a dog and the goose he had met at the bottom of the well in which he had left his sword.

Lifting his eyes, he saw that well; a midwife's skull rested atop the pile of bones, grinning at her own vindication. An overwhelming sorrow gripped him, and he awoke to a sudden, sharp drumming.

The sun was not yet risen. Dawn's gray frontier was already chasing away the stars, however, and a wind unusually lively and unusually cold was rolling down into the valley from the north. Riderch rose from the red-starred blanket folded beneath his head; he had not needed it in addition to his poncho, and it was a welcome change from the rocks on which he had lately propped his neck. Finding himself unbearably thirsty, he drank his whole waterskin in a few greedy gulps, then shot to his feet when the drumming began again.

He had first supposed it the sisters' strike-board, beaten to announce Mornsong. It was too unmusical, however, and he realized now too near. He looked down over the open windowsill to find a pair of does: the one clad in gray, carrying a staff and lit lamp, the other beating the barn's back door with her fist. He knew then, by some unmediated revelation, that his suspicions had been right, and wondered how Dinistrith would dispose of him.

A minute later the door was open, directed by rollers that desperately needed grease. The smell of herbs and sweet-barked trees mingled with the reek of hay and sheep, and in the warm red light of Melangell's lamp Riderch beheld a Rhian somewhat different from the one he had met in the stagecoach: fierce and watchful, restively observant of every sound and smell behind and beside her. The Anialdir had not been kind to her; she wore no sword, but her paw remembered it, and seemed to fumble when it could not find the hilt. There was a resolve in her face now, a will as ironclad as the hardest members of Riderch's band. He was surprised by how much she resembled Melangell.

They must have stared at each other without speaking for too long, for it was Melangell who broke the silence. "Good morning, Dinistriol," she said, clearing her throat. "How are you feeling?"

"Still good and hungry," said Riderch, "but I'm on the mend. Much obliged for putting me up, I know it's a real imposition."

"A surprise, perhaps, but no imposition," said Melangell, bowing her head. "I'm afraid I may be imposing upon you far more than you impose upon me."

"Is that so?" asked Riderch, arching an eyebrow.

"We need not discuss it now," said Melangell. "Breakfast will be after Mornsong."

"I wanted to meet with you beforehand, so that you weren't surprised," said Rhian.

"Surprised that you're staying?" Riderch chuckled. "Not a bit."

"You…you aren't?" Rhian balked, letting go the dozen arguments she had prepared.

"I wasn't quite expecting to find a flock of sungazers up here," Riderch shrugged, "but this is what you were looking for, isn't it? This is the kind of place you wanted me to take you?"

Rhian opened her mouth, grasping for words she could not find, then shook her head. "The first day of spring is in four days," she said at length. "I'm going to stay here until then. Perhaps longer. I don't know how long yet, but you deserve to be the first to know – although you seem to know it already."

"I appreciate it," Riderch nodded.

"You're not bound to me, Dinistriol," said Rhian. "I know how badly you want to leave the Anialdir; if you would like to move on, don't tarry here on my account."

"You're wrong," Riderch declared. "I told you I wouldn't let you out of my sight, and I don't mean to do it now. If you still want to go to Gromstall on the first day of spring, I'll take you there like I promised. If you want to stay…well, this place doesn't quite feel like the Anialdir anyhow."

"You don't mind waiting?" asked Rhian.

"I need a few days on something more than adders," said Riderch. "And I'll be damned if I leave you alone with these does before I'm convinced that they're trustworthy."

"Then it becomes my task to convince you both of our pure intentions," said Melangell wryly, "if not the purity of our character. Will you come to Mornsong, Dinistriol?"

"I reckon not," said Riderch, "unless it buys me breakfast."

Melangell smiled. "We'll feed you regardless. If you won't pray, however, there may be another way that you can assist us while you're here. Would you go along to Mornsong, Morgwynn? The strike-board is about to sound."

"Aye, Mother," said Rhian, then bowed to Riderch. "Thank you again, Dinistriol."

"Once is fine," said Riderch.

Melangell waited to speak again until Rhian had rounded the corner of the barn. "It needn't be today," she began. "The Great Ram knows how exhausted you must be."

"I'm fit enough to break a mustang," said Riderch, almost truthfully. In fact, he was feeling better than he expected after only a single night's sleep. His weakness was largely gone, his fever was down; and aside from the pain in his foot, hunger and thirst were his only discomforts.

"That's what I've been told," Melangell nodded. "Morgwynn used the word 'mighty,' in fact, and described feats that I confess I'm reluctant to credit."

"I've always had good reason to keep strong sinews," Riderch shrugged. "Were you hoping to make use of them?"

Melangell nodded sheepishly. "The spring that feeds this pond no longer flows, as I believe I told you yesterday."

"Aye," said Riderch. "Did it dry up?"

"No," said Melangell, turning around to point toward the northern peak. "A great stone fell across its mouth more than a year ago now, and we haven't been able to move it aside."

"You want me to do it?" asked Riderch.

"It's many times bigger than you are," said Melangell, shaking her head. "We've been forced to draw water from the well down the holler ever since, and hauling enough water for both ourselves and the garden is weary, repetitive work."

"It's not much of a garden, if you don't mind my saying so," said Riderch.

"It used to be three times this size," Melangell sighed. "We used to grow all that we needed ourselves. More recently we've received donations from Iwan Gwerthon every month; but if what you told me about Gwall is true, I don't know that we can rely on them any longer."

"So you want me to haul water?" asked Riderch. "I can do that."

"What we really need is to dig another well," continued Melangell, speaking faster as her thoughts crowded into her mouth. "We need a pump, like they have in the cities, but we haven't the money to buy one and none of the folk in Iwan know how to make one. Fetching water from below feels so often like pouring it through a sieve, but at this point we're…" She trailed off, shrugging mightily.

"Desperate," Riderch finished for her. "Listen, Mother, you don't have to make a case for me. I know when I'm up against a wall. If you're offering to take care of Morgwynn, I'll see that you can do it. If I reckon you're not doing right by her, I know whose ear to chew off. I'm not afraid of you, or any of your sisters. Now I don't know the first thing about digging wells, but hauling water is no great ask."

"You present even your charity as a threat," said Melangell, stopping just shy of laughter. "Do you realize that?"

"The folk I ride with don't answer to much else," said Riderch. "I'm not used to talking to she-folk."

"No, you certainly aren't," said Melangell. "There are urns in the supply room beside the kitchen, and small cisterns in the kitchen, the Wheelhouse, the barn, and the cells. I can't allow you

inside the cells, but if you would fill the other cisterns and help to water the garden as well as you can, I would be deeply, deeply indebted to you."

"Fair enough," said Riderch. "One more good meal ought to put me in shape for it."

"If I had more to offer you than cornbread and beans, I would," said Melangell ruefully. "As it stands, we'll have to ration both until I hear word from Iwan."

"I've fared worse," said Riderch.

"Thank you, Dinistriol," said Melangell with a bow. "For as long as you're here, I am at your service. If you need prayer, or counsel, or merely a friendly ear, don't hesitate to call upon me."

"Much obliged, Mother," said Riderch, as the Mornsong drumming began to fill the valley of Nawddfa. They parted without ceremony; and Riderch, donning his hat, made for the kitchen.

He found rows of three-footed urns in the dark supply room, dull and brown and with fluted necks painted with circling fish. Choosing the two largest that he could find, he shouldered them and began his first trek down the holler to the well. He was alone when he arrived, for the sisters were all at Mornsong – even the parrot who had bleated its alarm was nowhere to be found. The rope around the bucket served equally well to let the urns down by their handles. He filled them to the brim, then hauled them back up to fill the kitchen cistern before doing it again.

There is a kind of silence that folk who have never lived in the Deepwaste cannot fathom. Even the folk of the Anialdir, at all times one mere misstep away from letting their cities fall to wasteland, have never known it. It is deeper than the deepest canyon, broader than the boardlands, and as heavy as the mountains themselves. It will drive a folk mad if he has no companion with him – and indeed, often when he does. Riderch knew that silence well, for he had been more than once in the Deepwaste; and yet he discovered as he walked Nawddfa up and down that there was a silence deeper still. He imagined himself, and would have believed without questioning if someone had told him, that the valley had remained unchanged, unmoved, since the foundation of the world. Only the stoppered spring existed to contradict him; yet even that, by not flowing, exaggerated the silence. He could hear his own breathing, his pulse drumming in his ears, the very whisper of the wind through his fur. It laid bare a thousand hurts that he had stowed away in his struggle to conduct Rhian here. In spite of his best efforts, anger began to coalesce from them into a pool of blood.

All that morning he hauled water, pausing only for a meager breakfast, and worked even while the noonday sun scoured the mountain saddle. Never out of reach of water, he found that he did not mind the heat of the day. He worked wet as often as not, drenching himself with full urns, a sodden rat in a bright red poncho, and only rested long enough to recover from fatigue. The brutal work soothed his churning soul, and indeed may have been the only thing that stopped him from lashing out in anger as long as he did. For Riderch was no less coarse a creature among so many does. Their fairness only magnified his wild ways; and he, like a landed fish, found that he could not breathe their air.

When the hours of prayer were over and the sisters were at work, tending the animals, cutting herbs and prickly pear ears for supper, and fetching water themselves, Riderch more than once found himself so possessed by his task that he elbowed and shoved them aside to be the first to the well. Those who would not budge he shouted down, and owing to the glittering sword at his hip, they capitulated.

There was no noon meal. Riderch worked until Evensong found him ravenous, stared like a hawk through the tiny, shabby Wheelhouse door while the sisters pretended to ignore him, and then at supper crouched on his stool in the antechamber, scowling and muttering to himself as they passed by. Rhian apologized profusely for him, and tried to reason with him whenever she could; but for that first day she was so close beside Melangell that she only saw him twice. After supper she probed for the

source of his unrest. He merely brushed her off and wandered away to water the ewes, the pheasants, and their single jennet ass.

That night he slept again through Nightsong, and was only roused by the strike-board calling Mornsong. His limbs ached from overwork, yet he rose to do the same thing again, conveying endless stores of water wherever they were needed. Labor, however, would no longer grind down the spurs which pricked him. Fuming vinegar pounded against the doors of all his members, and he was more of a beast to the sisters on the second day than the first. Malmuck came to his mind again and again, sodden Malmuck hacking up a lung as he revealed to Riderch the treachery which had caused his band to unravel. It was the last of a thousand such losses, yet in it were contained all the others. He ran down the sisters like hens, scattered them like his own band, a wolf prowling the valley.

Rhian came to him that evening in the barn, alone and indignant. “You must be gentler with the sisters, Riderch,” she said. “They aren’t used to having a buck around – certainly not a buck with a sword, who could carry an ass up a hill.”

“I don’t aim to hurt them,” said Riderch, as he sharpened his buck knife in the hayloft.

“They don’t know that!” Rhian snapped. “I didn’t know it until you proved it for the hundredth time, and you were never this surly around me. Why are you acting this way?”

Moving without thinking, Riderch gripped his knife and drove it into the floorboards, startling Rhian. “Do you want me to rattle off the reasons?” he roared at her.

Rhian’s face was flint for several moments, softening gradually until only sorrow remained. “Yes,” she admitted. “Yes I do, if only you were willing. But they’ve done nothing to you, Riderch. You can’t take it out on them.”

Riderch stood then and narrowed his eyes at her. “What do you reckon it would look like if I did take it out on them?” he smoldered. “It wouldn’t look like this, I’ll tell you that much.”

“She’ll send you away if she fears for the sisters, Riderch,” Rhian pleaded. “Is that what you’re fishing for?”

“But she won’t send you away, and that’s what matters,” said Riderch. “You’re staying for good, aren’t you?”

Rhian pursed her lips, then nodded. “I’m waiting until Evensong tomorrow to tell anyone,” she whispered. “They’ll give me the little gray habit, and let me live with them for a time while I decide whether to stay for good – but I know my answer already. I knew it on the first night.”

“So did I,” he said.

“Riderch, this is the life to which I’ve aspired since I was a kitten,” said Rhian. “The war-band is barely a rumor here. I can be at peace.”

“Good, Riderch nodded. “Then it shouldn’t matter to you whether they chase me off, should it?” He returned to his whetstone after this; and although Rhian tried several times to speak to him again, he offered no reply, and she in the end stormed off in exasperation.

32

The third day was Sunday; and the sisters, who had stood vigil on the cliffs for a great portion of Leadsday night and had remained awake to greet the rising sun, took rest all morning. Riderch, however, went straight to work after breakfast. He awoke in pain – not the pain of fatigue, as he rightfully should have suffered, but a pain in his guts and in his jaw. He had been plagued by poor sleep, startled awake every hour or two by a feeling of falling or shortness of breath. His fever returned, a constant reminder of all the things he wished to ignore, and more keenly than ever he felt that those things were just beneath his feet, a rising flood that he had climbed the mountains to escape. But there

was no escape: the goose at the bottom of Gwydd Gwerthon had warned him so. Soon enough he would be sent down the mountain again, and ghosts would eat him alive.

He went to the well that morning, therefore, holding his urns as a cornered dog holds an uncracked bone. The resting sisters stretched out no paw for him to bite, at least, until noon inflamed his fever and left him dizzy and ravenously hungry. There would be no meal until supper – there never was, as far as he could tell, and there had been no one working in the kitchen when he went to fill its cistern. He knew, however, that there was food already prepared. Sister Imona had spent Leadsday afternoon baking an excess of cornbread, all of which lay stacked in the kitchen larder awaiting supper. Feeling that he could not continue his labor without sustenance, Riderch made for that larder at once, pilfered a fat stack of the fragrant cornbread, and slipped back out.

He collided with Sister Imona in the kitchen, eliciting a startled scream and nearly knocking her flat on her back. Startled himself, Riderch reached out to steady her; but Sister Imona was incensed, panting and swinging her tail wildly beneath her robe as Disma had been wont to do when provoked, and with surprising forcefulness swatted his paw away. Her claws scraped grooves along the back of it; he withdrew it with a wince.

"Stealing food now, you beast?" she howled. "Not enough that you get to run rampant among the sheep, eh? You've got to take even their grass for yourself?"

Riderch opened his mouth to protest – more loudly and more aggressively than was helpful – but owing to the bread stuffed therein, all that emerged was an angry growl. This, of course, brought Sister Imona's fury to a fever pitch. Snatching a thick, wooden ladle from a counter nearby, she began to belabor him with it, striking first at the paw which held the cornbread and then at his head and face when he tried to wrest the ladle from her. Her arm was solid, in spite of the mass attached to it; she landed several admirable blows on his muzzle and the crown of his head before he seized her wrist at last. With a mighty jerk he pulled her in through the kitchen doorway, sending her stumbling against a stack of sparsely-laden shelves. A sack of amaranth fell open and showered its golden grains onto her head. She slipped in these and slid to the floor, shrieking at Riderch the curses of one who is poorly practiced in cursing, while Riderch turned to walk out of the kitchen.

"Who are you going to eat first, before Mother Melangell realizes what she's done?" she asked. "What did you do to that poor girl, that she jumps at every sudden noise?"

"Bite your tongue before I feed it to you!" Riderch snarled, wheeling on her one last time. He received a thrown ladle between the eyes for that, then stormed off with his cornbread half shredded in his claws.

Melangell found him an hour later in the garden, watering plants that would remain thirsty in spite of his efforts. A few of the sisters who walked on the other side of the bone-dry pond stopped to watch when they saw her storming between the wintered rows, cornering Riderch against the spiny body of an algarrobo tree, and grabbing a fistful of his collar. She grabbed the ear along with it. Riderch gasped; but if she felt it, she made no indication.

"If you lay a claw on one of the sisters again, you will be out of Nawddfa that very hour. Do you understand me?" No threat from any foe of Riderch's, rider or fellow cutthroat, had ever been delivered with such confidence. She was no mighty doe: in her frame was the wiry resilience of all harefolk, and yet to judge by the way she leaned against him, she must have weighed little more than a child. Nevertheless, Riderch found that he feared her.

"I wouldn't have touched her if she hadn't started beating me with that ladle," said Riderch.

"That is a coward's answer," she husked. To Riderch's stark surprise, she slapped him as she let him go, a blow that stung his bruised face more than any calloused fist could have. He raised a paw to caress his cheek in disbelief, but she did not flinch. "Stealing food?" she barked. "Prying it from poor

Sister Imona's paws? What were you thinking?"

"I was hungry," he said hollowly.

"And so you terrorized her?" said Melangell, throwing her arms out wide. "Are you a wolf, Dinistriol, that you seize your meat through violence? Sister Imona is already scared to death of you. She fears most bucks, and she has good reason to. Many of the sisters do. Do you want to justify those fears?"

Riderch sputtered, flabbergasted, indignant that the halser was trampling the flame of his anger into the dust. "Aye, Mother, I'm a wolf," he managed at length. "You're not the first folk to say it, and nothing is going to change it. I am what I am. Is that good enough for you?"

Melangell's anger, on the other paw, was only beginning to kindle. "You were hungry, and that makes you a thief?" she shouted. "You were angry, and that makes you a brute? Is that what you would have me believe?" The pause told Riderch that it was a question for which she expected an answer. When he gave none, she let her arms drop clumsily to her sides. "If you had any idea how much pain you were capable of enduring," she said, "you would be ashamed to use it as an excuse for anything. Were you with the war-band before you came here? The son of some old Guilur from Pedwar Ceinych?"

"No, Mother," said Riderch.

"What, then?" she pressed. "What did you do before you found Morgwynn? How did you earn that sword? Tell me while you have the opportunity, Dinistriol, or the truth may announce itself in a much uglier voice."

Riderch's whiskers twitched. "Didn't she tell you about me?" he asked.

"She won't," said Melangell, shaking her head. "She only tells me to ask you myself. That girl has a kind of queer respect for you – a respect that I sincerely wish to share, if only you would let me."

"I was a thief," Riderch spat. "I was a thief and a cutthroat, who worked the roads around Gorseth Floyd robbing stagecoaches and trade caravans. This sword doesn't even belong to me," he said, jerking it and its scabbard out of his belt to show her. "It belongs to…to someone else. I stole it. I'm a thief. Is that respectable to you, Mother?"

Of all the many expressions Riderch expected to find on Melangell's face, sympathy was not among them. Sympathy, aye, and a subtle excitement, entirely out of place, that set her whiskers buzzing. "We are not what we want, Dinistriol, we are what we do," she said, regaining the solidity with which she had formerly carried herself. "You are not a murderer or a thief for wanting to kill someone and rob him; you are a murderer when you kill him and a thief when you take his purse. And you will not become something better until you do something better."

"Can I still do something better, then?" asked Riderch. The earnestness with which he asked surprised her; it showed on her face more transparently than she intended.

"Do you want to?" she asked.

"I don't want to leave Morgwynn," he answered, his voice higher and thinner than he could stand. "I can't leave her yet, I don't have the right to. She loves this place already, and bringing her here in one piece is the only good thing I've done in my whole, bloody, ugly life." He was trembling now, hideously naked before a doe who was old enough to be his mother. He continued to speak, knowing that he would not start again if he paused for breath. "I'm going to lose it, Mother. I'm going to lose it, or it'll be taken away from me, and I don't see how I'll avoid it."

If Melangell's sympathy baffled Riderch, her joy in that moment enraged him. "No one will take it from you, my son," she said, as confidently as she had threatened him. "You can only throw it away grasping for something below you – and if you will submit to being directed, I can help you reach for something higher."

"I'm not standing vigil with you," said Riderch. "I couldn't do it with Morgwynn, and I can't do it with you."

"I won't ask you to," said Melangell, holding up an open palm. "Certainly not now, given how skittish you've made my sisters. No, what I have in mind is something much more immediately helpful to both of us. If you wish to remain in Nawddfa, for as long as it takes Morgwynn to decide her own course, you must earn my trust and allay my sisters' fears. I can help you do that."

"What's in it for you?" asked Riderch.

"The very same," said Melangell. "A way to remain in Nawddfa."

"All right then, spit it out," Riderch shrugged.

"Come back here to see me tomorrow morning after breakfast," said Melangell, "under this very algarrobo tree. There's something I would like to show you, and we don't make a habit of laboring on Sundays. Will you do that?"

"I can't rightly say no," said Riderch.

"Very good," Melangell nodded. "In the meantime, Dinistriol, I will ask you to make up with Sister Imona however you must. As deadly an enemy as she is, you will find no mightier an ally in Nawddfa."

"I could use one or two of those," Riderch admitted, knowing already what he must do and dreading it.

"I want Morgwynn to be proven right about you, my son," said Melangell, turning away to speak over her shoulder, "and I confess that I have my own selfish hopes for you. But I am a jealous mother to these girls, and I will not allow them to be threatened. If you don't know yet how to act for your own benefit, act at least for your ward's. You'll break her heart if you don't."

"I'll try, Mother," said Riderch.

"We can do no more," she said, and left him.

That very hour Riderch left his work. Carrying the empty urns back to the dark supply room, he leaned them against their racks and set to searching high and low. There were none among the tools in the barn, he knew, and this was a good sign: for if any at all were to be found, they would have remained cool and dry away from the chapping Whirlwind. Where they were within the mess of hemp mats, dry firewood, horns and hooves and other scavenged articles, however, was a mystery he could not solve until he ran back to the barn to retrieve his loaned lantern and his waterskin.

He found it quickly after that, hay-packed in a crude chest beside a sack of waxed strings and a quiver of flint-headed arrows: a compound bow of starkly yellow hedge apple wood, reinforced with gray ram's horn. Both bow and strings were still supple. The strength needed to draw it was considerable, and Riderch wondered who among the sisters would have had the sinews for it. It was possible, he thought, that none of them did, and that this was why the bow had been stored in a corner beneath a roll of horsehide. It was enough of a reason to justify his taking it without permission, at least – with any luck he would have it back in its chest before it was missed, and would win a prize worthy of expunging both acts of theft. He pocketed the string and shouldered the quiver, then slipped out of the cool caves, left his lantern in the barn, and climbed the southern slopes of Nawddfa to wander the mountainside.

33

Countless times since their divergence at the dunes had Riderch wished for Disma's company. That day he wished for it again, as he padded and climbed and crawled through pathless, rocky wastes in the unbearable afternoon heat. Riderch was not nearly so deft a hunter as Disma, nor so quiet a

stalker of prey. He was, however, as dauntless as the wildest nomad, and more determined than he had ever been in his life. Every secluded patch of shade, therefore, was worthy of flushing out, every high, brave copse and jagged crag. Among them were adders aplenty, hosts of sleeping bats and carrion birds, yet no beast proved a fitting mark for his bow until afternoon had almost forfeited to evening.

There was a haze in the north, not unlike the darkness that heralds a sandstorm, but the wind was in the south again. His ascent had carried him nearly to the top of the shattered mountain, from which he could see the valley of Nawddfa and the higher peak beyond. Amidst the tumbled rocks around him was little life, save for in a few leeward crannies where rhatany and brambles found purchase. It was in such a thicket that Riderch at last found what he sought, announcing itself above the scrub with a pair of tremendous horns. A few rams, already alert, were sheltering against the northern face of the mountain; one of them was a king to the others, twice as large and with horns that would have made any other neck helpless to lift them. Riderch approached as closely as he dared from below, knowing that he was downwind; but having no clear shot, saw only one way to bag his game. They must flee farther up the mountain if they ran, he thought, and would be cornered against the highest cliffs. He nocked his arrow and prepared to pursue, then forewent stealth altogether.

A lusty shout set the thicket thrashing as if in a storm. Rams leaped up and bounded from their shelters, their hooves clattering southward up the mountainside. Six Riderch let free, placing all his hope in the larger seventh. It sprang into the air, eyeing the steep steps of its escape, and in its unexpected speed might have evaded Riderch also, if one of its horns had not caught the tangles of a rhatany bush. It jerked and stumbled, baring its flank, and Riderch smiled as he drew the bowstring. The first shaft found its heart. The ram never freed itself from the thicket, but with its own blood watered the red roots.

Bleeding and gutting was tedious work, but the reward was even greater than he had hoped. The ram was nearly as tall as he at the crown and respectably heavier, well-fed in spite of the lateness of the winter. His arrow had severed the artery atop the heart. This organ he removed along with the rest; and finding that he had no place to store the offal, wrapped all that was edible in his red poncho.

Even hollow, the ram was exceedingly heavy, yet Riderch paid his burden little mind: slinging both the carcass and the slithering offal over his shoulders, he picked his way back down the mountainside, panting and heaving, yet denying himself even the thought of returning with less. He could not afford, he knew, to make himself any less than indispensable to the sisters; this, at least, was a start.

His resolve brought him safely back to Nawddfa without breaking his neck. He was exhausted and surpassingly filthy, but the chill Whirlwind blowing down into the saddle soothed his boiled brains so deliciously that he could scarcely remember when last he had felt so good. Evensong was almost over when he passed the open Wheelhouse door. Hoping to speak with Sister Imona before he did anything else, he stopped in the threshold and scanned the low, cramped hall, still shouldering his ram. Half of the sisters ceased singing when they noticed him. The rest began to chatter their hymns like geese, too stunned to hold pitch. Sister Aine was only shocked until she saw what was disturbing her choir; her own ewe’s eyes met the dead ram’s, and shock gave way to bewildered ire.

Melangell stood facing Riderch before the star-spangled saloon doors at the far end of the Wheelhouse, wielding her staff and its lit lamp. Rhian stood beside her, shouldering the halser’s other paw. Her head was bowed until the commotion began, when quite by instinct she looked up to behold Riderch. Her jaw fell slack. Melangell, who had been speaking, paused just long enough to interpret the bloody scene before her. Recognition sparked exhilaration in them both.

“This daughter of the Great Hare seeks the life of heaven,” Melangell continued, gently tapping her staff upon the floor to regain the sisters’ attention. “If none object, she will receive the gray at Evensong tomorrow.”

The silence that followed, and the glow in Rhian's face, told Riderch all that he needed to know. Sister Imona was not in the Wheelhouse; he moved on to the kitchen, where she labored over a pot of stewing beans and prickly pear ears. She screamed bloody murder the moment she saw him, foregoing a ladle in favor of a cleaver. This time, however, Riderch did not provoke her. He pulled his ear at her instead, then turned the dead ram's head by the horn to face her. "Do you have some place I can hang this?" he grunted. "You'll need somewhere for the guts, too. I didn't get a chance to wash them, but the meat's still good and clean."

He had to repeat himself three times before Sister Imona realized that he was not threatening her life. Dumbly she directed him to a cellar at the rear of the kitchen, a cool, dark chamber at the bottom of a short flight of crude stairs in which hung several empty meat-hooks. Riderch gave the ram to the nearest of these, then brandished his damp poncho at the raccoon standing on the topmost step. "Do you want me to wash these?" he asked.

Sister Imona shook her head and licked her lips. "No," she husked. "I'll get a basket for them."

"Then I reckon I'll go wash up myself," said Riderch, making his way back through the kitchen with her in tow. "I'll be much obliged if I can borrow a lump of soap, Sister." But Sister Imona said nothing more. She merely took a wide wicker basket from the larder, traded a sliver of lye soap for the offal, his bow, and his quiver, and gave him a wide berth on his way out, staring at him with her open, masked eyes as long as he was in sight.

Riderch was forced to hike down to the well to clean himself, after the sun was far set and his only light came from his lantern and the myriad stars. He had no basin, and so a rock sufficed, swept clean by his paw of dust. Bucketful after bucketful of water drowned his clothes, each articled lathered in lye soap and then rinsed, over and over and over until the stench of the guts was gone. It would return, he knew, when next it grew hot, but the sun would make short work of it after a good hanging. He scoured himself next, lamenting the blood that stained his paws; in the shocking clarity of the cold well water he resolved to bring gloves next time, as well as a sack for the entrails – if there was indeed a next time. When at last he began the climb back up to Nawddfa, dripping clothes draped over his arm, he was half-delirious with exhaustion and could barely climb the ladder to the hayloft.

Rhian was waiting for him there. She turned from the open window when she heard his feet upon the floorboards, and even in the low lantern light the radiant joy in her face found his heart as easily as his arrow had found the ram's. Realizing that he wore the ear around his neck, he pressed his bundle of clothes tightly against his chest.

"You didn't stop to graze, did you?" he asked, intending a smooth sarcasm but managing only a reedy drawl.

"You're naked," Rhian remarked, letting slip a laugh that made him feel positively childish.

"You're in my bed," Riderch snapped, turning around and throwing his clammy poncho over his head. "Better?"

"Better without the blood in your fur, aye," said Rhian, still smiling. A draft from the rising Whirlwind curled around the barn to stir her own poncho, setting its white orchids aflutter. Her eyes wandered to his sword, and she reined in her amusement somewhat. "I've never been one to hesitate when I know what I should do," she said in answer to his question. "I've been longing for this since I was a girl, Riderch, for some place that the Whirlwind isn't always grinding down. That I found it here, tucked away in a far corner of the Anialdir, feels fitting somehow."

"Well judging by the way Sister Imona shook her cleaver at me, I reckon you'll fit right in," said Riderch, beginning to hang his damp clothes over the rafters. "Still, that Melangell is a slippery one, and you'd better play the Hare with her. She wants something out of me, but I'll be damned if I know what it is."

“I think she wants you to stay, Riderch,” said Melangell, relieving him of his belted sword and hanging his lantern on a nail.

“What?” Riderch hiccuped, earnestly surprised. “She tell you so?”

“She didn’t have to,” said Rhian. “She’s taken a keen interest in you, and she wants to like you as much as I do; but convincing the rest of the sisters will be no small task. You can’t live in the cells – Hare’s horns, to let you stay in the valley at all would ruffle their feathers. She hasn’t confided in me, but I gather that her conniving is on your behalf. That is, if you would like to stay yourself.”

“Dinistrith hasn’t cut me loose yet,” said Riderch. “He’s hardly said a word since we got to Nawddfa, in fact. I’m not leaving until he does, so that halser had better show her cards soon if you’re joining up with the sisters tomorrow night.”

“Well you’ve impressed her with that ram, I can tell you that much already,” said Rhian. “It was really very sweet of you. I think an apology would have sufficed, but this more than makes amends.”

“I’m not much for apologies,” said Riderch.

“No, I suppose you’re not,” said Rhian. The joy in her face was obscured by a cloud then; she seemed pained, and at her pain Riderch himself ached.

“What did I do?” asked Riderch.

“I made shrift to Mother Melangell before Evensong,” began Rhian in a much lower voice, “in preparation for tomorrow. A Shepherd will finish the prayers when he visits someday – or at least we hope so, given what happened to Iwan Gwerthon – but in the meantime, she has given me some advice.”

Finding that he was too exhausted to stand any longer, Riderch let himself down onto a hay bale. The relief in his throbbing legs was rapturous. “Did you tell her about me?” he asked.

“Only what directly pertained to my own deeds,” said Rhian. “I didn’t tell her about Dinistrith, or recount anything that Malmuck said.”

“That’s mighty kind of you,” Riderch nodded. “Thank you.”

“I have no right to gossip about you in shrift, Riderch,” said Rhian, sounding now as pained as she looked. “Besides, you’ve told me so little about yourself that I would be piling up a mountain of idle speculation. Even so, I must ask your forgiveness.”

“Forgiveness for what?” Riderch balked. “You haven’t done a thing to me.”

“Yes I have,” Rhian insisted, “and I should have apologized for it much sooner. I’m ashamed that someone else had to tell me how wrong I was.”

“All right then, spit it out if it will make you feel better,” Riderch shrugged.

“Riderch, I threatened to kill myself to get you off of Malmuck!” Rhian exclaimed, throwing wide her arms exactly as Melangell had done. “Aren’t you angry with me? I threatened to kill myself, and then I revealed to you that I had been planning to kill myself already when you found me. Both of those hurt you. I saw it at the time, too, but I didn’t…I didn’t know how else…” She trailed off, stammering to a halt, then sniffed.

“I don’t want you to apologize for any of that,” said Riderch as firmly as he could. “You did what you had to do, and it worked. How can I fault you for that?”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses, Riderch,” Rhian pleaded, “certainly not on my own behalf. I’ve never seen anyone look as betrayed as you did then. I hurt you, and I feel terrible for it, and I’ll never forgive myself if you won’t.”

“Fine then, I forgive you,” Riderch growled, finding himself more irritated than he liked. “Water off a duck’s back. Does that make you feel better?”

“When you put it that way, not particularly,” Rhian sobbed, wiping her eyes with a claw. “But thank you. I feel I owe you an explanation, if you’ll hear it.”

“You don’t need to explain yourself to me,” said Riderch. “I know all too well why you did it. I’ve done worse, for the same reason.”

“I don’t want to explain myself,” said Rhian, staring at the golden hilt of Riderch’s sword as it dangled on its belt from the rafter. “I want to explain my Shepherd, the one who oversaw the Wheelhouse at Pedwar Ceinych, and to tell you that he had nothing to do with my threats.”

“I’ve never met your Shepherd once in my life,” Riderch protested.

“Which makes it all the more imperative that you believe no lies about him,” Rhian pressed. “You assumed that he was helping me plan to kill myself, and I never corrected you. I should have, because it wasn’t true.”

“That’s a word in his favor, then,” said Riderch guardedly. “I still don’t reckon my regard for him matters much.”

“It matters to me,” said Rhian, almost beating her breast with her paw. “He counseled me so often about so many things – he was really very wise, although his wisdom usually landed on deaf ears. He told me wisely whenever I shared my hopes that I should obey my father, and I knew as well as he that there was more than simple piety in his advice. But toward the end, when my father’s warlords were growing angry with him and I suggested – I thought subtly – that I was planning to slip away, he told me something that I’m afraid may not make much sense to you.”

“Sift me,” said Riderch.

“He said: ‘The opossum is a fool to hunt the adder, unless he kills it.’”

Riderch’s exhaustion was such that the mere effort of keeping his eyes open made him feel drunk. He grinned, and for the first time in days heard laughter ringing in his ears. “That’s a war-band saying,” he said. “It makes more sense to me now than it did the last time I heard it.”

“He would have never left me alone if he had known I was planning to kill myself,” said Rhian. “He would have made himself a gelding and insisted upon riding in my stagecoach with me, if I know him. But I think – or at least I hope – he was saying that, while he could never endorse my desire to abandon my father, even for the sake of prayer, if I truly desired the life of heaven, no endorsement mattered in the end. I must do it, and succeed at all costs.”

Riderch nodded. “I told myself the same thing when I left home.”

“Was it worth it?” asked Rhian.

“I don't know yet,” Riderch admitted. “I’m afraid I blew my chance to make it count. But then again, I didn't leave so I could pray.”

“Why did you leave?” asked Rhian.

For the first time in his life, Riderch felt the urge to give an answer to that question. It was almost past his lips, in fact, before he could rein it back in. “I was trying to help someone,” he said, only to scoff a moment later and rub his face violently. “Wait, that’s a lie. I left because I wanted revenge.”

“Did you get it?” Rhian almost whispered.

“I figured so,” said Riderch. “Up until yesterday I would have told you I did. But I’ve been out for more ever since, and it only hit me then, and it’s got me so mad I could spit.”

“Revenge is like that,” said Rhian, sitting down unexpectedly beside him. “I’ve seen it in my father, and in his warlords. It will destroy the war-band now that I’m gone, I suppose.”

“It was about to destroy it anyways,” said Riderch.

“Indeed it was,” Rhian nodded, gazing out the window at the heavens surrounding the mountain peak. “The world is a mortar full of stones, and time grinds us all to sand.”

“So is heaven,” said Riderch. “I’m no little gray hare, as much blood as I’ve soaked up, but I reckon I know that if I know anything at all. You’ll learn it yourself, if you haven’t yet.”

"Perhaps you're right," said Rhian, patting his stained paw. "Perhaps heaven does grind us – but if it grinds us into anything, it grinds us into Stars. I'm willing to consent to that."

"What's so good about being a Star?" Riderch grumbled.

Rhian smiled at him. "It means that you're remembered forever," she said, "by folk and by all of the heavenly powers. That you're remembered no matter how many Great Days come and go, and that you live always to aid the folk who supplicate you."

Riderch thought for several moments, then declined his head half an inch. "I might forgive it, if that were true," he said.

"It's a start," said Rhian, but Riderch did not hear her. He was asleep, slumped against the bale behind him. She removed his damp poncho and covered him with Melangell's star-studded blanket, then left the barn as quietly as she could.

34

Riderch did not realize that he had not eaten supper until he awoke the next morning to a roaring stomach. Mornsong was over and breakfast halfway through when he skulked into the refectory's antechamber, expecting to be denied a second meal. To his surprise, however, a bowl full of stew waited on the beaten stool upon which he was wont to sit, full of the ram's gamey offal and enough hot peppers to bring tears. He received as much as the others; and at the end of the meal, from Sister Imona's own ladle, a second helping besides. No words passed between them – indeed, they made eye contact only for the briefest of moments – but judging by the encouraging looks he received from the other sisters, all of them knew who had fed them. He left the refectory enlivened, and made for the garden to look for Melangell.

She waited beneath the algarrobo tree, just as she had promised. Her staff was in her paw, hung with its burning lamp in spite of the daylight, and she watched as her sisters in teams of two or three arrived to tend the garden. Deep concern weighed down her whiskers, a thoughtfulness at once resolved and apprehensive. For a change she made no attempt to conceal it when she noticed Riderch approaching, but merely bowed low at the waist. Riderch tipped his hat to her.

"Good morning, Dinistriol," she said shortly.

"Good morning, Mother," said Riderch. "I hope I didn't rustle your sisters too badly when I stopped by the Wheelhouse last night. I was looking for Sister Imona."

Melangell's dourness brightened briefly. "It hardly matters now if you did," she tutted. "That ram you gave us will make a finer feast for the first day of spring than any we expected to have. We can't afford to slaughter any of our milking ewes these days."

"Fine enough to get the cook on my side?" asked Riderch.

Here Melangell's mouth split into a grin, just long enough for its deflation to feel like a loss. "I don't believe I've ever heard her speak so highly of a buck before," she answered. "You wouldn't believe her the same folk, knowing how she was…well, that doesn't matter. It was a quetzal's feather to her, to say the very least."

"If you let me take that bow again, I reckon I can bag another," said Riderch.

Melangell sighed and turned away, looking up through the struggling brown palm fronds toward the northern mountain. "I'm about to ask a great deal more of you than another ram, Dinistriol," she warned him. "Are you up for a walk?"

"Aye, I don't see why not," said Riderch. "Where are we going?"

"Up there," said Melangell, and motioned with the head of her staff to the mountain peak. The young sun spilled red upon its crown, a deep red that foreboded ill weather, and the shadows of its high crags seemed to melt to an infinite depth.

“All the way to the top?” asked Riderch.

“There’s a path among the stones,” said Melangell. “I have no doubt that someone with your experience will find it an easy climb, although it would be harrowing for some of the sisters.”

“And yourself, Mother?” asked Riderch.

“I’ve lived long among the rocks myself,” she said, “and have made that climb too many times to count. It will be a matter of three or four hours, all told, to show you what I wish to show you and return here.”

“We’ll want to go soon, in that case, if we want to be back before the sun rages,” said Riderch. “Do you want me to fetch some water?”

Melangell shook her head. “I’ve already filled two skins, and hung them on a nail beside my cell door. I’ll fetch them on our way up. We’ll go now.”

“Lead the way,” said Riderch, and together they struck off toward the northern side of the valley.

The path that Melangell specified began on the western side of Nawddfa. There a steep climb skirted the cliffs, ascending shortly above them as it folded upon itself on its way up the mountainside. All was bare rock in half an hour, rock where no green thing could cling and whose proper footing had been smoothed by steps uncounted and uncountable. Red stripes streaked down across their tawny surfaces, a red that reminded Riderch of Godnu and niggled him until he checked the soles of his feet to see if they were stained. They were not, and yet his discomfort only grew the higher they climbed.

Melangell had undersold the difficulty of the path, he soon found. In places there was a mere foot of level rock between the mountainside and a deadly fall. Sheer climbs of ten feet separated several stretches, aided by staples driven into the stone. It was a path for bighorns, he thought; and while he knew himself capable of it, he was surprised at the ease with which the little halser picked her own way up. She slung her staff across her back with her hide belt when both paws were needed. When they were not, she entrusted her life in leaning against it. Never once did she begin to pant – on the contrary, when they were an hour above Nawddfa she broke their focused silence with a voice wholly undisturbed: “I think it’s safe to say that you’ve no interest in imitating Morgwynn?”

The sun was strangely fat in the distance, rising all the way across the Anialdir to begin the winter’s leavetaking. Riderch could see no impending storm, no cloud of scouring sand, and yet the angry pallor with which it painted the holler all the way down across the salt flats told him that one must be brewing. The wind was up. He could feel the charge in his fur. “How could I?” he answered. “It’s only does here. I couldn’t take one of your rooms, and I can’t sleep in the barn forever.”

“There are ways around these things, if only you were willing,” said Melangell, offering her staff to hold while he clambered up three steep steps.

“I don’t see why I would,” said Riderch. “I’m not bred for this kind of thing.”

“You may be surprised to hear how unfit I am for this life,” said Melangell, “not to mention the tales my sisters would tell you.”

“Is that turkey?” Riderch grunted. “Tell me how this finds you, then: when I was thirteen years old, I found out just how badly my pa had been treating his stablepaws. I knew how badly he treated me, of course, and everyone takes the whip to those little Anialdir ragamuffins. They take them in and put them to work, the war-banders, whenever they conquer a gwerthon. Sometimes they sell them, and Eguin bought a few. He was an Anialdir hare himself, mind you, but they’re the worst sometimes.”

“I know only too well how it goes,” Melangell nodded.

“Anyhow, this was more than I reckoned on, and one of those stablepaws was my best friend,” Riderch continued. “So I cut my pa’s throat clean through with a buck knife while he was sleeping the next night, and after I drove the other boys out of the barn I burned his whole ranch to the ground. You

could say that set the pace for the last eight years, so I wouldn't be so keen on setting a place at table for me if I were you."

"What became of your mother?" asked Melangell.

"Never knew her," said Riderch. "Eguin never talked about her, so I reckon she either died or ran off."

"She must have been from the war-band herself, if he wasn't," Melangell offered. "They gave you a war-band name, at the very least."

"It's either that or wishful thinking," Riderch shrugged. "Anialdir folk give their kittens war-band names sometimes – makes it easier to buy land from them a couple generations down the line, or that's the hope."

Melangell nodded, then after a moment's pause said: "Tale for tale. I was born to a nomad clan, far southwest of the Anialdir."

"You look like it," said Riderch. "I would have guessed the war-band, but you're a little short for that."

"We were little different than the war-band," said Melangell darkly. "When I was only a girl – to say less than I mean – we were raided by a warring clan on our way through a gorge. I was among the spoils, and was made a camp-wife."

Riderch stopped cold, and only thought to continue when Melangell shot him a harsh glance over her shoulder. "It was twenty-two years ago now that I conceived and bore a son," she continued, rounding a sharp bend to the north. "We didn't know who the father was. They fought over him; and because I hated them – hated every single one of them with a murderous passion – I hated my kitten as well. I resolved to let none of them have him. I myself couldn't bear to look at him. I believe I wouldn't have minded him so much if he had been ugly, for then I could have laid upon him all of my own ugliness; but he was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I couldn't bear to do the deed myself. One night, therefore, while the bucks petitioned the elders for custody, I stole a canoe and laid my naked son in the bottom, then sent it down a river. I hoped that the sun would finish the work; and when they thrust me out of the camp for what I had done, I hoped that he would do the same to me. He did not. I walked northeast bearing nary a waterskin for many days, and in the end collapsed in a full trough belonging to the halsers of Nannygat."

The incessant steadiness with which Melangell spoke raked Riderch's spine with a thousand claws. She did not weep, as he would have expected a doe to weep at such an admission; but the paw that grasped her staff trembled while she told the tale, and only stilled when she was finished.

"There are folk for whom the land of the living is ruined," she added at length. "I know that as well as you, Dinistriol, and you're sorely mistaken if you believed you would find no such folk in Nawddfa."

"So you became a halser because you felt guilty, is that it?" asked Riderch with a venomous scowl.

"I became a halser because I expected the sun's fire to consume me," Melangell corrected him, caressing her four-cornered lamp. "But it did not, and by this I'm assured that my son still lives. I came to Nawddfa when I realized that I too would have to live, and so I live to pray for him and for my sisters. Do you understand why I'm telling you this, Dinistriol?"

"I'm not spending my whole life praying," Riderch snapped.

"And yet you still intend to remain with Morgwynn?" asked Melangell.

"I have to," he insisted. "I promised I would."

Melangell stopped then, just as they emerged from the shadow of a looming stone onto a level shelf beneath the jagged peak. "Promised whom?" she asked. "I asked Morgwynn how you two knew each other, and she told me just enough to make me understand that she was omitting a great deal. I

pressed her on it, but she only insisted that I ask you. Will you tell me?"

"What's that?" asked Riderch, pointing past her.

They were still some short distance below the mountain peak, but the path did not continue to the very top. Riderch was struck then by how much shorter the mountain was than he expected it to be, or rather how much higher Nawddfa was upon its slopes. For they were very high up, as he could tell by looking down the range at the distant salt flats, and the next highest peak was a mere adjoining shoulder of rock a little east and north of the one they climbed. He had not been able to look out northward in days, to where the desert floor declined to conduct the Rinnea all the way down to the western sea. It was between these two peaks, therefore, that he caught his first full glimpse of the northern sky, and all of his foreboding of storm was suddenly vindicated.

Coal-black clouds hung low on the horizon, so distant from them that they formed a mere gouge in the sunlit world. So hard was that gouge, however, that Riderch rubbed his eyes, fearing that they had somehow been scratched without his knowledge. The clouds remained after he blinked, shaking out successive streaks of sepulchral haze that faded at last into the clear sky overhead.

"The Opossum Star has burned his tail, says the Hare," Melangell lilted, seemingly unsurprised by the sign. "The sun is about to jump the Abyssal chasm to the next Great Hour – I don't suppose you're familiar with the tale?"

"Can't say as I am," said Riderch.

"Then I needn't tell it here," said Melangell. "It's a storm, suffice it to say. A great and mighty storm. It rolled in with you and Morgwynn, as if I needed more of a portent."

"We didn't come here from the north," said Riderch.

"And yet here you both are," Melangell sighed. Riderch could not tell if her 'both' referred to Rhian or to the storm. "We receive most of our supplies from Iwan, you know, or at least we did. That is likely over now."

"Aye, likely enough," said Riderch, smelling again the corn charring in the burning hut.

"We once grew all we needed ourselves and still had some left over to sell, until he stopped up the spring," said Melangell. "Now we must haul water up the holler for the garden, and still it dies. We can't sustain ourselves this way, not without Iwan."

"Who stopped it up?" asked Riderch, finally turning away from the horizon to look at her. "I thought you said a rock fell over it."

"Do you see that cave there, facing east?" asked Melangell, pointing her staff's horns at a rough alcove in the mountainside fifty paces or so ahead of them and to their left. Riderch would not have known to call it a cave, but he nodded nevertheless.

"Beyond it, just over the garden, is the source of the spring," said Melangell, drawing her staff over to point at the slumped shoulder of rock clinging to the far end of the shelf. "It once flowed down into the pond, then down the western side of Nawddfa, but we can't reach it now. A Hellknight has taken up residence in that cave. It was he who blocked the spring, and he kills and eats anyone who tries to remove it."

In the wake of their leaden words, jesting was the last thing Riderch should have expected from Melangell. He assumed it a jest nevertheless, but his heart sank all the lower when she did not laugh.

"There aren't any more Hellknights," he ventured at length. "That's one of the first things folk tell you about halsers."

"Why, because we killed them all?" Melangell snapped. "If that were true, there would be no need for us in this Day of the World."

"Well why don't you throw it out on its ear, then, if that's what halsers are for?" Riderch growled.

Melangell's severe serenity cracked then, revealing in scandalous nakedness the full depth of

the worry Riderch had first noticed in her face. She closed her eyes and butted heads with her staff again, and Riderch felt the urge to step away. “I can’t,” she said with an almighty sigh. “I haven’t been able to.”

“Then what good is a halser?” asked Riderch, finding himself suddenly brimming with contempt.

“This one isn’t worth her water, I’m afraid,” said Melangell. “It has vexed me beyond almost any distress I have ever suffered. I’ve never known the Scouring Flame to fail, and yet heaven has declined to send it. Eighteen times I have tried to cast him out, the first after seven of my sisters were slaughtered trying to pry the stone free; and yet, though he dares not touch me while I carry the Flame, neither have I been able to drive him from the mountain. I’ve been begging Dinistrith for help every day since he arrived, one year and a half ago. I was weeping to him over our dying garden, in fact, when Sister Imona ran to me, screaming and shouting about bandits climbing the holler.” Her words, which had come out in torrents, stopped abruptly as she paused for breath. “We can’t sustain the garden toting water up from the well. We need the spring open, but the Hellknight won’t let us at it. And if I fail to drive him out very soon, we will have to leave Nawddfa.”

There was indeed a great stone leaning against the northern rocky shoulder, a rough piece which had broken off from its peak and rolled down across a low, smooth channel in the stone. The remains of dead trees rotted over and around it. Riderch looked again at the alcove to his left; the rising sun failed to penetrate its shade, betraying a depth still unapparent. “So that’s why you seem so guilty every time you look at me,” he muttered.

“What you see is fear, my son, not guilt,” said Melangell. “I fear to send you into danger. I fear to risk your life, when I’ve already proven myself a poor steward of other lives.”

“But you’re going to do it anyway,” said Riderch, balling his fists.

“Having heard what you just told me, I’m convinced I can do no less than ask.” A sigh fell from her lips into the valley below, full of a familiar rue that Riderch had never expected to hear expressed in the open air. “You can’t pray. You can’t fast. You can’t stand vigil. You steal food. You’re mighty beyond crediting, and you use that might as a cudgel. And yet you have a dogged devotion to that girl, to the extent that you’ve sworn to follow her across the whole face of the earth. Whom did you promise to guard her, Dinistriol? Look me in the eye and tell me the truth.”

She was already looking at him. He returned her gaze, and felt that he looked in a mirror not made by paws. “Dinistrith,” he admitted for the second time. “Dinistrith told me not to leave her side, and I swore I wouldn’t.”

“Then I am a halser indeed,” said Melangell, reassuming a measure of confidence as if it weighed a hundred pounds. “I won’t try to manipulate you, my son. I won’t lie to you, I won’t trick you, and I can’t force you. If Morgwynn had decided to move on, I wouldn’t have even asked this of you. Furthermore, if she were to undertake the life of heaven without you, I should ask you to leave Nawddfa regardless. But I see now that you won’t, and I believe your stubbornness is insurance against my lack of discernment. Nawddfa will make a good home for Morgwynn, by my faith. But the spring must be freed to flow into the garden, or she will have to leave.”

“You want me to kill him,” said Riderch.

“It took six of the sisters to lift on a pole the same ram that you bore down the mountain on your shoulders,” said Melangell. “Morgwynn tells me that you tore a wolf in half with your bare paws, that you stuffed the prince of Ancathair in a sack and swung him around as if he were goose down. Is that true?”

“She’s making it sound easier than it was,” said Riderch.

“Then perhaps my prayers were not in vain after all,” said Melangell, with more conviction than before. “Dinistrith has sent me a sword. If I am wrong, may it smite me instead.”

She thrust the horns of her staff forcefully at the dark opening, and a smudge of shadow seemed to peel from its walls and retreat within. “Are you angry, Dinistriol?” she asked. “Do you want something to fight? Do you desire to see your bottomless bloodthirst before you? It is in that cave.”

Riderch’s paw wandered to the ear beneath his shirt. He wrung it in his claws, hoping to coax a word out of the power that hounded him, but received none. The interminable silence of Nawddfa flayed the hide from his flesh for the sand to grind away, and his skeletal claws curled around the handle of his falchion. “You’ve got me over a barrel, Mother,” said Riderch, spitting over the edge of the shelf. “I’ll do it for Morgwynn.”

With that he stepped forward, making for the alcove with his paw upon his sword – only to be stopped short when Melangell jerked him back by the collar of his poncho. “I wasn’t asking you to do it this very moment, Dinistriol,” she said. “I brought you up here to ask you to consider it, and to show you the way.”

“I’ve considered it,” said Riderch, turning on his heel to face her. “I said I’ll do it. I’m not one to wait when I know what I’ve got to do.”

“Will you at least delay a day or two?” asked Melangell.

“What? Why?” Riderch snapped. “Do you want me to kill him or not? Hare’s horns, make up your mind!”

“You must be prepared to do battle against so great a foe,” Melangell insisted. “We both must – for make no mistake, Dinistriol, I plan to aid you if I can. Heaven may refuse me the Flame, but I’ll pray for you at the very least, and shield you from him if he drives you back. You will want a bow as well, and ample rest before the hour.”

“I’m rested enough now,” said Riderch.

“You were staggering like a drunkard when you arrived,” Melangell retorted, “and you’ve scarcely stopped moving since. However mighty you may be, Dinistriol, you are only a mortal folk, and fatigue is the deadliest foe in the desert. Above all, Morgwynn will accept the gray tonight, on the eve of the Flaming Dawn. I would have you share in that joy before throwing yourself into battle.”

“How long?” asked Riderch.

“Rest for three days, at least,” said Melangell. “Eat your share of the ram. You need not carry water until then.”

“You want me to sit around and chew my cud for three days while your Hellknight squats in that cave?” Riderch balked.

“I want you to *prepare* yourself, my son,” said Melangell, striking her staff against the stones. “If you must fight something in the meantime, fight against your own beastly urges. Do you understand me?”

With a coarse grunt, Riderch turned to kick a small stone over the edge of the shelf. It tumbled in the air for a few moments, then cracked sharply against the mountainside. “Three days,” he barked, holding up as many claws. “I’ll give you your three days, then I’m going up with or without you.”

“I’ll do all I can to prepare myself, in that case,” said Melangell, only then releasing his collar. “A poor time to fast, but it will be a worthy exchange.”

“What’s he like, this Hellknight?” asked Riderch. “The ones in the Coyote tales are always looking over the tops of the trees, but the cave can’t be that big.”

“He refuses to leave the cave whenever I’m near,” said Melangell, “and because he hates the light, I have only caught what glimpses the Flame affords me – but his head scrapes the top of the alcove. He has a great many arms, and the biggest jaws of any beast I have ever seen. Now come, child, let’s begin the climb down. I would like to rest a bit before braving the heat again, and we should by no means rest here.”

Riderch did not say a word during their descent, and Melangell did not attempt to coax him. He could think only of her brief description of his foe, and knew before he set foot on the valley floor that it had begun to haunt him. *This is what the bridle meant,* he told himself. *I left that well to die anyway, and this is how it happens.* He resolved, if nothing else, to open the spring before the requiting sword fell.

35
No Great Silence

Melangell brought Riderch straight to the kitchen when they returned to Nawddfa; and finding Sister Imona there, instructed her to give Riderch as much of the leftover stew as he wished to eat. She eagerly obliged, to Riderch's surprise, filling a bowl with it and pushing it into his paws. It had been simmering in a great pot upon the stove all day, much to its benefit in his opinion. He ate three bowls, and being sternly warned by Melangell to take his rest while he could, walked with her back to the barn.

"I'm afraid I must tell you to stay here for the first part of Evensong," she said before they parted. "Morgwynn is to enter the Wheelhouse unclad, and no buck may look at her. I will then vest her in the gray, and one of the sisters will come here to fetch you."

"Fair enough," Riderch shrugged.

"Evensong will continue straight into Nightsong, then into Mornsong, as is our habit on the eve of spring," she continued. "It's a long trek of a night, but supper afterward will be sumptuous – at least by our own standards. There will be no great silence tonight, and no work tomorrow."

"Not for me, at least," said Riderch.

She left him then, and throughout the heat of the day Riderch was left to his own devices. At such times in Mydge Boardland, when his band was fat with spoil and there were no marks on the roads, he might have occupied himself with cards or games of backgammon, or in wrestling tournaments held over wagered treasure. No such merciful diversions awaited him that afternoon. There was nothing for him but to prepare himself, as Melangell had so forcefully commanded; and that, Riderch found, was the one thing he did not know how to do. He could not sleep without seeing a drooling, hundred-armed centipede whenever he closed his eyes. He would not pray as Melangell was no doubt doing; thrice he petitioned for Dinistrith's attention, only to be answered by silence. He settled after pacing the withering garden into a malignant brooding, and there in the hayloft he remained until sunset: sharpening and re-sharpening his falchion and his buck knife; stripping limbs until he had passable arrow shafts, then knapping flints for their heads and fletching them with feathers from the pheasants in the sisters' coop. He made only three arrows that way; but given that there were only four left in the quiver with the hedge apple bow, it was a significant improvement.

He had just finished the last arrow by lamplight, in fact, when he heard a rapping at the barn door. The strike-board for Evensong had sounded almost an hour ago, followed by a chorus so sublime that Riderch knew, as he had known wordlessly with Rhian in the wilderness, that he preferred to die rather than to never hear it again. It filled the whole valley, even through the Wheelhouse's pitiful little door; he wondered as he climbed down the ladder, arrows in his teeth and lantern in one paw, if the Hellknight could hear it, and what he thought of it.

Sister Andrasta waited to bring him to Evensong, carrying her own lantern. Her loose robes, draped as they were over an armadillo's cuirass, made her into a queer quail peeking out of its veiled cage. Eyes that Riderch had first thought dull fell upon the arrows he gripped in his paw, and sparks no less brilliant than those from his fire-striker flashed in them.

“Rhian’s clad now,” she said plainly, motioning for him to follow. “Mother Melangell sent me to fetch you. Did you make those yourself?”

“Aye,” said Riderch, walking a few paces behind her. “There were only a few in the quiver, and I wanted more.”

“They’re not bad,” she offered graciously. “I’d be happy to make you some better ones, if you used them to bag more game.”

“That’s my plan,” Riderch grunted.

“Morgwynn tells me you’re staying here until she decides what to do with herself,” Sister Andrasta ventured – it was a guarded inquiry, but there was less dread in it than Riderch might have feared.

“Is that a problem?” asked Riderch.

Sister Andrasta shrugged, and her whole back heaved. “There are wolves up here,” she said. “I don’t mind having someone around to scare them off.”

“I’ll bag you a wolf in exchange for the arrows, then,” said Riderch.

“I reckon that’ll do fine,” she nodded, then said no more.

Rhian was still at the front of the Wheelhouse when Riderch took up his wonted station in the threshold. She knelt before Melangell, who rested a paw upon her head while her mouth moved in spoken prayer. The words of the prayer were almost wholly drowned in the chanted lines of Evensong; but even if they had been shouted into his ear, Riderch would not have heard them. Rhian herself occupied his whole attention, newly hung in slate-gray robes and a wimple that framed a face more jubilant than he thought possible. Hawen in all of her finery had never been half as beautiful. Disma, even in their greatest successes, had never been so unfettered in his delight. He remembered her once more in her wedding garments, in the feathers and the golden brocade, and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that to give her to one of the Anialdir’s warlords would have been a blasphemy heinous enough to shake the heavens.

The choir paused for breath. “…And enter the long silence of heaven,” he heard Melangell say. Rhian rose. Her eyes met Riderch’s, and the grin she gave him was worth more than all of the gold in the Anialdir. With that she melted into the gray host, and then at once the choir began Nightsong.

Riderch remained only as long as he needed to assure himself that the sisters would be occupied in prayer for at least another hour. The lard lamps were burning high, having just been replenished by the ram’s renderings. Copal and cedar smoke rolled through the Wheelhouse door, pushed out by the wind through narrow exchanges in the rock. A small part of Riderch wished that it would never end, that he could guard their threshold forever, but he knew all too well that the thing against which he was to guard it awaited elsewhere. He peeled himself away and crept off to the refectory hall, then into the dark supply room where the bow awaited. He needed no light to find it; by feeling alone he retrieved bow and string and quiver. Topping off his waterskin in the kitchen cistern, he slipped out of the caves and hiked across the valley by lantern light toward the trailhead which Melangell had shown him earlier.

“Where are you going, Riderch?”

“Oh, now you remember how to unbutton your lips?” Riderch grumbled, using the stars to keep his bearings. “You know where I’m going.”

“Without Melangell?”

“A Hellknight would swallow her whole,” said Riderch. “She couldn’t do a thing about it before, and she won’t be a feather on the scale now.”

“A halser’s prayer is no small thing.”

“Then let her pray down here!” Riderch snapped. “Hare’s scut, don’t pretend that means a damn thing to me. Can I kill it, or not?”

No answer came. Riderch felt a fevered flush, and the wind that swept through the coarse grass sapped the heat from his ears. Step by step he left the odor of incense, left the echoing chorus of Nightsong, until in the aching silence and dry, thin sweetness of the mountain air he met the paw-polished trail. One last look down the dark saddle of Nawddfa sufficed, and then he began his climb.

It was then, at the outset, that the Whirlwind which had been rising all day mounted to a ghastly howl. It drove Riderch against the rocks, bringing with it neither rain nor sand, but whipping so furiously that he was forced to cling to every hold he could find lest he be bowled over. The hedge apple bow was useless as a staff unstrung, and he would not stress it by stringing it several hours early. In the end he pulled his sword and scabbard from his belt, and with it anchored himself at every precarious juncture.

He was deaf and windburnt by the time he reached the high shelf, the pockmark scars that Malmuck had peppered across his face stinging like a hundred bee-barbs. The pain steadied him in his dizziness. He looked to his lantern and found the oil half spent, but it hardly mattered. He needed only enough light to see the stone across the spring, and to see the Hellknight if it emerged to harass him. He would descend the mountain, if he descended at all, by daylight.

With his sword hung at the ready from his belt, therefore, he walked the length of the shelf toward the spring. The twin peaks opened to him when he was almost beside the high alcove; there he lifted his eyes to look north, and halted with a chill. The whole field of the never-setting stars was gone, smudged coal-black by the encroaching storm he had seen that morning. Even so, the wind was from the south, the Whirlwind he knew gasping in the death-throes of winter. It was the loneliest thing he had ever seen. Angry at himself for the thought, he could not help but wish that he had brought Melangell with him, or that he had brought Disma, Disma who would be a better shot in the dark.

Slapping himself hard enough to make his ears ring, he gripped his sword and walked toward the alcove until his lamp could draw its pale outline. There was a door tucked away within it, a door twice his height and four times his width that led into a spacious antechamber, which in turn disappeared into a cavernous blackness beyond. A faint reek emerged from it, a reek of old filth and decay, but nothing stirred within. Only the moaning wind could be heard. Watching the portal closely as he passed by, Riderch went on toward the lower shoulder, only to trip and fall into the narrow channel. He rose with a curse and a bump on his head, but after this was more confidently able to follow the channel up to the foot of the rocky mound.

There had been a cleft in that mound once. His lantern delineated its cracks, high and thin, yet wider toward the bottom as the spring water had carved it out. The stone that stopped it was thrice Riderch’s size and no less snug than a wine-stopper, immovable save by steel levers and a team of draft horses. His hope, as faint as it was, died with the trees whose skeletal branches beat against the stone in the wind.

He could not open the spring, then. It seemed almost a given when he admitted it: such wholesome, constructive deeds were beyond him. He was skilled at one thing, and one thing only, and that one thing might at least pave the way for the sisters to pry open the spring themselves. Setting his jaw, Riderch turned around and made his way back to the alcove door, face to the wind.

It, at least, was not blocked. Nothing prevented his entry into the high antechamber, save for a fear of fighting he had long thought ironed out. Years had passed, he realized, since he had been smaller than his foes, years since he had been forced to fight fairly. He resolved not to if he could help it, and strung his bow on the antechamber floor.

To his left and right, on opposite sides of the room, were smaller doors: too small, he assumed, to accommodate any creature whose head scarcely cleared the alcove’s entrance. These were closed, in

any case, and on their metal hinges must have shrieked, and so he had little fear of ambush from those directions. Ahead of him, however, another high portal led into a chamber too vast for his lantern to light. He let out its wick, enlarging the flame as much as he dared; yet while he still could not see far into the chamber, what the light revealed robbed him of an echoing gasp.

On an architrave over the doorway was a familiar mural, dulled by time and yet unmistakable. A many-colored anaconda was wrapped around an ash tree, pulled head and tail by opposing teams of folk and fiendish Hellknights. The tree had been pulled from the ground, and among its tangled roots was the carcass of a cormorant. Turning around, Riderch saw above the outer door the Ever-Waiting Wolf, distinguishable by the kings sliding down the back of his throat. Stars still shone dimly in the east; a lonely red one, larger than the rest, was just cresting the high shelf. It gave Riderch confidence unforeseen. He pulled the cap from his quiver and retrieved the best of his seven arrows, then hanging his lantern from his belt padded into the great chamber beyond.

He learned quickly to keep to the wall. The starlight spilling through the doorway was enough to tell him reliably the way of escape, but there was no finding his way otherwise. His lantern brought into being sprawling scenes of deeply Southern fresco on his left side: folk riding across the yellow stone upon enormous armadillos in the days before horses had been brought to the Eastern Lands, leading behind them the great ground sloths who are still seen at times under hedge apple trees; a young Star who, when pursued by a mortal folk, split herself into two and confounded his hunt; folk wearing fiery tongues upon their heads, inscribed with countless names and yet all bearing the same red lamps. Gwyner, the Jaguar Star wielding his golden spear, hugged the first corner; and opposite him, ten or twelve feet away from the wall, a thick square pillar upheld an invisible ceiling. Judging by the angle of the corner, Riderch guessed the room to be foursquare: if so, he thought, it was smaller than it felt. For it felt positively vast, an endless expanse upon which was inscribed the whole Wheel of Time in all of its revolutions.

Alas, its beauty was lost on him: for the silence of Nawddfa, which killed with its purity, was here malignant and soiled. The floor was streaked with dirt and dried blood, strewn with the refuse of some great beast who cared not for its own abode. Bones were stacked in cairns here and there, crude reconstructions of skeletons whose flesh had been scraped off by merciless teeth. Even with the Whirlwind curling in through the door, the air was stagnant, its foulness covering a faint sweetness still barely detectable.

Riderch passed by several more bone cairns on his way to the southwest corner. There awaited a Dinistrith older than the war-band, a red wolf whose mouth breathed fire and whose sword ran with blood. His face betrayed neither laughter nor recognition, and yet Riderch felt certain that he had found his image through no blind chance, but rather as a fated end. Here stood his dogged pursuer, holding aloft the requiting sword, and he was next to the block. He loosed his own sword in its scabbard, determined to make one last stroke himself.

A curtain ran the length of the western wall, tightly woven of hemp linen and embroidered with countless coiled suns. Against this curtain, piled up in a makeshift wall, were a hundred golden fixtures among a mountain of detritus and mismatched scraps. Brilliant lampstands leaned against cedar log benches made scaffolding for stones and books and ewers and bellows draped in woven mats hung with gold and turquoise beads. To part the curtain from the middle would have required a climb only a bighorn could make. Feeling an itchy recognition skitter up his spine, Riderch took its outer edge in his paw and made to pull it away from the wall, only to drop it a moment later. Something huge had fallen from the ceiling across the starlit doorway. It landed as lightly as a cat, yet he heard countless claws click against the stone. He nocked an arrow and ducked behind the pillar, only to peer around it again when he realized that his lantern gave him away.

If a spider could rear up on its hind legs like a horse, Riderch would have thought it a spider the size of a cottage. Limbs like eddies in the flooding Fawwyrm fanned in all directions, carrying in their wake a multitude of items too dark to identify. One seemed a sword, straight and broad and tipless. Another might have been a staff, although it was a staff for someone several times Riderch's height. The others were lost in a tangled mess, a mess overmastered by what Riderch could only deem a mask. It was half the creature's height and as broad as its shoulders, boasting sharp ears and a long canine snout. Its face smoldered as if it had been aflame a moment ago, lined like the floor of the salt flats with flickering red cracks. This subtle light framed eye sockets as black as new moons; smoke rose from them, obscuring the stars.

There were no eyes in those sockets, and yet even in the darkness Riderch felt that the ent beheld him. Its mask was turned toward his corner of the room, at least, and there was a sudden inclination of its unapparent body in that direction. Snuffling sounds broke up the silence. A jaw as wide as Riderch's wingspan fell open, permitting a third stream of smoke. It spoke in a language he did not understand, a collapsing mountain grating and pounding against itself, then began to walk toward him.

He was just inside the circle of Riderch's lantern when the hare shot his bow at the massive head. There was no missing against a target so huge; the shot felt true, and he watched for the space of a blink as the yellow arrow sought the monster's eye. It sought in vain, however; for with a speed that surpassed a striking serpent, one of its many arms reached up and plucked the arrow from the air. Riderch shot a second and a third as fast as he could nock them, but these fared no better. He cursed, and the monster halted halfway across the room.

"What year is it?" it asked in Hareish.

Revealed now by the lantern's light, its form was no less confounding. It stood on no legs, but rather reared up on an emerald anaconda's tail as thick as any cedar. Arms too numerous to count sprouted from its sides, diverse limbs hung with a king's hoard of gold and turquoise bracelets, chains, rings, and windings. A lizard's talons gripped sword and staff, as well as a haphazard mix of sundries: the gnomon of a sundial, a mechanical compass, a thorny stalk, a deep goblet, and scavenged stones and bones. It wore no clothes besides its windings; in the middle of its upraised belly, where a folk's legs might have begun, a puckering scar crusted over in livid red. The wolf's face, Riderch realized then, was no mask at all, but rather a living skull robed in charred flesh and red fur. Innumerable teeth lined its open jaws, slick with fetid, pooling saliva.

"What year is it?" it asked again. The booming voice could have been a snarl, but there was no anger in it.

Riderch had hardly heard it the first time. At the second he twitched, desperate to send an arrow home, but had no more faith that he could do so. Ready to drop his bow and draw his sword at need, he stood half-shielded by the pillar. "The Year of the Cat," he answered. His own voice, he was surprised to find, was full of a white rage he had until then mistaken for fear.

"How many since the fall of Pedwar Ceinych?" it asked.

Riderch blinked. Nothing approaching folkish emotion could be read in its burning face, and yet its question seemed perfectly earnest. "Thirty," he said, counting in his head. "No, less than that. Just shy."

The monster did not speak again for several moments. Its arms moved ceaselessly, a swarm of undulating eels, but otherwise it was still. "I believe you misunderstand me, wild ram," it said at length. "What Day of the World is it?"

"Oh," was all that Riderch could think to say at first. "The Second. That's what folk say, at least."

"The second since the beginning, or since the fall of Pedwar Ceinych?" the monster asked. "What is its name?"

"I don't…I don't know," Riderch stumbled.

The wolf's head clattered its teeth together. "The Opossum has burnt out his tail," he remarked, almost as an aside. "You are the offering to be passed across the chasm, aye? The smell of your entrails is foreboding."

"There is no crossing the chasm for you, Riderch."

Knowing not what to say to this, Riderch kept silent.

"But no," the monster added a moment later. "You know the boardland passwords. I can hear it in your voice. You are one of Coyote's custodians?"

"Coyote?" said Riderch.

"He sent you to pillage my rightful spoils, no doubt, as soon as he heard that I had returned," the monster nodded. Its coils hissed as they slid against the floor, as it came shortly to loom over Riderch; seeing claws reached out to feel his face, his arms, his thighs. He felt that Hawen rubbed against him again, searching for something she might claim as a gift.

"I didn't come here to rob you," said Riderch, weighing the wisdom of an open challenge against some underhanded scheme he had no hope of concocting.

"Then name yourself, or else cast your last darts!" The monster thundered, in a voice that rattled Riderch's teeth and turned his guts to water. "Recount your lineage to Arow, scion of the Valley of Corn, that he may judge the worthiness of his foe!" He leveled his great sword against Riderch then, directing its pointless wooden tip at his chest, and Riderch saw that its inlaid blade was of knapped green glass. His eyes widened when he recognized it. The sound of little Disma's weeping returned to him, the scent of burning fur and wolf fat. Long-stifled fear mingled with and stoked the fire of his anger.

"Dinistriol," he answered.

A grin split Arow's face, so slowly that it was several seconds before all of his teeth were bared. "Name you yourself, or me?" he growled.

Although it could not have resembled it less, Arow's grin was the very same that Eguin had shown Riderch the first time he had tried to fight back. It was as if Eguin had stepped out of their burning ranch that very moment to mock him again. Riderch flushed so deeply that he felt the urge to fan himself with his own hat, though his paws ached to draw the bow.

"Are you the one who killed those she-folk?" asked Riderch. "The Little Gray Ones who came up here to pull the rock out of the spring? Killed and ate them?" He had said almost the same to Eguin.

Arow's grin became a grimace. "It was the halser who sent you, then," he rumbled, resting his sword over one of his shoulders. "And yet you've no Flame of your own. No Flame! I would accuse her of conscripting pilgrims, but neither are you, all red with blood as you are."

"Are you going to own up to it, or should I just assume?" Riderch barked. His heart rolled like a bodhran, galled at the familiar shape of the words.

"Gladly will I own that which belongs to me!" Arow barked back, taking up a wretched whining that grated the depths of Riderch's ears. He wheeled on his coils and began to circle the middle of the room, no less than pacing, his laden claws beating the floor with rocks. "Must one own in shrift that he has fed his own babes? Must he? For they hunger, Dinistriol, they hunger and must eat, as you well know, and they may not eat unless I feed them, for I have eaten them. They eat all save the bones, all save the bones, and these they make me vomit up in this charnel house. Am I to make shrift every time I cull my herd? Am I, Dinistriol?"

Arow was screaming now, a catamount's shriek that strained against a ceiling far above. Seeing that his back was turned, Riderch thought to cast another arrow, but reconsidered when the Hellknight

returned to stand even nearer him. “Are you a stranger to desperation, Dinistriol?” he howled in Riderch’s face. It was transparently a plea, to his astonishment, the kind of plea he knew no confident foe to make.

“She said that you ate seven of them at once,” Riderch continued, digging the knife a little deeper, “then never again. Why didn’t you go down into Nawddfa for more?”

“Mighty you may be, Dinistriol, but you are no great lord,” Arow answered proudly, jabbing half a dozen claws at him. “No great lord! The Melangell’s voice fills that whole valley, and while it persists I shall not go down. I, at least, will not be enthralled by it. No, not I. Let it cease, and then I would feast upon the whole herd.”

“Then why did you start squatting here in the first place?” Riderch shot back.

“Pah!” Arow roared, swinging his long staff at Riderch. The hare ducked behind the pillar, and it cracked too high against the stone. “The cottager is thrown in prison for a time, and when he returns, rats have made his abode their own. At all hours they screech behind the walls. At every hour, day and night. Squatters, indeed! And now they have turned the dog against me!”

Riderch furrowed his brow, daring once more to step out from behind the pillar. “Is that why you stopped up the spring?” he asked. “Are you trying to drive them away?”

“The Melangell attracts them,” Arow explained, lifting his radiating arms in a gesture Riderch did not understand. “It was true when I was exiled from this place, and it is true now. Let the valley turn to dust if it expels the rats. Let it become a barren rock again!”

“Was it Melangell who sent you away?” asked Riderch, growing more and more perplexed. “She didn’t say anything about that. Where did you go? Why’d you only come back now?”

“The chains in which I was bound are all rusted through,” said Arow, rattling lengths of rusted chain that hung from corroded manacles around some of his wrists. “The Whirlwind devours even these. Yea, even its own prisoner’s chains! My long-necked jailer departed. For a time I wandered deep gorges beneath the Valley of Corn, only to mount the rocks again when the eye of heaven batted in sleep.”

By now Riderch was quite certain he did not know what Arow was saying. Arow, however, seemed utterly confident in Riderch’s own comprehension, such that he grew more triumphal the longer he spoke.

“And what of you, Dinistriol?” he asked, gesturing at the hare’s chest with a crowd of open palms. “What misadventure sends you armed into the lord’s house at a halser’s behest? You, a warlord, to reckon by the corpses beneath your feet, or else a warlord’s scion.”

“You’re off the mark,” said Riderch, shaking his head although he was more certain than ever that Arow was blind. “I’m just a common thief.”

Arow balked, rising several feet on his coils. “A dog indeed,” he growled. “A dog, and worthy of a dog’s death. And yet you would have me believe that you come not to pillage? What then?”

“Riderch, listen to me. Listen very carefully.”

“Aye?” Riderch muttered.

“Eye? Whose eye?” Arow shouted, growing more irritated by the second.

“You must tell him the truth – it will make him angry enough to strike you. When he does, you must fill his open claws.”

“Aye, I reckon I’ve earned a dog’s death,” said Riderch, raising his own voice to match Arow’s howl. “I’m a thief and a cutthroat – but do you know who’s fond of cutthroats?” Dropping his arrow back in its quiver, he braced his paw against his falchion’s guard and used his thumb to slowly, silently free it from the scabbard’s grip. “Dinistrith,” he barked. It was directed at the Star speaking from the wall over his shoulder.

“Make no idle threats!” Arow snarled, and with four swift arms reached out to seize Riderch. One found his ears, one his leg, and one his bow arm – the fourth, however, found the ear beneath his shirt. He gripped it tightly, taking with it a patch of Riderch’s fur, before a tremendous shudder wracked his body. He hissed and cringed, shaking Riderch’s torn red poncho from a smoking limb, but could not draw back before Riderch had severed the limb that held his ears. It fell hard to the floor, writhing as an earthworm writhes.

Keeping his falchion in his paw, Riderch drew another arrow from his scabbard and let fly, then another without thought. Arow caught them both, though he roared in pain, and Riderch would have given him two more if the Hellknight had not raised another of its laden limbs. In it was a great wand of some silver metal, dull with age and ugly corrosion. At its end was another eye as empty as his own, baleful and unblinking. A spark emerged from it, followed by a deafening thunderclap, before the wall behind Riderch shattered into a hail of cutting stones.

He has no time to duck behind the pillar again before a second spark is born. This one, however, breathes no fire against Riderch, but like an adder caught by the tail turns and strikes its captor. Arow’s wand, feeble with age, destroys itself in the blast, sending up smoke and sparks that stun the Hellknight. Ears ringing, stinging from the stones that peppered his back, Riderch takes the opportunity to dart between the monster’s coils and the curtain, leaping as a ram leaps to the top of the heap Arow had piled. From this higher vantage he casts his last two arrows, both fashioned by his own paws. Seeing claws catch them easily, in spite of Arow’s fresh wounds; but this, if anything can so be called, is fortunate to Riderch.

He lays aside his yellow bow as the beast wheels around to pursue him. Green coils speedily scrape the floor, vast ribbons surging beyond the lantern’s eye. Arow mounts his own hoard with ease; but Riderch, armed with Dinistrith’s merest word, makes haste to delay him. Beneath his feet are a hundred works of gold, ancient and pure, tooled with willow-armed, moon-eyed figures unmistakably foreign to the Anialdir. He pulls up the first he sees, a golden lampstand, and lets fly at Arow. The Hellknight catches it, pulling it close to his breast, but continues on. A golden ladle Riderch hurls then, aiming for his foe’s face as Sister Imona had aimed for his. Arow catches it in another empty claw, not slowing his ascent until he climbs the crest. His sword upraised, he dares a cut at Riderch’s neck, and it is all the hare can do to parry it. Sacrificial glass shatters against steel. The inlaid oak roars over Riderch’s head. Very nearly he topples down the side of the heap, but with an effort retains his footing. Desperate, then, he finds a golden plate nearby, and on an instinct flings it as an athlete’s disk toward the eastern door.

“Stop moving my things!” Arow shrieks, taking up a child’s tantrum; and to Riderch’s stark surprise, turns from him to chase the plate across the room.

Thrilling clarity cools Riderch’s brow, just enough to let him catch his breath. Fetching gold as fast as he can pluck it, he hurls cups and rings and showers of stolen coins with all his might, scattering them to every corner of the room. They glitter in his lantern light before falling into darkness, and once more he feels that he is tumbling with the stagecoach pilot through the sky, surrounded by ten thousand flashing sparks.

“Unhand my rightful spoils, base thief!” Arow howls, catching what he can and scooping up the rest. Before long his every claw is filled; he clutches his treasures against his scaled chest until he can no longer grasp. Riderch continues to throw, however, unsure how to proceed, and finds to his excitement that Arow favors the greater wealth over the lesser. He drops great stones in favor of the smallest coins, his staff for a jeweled chain, his ruined wand for a croton-stained saucer, and at the very last – before Riderch knows what he throws – his broad sword for a skull with a golden tooth.

Overburdened to the point of teetering, Arow sends up another desperate whine, and with a mind to stop the thrower for good charges back up the clattering mound. His countless arms cage a

superfluity of gold, unwilling and unable to let it go. Not one limb still wields a weapon, not one claw remains to throttle Riderch's throat. Only Arow's great jaws remain open, charred to the bone and slick with their own rotten liquor; these he snaps, lunging forward with a mind to make a meal of the cutthroat.

A cutthroat he is aptly named, however. He sees as Arow rolls upon him the biting stagecoach pilot, the wolf on the floor of Islawr, and Eguin's ghoulish death-mask, between them more necks than he can count, and knows what he must do. He waits for the open maw to overshadow him, for its forked black tongue to flick, then unopposed by arms he pours his red wrath into a roar and makes a mighty cut. Arow's smoldering head smothers him, powerless to bite. His body slips limply to the bottom of the heap, surrounded by gold.

Afraid of being burned, Riderch pushed the reeking head off of himself, but found when he did so that its smoldering flesh was now gray and ashen. Red fur still ran between its ears and down the back of its skull; all that remained of its face fell away to mere bone under his touch. Larger than he was himself, Riderch braced both feet against that head and kicked it down the heap, where it rolled to the middle of the floor and was still.

"Well done, Dinistriol. Well done indeed! Rise up now and labor: the spring is still stopped."

"I can't move the stone," Riderch panted, terrified of betraying the dizzying joy he felt at those words.

"And yet you must. Indeed, you will if you trust me again as you just did."

Seeing that it hung torn and bloodstained from his shoulders, Riderch threw off his shirt and wiped his blade clean. Beneath it, the ear hung unharmed from its thong, resting in the seeping blood where the Hellknight had torn out his fur. He cursed, then threw the ear over his shoulder while he retrieved his bow and clambered down the heap to the floor.

Arow's body was already half-shriveled by the time he reached it, rigid and wrinkled and gray, with all of its many arms curled in like a spider's. Fat, white worms as long as Riderch's legs crawled out of its headless neck, only to die newborn. Wiping the blood from his chest with his ruined shirt, he returned his falchion to its scabbard, then dropped the shirt and placed his lantern on the floor in order to unstring his bow. The arrows were lost in the scattered heap, but Sister Andrasta would make more – he had earned them. He pocketed the string with a grin, repeating it to himself: he had earned them.

"What do I do now?" he asked, satisfied that he had suffered no other injuries.

"Fur still remains on the Hellknight's head. Cut it off in one clean piece."

"I've never scalped a folk in my life," Riderch balked, realizing when he had said it that he had no legitimate complaint. He received no answer, in any case; and so, heaving a great sigh, he pulled out his buck knife and retrieved the lantern, then padded to the middle of the room where the head lay.

How fur so fine could cling to a skull so fleshless, he could not fathom. His knife slid through the hide as if it were a purse, glancing against the bone with nary a flow of blood. Carefully – at least as carefully as he could in the low light – he freed the fur from the charred flesh around the Hellknight's ears, then down the jowls to the stumped neck, prying up the edges with his knife as he went. It peeled away as leather, already tanned by immemorial ages, so dry that nothing remained in it to stink. Some hours later, aided by a lamp suspiciously longsuffering, he pulled it from the skull in a single piece as large as a quilt. It made him somewhat sick to think so, but it was as fine a pelt as any he had ever seen, finer far than his abandoned wolf's hide.

"That's done," he grunted. "Now what?"

"Cut a hole in the middle."

Riderch furrowed his brow, but knew better now than to interrogate. "How big?"

"Big enough to fit your head through."

He made none of the blue refusals he wished to make, although he muttered them brokenly to himself. Rather he set to work, slicing a simple hole in the middle of the hide and tossing away the discard.

"Now put it on."

"Why?" Riderch barked, unable to contain himself.

There was no answer.

"He ate those seven Little Gray Ones," Riderch pressed, glancing again at the body to find it less than half its original size. "Who knows how many more folk he's eaten?"

"And how many have you devoured, Dinistriol?"

Riderch kept silent then and donned the makeshift poncho, choosing to keep the coarse hide against his coat when he found he could not bear to feel the fur. It fell halfway past his knees front and back, exactly as it should have. Lifting his arms, he noted with some chagrin that the fur was a deeper red than his old poncho's, precisely the red of blood. It would not breathe well, he suspected, and yet for the moment the leather was beautifully cool against his fevered body.

"What now?" he asked.

"The corpse must not be allowed to remain here, and I would spare other paws the indignity of touching it. Drag it out of this house and leave it for the sun to destroy."

Grunting his assent, Riderch obeyed without delay. He hung the lantern from his belt again, noting that it had begun to gutter at last, and began with the head. Lifting it proved unwieldy, though he felt not too heavy, and so he chose to drag it backwards by two of its great teeth. Black sockets stared at him all the while, no more dead than they had been in life, until Riderch cast it without honors over the southern edge of the shelf to be dashed to pieces against the rocks.

The body, unexpectedly, proved easier to lift, being by that time only skin and bones. He slung it over his shoulder, half carrying it, half dragging it behind him, then flung it down after its head and brushed a cloud of dust from himself into the Whirlwind. To the east, the Abyss was almost fully risen, skirted by a gray that marked an imminent sunrise. To the west, behind the mountain, the Ram's rear hoof would be leaving the Anialdir, making the journey that Riderch himself was making. It struck him in that moment that he had not died, although in truth he felt he lived no longer. His fever was more punishing than ever, throbbing in his skull with the rhythm of someone else's heartbeat. If he was lucky, he thought, it would claim him before he returned to Nawddfa.

"What do I do next?" he panted.

"The stone, Dinistriol. It must be removed before sunrise."

"You have a few draft horses lying around somewhere?" he asked.

"I don't need them. I have you. Now hurry, before you grow too weak."

Nodding feebly, Riderch obeyed, finding the shallow channel just as his lantern died and following it north in the dark. He thought as he climbed that he could hear the sisters singing again, taking up an early Mornsong on his behalf – but they would still be feasting, or else asleep, as they rightfully should be. There was nothing left to fear, doubly so now that he himself was passing out of the land of the living. Someone was singing, however, singing texts that he had never heard from Rhian's little book. They flew around his ears as fast as the turning firmament, triumphant beyond description, and for the first time all of the relish he had hoped to feel at Morgwynn's kidnapping crashed upon him with force. The first good thing he had ever done in his life would prove in the final reckoning the only one. He did not know which way the scales would fall; but if he was forced to live, he thought, he might strive to do that same thing again and again until he could do nothing else. So the heavens turned; and so, as Melangell implied, the Stars lived.

He met the stone then, when it was too dark to see his paws in front of his face. It was even bigger under his seeing claws, even more imposing, a stopper sufficient to eclipse the upper heaven. At

the same time, he knew that he could move it. No brightwine had ever made him as drunk as this fever had made him, just as no brightwine had ever made him so bold. Reaching beneath the boulder, he took it in his arms and heaved with all his might, howling with agony in every sinew as the song swelled overhead:

“Thus when the sun from his watery bed
All curtained with a cloudy red,
Pillows his chin upon an orient wave;
The wandering shadows ghastly pale,
All troop to their infernal jail
Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave.”

The stone budged. He gasped, and that gasp granted him the strength to lift it even higher: onto his shoulders, and from there over his head. A gurgling began. Water pooled around his ankles. Turning left, he threw the stone westward as hard as he could, and in the first effulgent light of dawn beheld it crashing against the mountainside. He wheeled around to see the sun, singing with a voice unlovely yet unabashed the words which filled his ears:

“With might endued above the sons of folk,
Swift as the lightning's glance his errand execute,
And spread his name amongst the heathen round.”

Foam burst forth from the earth, spraying into the air in the glee of its manumission, then with a lusty flow rushed out of the spring and down the channel. Riderch opened his mouth to sing again. Flames poured out of it instead, extinguished by the water that swept him away.

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For a measureless span of time he was Malmuck, floundering in the waters of Gwydd Gwerthon before he was pulled into the air by his tail. The pain was excruciating, but ultimately the tail was torn off, and from its bleeding end the goose who held it hung a pair of scales. Upon one she placed Riderch’s head; upon the other, Arow’s. The latter, being so much heavier, sank down again into the water, hoisting Riderch’s aloft. From that high perch he could hear a constant chorus of voices whose harmonies changed as their regard for one another changed, as they moved in and out of each other’s sight, departing and emerging over the gwerthon’s round rim. Riderch joined them for a time, knowing that he was resented for his guttural voice and scarred face, until the chorus fell away to a soloist who sang directly over his head:

“On yonder dune there sits a hare,
Full of worry, woe and care,
In direst dread of hound and snare,
Singing ho, brave boys, hey-ho;
In direst dread of hound and snare,
Singing ho, brave boys, hey-ho

And now she’s wheeled and wheeled again,
Merrily as she wends the plain,

And may she live to wend again,
Singing ho, brave boys, hey-ho;
And may she live to wend again,
Singing ho, brave boys, hey-ho”

It was a hunting song, or at least it sounded like one. His paw twitched, reaching for an arrow, but all seven of them were spent. His sword was at the bottom of the well. Weaponless, he reached for the ear around his neck, thinking to throttle it until Dinistrith forfeited some advice – but it too was gone, and this was the loss that spurred him to his senses. He sat up too fast and found the room spinning; a firm yet gentle paw caressed his forehead and pushed him back down onto a coarse pillow.

It was deliciously cool. The room was softly, ruddily lit, its walls and ceiling of bare brown rock. He was lying upon a cot, to judge by the way it hugged his body, and was so weak that he feared at first that he could not move at all. A moment’s effort proved him quick, at least, and while his paw clutched vainly at his chest, his eyes alighted upon the familiar, severe face which hung over him.

“You weren’t to go up again without me,” said Melangell with breathless force. “You gave me your word that you would wait.”

“Why am I here?” asked Riderch, finding his own voice so gravelly that he hardly recognized it. “That should have killed me. The goose said so.”

Melangell furrowed her brow and bent down, and for a moment Riderch believed that she was going to kiss him; but she only pressed her nose to his nose and ears, taking his temperature, and rose shaking her head. “I’ve put you in the supply room beside the kitchen,” she said. “It’s cool and out of the way, and you were running such a terrible fever that I wasn’t about to put you back in the barn. It’s just after Nightsong now – you’ve been here most of the day.”

“Did I walk back down?” asked Riderch, clearing his throat but finding that his voice remained as rough as sandpaper. “I can’t remember.”

Melangell shook her head, and its austerity cracked ever so slightly along lines of joy. “We all flew out of our cells when we heard the spring erupt,” she said. For the first time Riderch noticed that she held her staff, for she pulled it toward herself and leaned her head against the Ram’s own stubborn head. “The sound of the spray filled the whole valley, and the pond was already overfull and flowing down the western side when I arrived.”

She paused for a long moment and looked at him hard, whiskers all a-flitter, and in the lull Riderch looked down at himself. The borrowed red-star blanket was covering his shirtless body; he threw it aside to find that he still wore his pants, though the belt and chaps were gone. Neither the ear nor its thong were around his neck. “It was Morgwynn who found you,” Melangell continued, “spinning around an eddy in the middle of the pond with a cluster of other wrack. She dove in and fished you out before the other sisters knew what they were looking at.”

“Was I wearing an ear?” asked Riderch, who was sitting up now and would not be coaxed back down. “An ear around my neck?”

“This ear?” asked Melangell, producing the sun-red organ from one of her voluminous sleeves. She held it by the thong so that it dangled in front of Riderch; he grasped for it, but she jerked it back out of reach before he could touch it. The severity had returned to her face with force.

“Aye,” said Riderch, grateful for the weakness that prevented him from taking it from her. “It’s mine.”

“It’s your ear?” Melangell challenged. “Were you born with three?”

Still too dizzy to keep his thoughts straight, Riderch could only shake his head and look down at his chest. The flesh was still inflamed where the fur had been ripped out; and yet his fever, for the first

time since his band had returned from the Deepwaste, was gone. “It burned him when he touched it, Mother,” said Riderch. “Burned me too, when he talked to me. It’s bad luck to hold onto.”

“When who touched it, Dinistriol?” asked Melangell.

“Arow,” said Riderch. “The Hellknight up on the mountain. I killed him.”

The ensuing silence was so fraught that Riderch’s sword could not have cut it. Melangell’s voice was a distant thunder when it came. “Well that answers one of my questions, at least,” she said, seeming to rise to twice her height though she already stood. “I have more, if you’re well enough to answer them.”

“Will you give it back?” asked Riderch pitifully.

Melangell shook her head again and slipped the ear back into her sleeve. “Not until you’ve answered my questions,” she said. “And perhaps not even then, although I’ll explain why when I’m satisfied myself.”

Riderch rubbed his pitted face and cleared his throat again; the millstone scratching persisted. “I’m as dry as a dune,” he said.

“Drink as much as you like,” said Melangell, permitting a guarded smile as she picked up a waterskin from beside the cot and dropped it into his paws. “We needn’t go far to fetch it, now.”

Riderch drank greedily, emptying the skin before coming up for air. He coughed, pawed back the skin, and wiped his mouth with his arm. “Was I wearing a fur poncho?” he asked, no less hoarsely. “Scarlet fur, with tanned hide on the inside?”

“That was another one of my questions,” Melangell nodded, “though my ridiculous guess may turn out to be true.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you,” said Riderch. “Fetch it for me if you would, Mother – I’d do it myself if I could. I don’t care if it’s still wet.”

“Are you cold?” asked Melangell, eyeing his blanket.

Riderch shook his head. “It’ll make it easier for me to sit up and talk, I reckon.”

“Very well,” said Melangell, and slipped out of the crowded supply room. Everything was as it had been when Riderch left, save for a few more lamps. He wondered if his bow was still in the cave, and what had become of his arrows.

Melangell returned bearing his poncho in both arms, seeming to struggle with its weight. Riderch took it from her easily enough; yet against his hope, no measure of strength returned when he threw it over his head. It was the ear after all then, as it had always been. The hide scraped against his bald skin, but he paid it no heed. “Thank you,” he said.

“Where did you get the ear, Dinistriol?” asked Melangell. “From whom?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Riderch. Finding that his cot was pushed against the wall, he propped his back against it.

“It does,” Melangell corrected him. “It matters a very great deal, and I will by no means return it to you until you’ve explained to me where it came from and why you’re so desperate to have it back.”

Riderch sighed then, and the sound of his breath was nothing less than the snort of a charger. “You don’t have the right to keep it from me,” he growled.

“I have a duty, by the Hare’s cup!” Melangell declared. The sound of her staff beating the floor made Riderch cringe. “You were in the throes of a deadly fever when Morgwynn pulled you ashore, Dinistriol. We did all we could for you, I and Sister Airmed and poor Sister Imona, but you were too hot to touch until we pulled off that ear to rub creosote on your chest.”

Here she leaned in again, as fierce as any mounted rider, and plied his tender breast with a claw. “I have seen nomads with their trophies, Dinistriol, don’t suppose me a kitten,” she smoldered. “I’ve seen them so fresh that they could have been cut from the foe five minutes ago. Never have I seen a

severed ear still warm to the touch, still soft, as if it still lived. It didn't come from Arow, that much I know. So where?"

When he did not answer, Melangell pulled back and hugged her staff, heaving a great sigh. "Why won't you answer me, my son?" she asked haggardly. "You've proven yourself a very Star sent from heaven – nothing you say will make me regard you any differently. What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," Riderch protested, only to choke and sink down into the folds of his poncho. Another silence stretched on, until at last he muttered: "Why am I still here?"

"In Nawddfa?" asked Melangell.

"That Hellknight should have killed me," said Riderch. "It told me I was going to die."

"The Hellknight told you that?" Melangell pressed.

Riderch shook his head and shrugged. "I didn't expect to make it to spring," he said.

"You mean you hoped you wouldn't," said Melangell. It was not a question, but Riderch nodded regardless.

"And then you awoke in a halser's trough," Melangell added, unable to stifle a smile.

"A gwerthon," Riderch rasped. "I reckon I never left it. Dinistrith watched me cut that halser's ear off, and he's been hounding me ever since. I expected him to kill me when he was through with me."

Melangell's eyes bulged out of their sockets. "The ear belonged to a halser?" she husked.

"Out in the Deepwaste," said Riderch. "They were at a little gwerthon right off the Swartway, a day or so west of a mountain at the tail end of Clegyrau. They were from way up north – or two of them were. The third was one of us, some nomad from down by Sunstone to listen to him talk. I robbed them and cut the rabbit's ear off. It never dried out. I don't know what happened to them."

Hearing that his lips were looser, Melangell swallowed her shock and sat down beside him on the cot. Riderch stiffened, but did not move away. "Go on," she said, as gently as possible.

The invitation was a starting bell for Riderch. Rubbed raw by insufferable weariness, he began to tell all in guttural, bloody detail, beginning with his failure in the Deepwaste and ending with his contest against Arow. His voice never grew smooth again, but neither did it fail nor falter as he recounted his crimes. Melangell listened patiently, leaning her head against the Ram's with her eyes closed, her only motion an occasional reverent caressing of the ear through her sleeve. She did not interrupt, though Riderch's telling was disjointed and, in places, hopelessly shattered by his own lack of comprehension. He recited the words of the song which had accompanied his loosing of the spring, and as he did so the cave around them seemed to lean in, forbidding all other sound.

"You say that it's Dinistrith who speaks to you," said Melangell at length, "but you've described at least two voices, not counting the heavenly choir."

"That's turkey," said Riderch, painfully mindful of the heat radiating from the halser's body, "but Dinistrith is the one who put me onto Morgwynn, and he's the one who talks to me the most."

"Did he call himself Dinistrith?" asked Melangell.

The question found Riderch like a fist. He jerked and looked at her, as a hundred cold claws skittered up his spine. "I heard the name a few times," he said, almost defensively. "He used it, aye."

"To refer to himself?" Melangell pressed.

"Well who else would it be?" Riderch snapped. "Who else would tell me to cut a goiter out of a horse's neck?"

"But did he tell you his name, Dinistriol?" asked Melangell.

Riderch opened his mouth, then closed it, sifting through the dry sand of his memory. "No," he finally admitted. "You don't reckon it's him, maybe, but I don't reckon it could be anyone else."

"And what makes you say that?" asked Melangell.

The sacrificial glass of Arow's sword flashed in Riderch's mind again, glass which he knew from experience was difficult to knap. "Well if it isn't Dinistrith, who is it?" he barked.

"I don't know," Melangell shrugged. "But the Stars, in their dealings with folk, are wont to name themselves only when they wish to be named. I wonder that you're so confident you've been talking to Dinistrith, when none of the voices you've heard have named themselves as Dinistrith."

"What other Star would bother with a thief and a cutthroat?" Riderch asked.

"Blinda, perhaps, if he helped you to slay a Hellknight," Melangell offered, "although Blinda's voice is said to be unlovely. I wouldn't presume to call him that either, in any case. My pestering isn't idle speculation, as prone as I am to it. I want to understand what's happening to you, my son."

"So do I," Riderch grunted. "If you've got a notion, I'd like to hear it."

"Nothing more than half baked, I'm afraid," said Melangell. "You say that he told you not to leave Morgwynn's side? I'll call her Morgwynn, mind you, though I'm certain that wasn't the name he used."

"That's turkey," said Riderch, "and I don't aim to do it now."

"I'm not asking you to," said Melangell, offering an upraised palm. "I'm only fumbling for clarity in the inscrutable heavens, as you've done yourself. You say that the fever is worse when he speaks to you?"

"Aye, when he talks too much," said Riderch, "or takes the spurs to me. It's not so bad when I'm just wearing the ear – I get flush, but otherwise I feel fine."

"And how do you feel now?" asked Melangell.

"Better," said Riderch truthfully. "Better than I've felt in a coon's age, to talk turkey. But I feel like I shouldn't."

"Why not?" asked Melangell.

"Why am I still here?" Riderch asked again, looking at the halser with pleading eyes. Those eyes were huge and glassy now, full of the quiet madness that he shared with the Little Gray Ones. It made his pitted face even more forbidding.

"Not all deaths are equal, my son," said Melangell, as she pulled the ear from her sleeve and held it out to him. "It seems clear enough to me that heaven sees no use in sending you to the Path of Souls just yet. Learn to live with the time given you. Ply your sword against yourself for a change."

Riderch took the ear back gingerly, fingering its velvet softness. Its warmth sank into his bones, the same radiant warmth he had felt when the little halser had ridden ahead of him in the saddle. He wanted to weep, but would not allow himself. Instead he slipped its thong over his head and tucked it under the collar of his poncho, where it lay against his raw chest and soothed it. "Are you really Dinistrith?" he asked, but received no answer. "Would you tell her if you won't tell me?" he pressed, and heard only silence.

"No luck?" asked Melangell.

"He's been quieter lately," said Riderch.

"He doesn't want to hurt you," said Melangell, "or perhaps he's said all that he wishes to say."

"Maybe," said Riderch.

"Who is Riderch, my son?" asked Melangell, coolly enough that he did not understand the question at first. His whiskers drooped when it sank in.

"I told her not to use that name," he said.

"You were muttering it in your fever," Melangell corrected him. "'For this you were born, Riderch, with this I entrust you,' over and over again. Is it someone you know?"

Riderch shook his head stiffly. "He's just a dead hare, Mother," he answered.

Melangell nodded. "Did you kill him?"

"I tried to," said Riderch.

"It's a war-band name," said Melangell.

"I've killed a few of those," said Riderch.

"Then I won't pry any more," said Melangell, "though if ever you would like to make shrift, I may at least hear it, in faith against the next visit from a Shepherd."

"Much obliged," said Riderch.

Melangell rose at last from the cot, to Riderch's great relief. "Thank you for enduring my interrogations, my son," she said, bowing to him. "Are you hungry? You haven't eaten since last night."

"Starving," Riderch answered, rising after her with an effort. "But I can wait until Evensong."

"There's no need," Melangell smirked, curling a claw to summon him out of the supply room with her. "We saved you a portion of the ram, among other things. There is, however, one more mystery I would make you privy to."

She did not lead him to the kitchen. They walked in the opposite direction, in fact, through the refectory antechamber and out of the cave entirely. Riderch stopped to gape not three steps out the door. The first day of spring had brought with it a warmer night, the first hint of the unendurable heat to come. Delicious breezes flowed down into Nawddfa, carrying the nectar of flowers as numerous as the stars who blazed overhead. The moon was still young, a mere cat's claw on the western horizon, and yet the refulgent heavens spilled such light into the high valley that he at first supposed it full. The stars had been washed clean by the spraying spring, he thought, finding it foolish and yet knowing that it was true. Showers of gold as rich as milled corn crowded every inch of the firmament. Innumerable voices sang slow rounds: softly, but by no means timidly. Riderch heard them all and flushed, then followed Melangell's beckoning.

"I know now the provenance of this sign, having heard your tale," she said, leading him past the barn toward the garden, "although I marvel that it came on your heels."

He had no time to ask what she meant before the garden answered for her. Starlight played upon the surface of the pond, full now of cool, clear water, overflowing into its stream where it was borne away westward, out of the Anialdir entirely. The sound of a splashing waterfall was as musical as the heavenly choir, both expansive and penetrating in the sleeping cradle of the garden. Greenery had sprung up everywhere, thick and succulent where it had only hours ago been crumbling to dust. Corn fully grown flanked the western stream, supporting fruiting beans and shading, hunched squashes below. The palm trees dropped ripe fruits. All that was not fruiting was flowering, just as it had in the gwerthon upon the eastern slopes of the Greteboga, just as it had in the blood-stained gwerthon east of Cair Cunning. Even the gnarled algarrobo tree, perfectly at home in the dry desert basin, hurried ahead of spring to put forth its summer flowers.

Riderch himself was rooted to the ground when he noticed Rhian standing on the shore of the pond, sniffing a long wand of flowering brightbush. She turned to him, gray robes fairly melting into the shimmering water, and grinned more widely than Riderch had ever seen. He was in her arms before he knew it; she was weeping, but it was nothing like the weeping she had done in Godnu. He did not return the embrace, somehow afraid that he might break her, but he savored it for as long as it lasted.

"Do you resent that you still live, Dinistriol?"

He gave no answer, but simply gazed at the never-setting stars that crowned the northern peak, while the sweet spring winds set the palm fronds nodding all around him.

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Five more days of rest saw Riderch back to his former strength – rest, at least, by his own standards, which entailed very little time in bed at all. The first thing he did, in fact, was to show himself to Sister Andrasta, and by the red wolf pelt he wore to win from her a full quiver of new

arrows. There was a hedge apple tree in Nawddfa, on the north side of the garden beside the runnel where the spring fell down. She cut the shafts from its branches, as well as a simple longbow to arm him while the other bow remained in the high mountain cave, and in the meantime Riderch restored his falchion's blade. The Hellknight's blood had not rusted it in its scabbard as he had feared – indeed, its finish under the polishing cloth was finer than ever, newly burnished, as if its golden hilt had lent its own gold to the blade. The sunlight played fantastic patterns upon it, tongues of fire that flickered along its length whenever it moved, so that more than once Riderch fingered the flat, expecting to find it searing hot. It remained cool, and he told no one of the change.

When his quiver was full, therefore, and his sword sharp, Riderch took to wandering the marches of Nawddfa, patrolling the valley on a circuit that deferred to the sisters' northern cells. He used his longbow as a staff, never stringing it, for he spared himself those five days the labor of hunting and all other strenuous exertion. He did walk, however, and walked almost constantly, so troubled by thoughts that he could not keep still. More troubling still, the music of the heavenly choir never ceased now, not even by daylight, not even when the sisters took up their great silence. It was not the exceedingly high song he had heard beside the spring, which had seared itself so indelibly in his mind; but there were always snatches of melody, of voice calling to voice from peak to peak to peak. All of Clegyrau was full of these voices, and Riderch quickly realized that his rest required him always to seek out those places where the voices were quietest. Never once, however, did he think to lay aside the ear against his chest: it was his bit and bridle, and until he was told otherwise he would go where it led him. Only thus had he done anything worth doing in his life, and thus only by command would he be parted from it.

When the sisters were at prayer, he would unfailingly return to the Wheelhouse door, where he stood guard against no threat half as daunting as the one he had already slain. He never entered, neither did he graduate from his beaten stool in the refectory antechamber, for not even now would he be parted from his sword. Indeed, he spoke even less than he had before; and when some sister, knowing what he had done for them, would try to fawn over him, he would without fail snarl and storm away – at times even in the middle of meals – and begin to pace the valley again. He no longer bullied them; on the contrary, he refused to touch them, fearing to crush them like butterflies. But just as he had failed to emerge a benign rabbit from the bone-strewn gwerthon, the waters of Nawddfa's spring could not wash his spurs smooth. He would watch them from a middling distance, therefore, and listen with pained attention to their prayers, until his very footsteps fell to their rhythms.

He walked at times with Rhian, however, reporting to her alone the tidings he heard among the rocks: of the arrival of spring, of impending storms, and of the troublesome movements of riders in the Anialdir. She would listen and nod, and now and again ask for clarity that Riderch could never give. It was on one such walk, on Sunday, the eighth of Cat, that she inquired into his queer change of demeanor while they trod the fresh green banks of the pond. His yellow bow, as tall as the tips of his ears, shone vibrantly in the twilight.

"I wish you would tell me what happened on the mountaintop," she said. "You're like one of those halsers who stand on top of the boardlands to watch the sun. I fear that you've come out the worse for your fever."

"There's nothing left to tell," replied Riderch, still as raspy as the hour he awoke. "I killed the Hellknight, like I said."

"And moved a stone the size of a bison all by yourself, according to Mother Melangell," said Rhian with a sniff. "And now the sisters are tripping over themselves in their gratitude – myself included, I might add – and you run from them like a wild dog?"

"Nothing left to tell," Riderch nodded, stopping to eye a flowering firebush. "I realized up there that I'm meant to be alone, that's all. There's no need to worry your whiskers about it."

“You mustn’t punish yourself, Riderch,” Rhian sighed.

“Don’t call me that,” Riderch barked, startling her.

“Sorry, Dinistriol,” said Rhian, bowing her head.

“And it isn’t a punishment,” said Riderch, knowing already that it was hopeless to put words to his thoughts. “I’m staying here. I’m watching over you and the other sisters. I’ll do what needs doing, so long as I can do it with my arms and legs. I know what I’m good for now, and it isn’t mingling with a flock of gray doves.”

“Then what is it?” asked Rhian more gently.

Riderch thought for a long moment, then slapped the hilt of his falchion. “I’m Dinistrith’s sword,” he said. “Best when I’m all alone, aye?”

Rhian knew not what to say to that; and Riderch, of course, did her no favors.

On Moonday, the ninth of Cat, the sisters made their first climb to the mountaintop. Led by Melangell, all with the strength to make the trek took great baskets upon their backs, full of soap and rags and wax and scours and censers and potent white sage, or else strapped shovels and brooms and mops to themselves. Riderch joined them, walking always beside Melangell or a little ahead, until they reached the high shelf. All signs of Arow’s corpse were gone. The spring flowed eagerly down its channel, feeding the resurrected cedars that sprouted from cracks in the rocks. Grackles sang on all sides their indelicate song, taking wing in a blue as deep as the sky around the moon.

Melangell led them into the cave, red lamp lit, and thus ensued a great spring cleaning. The sun was shining in through apertures in the walls and ceiling, perfectly tuned for every season of the year, revealing now in plain daylight the remnants of Riderch’s struggle. Blood and bones and filth still soiled the floor. Arow’s great heap of plunder remained before the long curtain, although his worms were nowhere to be found. And the portrait of Dinistrith, in the corner where Riderch had hidden behind the pillar, was a shattered crater in the wall. Arow’s wand, in hurling its final fiery shaft, had chiseled the wolf’s head from the stone, leaving only his body and his bloody sword.

They began with the bones. Emptying their baskets, the sisters interred them therein, one body in each. Their lost sisters were among them, to take account of the skulls by their kind, along with other poor souls of unknown provenance. They left their supplies in the cave, and setting aside the baskets to be carried down again into the valley, began to scour the filth from every surface.

It was then, and only then, that Riderch realized where he stood. The cave was an illustrated house, a four-cornered heaven with pillars upholding a cavernous dome. It was by the dozen light-wells in the belly of this dome that he could see at all, see the Great Constellations who had custody of the Wheel of Time. The greatest light came from the Cat’s aperture, but it was the Dragon that Riderch noticed first. Her feathered hood was a full pair of outspread wings in that old fresco, her head that of the green Quetzal Star, as if the painter had been unable to decide whom to depict. Riderch had never been in such a place before – but Disma had. The things of which he had spoken when Riderch had bothered to listen were around him now in all of their lonely glory, and he was cut to the heart with worry.

“Wherever Disma ended up, I want someone looking after him,” he whispered in the midst of the milling sisters. “Even just one of you, if any of you care enough to bother. I won’t ask for anything more for killing that Hellknight, but give me that. I wasn’t there for him, and now I can’t be, so give me that.”

He received no answer; but faintly he heard his own words, in much finer tongues, conveyed along the peaks of Clegyrau, and this at least gave him the fortitude to continue his labors.

He found himself most useful that day as a mule, pulling the heaviest articles out of the mound and carrying them down again and again to the Wheelhouse floor. Many of the items, he learned,

belonged to the Wheelhouse: the lampstands and candlestands to the walls before the frescoes, the crude benches to the rear corners and the antechamber, the books and brocades to a modest vestry through the northern antechamber door. Others, however, were plunder indeed, the most valuable of which Melangell set aside to be carried down into Nawddfa. Riderch's borrowed composite bow was among them, forfeited in favor of the longbow he now found that he preferred.

They worked long and hard that day, sweeping out the drifted dust and scrubbing with water from the spring, until by sunset the Wheelhouse was, if not in order, at least not in chaos. Melangell declared that they should hold Evensong there; but Riderch, though no one came to confiscate his sword, could not bring himself to join them. He stood in the threshold of the antechamber instead, listening to nested wheels of stellar song while he watched the Great Fox creep over the Greteboga. It struck him then that he had dreamed this mere days ago, and that his dream was now more imminent to him than a whole life which lay over an impassable gulf behind him. He ran a paw through the fur on the crown of his head, scowling at a persistent, lunatic impulse.

"She kept the horns, Dinistriol. They always do."

Riderch nodded, inexplicably content, and scarcely moved until Evensong was over.

They ate in the antechamber afterward, feasting by lamplight on cornbread they had carried up with them. When the sisters were finished, and together were shouldering their baskets as they prepared to return to Nawddfa, Melangell pulled Riderch aside to speak to him in front of the antechamber's southern door. She held a stack of cornbread in one paw, her staff and lit lamp in the other. Her untrimmed claws fussed against the smooth stone floor – whether from excitement or unease, he could not tell.

"I hope you understand now just how much you've done for us, my son," she said breathlessly.

Excitement then, thought Riderch. He nodded, mindful of how bright the flame of her lamp was. "Why didn't you tell me this was a Wheelhouse?" he asked.

"You haven't set foot once in our little makeshift Wheelhouse downstairs," said Melangell. "I was afraid you would refuse."

Riderch gave a dry chuckle. "I told Morgwynn you were a slippery one," he said. "I take it this is the Wheelhouse you used to use?"

"And will use from now on," Melangell nodded, "although we won't be able to make full use of it until a Shepherd arrives to hallow it again. To tell you the truth, however, the exorcism was finished the moment you slew the Hellknight. We owe you more…" She trailed off, madly scraping the floor with her claws as she wrestled with tears.

"I don't want a thing," Riderch growled, holding up a forbidding paw. "Not from you."

"Understood," said Melangell, squaring her shoulders. "And you still intend to remain in Nawddfa?"

"Until I hear otherwise," said Riderch.

"Ears up, in that case," said Melangell, and opened the weathered door to lead him into a stone cell not half the size of the supply room he had lately slept in. A recessed slab cut out of the living rock wall might have hosted a bed, though it was at the moment bald. A smaller might serve as a shelf. Unlike the Wheelhouse, it was utterly unadorned, save for a flowering creosote bush painted on the wall over the bed. The stirring air told Riderch of a window before he saw it, a high little window cut into the mountainside that would admit the rising sun. The cell smelled faintly of cedar, and was as silent as any tomb.

"I ground my teeth to stumps over where I should put you when I learned that you were staying," she said, lighting from her lamp a little lard lamp on the shelf. The old tallow was rancid, but not unbearably so. "The sisters' cells were off the table, of course, but the barn was nothing more than a stopgap, and the supply room is needed for, well, supplies."

“I would have been happy enough in the barn,” said Riderch.

“I will not relegate you to a hayloft after what you confided in me, Dinistriol,” Melangell snapped with surprising ferocity. “But it won’t be necessary, thank heaven. I believe this may be the best for everyone involved.”

“This room here?” asked Riderch, blinking as he regarded it anew. The ceiling was high enough for his ears, at least, and it was bigger than his tent in Mydge Boardland.

“Wheelhouses such as these often have cells attached for anchorites,” she said, crossing to paw him the stack of cornbread. “The climb down is more than you may prefer, I’m afraid; but if you don’t mind having your food carried up to you when we come to pray, you might enjoy the benefit of your own quarters, and we might enjoy the benefit of your presence to guard the house. You would, of course, be welcome to take meals in the refectory whenever you like – or rather just outside the refectory.”

“Much obliged,” said Riderch, setting the bread down on the shelf beside the lard lamp.

“You needn’t make the move tonight,” said Melangell. “It will be some days yet, I expect, before the Wheelhouse is in order. I’ll be content if you would like to furnish it a bit more first, or make some other proposal.”

“No shaving my scut,” Riderch grunted. “I reckon those are better terms than I could have asked for. I’ll stay.” To punctuate his point, he leaned his yellow bow against the corner by the door, then unslung the waterskin from his shoulder and tossed it onto the bed.

“Very well,” said Melangell, her smile more unfettered now. “We’ll return tomorrow for Mornsong, then it will be back to work. Is there anything I can bring you when I come? A bedroll, perhaps?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” said Riderch, already feeling so enormously foolish that he very nearly told her to forget about it. “You kept the horns from that ram I bagged, didn’t you?”

Melangell’s brow shot up. “I…I believe Sister Imona must have, aye,” she said. “I see no reason why she wouldn’t have.”

“Bring them,” said Riderch, “and a good bundle of green reeds, and a big sack, and twine to tie the mouth shut. Don’t ask me what they’re for.”

“Done,” said Melangell with a halting nod.

“Oh, and let me keep using this lantern you lent me, too, if you won’t miss it,” he added, patting it where it hung from his belt.

“I’ll bring oil for it,” she said. “Heaven knows we can afford it now. Is there nothing else?”

“I’ll go down and get it myself if there is,” said Riderch. “I don’t need you fussing over me.”

“No, I daresay that’s true,” Melangell snickered, then with a bow swept past him and into the cell’s doorway. “You’ll see Morgwynn down from the shelf, at least?” she ventured over her shoulder.

“Aye,” said Riderch, and followed her out.

He went as far as the Wheelhouse’s threshold, where he found the sisters waiting for Melangell, all awash in the light of their lanterns. Rhian grinned when she saw him; and he, with an expression too shadowed to be read, pulled down his ear to her. She could see his tall silhouette against the northern stars until she rounded the first bend, and he in turn watched her lamp bob up and down until the obscuring rocks snuffed it out. Then he slipped back into the little cell by tracing his claws along the wall, blew out his fat lamp, and lying down upon his naked bed prepared for the great silence.

Prepared, aye, and yet there was no preparing himself for the misery of that first night. His labor, as always, had shielded him from his hounding thoughts, but there was no work to do now. There was no water to haul, no game to hunt, no Hellknight to slay. He could not steal peace of mind, unless he willed like a dragon to regather Arow's hoard and sit upon it himself. And soon enough, to his mounting dismay, there would be no Wheelhouse to repair.

At such times among his band, when pickings were slim and they had no leads, there had always been the presence of company to insulate him from dread. Even toward the end, amidst the treachery and his failing grip, there had at least been Disma. There was no such comfort now, no short trek that would lead him to another living soul, not even the ewes in the barn. He was utterly, irreparably alone for the first time since he had stolen Carbit to ride out to Rhian's kidnapping; and he found, in spite of his earlier insistence to her, that the sensation was suffocating. He could not sleep that night. He left his door wide open, hoping to admit at least the sounds of birds or insects, but to no avail. He had only to wrestle with the Whirlwind in his spirit, or else to throw himself from the cliffs.

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The sisters arrived at the Wheelhouse the next morning already singing the hour, undaunted by the difficult climb. Riderch heard them before he saw them, and to his sleepless ears their voices were stronger than mate. Melangell had brought all that he had requested, along with another stack of cornbread. He could see as she pawed him the bundle on her way in how badly she wished to ask its purpose; but discerning already that he would not tell her, she kept silent. The sisters sang Mornsong in the echoing vault of the Wheelhouse while Riderch breakfasted, then all together they resumed their reparations.

Most of the mound was still left to sift through, a mingled pile of refuse, treasure, and holy articles to be handled with varying degrees of reverence. Riderch chipped sleepily away at this the whole day, hauling by himself great hunks of iron ore and single turquoises large enough to repair whole hare heads at Pedwar Ceinych with an ease that surprised even him. These fat fruits of the earth could not go down to Nawddfa whole; Riderch laid them aside in the alcove by the door at the request of Sister Andrasta, who hoped one day to work them into adornments for the Wheelhouse.

As the mound shrank, more and more of the filth was washed clean from the walls and floor. A mosaic appeared underfoot, in which the sun fished up a swimming serpent with a coral hook and golden line. The curtain obscuring the house’s western side became accessible, though Riderch was puzzled to find that no one ever stepped behind it. Once, and only once, did Melangell part its southern edge to examine whatever lay within; she nodded to Sister Aine with easy solemnity, and afterward left it alone.

That day passed much like the last, ending in Evensong and leaving Riderch achingly alone in the dark. He began to soak his reeds that night, closing them up in the sack and tying its neck to the root of a cedar so that it trailed in the flowing spring. He ate and curled up in bed, facing the flowering creosote bush, but rose to pace again and again throughout the night whenever loneliness or bloody memory seized him. There was no one against whom to vent his spleen. He splashed water on his face before sunrise, threatening to cane himself with his own yellow bow if he were to take it out on the sisters, and was waiting for them at the threshold when they arrived like clockwork for Mornsong. Melangell brought him stewed beans and yellow squash with his cornbread, as well as a thin bedroll, which he accepted with a single, haggard nod.

So passed that whole week in kind, with labor by day and agony by night, relieved by little sleep and no pleasures beside the satisfaction of progress in the Wheelhouse. Several times his resolve faltered; he would snap at the sisters, especially in the beginning, but less and less often when after every infraction he caned himself mercilessly in the blind night. When he could not sleep he began to weave reeds by lamplight, fumbling and cursing and throwing them against the walls while he worked out his technique. By Ironsday morning, however, he had mastered the braid; and when he had lashed the ram’s horns tightly to it with a wicker lattice, he hung the whole thing up to dry in the sun on a cedar branch over the spring.

That day, the seventeenth of Cat, was the end of their efforts. Arow's mound had been sorted. The floor was scrubbed clean. Everything belonging to the Wheelhouse was where it ought to be, and the last of the ancient treasure was in the sisters' baskets, ready to be carried down. Even the bones were buried, marked where they thought they knew the names and left nameless otherwise. Melangell brought Riderch a great deal more food than usual, dry stock that would last, which he kept on the shelf in his cell.

His final task was to help Sister Andrasta repair the shattered image of Dinistrith. All that week she had been shaping rocks to fill the crater, and now together they cemented them to the wall and smoothed the cracks with plaster. The end result was admirably near the natural stone, though close inspection revealed obvious imperfections. This done, Sister Andrasta mixed a palette of vibrant paints, and half from memory, half from Riderch's more recent description, restored Dinistrith's head as seamlessly as she could. Thinking himself useless in this final stage, and feeling sick with sleeplessness, Riderch turned to depart; but she, bravely clutching the hem of his poncho, ordered him to stay. He did so, and thought when the fresco was finished that Dinistrith now looked strangely like him.

It was the last straw. Something within Riderch, some sense of guarded propriety hammered into his heart by a life among thieves, buckled and broke. He skulked out of the Wheelhouse before Evensong began and traced the racing channel upstream, then climbed the overhanging cedar to retrieve the wicker-bound ram's horns. They were dry now. The wicker braid was bent into a perfect circlet. He placed it upon his head, thirty-pound horns curling around his long ears, and went to stand in the antechamber through Evensong as he always did.

Rhian's whiskers fell limp the moment she saw him. The other sisters likewise blanched, and yet only she dared to approach, reaching up to run her claws along the wicker crown. Even Melangell hung back, coolly contemplating.

"What is this, Dinistriol?" Rhian asked. "Did you make this?"

"Aye," he rasped, "out of the ram I bagged."

"But why?" she pleaded. "Between this and the pelt, you're making yourself look like a beast."

"Are you all right?" he asked her, tightly furrowing his brow. "Do you need anything from me?"

Rhian blinked, then frowned. "I'm well, aye," she said. "Are you? I've never seen anyone look so tired."

"And you look as happy as a flea in a rabbit's ear," said Riderch, offering her a smile that looked more like a grimace. "If you don't want for anything, neither do I. Leave me be."

Rhian's frown fell to a scowl, though it seemed she fought with tears. "I'm worried about you," she said. "Is that such a terrible thing?"

"Goodnight, Morgwynn," said Riderch, pulling down his ear to her.

She sniffed then, and turning on her heel stormed out of the Wheelhouse to join her sisters in the light of the rising moon. Melangell was the last to leave; she tarried with Riderch on her way out, red lamp blazing with fervent heat. "I'll take the ear from you, if it's too much," she said quietly.

Riderch shook his head. "The fever stays down now, so long as I don't pull against the reins too hard."

The single chuckle that escaped Melangell's lips could have come from his own. "If I see that it's likely to kill you, I won't hesitate to take it from you," she warned. "Do with that what you will."

"Fair enough, Mother," said Riderch.

"For now we plan to hold vigil and Mornsong up here once a week, Leadsday evening into Sunday morning," she continued. "Quite possibly more often, if there are holidays, but not much more. You will be alone up here otherwise. If that fills you with cold horror, as it would many folk, now is the time to tell me."

"Don't tell me to turn tail now," Riderch begged, furious at the sound of his own cracking voice. "Hare's horns, let me take my licks."

"Then fight, my son," said Melangell, with a sharp nod and a crack of her staff against his horns. "Fight and win." She left him without another word, and Riderch stood in the threshold until the sounds of Nightsong could be heard only in the heavens.

There are times when one knows without looking that a storm is brewing, that the Whirlwind is driving a hard wedge of sand and pounding rain ahead of him like a bison rancher driving his herd along the riverbank. He waits for the flashing fork of lightning that will open heaven's furious storehouses, feeling in his guts that the Great Dragon will cast it at any moment. And yet no storm was ever more portentous than Riderch's soul at that moment, no rider's charge more clearly marked by trumpet blast. Once he had outrun it, all the way to the uttermost marches of the Anialdir, but no more. There was nowhere left to go. The wolf had cornered the hare among the rocks. Riderch retrieved his borrowed lantern from his cell, lit it with his fire-striker, then staggered out into the Wheelhouse. The full moon was spilling across the floor, lighting even the curtain and the frescoes to either side. Silvery ghosts of the Great Constellations played in the shafts sent through their windows, an eyed sun overwatching them. All was fresh and clean and new, washed like the heavens by beneficent spring, and the beauty thereof transfixed Riderch's heart as mortally as any sword. He stood before Dinistrith's snarling face, lantern in paw, and began to tremble violently.

"Where were you?" he asked, first in a mere broken whisper. "Where were you?" he repeated in a venomous rasp; and finally, screaming like a strangled dog: "Where were you? Where were you when I was alone in the barn? When Disma was alone? When we were starving in Godnu, and Disma kept on praying and lighting candles? I named you. I named you, because I reckoned you were the only one who might do something for a killer, but you didn't do a double-damn thing, you horrible bastard! Why do you like her so much more than me? Why didn't anyone help me?"

He screamed until his voice gave out in a dry, beastly hack, and then he began to cough, choking and wheezing as his frantic breaths came too fast. He dropped his lantern and fell to his knees, pitifully weak, and there Riderch began to weep for the first time that he could remember. No wrathful panting was this, as had come upon him after his brawl in the alley, but full-throated sobs, a mournful howl, and an endless river of tears. He pounded the floor with his fists until they were numb, asking whenever he found breath the same question again and again: "Where were you?" But he received only silence. No mountain voices carried his pleas abroad. Even the heavenly choir had fallen silent. He was utterly alone. Riderch wept all night.

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Spring matured and grew old. Grackles nested in the branches of the cedars beside the spring, and their trunks, beset by the nearer sun and battered by early rains, wept fragrant resin from their bark. The hare and the deer and the wild ram ran rampant upon the slopes, driven mad by love. They fought no less fiercely than the war-band, for no less costly a prize, and the hunting in those months was abundant.

Every Leadsday the sisters climbed to the Wheelhouse, as surely as the sun climbed the distant Greteboga. Riderch was always there, in his wolf pelt and ragged chaps, with his yellow bow and his quiver of arrows and his priceless golden sword. He never entered the Wheelhouse while they prayed, and declined now to take any meals with them, choosing to eat by himself in secret. He stood instead at the threshold of the antechamber, watching the shelf and the steep slopes with his paw upon the hilt.

The first weeks of his solitude wrought even more of a change in Riderch than his contest with Arow. Great pains churned up the silt in his guts. His sleep was full of unwelcome memories and

wicked dreams. He wandered the cliffs over Nawddfa more than ever, at times hunting game which he hung wordlessly in Sister Imona's cellar, at others driving away packs of wolves when they hunted too near the valley. He rarely spoke, save to Rhian and Melangell, and when he did his blown voice was a tumbling scree of rocks. Veins in his eyes had burst, leaving them red. He smelled of cedar resin and hunted animals. He never removed his poncho or his queer horns. In every sense he seemed more beast than folk, and this transformation was more profound and more dreadful every time the sisters saw him.

For Riderch's part, however, the change was purely a welcome one. He realized, when the misery of those first weeks gave way to a silence within as well as without, that his long fever had addled his brains more than he had noticed. At certain times he could not speak. At others he could not stop muttering aloud the voices that echoed upon the rocks of Clegyrau. Often he would feel compelled to climb to the very peak of the mountain, where he would spend long nights with his arms outstretched, believing himself a tree and staring at the firmament without blinking until he perceived its turning. Grackles would perch on him, soiling his poncho, and he without a second thought would throw himself clothed into the waters of the spring to wash. He did all with the utmost scorn for propriety, imitating with only slim comprehension the movements of the voices that flitted always about his ears, caning himself in fevers when his stubborn will won out; until after three months, toward the end of the Month of the Bear, he felt that he had just begun to learn how to rein in his rage. It gathered in him like the pus of a recurring cyst; and he, until the wound should heal, lanced it daily through bitter hardship, not even knowing that the sisters did the same.

His last true conversation with Melangell was in shrift, accepted long after her first invitation. "The first day of summer will arrive soon," she told him. "Morgwynn has chosen that day to be severed from the Anialdir; and while you may remain here as long as you like, you will no longer be to her what you were. I would spare you the burden of what came before, for both of your sakes."

She tarried in the Wheelhouse, therefore, after the other sisters began their climb down on Sunday morning, and there Riderch revealed to the halser every crime he could remember committing, as well as many burdensome secrets regarding himself which he had come to understand in his solitude. The sun was already westering when they finished. She gave him her blessing, against such a time that he should encounter a Shepherd who could finish the prayers.

"Do you reckon I could ask one question before you go?" Riderch rasped, grasping her sleeve as she turned toward the door.

"Anything, my son," she nodded.

"What does the picture on the floor mean?" he asked, tapping with his bow the sun-snagged serpent under their feet. "I keep wondering, but I always forget to ask."

Melangell stared severely down at it for several moments, then broke into a grin so wide that Riderch expected her to laugh. "Am I wrong in thinking that this is the first such question you've ever asked me?" she said, perfectly serious. "I'm surprised you didn't ask someone else."

"I don't ask questions like that, and they don't answer them," said Riderch.

"But they do answer questions?" asked Melangell.

Riderch paused for long enough that Melangell feared he had been struck dumb again, but at length shook his head. "Disma's alive, at least," he answered. "I won't go looking for him – it wouldn't be good for either of us – but he's alive."

Melangell nodded knowingly. "Then we shoulder the same yoke," she sighed. Shaking herself as if wet, she stretched out a claw, pointing to the Great Dragon in the belly of the dome overhead. "You know where the Quetzal Star sits, I assume?" she asked.

"Aye," said Riderch, following her gesture. "It's the bright one at the Dragon's neck."

"It's said that the Quetzal Star is the mane around the Dragon's neck, and her wings," Melangell added. "The Great Dragon has at times appeared to folk as a Quetzal; and as you've no doubt noticed, the names for both are used interchangeably. Have you ever wondered why?"

"Can't say that I have," said Riderch.

"So incurious," Melangell tutted, returning her gaze to the floor. "The tale goes that, when Black Goat absconded from heaven with his share of the Wheel of Time, it was the sun's task to reassign his duties among the remaining Stars. He had been over the waters once, and so from the waters the sun fished up a great serpent to replace him. That serpent could not remain aloft, of course; therefore the sun, in his great wisdom, joined her to a resplendent quetzal and fixed both in the firmament. This is why, although the Great Ram is Black Goat's natural foe, the Great Dragon has always despised him more, and why she, as the Quetzal, casts her lightning into the Abyss every winter."

"Why not get some other Star to replace him?" asked Riderch. "There are still plenty left."

Melangell chuckled, and fixed him with a gaze that spoke of some shared joke he had not caught. "I could wax poetic about it," she said, "and many folk have; but I believe myself that to elevate a lowly fish to Black Goat's office shames the old fiend more than anything else in the world."

"This is like that painting in the hall, isn't it?" asked Riderch, jerking his head toward the door where the architrave hung. "The one of the snake wrapped around the saguaro?"

"That's an ash tree, Dinistriol, but how so?" said Melangell.

"Sorry, it's a saguaro somewhere else," Riderch husked. "But I asked about it once, and the answer someone gave was that it showed folk 'mastering their beastly impulses.' I reckoned he was dodging the question at first, but maybe there's too much in it to explain to someone like me."

Melangell clucked her tongue. "The saguaro is the heart, my son – a more fitting image for your own than an ash tree, if you'll forgive the jab. The folk and the Hellknights on either side are warring for mastery over it, for the great work of life is to conquer one's own heart at all costs."

"Not to conquer the Anialdir?" Riderch smirked.

"The quarreling in the Anialdir will never end – not really – if none of the conquerors will conquer himself," said Melangell emphatically. "None of that is at odds with any other true explanation a folk might give, on earth or in heaven."

Riderch grunted, then scratched his chest where the ear lay beneath his poncho. The fur there had grown back pale gold, and markedly thicker, as if to cushion the still-supple trophy he wore. "You bringing in Morgwynn up here, or down there?" he asked.

"Down in Nawddfa," said Melangell, "although we'll climb up here after supper to hold the vigil for Midsummer's Eve."

"I'll hunt, then," Riderch nodded. It was the abrupt end of their conversation, and none too soon, for Riderch's tongue was lame all the rest of that day.

He brought a great brace of hares to Sister Imona on the morning of Midsummer's Eve, forty in all skinned and strung over his back. She kissed his cheeks, this being their only exchange and the only one Riderch would abide, and then for the rest of the morning he examined the milking ewes in the barn, ensuring that none needed leeching. They feared him, unexpectedly; it was only through great care and gentle approach that any of them would allow him near. He deemed them all well in the end, and by the smell of the barn and the hay beneath his feet he ached for Carbit, and Ruddo, and all of the horses at Pedwar Ceinych.

Melangell was talking to three strangers in the shade beside the pond when he emerged, each one watering a mule. All three were dressed in shabby ponchos and sun-veiled hats, and only the third had pulled his veil up. This one, a ringtailed catfolk, was gesticulating in no particular direction,

counting on his claws and consulting his fellows for nods or indistinct replies. Melangell, perfectly serene, was leaning on her staff while she listened. Riderch padded their way, bending his ears toward them.

"You'll be waiting for it, you will, but I reckon none of that'll be too hard to snag," he said through a pair of missing front teeth.

"We would be deeply grateful," said Melangell, bowing her head to them. "You'll be paid handsomely for making the trek in summer, of course."

"Fairly, Mother, fairly," said the folk. "Wouldn't dream of fleecing the Little Gray Ones, would we boys?" His voice was somewhat familiar to Riderch, and now by the shape of his upraised paw he unearthed his identity with some difficulty. It was perhaps the only strange face he could have expected to see in Nawddfa, yet even so it filled him with unease.

"Heaven forbid," said one of his veiled fellows, with a snout so long that it could only have belonged to an anteaterfolk.

"And heaven forbid I do the same," Melangell insisted. "I've given you enough to purchase all I asked for; the same again will be yours upon delivery, and you may keep whatever remains as gratuity if the total is less."

"I can drive a hard bargain for mules, that I can," said the ringtail proudly, hooking a thumb at his own chest. "It'll make it easier to get the rest to you, anyhow."

"You mind if I ask what you did with your other ones, Mother?" asked the second veiled folk – a coati, to judge by his nasal voice and slim frame.

"Sold them, my son," said Melangell, "while we were as yet unaware that we'd been reduced to beggars."

"You're sitting on goose down now, by the look of it," said the ringtail, gesturing broadly at the garden. "Full larders, and then some."

"The Stars saw fit to bring us a change of fortune," Melangell nodded; and noticing Riderch's approach, added: "Ah, and here comes the pivot now."

The ringtail followed her gaze. He stiffened when he saw Riderch, as did his companions. Paws disappeared beneath ponchos; but when the ringtail's shock dissolved into raucous, throaty laughter, the tension dissolved with it.

"Well look who it is!" he cried, tipping his hat to him. "Cat's claws, I weren't expecting to see you here, no sir. Look like you been worried to death, don't you Lording?"

"You know this nomad, Nicestre?" asked one of his fellows.

Riderch stood beside Melangell, mirroring her with his hedge apple bow in his paw, but declined to speak, listening carefully for subtler voices.

"Something akin to it, aye, and that's turkey," Nicestre nodded, sticking out a paw for Riderch to shake. He only gawked at it, seeming by the wideness of his face uncomprehending.

"Have you two met?" asked Melangell, looking surprised enough for the both of them.

"Aye, Mother, met on the same day they torched Iwan," Nicestre declared, retracting his paw and making a show of shaking his head. "You were there with that wild catch of a doe, weren't you Lording? Blinda's bark, I reckoned you'd turned tail to Clegyrau, or else was back down in the Anialdir somewhere, that I did."

Riderch's silent staring persisted, broken only by the flicking of his ears as a thread of melody slithered between them:

"With promises of power he procured them,
Then set the hook with skillful flattery…"

"Nicestre – with his friends Hock and Spicking – made the journey across the Western Waste to shoo away the buzzards, Dinistriol, and to see if we needed anything," said Melangell, steering the topic away after an uncomfortable pause. "They've been very graciously providing me with news from the Anialdir: rather alarming news, in fact." She hesitated just long enough to summon Riderch's full attention. "It seems…it seems that King Cyngen of Ancathair is dead. May the sun shine upon his head."

Riderch's face betrayed none of the frigid alarm he felt. He allowed himself to raise a brow, but no more.

"Dead, aye, and killed too, so says everyone," said Nicestre rather excitedly. "Rumor runs that his little piglet Brockwell did for him on account of some bungled wedding down at the Gray Throne. He was old enough, mind you, he was, but you know how them war-banders are. Got devils on both shoulders, if you'll forgive me for assuming the worst."

"He died at supper," said Melangell to Riderch, "at table with King Osging of Godnu at one paw and the prince at the other."

"Poisoned," offered the coati, "and I'd put a mule on that. Only it hasn't done no ill for Brockwell or Osging – it's only made Rhuddri and Sheen madder than wet hens."

"As I told Dinistriol, it will bring nothing but more quarreling," Melangell sighed. "I thank you all for your help, in spite of your late difficulties. You'll stay for supper, I hope?"

"Aye, Mother, if you'll have us," said Nicestre, tipping his hat to her. "We'll bed down at the well tonight and be gone in the morning."

"I'm pleased to give to pilgrims for a change, instead of taking from them," said Melangell. She blessed them then; and after an exchange of bows, the visitors led their mules away from the pond and back down the holler toward the well. Riderch remained beside the halser until they were out of sight, tightly gripping his yellow bow.

"Is it your tongue, my son?" she asked at length, plying him with a probing stare.

Riderch shook his head. "You didn't tell them about her, did you?"

"Whom?" said Melangell with a sniff. "I live here with my sisters, and at times a wild ram comes down from the marches to visit. To ask any more would be prying, don't you agree?"

Riderch grunted and nodded. "I'll stay down here tonight while you're up at vigil, Mother. Someone ought to keep an eye on them."

"For the sake of the older sisters, at least," Melangell agreed. "Thank you, Dinistriol."

"Don't mention it," said Riderch; and as if moved by the wind, he left her to wander the cliffs.

Neither Riderch nor the pilgrims were invited to the beginning of Evensong that night, and the pilgrims not at all; for as when Rhian had taken the gray, she was to enter the little Wheelhouse naked and there be clothed anew. Riderch, however, was allowed his usual place outside the low door when the dressing was done, to stand guard at the threshold, where he watched the solemn ceremony through clouds of precious cedar resin. He had seen many such Evensongs by that time, most of them grander and starker in the broad beauty of the mountain's Wheelhouse; and yet this one, among them all, stood in his memory as the only one that mattered. The sun descended into gray bands on the western horizon, as if he was pleased to follow Rhian in her veiling. The heat was oppressive, unaided by the wind; it muffled even the sounds of their voices, so that the sisters seemed to whisper in each other's ears. And Rhian, whose adorable joy had remained unconcealed since that first Evensong, strove to appear burdened by the gravity of the vows she made.

The entirety of that Evensong was contained, for Riderch, in her – indeed, of every Evensong, of every midnight vigil and Mornsong and every other chanted hour that galloped across the stones of Nawddfa. Riderch had never found much use in the words of those prayers, had never paid them very

much mind; but that she prayed them, that she bowed and pressed her forehead to the floor, that she deferred to her sisters and kissed their cheeks, were to him the acts of a beloved mistress to her dog: purely good, beyond reproach, to be imitated insofar as a speechless beast may imitate us.

"Morgwynn we have lately called you," Melangell told her between hymns. "Morgwynn now I name you, for so the Morning Star is named when he portends healing rains." She too was struggling to remain serene, so full was she of affection. With a pair of iron shears she cut locks of fur from the tips of Rhian's ears and from the soles of her feet; and burning them in her censer, continued: "be severed from this lower world, from the changing air beneath the moon, and enter the life of heaven."

Something fell from Riderch at the sound of the snipping shears. As when an unruly horse realizes that its master has dropped its lead, so was he then, thumping his foot on the ground with restless eagerness.

"You will be leaving her soon, Dinistriol."

This proclamation, no less than the one he had heard in the stagecoach, was to Riderch only a sign of what he already understood. It spit his heart like a spear, even so; he allowed it to bleed out a little more of his rage.

"Will she be all right?" he asked.

"She has her own work ahead of her, as do you. There are things I would have you say to the war-band. Will you go?"

"I said I would when I was down in the gwerthon," Riderch growled. "Don't ask me again."

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The character of Riderch's self-imposed seclusion changed after that. He spent less time among the jagged rocks or upon the mountaintop, listening to the heavenly round, and more time pacing up and down the eastern holler's flanking hills. All who saw him thought him burdened by something, absorbed in a puzzle over which he fretted; but he, as they had come to expect, declined to volunteer a single word about it. Not even Morgwynn could coax a hint from him. He smiled at her as often as she approached him, and would claim to be well whenever she asked, only to return afterward to his fitful wandering. If he ever confided in Melangell, neither spoke of it. So passed the first two weeks of summer, hot and dry and woefully sunny, while the sisters began to work more and more in the merciful night.

It was on the fourteenth of Cat, very early in the morning, that Riderch awoke in his cell from a dead sleep, feverish and panting and with his heart pounding. Rising from his thin bed, he retrieved his bow from the corner and belted on his sword and quiver, then sprang out onto the open shelf with unchecked haste, training his eyes and ears and nose toward the east. The sun had not risen, and yet it was already hot. A haze of Whirlwind sand hung in the south, enlivened to wear away the works of folk by the wind's relentless, moaning song. It was a fitting horn to announce the hooves that pounded up the holler from the salt flats, distant chargers' hooves and the hooves of the mules who carried the riders' sloshing waterskins. Their spears clattered like a stand of shaken pines. He could not see them, and yet he was as certain of their approach as he had been at the falls beneath Iwan Gwerthon.

"What do I do?" he asked.

"You must get them to leave Nawddfa, Dinistriol. Make yourself as frightening to them as you can."

"How many?" he asked.

"Hurry, Dinistriol. You will find her alone beneath the calabash tree until the strike-board calls them to Mornsong. She'll hesitate too long if she's with the other sisters."

Riderch was bounding down the mountainside before the last word was spoken, trusting in the sureness of his feet and his acquaintance with the path. No wild ram had ever been so daring in its flight, so singleminded in its destination. He made the descent of hours in but one, and entered Nawddfa while as yet no soul stirred.

No soul, that is, save Morgwynn. She was standing beneath the garden's tallest calabash tree when Riderch found her, staring up at its green fruits in the light of a setting full moon. His incautious footsteps told her early that he was coming, and so she was spared surprise, though not confusion, when he nearly bowled her over. The mighty paw that did not grip his bow found her shoulder, a paw far better mastered than the one which had wrenched Disma's. He tried to speak, only to find to his horror that he fought with a half-lame tongue in a mouth that would not stop panting.

"Hare's horns, Dinistriol, take a breath!" said Morgwynn, reaching out to test his dry nose with the back of her paw. "You're feverish again. Are you all right?"

"W-what…what…" Riderch's voice was that of a retching dog. He grasped her paw and pressed it more firmly to his nose, finding that some quality of her scent made soft his leathery tongue. "Why?" he asked, gesturing broadly at the garden.

"Why am I up already?" she asked. "I couldn't sleep. I had a rather distressing dream about my mother, and I've been out here chewing on it for an hour or so. But that hardly matters when you can barely speak, Dinistriol. Sit down here against the trunk. Can I get you some water?"

"No!" Riderch barked, much more sharply than he intended. Morgwynn started and pulled her paw away, then hugged her own shoulders.

"What's the matter?" she whispered. "Did you run all the way down here?"

Furious with his stubborn tongue, Riderch swung his yellow bow across the pond, pointing it at the eastern holler where the gray sky was just beginning to turn purple. "Riders," he managed to snarl, and slapped the hilt of his sword with his palm.

Morgwynn's unease turned to alarm. Her own paw shot to a sword that she no longer wore, and an old flint could be seen in her face. "Riders from where?" she asked, scanning the dark windows of the sisters' cells to find some of the lamps newly lit. "Have you told Mother Melangell?"

But Riderch was already past the point of explanation. Gripping the collar of his red fur poncho, he threw it over his head in one deft motion, revealing a bare, chafed torso and the ear that hung over his white gold chest. It was the first time that Morgwynn had ever seen the ear. Her face said clearly enough that she knew what it was; and yet she had no time to inquire about it, for Riderch was already pushing his poncho into her arms.

"Trade," he slurred, snagging one of her wide sleeves and tugging at it.

"W-what?" Morgwynn balked, unable to look away from his stark white chest. "I can't give you my habit, Dinistriol."

"Do it!" Riderch yelped, setting his wicker-bound horns atop the poncho and tugging the sleeve again. It was the most forceful he had been with her – indeed, with anyone from Nawddfa – in a long while; yet even now he did not dare to rip off the robes with his own paws. He only took to pacing, raggedly whining around the calabash tree, as he fought to form words.

"They want you," he managed with tremendous difficulty, pointing first at her, then at the northern mountaintop. "Put on my things and go up."

Morgwynn's eyes widened. "Did Dinistrith tell you that?" she asked.

"Please," Riderch begged, slapping his own cheeks and grinding his teeth. "Please trust me."

A single, pregnant moment passed in which Morgwynn stared at the wild, desert-scented garments in her arms. The water falling into the pond from the spring above sounded so much like the cataract under Iwan that she found herself there again, tempted a second time to scorn Riderch for

reasons she had found compelling then, but which collapsed into dust now. He had made himself a wild beast for her sake; the least she could do was to taste of the cup that he had drank to the dregs.

"Very well, Dinistriol, I trust you," she said, beginning unceremoniously to remove her rawhide belt and shrug off her robes. "But if I must go up the mountain, I'm taking the sisters with me. Mother Melangell needs to know if there are riders coming."

Riderch shook his head violently, as though wringing it out of water. "Too late," he said. "They'll leave if you're gone. I'll make them."

"But I can't leave the sisters all-"

"My sword!" Riderch shouted, finding the effort of speaking a little easier now. He fumbled with his belt, pulling it off to give sword and quiver and lantern to her. "We're up to the hour, Morgwynn. Wish he'd have told me sooner, but he didn't. Go now. Let me take the heat."

This at last was enough for Morgwynn. Screwing up her face, she stepped clumsily out of her gray robes, shivering violently in her linen undergarments in spite of the heat. Once she had expected Riderch to eye her like a wolf if ever she allowed him to see her undressed; now, with a bitter irony, she realized that a wolf would not have regarded her nakedness so little. The belt went on first, her father's sword returned to her after long lending. After it she threw on the poncho, perfectly fitted to her frame, then slid the queer wicker crown over her ears, gasping at its weight.

Morgwynn's robes fit Riderch equally well, as he knew they would. Veiled, only his scowling, pitted face betrayed him. Last of all he pawed his bow to her, reserving only the bowstring, for he knew that not even she would be able to draw it. "Which cell?" he asked.

"Which is mine?" asked Morgwynn. "The leftmost, on the highest cliff. Why?"

"Stay in the Wheelhouse until I come to get you," he ordered her. "Don't let anyone see your face."

Morgwynn ground her teeth, watching in vain for movement among the cells, then nodded gravely. "May Dinistrith's iron make you sharp," she declared. "Keep them safe, Dinistriol, please."

"Aye," Riderch grunted; then bracing a paw against her back, he pushed her into a run toward the trailhead at the western end of the valley. He himself turned north, toward the cells he was under no circumstances to approach. In the first gray light of dawn he found the outer steps leading up the cliffs, and keeping his head bowed low made his way to Morgwynn's. The simple, palm-wood door swung open on hinges newly greased with the fat of one of the wolves Riderch had brought into Nawddfa. She had very little in the way of possessions; and yet her sword, curiously, remained in the far corner at the foot of a recessed bed much like his own. He took it by the scabbard and drew it, examining it by the light of a low lard lamp on the windowsill. It was clean and sharp, ready for hard use. He sat down upon the floor beside the window and listened, waiting for the illusory peace of morning to break.

The call to Mornsong brought the sisters out of their cells. They crossed the valley almost too quietly to hear, intoning the hour in the lower Wheelhouse, so that Riderch was surprised by the knock at Morgwynn's door a quarter of an hour later.

"Morgwynn? Sister Morgwynn? Are you feeling all right, dear?" It was Sister Andrasta. Riderch hid against the wall behind the door as it opened; Andrasta scanned the little room, gave a single, baffled snort when she was not there, then shut the door and shuffled off. Riderch, who had been holding his breath, thought his heart would beat itself inside out.

Soon after, Mornsong was echoing sweetly upon the cliffs. He nearly wept then, knowing it the last time he would ever hear it. The sisters would be too afraid to let him remain in Nawddfa after this, even in his hole atop the mountain. Morgwynn might petition for him, and even Melangell; but if the sisters came to fear him again, he himself would not be able to bear it. He would not be a Hellknight to them, even if he planned to be a Hellknight to the folk who rode up the holler. They must be persuaded

to stop looking for her. They must learn the peril of molesting holy things. He must frighten a host of riders away by himself, and he knew only one way to do it. His claws tightened upon his sword's grip. He stroked the ear through his linen robes.

A host of pounding hooves overwhelmed the chanting near the end of Mornsong. Shouting followed; and being in Old Talk, he knew at least that it was not Gorseth Floyd who rode in. Those who escaped might not know his face, in that case. He counted it a blessing, and stood to peer carefully around the side of the windowsill. Some of the sisters were already running out to investigate the racket, three of them making for a whole company of forty riders, their horses, and their pack mules. Wide-brimmed helmets gleamed in the early sun, capping the green ponchos of Gwall. A Guilur was among them, white sash dangling at his knee. Several held their spears in the saddle, while most were dismounting with only their falchions at their sides. One of them, and only one, was unlike the rest, black-clad even in summer. Riderch bristled. The hunter had returned for the hare who had slipped his snare, and had brought his best dog with him. There were no crowns among them, however, no royal arms or fine brocade. Sheen had not ridden out with the company – with any luck, may not have known that his riders had gone to Nawddfa at all. This too Riderch considered a blessing, if only for the sake of the Anialdir.

A stilted exchange began between the riders and the thin stream of Little Gray Ones who emerged from the Wheelhouse. Riderch could not understand the words from that distance, but he heard clearly enough that the riders were shouting the sisters down whenever they spoke. Melangell emerged last, storming across the stiff green scrub, wielding her staff and lamp as confidently as any spear. At the fore of the riders, beside the black streak Malmuck, was the Guilur, a tawny tamarinfolk with a great white mustache. Melangell prodded his chest with her claw no less boldly than she had once jabbed Riderch's own. For a moment the host of riders withered, no doubt at the appearance of a halser. Malmuck shouted at her. She shouted back; and taking whatever she said as an invitation, Malmuck shouldered her out of the way. Following his lead, the Guilur whistled to the other riders. Riderch gripped his sword, waiting for the first flash of steel, but to his relief they did not draw upon the sisters. They menaced them, however, pulling and pushing and jerking them into a mass on the ground in front of the Wheelhouse, where they detained them with their upright spears.

The tamarin and Malmuck, each taking twelve riders with him, began to comb the caves on Nawddfa's southern side. Malmuck forced his way into the Wheelhouse, and with his riders dragged out one by one all of the sisters still inside, the aged and the indignant and the terrified. Melangell was raving at them all the while, waving her paw and jabbing the butt of her staff again and again into the ground. Only Malmuck was willing to meet her eyes; the rest continued their raid as if she were not there.

The Guilur's detachment found only Sister Imona outside of the Wheelhouse: toiling over breakfast, no doubt, only to be wrenched from her domain as rudely as Riderch had wrenched her. She was kicking and screaming, belaboring one of her captors with a rolling pin until he wrestled it from her. Riderch smirked at her salt, only for the smirk to fall to a snarl when he spied the blood running from her nose and mouth. They threw her rudely into the other sisters, who caught her and held her upright, and Riderch swore upon the ear that he would pay them back tenfold. He received no permission, nor any prohibition, but neither would have moved him an inch.

With all of the sisters huddled upon the coarse grass in the rising sun, the Guilur began to ply them with questions, furiously twirling his mustache. They were as silent as doves, to their credit, and for a long time would not budge in their ironclad solidarity. When the Guilur realized this, however, he sent one of his riders to fetch a waterskin from his horse and made him overturn it in the sisters' sight, pouring until it was empty and throwing it hard on the ground at their paws.

Riderch knew then that they planned to do what he had done to Gwyarc. Summer had arrived. The sun was a scouring flame, and without water or shade he would bake them by the day's end. Melangell must have known it as well, for she reluctantly gave them an inch of ground, pointing out the trailhead to the mountaintop. A dozen of the riders shouldered waterskins and set out to climb it. Riderch chose to believe that she was sending them unwittingly to get his attention, and hoped against hope that Morgwynn's disguise would convince them.

More questions, sharp and fast. Some of the riders began to rip off the wimples of every harefolk among the sisters, cuffing those who resisted and wrestling those who came to their rescue, then finally letting Malmuck examine their faces. He shook his head when they were through; and pointing across the garden toward the northern cliff face, rounded up another dozen riders and set off toward the cells. Riderch moved away from the window, aflame with rage, and positioned himself before the bed on the wall opposite his door. He hugged the rider's falchion to his side, feeling the thousand needle-pricks of bloodlust crawling up and down his spine.

"Four on the ground!" he heard Malmuck shout. "Watch those doors, make sure nobody weasels out. We're starting at the bottom. Everyone out in the sun!"

They began to kick open the doors. A few of the older ones flew off of their hinges. Riders stormed into cell after cell, brandishing falchions, barking as if they were charging into battle and not in fact invading ladies' bedrooms. Rhian, they were shouting. Rhian, Rhian, Rhian; but Rhian was dead, thought Riderch, and soon they would be able to hunt her among the dead.

"King Sheen of Gwall is Rhian's rightful lord!" Malmuck was shouting from a lower cliff. "Send her out now and we'll leave you ladies alone." He was answered by the stark silence of Nawddfa, broken only by the riders' rampaging.

So small were the sisters' cells that each was searched in seconds. Door after door was thrown open, filled with green Gwall's swords, then summarily abandoned for the next. Closer and closer came the raiding gang to Morgwynn's cell, highest and farthest along the cliff, until at the front of the Whirlwind arrived a single soldier. He was a culpeofolk the very color of the cliffs, whose teeth were bared in a persistent snarl. A paw unmoved by the threat of unarmed she-folk threw the door aside, to rap the wall just as the hammer raps the strike-board for Evensong. His green bulk filled the doorway, falchion at the ready. He gasped, for kneeling in prayer on the far side of the room, its gray-clad back to him, was a hare. The ears, erect and searching, told him all he wished to know.

"She's in here!" the culpeo shouted down the cliffside. Answering cries returned, spreading across the valley to where the sisters stood imprisoned. Steps crowded up the stairs. The silence of Nawddfa was still so profound, even in the clamor, that Riderch feared they could hear him grinding his teeth.

"You've got to come with me, Your Highness," the Culpeo ordered. "We're not going to hurt you or your friends if you go quietly."

He laid a paw on Riderch's shoulder, squeezing as hard as Riderch had squeezed Disma's, not noticing that the hare held a naked falchion until it was too late. Riderch had severed his leg halfway from his hip before the culpeo knew to guard. He fell to the floor screaming; and Riderch, snarling, swiftly removed his head.

Three more riders swarm into the little cell, crowding themselves in a press for the bloodstained hare. They find there a bloodbath, the rider's headless body and a rabid dog driven mad with rage. Riderch throws himself upon them, scarcely knowing what he does. The might that had opened the spring is alive again. Falchions whistle in the air, clashing against each other and against the constraining walls. Riderch fields all three at once, slashing their wielders to ribbons at the threshold. Blood pools ankle-deep, running into the room and out onto the cliff, where it trickles in rills down the yellow rocks. More riders are crowding behind the first, slipping in the flow; and yet while half a dozen

press toward the door, they may as well have caught a grizzly in his cave. Riderch minds their blows not a little, returning panicked thrusts with cuts and claws and teeth. Morgwynn's gray habit is purely crimson when he wins his way out of the cell, hurling a corpse at a rider and sending him tumbling over the cliff to break his neck against the rocks. His fever rages with palpable heat.

He kicks another corpse down onto the stairs where Malmuck climbs, missing him by mere inches. The jaguar bristles, locking eyes with Riderch for the first time. Six dead riders surround the buck. Four more lay in Morgwynn's cell behind. The two who had remained to watch the cells below begin to hang back on their ascent, filled with blind terror. Wordless understanding passes between Malmuck and Riderch. Rhian is no longer here to mediate. Riderch will take Malmuck's head if he can; and so Malmuck turns tail and slips away down the cliffs, just as he had slipped out of Rusty's storeroom. The pair of riders, seeing themselves abandoned, run after him.

Another six riders, having heard the dreadful screams, are halfway to the cells when Malmuck and the rearguard pass them. Two are on horseback, spears at the ready. The tamarin is walking ahead of them, holding his drawn sword. Then see the bloody corpses, the fresh blood running down the sunlit stones, and hesitate just long enough to spot Riderch following them. In his right paw is his borrowed falchion, red to the hilt and dripping. In his left is the culpeo's severed head, gripped by the ear and wearing a mask of ghastly death. Riderch's face is indiscernible beneath the blood, his ears alone betraying his patronage. His eyes, beastly and sun-stricken, fall upon the tamarin, and with a snarl he begins to run him down.

Six proven riders, two of them mounted, should by no means have struggled to dispatch a single harefolk. There was something in Riderch's countenance, however, something so perilous, so fiery, so fell, that he appeared to them thrice his size, the requiting sword given form. They had seen paintings of halsers calling down fire from heaven upon the wicked, all of them since youth, and had arrived in Nawddfa to find just such a halser. This hare was not aflame; and yet the blood that drenched him steamed, or even smoked, and his hungry sword slithered for their Guilur's heart. The horses spooked. The riders turned tail and ran after Malmuck. The tamarin, at least, stood his ground, intending at first to put up a fight; but when it was clear that Riderch was of a mind to butcher him, he cut his losses and fell back to their horses.

A mere three riders were left to guard the sisters. The rest were hauling treasure out of Nawddfa's storerooms, all of the gold and turquoise and fine brocade that Riderch had won from Arow, burdening their mules with as much as they could carry. They paused when their fellows returned from the cells in flight, without the maiden they were sent to retrieve. The sisters screamed as Riderch broke the treeline, blood-soaked and howling, stalking the stragglers. Their screams spurred the others into action. The few who still bore spoils dropped them on the valley floor and bolted for their mounts, gripped by an infectious terror that met them like a driving lance. Malmuck was the first out of Nawddfa, thrashing his black palfrey with its reins. The other riders streamed after him in no formation, as soon as they could get away, with the Guilur and the sisters' guards last of all. Melangell moved to stand between Riderch and her sisters, her gray robe the pinions of a great gray hen, ensuring that the cutthroat did not come too close.

"I reckon I'll be leaving soon, Mother," said Riderch, looking so mournful that the sisters almost forgot to be afraid.

"Where is Morgwynn, my son?" she asked, looking impregnable and yet sounding even nearer to tears than he.

"I sent her up," he said. "I'll go get her." Melangell could not reply before he had turned tail himself, striking off toward the cells to begin bringing out the bodies.

Morgwynn prayed that morning as she had never prayed before, a desperate beseeching beyond words before the new painting of Dinistrith in the great Wheelhouse. Everything within her wished to throw her father's sword over the edge of the high shelf, to cast away the red thread of bloodshed that had hounded her even to the threshold of heaven. She did not cast it away, however, just as she could not cast away the beaten rider's falchion if she hoped to sleep.

Between ragged sobs she surveyed the ill-fated sword. Her father had never bestowed it upon anyone, for its intended recipient had not lived to receive it, and Dinistriol had stolen it and stolen it again. It had nearly drank her blood once. For the briefest of moments she wondered if it might not do so now, before a sudden realization checked her like the bark of an unseen dog. The sword was not ill-fated. Its golden blade proclaimed it hallowed with blood that any halser would be proud to have spilled. Rather, it was Dinistriol who was ill-fated, and even now he wielded his own doom as a weapon for her sake. Smelling of him, feeling the incredible weight of the horns and the sandpaper of the poncho's hide that must have left him in agony, she gripped its handle, and it gave her the courage to rise and meet the chattering folk who now approached the Wheelhouse.

She went as far as the alcove overhanging the Wheelhouse door. Twelve green riders stood a stone's throw off, bathed in late morning sunlight while she remained cloaked in shade. They froze when they saw her, seeing the scarlet fur and the tremendous horns in silhouette. By their hesitation Morgwynn realized that they knew as well as she what Dinistriol had hoped they would. It was no secret that fiends lived in the mountains. The salt flats were haunted. The boardlands hosted the phantoms of Hellknights. Wraiths hid in the deepest clefts of the Anialdir, waiting for unlucky travelers to wander in out of the sun. She had heard all of these things since her youth, and so had they.

With a single, confident motion she drew Dinistriol's sword. Ribbons of heat played upon its blade as if it were the desert itself. Filled with terror, the riders turned tail and fled back down the mountainside. They found at its bottom a naked hare drenched in blood and holding a bloody sword, standing beside a pile of their dismembered fellows and a second pile of burning clothes and armor. No wild hare ever fled from a wolf as fast as those twelve riders fled Nawddfa, driving their mounts nearly to death on their way to warn Iwan Gwerthon of the devils that lived in Clegyrau.

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Rhian's old clothes were in a small chest in her room, unsullied by the blood that coated every other surface. When Riderch had removed the bodies – at times in pieces – had burned her old habit, and submerged himself totally in the waters of Nawddfa's west-flowing stream, he retrieved them, washed his feet again of the blood he had stepped in, then hiked up the mountain to fetch her. He left Morgwynn's bloody falchion with the bodies, to be buried so that no one could use it again. He was quite naked, therefore, when he stepped onto the high shelf; and being now unwilling to enter the Wheelhouse, called for her at the threshold. She stepped out of its shade a few moments later, holding his horns in one paw and his bow in the other, desperate expectation on her face.

"They're alive," he told her, freshly aware of his bloodstained fur. "The sisters, at least. Roughed up a little, but they'll live."

Tears were already brimming in her eyes. "Did you…" She hesitated, unable to finish.

"They won't be coming back any time soon," said Riderch, holding out her clothes. "And neither will I."

She did not take them. She dropped his horns and his bow, rather, and pulled him into a suffocating embrace, then began to weep on his shoulder. He could not bring himself to return it, even now; but he leaned his head against hers and closed his eyes, relishing her fearless touch as long as it lasted.

That day and the next Riderch spent in burying the riders' bodies, digging up plots in a little cemetery on the far western slope of Nawddfa. The headstones there were small and crude, though lovingly engraved. The Whirlwind had expunged the oldest; but among them, curiously, were several bearing the name Melangell. The riders, of course, received only the bare stones resting at the foot of the cliffs.

After this he mopped – or rather scraped – the congealed blood from Morgwynn's floor, trying with bucketful after bucketful of water and hard scrubbing to remove the red stains from the rock. She was staying in another empty cell now, and would thereafter, for beyond doubt Melangell would put no sister in this one while memory of him persisted.

He was moderately successful in his efforts, though even a veritable flood of water would not erase the red streaks from the cliff in front of the door. Only the sun and the sand would do that, as they did to the rest of the Anialdir. He stayed as far away from the sisters as possible, and they did not keep him from his work.

The full moon was overhead on the fifteenth of Rabbit when at last he chose to slip out. There was a storm coming: he could hear it in the wind's song, but did not care. He had with him a single waterskin; his belt with a leather pouch in which sat his buck knife, his whetstone, his compass, his fire-striker, his bowstring, and a tiny lump of rendered and wrapped tallow; his golden sword; his hedge apple bow; his quiver; his poncho, and his horns. Nothing else remained to him. Even his pants and chaps were gone, having been irreparably soaked in blood, so that only his poncho concealed his nakedness. All the better for a beast, he thought, as he padded eastward across the valley.

Morgwynn and Melangell were waiting for him at the well, beneath the ripe and laden nance trees. Both were a doleful red in the light of the halser's lamp, sitting beside one another upon the flat stone which had once served as Riderch's washboard. Melangell was comforting Morgwynn, petting her ears. They rose when they saw him, and Morgwynn stepped into the path to stop him from passing by. She was angry. Riderch grimaced.

"Leaving without a word," she seethed, "as if you haven't grieved me enough."

"I didn't want to scare anyone by going near the cells again," he said.

"I wasn't in my cell," she said more forcefully. "I didn't even go to Nightsong, because I was afraid you would slip away behind my back."

"I found her in the garden," Melangell added. "We walked down here together."

"Why, so you could get me to apologize?" Riderch snapped. "It won't make a lick of difference for all of the trouble I've caused you. If I've ever done any good by you, remember that and forget the rest."

"Dinistriol, the only thing I would have you apologize for is refusing to say goodbye," Morgwynn snapped back. "Do you reckon either of us so foolish that we can't understand what you've done for us? Any of us? Sister Imona would be here if she knew, and Sister Andrasta; but they would have taken the rest of the sisters with them, and we knew you would never abide that."

Pulling hard at his ear, Riderch growled and paced in a tight circle. "He cut me loose, Morgwynn," he said, almost too quietly to hear. "You can't keep me here."

"I won't," said Morgwynn, slipping her paws into the sleeves of her new robe. "I wouldn't. Gwyner's lips, I don't even know what to say, but I couldn't bear to let you leave all alone."

"That's the whole point of leaving," said Riderch. "There's no sense in saddling me on the way out."

"But where will you go, my son?" asked Melangell.

"Back to Gorseth Floyd," said Riderch.

Melangell's brows shot up. "Gorseth Floyd?" she cried. "Aren't you wanted there?"

“I reckon I’m wanted everywhere, Mother,” Riderch chuckled. “But Morgwynn here promised someone a boon back in Godnu, and I ought to make sure he got it if I can. She already knows, if she hasn’t mentioned it – I told her up on the mountain.”

“I tried to talk him out of it,” Morgwynn quavered, desperately clutching her own shoulders. “He never listens.”

“They’ll hang me, as sure as a brightbush blooms,” Riderch shrugged. “But Morgwynn’s got her word at stake; and since I was never one to hold up mine, I reckon I should hold up hers.”

“And if they don’t hang you?” asked Melangell.

The question surprised Riderch. “Then I’m blown,” he shrugged. “If you’ve got suggestions, Mother, I’m all ears.”

“Trying to have yourself killed will be no easy task if the Stars still purpose to use you,” Melangell warned, “but I think you know that already. If it so happens that you live, I believe I know where you may find guidance.”

“Is that turkey?” said Riderch, striving to appear unmoved.

Morgwynn gasped then, drumming her foot upon the ground like a rolling bodhran. “Are you going to send him to see the Melangell, Mother?” she breathed.

“If she will permit him to see her, aye,” Melangell nodded.

“Gwyner’s spots, Dinistriol, how I envy you!” Morgwynn beamed.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Riderch, remembering only a moment later the queer headstones he had seen.

Morgwynn looked to Mother Melangell, but the halser did not answer right away, leaning instead her wind-worn, time-burdened head against the Great Ram’s horns. She closed her eyes and sighed; the wind swelled, rustling the leaves of the nance trees around the well, and a parrot among their branches squawked inquiringly. “Do you know where Met Heafod is, my son?” she finally asked.

“That’s the headwaters of the Rinnea, isn’t it?” said Riderch. “You just follow the river up the mountain over Iwan Gwerthon.”

“It’s the headwaters of two rivers, actually,” said Melangell, opening her eyes again. “The Rinnea and the Atheling.”

“I’ve never heard of the Atheling,” said Riderch, “but all right.”

“I once knew a doe who was hopelessly lost,” Melangell continued dreamily. “Her name was Ethniu, and she had been wandering very far for a very long time. Quite by accident – or so she thought – she found herself at Met Heafod, a high, wooded lake between four bald peaks. No folk lived there, and yet in a bower of willows on the lakeshore Ethniu found another doe kneeling upon a stone, clad all in gray and holding a wild hare to her breast. Her name was Melangell, she said, and she came at times to pray at the lake.

“Ethniu, being by that time too tired to go on, climbed onto the stone and prayed with her. She spent three days in this way, learning the song of the hours by heart, and afterward asked the Melangell what she should do. ‘Go north,’ she told her, ‘due north as closely as you can, until you find a valley of little gray hares.’ Ethniu did so, and in a number of days found herself in Nawddfa.”

“Is she still here?” asked Riderch, trying vainly to remember the names of all of the sisters he had met.

“She died here, my son,” said Melangell. “But she died happy, and at peace. I would see the same for you.”

Riderch nodded, fingering the ear beneath his poncho. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he said.

“Please do,” said Melangell with a light bow. “With that said, I know that you will make no apologies. Will you at least receive thanks?”

“I don’t want you to thank me,” said Riderch, shaking his head.

"Then I won't, although thanks are due," Melangell sighed. "Neither of them, I fear, are sufficient any more; but I will pray for you. Heaven knows I wish I could do more."

"So will I," Morgwynn added.

"Much obliged to you both," said Riderch, bowing his horned head to them. "Can I go now?"

"May I bless you, at least?" asked Melangell.

Riderch shook his head, straining as restlessly as any mustang against the lead.

"Of course," Melangell nodded, stretching out her arm to gesture down the holler. "May the Stars keep you, my son."

"Wait," said Morgwynn, gripping his arm with an iron paw.

"Oh, what now?" Riderch snarled. "Are you going to keep me here until morning? I want to get out of the holler before the sun bakes me."

"Be patient with them, Dinistriol. You won't often find folk who are so happy to see you."

"There's one more thing I must tell you," said Morgwynn, dropping her voice nearly to a whisper, as if she feared being overheard. "It's been gnawing me hollow, and I reckon you should hear it. I don't quite know why, to tell you the truth."

"Spit it out, then," Riderch grunted.

"The dream I had on Moonday night," she began, "the one I was beginning to tell you about beneath the calabash tree? It woke me up. It was terrible, and I couldn't fall asleep afterward, so I rose to wander the garden for a while." Her paw wandered to her rawhide belt, where it fumbled fruitlessly for a falchion that was no longer there. Riderch's ears bent toward her.

"There was a black wolf outside my window, with great fangs and a long tongue," she continued furtively. "I was lying in bed, paralyzed – this was in the dream, mind you – and my poor dead mother was in the bed with me. She was enormous, thrice the size that she should have been at least, and all bloody, and some doe I couldn't see was washing her body. I was crying and screaming, trying to tell her about the wolf, but I don't think she heard me. It…it reached through the window, Rid-Dinistriol, forgive me. This monstrous paw, brown and covered in bristling hair, reached through the window and grabbed me by the leg, and pulled me out of bed and through the window, and I kept on crying and screaming, but no one heeded me. I was upside-down, but I could see my mother at the top of the bed, wrapped in a shroud. The doe who had been washing her was standing beside it, or rather the mere skeleton of a doe, and yet it wasn't only her." She paused and tugged hard at her ear, staring at the ground.

"Go on," said Riderch.

"I was still there," she said. "The wolf was carrying me away from the window, but I could see myself in that dead doe's arms, crying and screaming and covered in blood."

"Was this here in Nawddfa?" asked Riderch, squeezing the ear in his claws.

"No," said Morgwynn. "It was at Pedwar Ceinych, in Gorseth Floyd. In my mother's bedchamber."

Riderch's whiskers buzzed. "You're awfully quiet, Mother," He said to Melangell.

"She recounted it to me this morning," the halser answered gravely. "I'm afraid I've no wisdom to give; but if you're going to Gorseth Floyd, I suppose it best that you're aware of it."

"Aye," said Riderch, pulling his ear down at them. "I'll tuck it in my cheek. Are you going to keep me any longer?"

"No," said Morgwynn, stepping reluctantly aside. "You may go. Thank you, Dinistriol. Thank you very, very much. I'm not ashamed if the thanks are inadequate, either. I wouldn't be here if not for you, and I'll never forget that as long as I live. Thank Dinistrith for me, please."

"I always do," said Riderch; then without another word he set off down the holler, feeling his dim way through the scrub with his yellow bow, stepping as confidently as if it were high noon. The holler bent, concealing him from their sight, and so Riderch found himself alone again.

42

The storm reached Riderch when he was halfway down the holler, when the sun should have been at war with the Anialdir. There was only sand instead, a thick red haze in a screaming gale that skipped across the rocks over his ears and curled down to tear at his face. He closed his eyes and continued to walk anyway, until the red haze turned to slate and the flying sand turned first to falling mud and then to pounding rain.

"I'm in a wash," he said, when the water was already up to his ankles. "It'll sweep me away if I keep this up."

"There's a cleft against the western wall. Enter it, and the water will pass you by."

He could hardly see it in the overcast darkness. Indeed, his yellow bow saw it before he did, slipping behind a sharp bend in a bald heap. There stood a drowning black slit, a crack no doubt infested with adders and scorpions. He entered it anyway, wedging himself tightly between the rocks and squatting on an inclined sandpaper floor. That floor was not dry, though it was not the river that the outer holler was becoming. Rain still pattered against his head, soaking him until he smelled of wild game, but he scarcely perceived it. He slept soundly for three hours, then moved on when the water was low enough to wade in.

So commenced Riderch's wanderings. His flight down the mountainside after the burning of Iwan Gwerthon had been a mere rehearsal, a practice on the parade ground for the true charge. To keep it up for any length of time would have burned him alive back then; but now, if only the slightest bit more, the buck was saddlebroken. He had no horse, no mule, not the merest ass. No pack hung on his shoulders, no tent or bedroll. He had a single skin of water and a guide speaking in his ear; and as long as he stepped precisely where his guide directed, these were enough. Being strictly warned against it, he did not return to the Rinnea, but crossed the full breadth of the salt flat's stone forest, stopping to drink at the well Rhian had uncovered. After this he became a serpent winding through the Western Waste, meandering from gwerthon to gwerthon with even greater ease than he had with Rhian and Carbit. The rhythm of the heavenly round set his pace morning and evening, sung by the sisters of Nawddfa and carried to him on the wind:

"Forth fareth the sun-bearer,
Bringing the world the sun's radiance;
The watch at the morning appeareth,
Which is the sun's rays at the sunrise"

Followed by:

"Now fare we to the farther eyemark, westering lord,
And seek the shelter of the sunset's shaded booth
Wherein we wait at watch, aright until the morn
When sunken sun springs up again in glorious youth"

On certain days he found small game or foraged greens, on other days neither. Some hikes were entirely without water. Once he was stung by a scorpion in the brush; terrible was his misery for days

afterward, yet not so terrible as the solitude of the mountaintop. The silence which had magnified his every thought was broken now by the sounds of distant skirmishes, of hooves drumming against the Swartway and spears striking shields. He walked on and on and on, ever eastward, until on the twenty-sixth day of Rabbit he met the Swartway himself.

There were no travelers on the road at that time, for it was high noon and the whole world was a rippling kiln. There were bodies strewn about, however, half a day old or older to judge by their stench, red-clad riders and their chargers made redder in their own blood. Godnu had lost a battle here, clearly, and its foes had not allowed them to retrieve their dead. Riderch found himself unexpectedly angry at this realization, though he had long since lost count of how many times he had done the very same thing. Storming across the black highway, he made for the undulating western wall of Gorseth Floyd along the first road he had taken in months. Folk who chattered in the roadside booths, waiting out the merciless sun, fell silent and stared the moment they caught sight of him, of his crude scarlet poncho that revealed a naked, leathern frame and a polished golden sword whenever the wind arose, of a face belonging to the mad, blind halsers who lived along the Sunneweg, and of a pair of curling gray horns that would have made for peerless clarions at the charge.

The wall was finished now. Square towers upon its ramparts were full of gray sentries. The parapet was one long gibbet, hung with the disgraced corpses of the city's captured foes – Riderch pulled his ear down at them, knowing that he would soon be among their number. The western Blinda Gate, ostensibly the less likely to be assaulted, was more heavily guarded than the eastern Gwyner Gate had been when last he had visited Gorseth Floyd. He counted a round dozen wardens in the shade of the open pylon, all of them harefolk, who fielded a thin trickle of only the bravest travelers. Riderch bowed his head and made to walk past them without a word, as he and Rhian had done in Godnu, but to no avail. A paw shot out, bracing against his chest; and the warden, thinking himself solidly rooted, staggered back under the hare's momentum. It was innocently done, for Riderch had not noticed his locked arm. Nevertheless, it brought the other wardens swarming around him, brandishing their polished spear-heads like a single organ pipe.

"Ears up, redcoat!" one of the wardens shouted.

"He pushed me, the dumb mule!" snarled the one who had touched him.

"Is that true, Father?" asked another.

Riderch looked up, startled, and searched their faces. A few of the wardens were bellicose, especially the one who had stumbled. Others were merely puzzled or, to his surprise, pitying. He heard reedy laughter over his ears, rare laughter that washed his burning head in a cool spring. "No," he rasped. "Father?"

"My right ear if that one's a halser," said one of the bucks at his left. "He's got a sword."

"He's clearly a wayfarer," said the warden directly in front of him. "They carry swords sometimes."

"That's an awful lot of gold for a halser's sword," the first warden mumbled.

"You ought to be taxed," grunted another. "You're war-band stock, or else I'm a rabbit."

"I don't have a purse," said Riderch, remembering only then that it was true. He had given up his purse in Godnu, and had not thought about it since he had fallen in the gwerthon.

"I reckon you wouldn't be worth shaking down if you did, Father," said the warden in front of him. Cocking an eyebrow, he reached out to pull aside the hem of his poncho. "Rabbit's rod," he husked, then let it fall to cover him again.

"I'm not a halser," said Riderch. He looked down at himself, freshly reminded of his own queer appearance, then flexed his yellow bow between his paws. "This thing's just hedge apple. Haven't you ever seen a halser's staff before?"

“Would you mind telling us your business, then, brother?” asked the warden in front of him. He was wearing a Guilur’s turquoise sash beneath his poncho, Riderch noticed then, the only one among the company. By the strap of gray fur under his chin he belonged to some Ceinych family, one of those who had first taken Gorseth Floyd under King Rhuddri. Riderch was all the more glad to see that he was one of those who pitied him.

“What’s your name?” Riderch asked him.

“That’s not what I asked you,” said the hare stonily.

“I know,” Riderch nodded. “What is my business, anyhow?”

“Oh this one’s baked, Captain,” said one of the wardens on his right.

“He would have bowled me right over if I’d let him,” grumbled the hare who had touched him.

“Shut up, Teyrnaswr,” the captain snapped.

“Tell him that the boardlands are open. You know the passwords.”

Riderch grinned then, relishing for the first time in ages the joy of someone’s cleverness, even if it was not his own. “My name’s Dinistriol, brother,” said Riderch, removing the falchion and scabbard from his belt to show them. “I came to bring My Lord the passwords for the boardlands – well, Mydge at least, although I reckon it’ll work for the others – and to give him the first of the spoils.”

The Guilur’s brows shot up. His wardens fell silent and still, eyeing him without blinking. “I’m not talking about this here,” he hissed under his breath, “and neither will you if you’ve got any sense. Are you one of My Lord’s riders? I don’t recognize you.”

Riderch shook his head. “I don’t have a horse,” he said.

“Where’d you get the sword?” the Guilur pressed.

“Spoils,” said Riderch. “It ought to prove what I’m about to tell him, or I hope it will.”

A doubtful murmur spread throughout the wardens. A few travelers skirted furtively around them and into the city. “Put it away,” the Guilur ordered. “I won’t touch it if it’s for My Lord, but I’m taking you to the Ceinych myself. The other Guilurs will never let you in, looking like that.”

Riderch returned the sword to his belt, then drank from his waterskin.

“What are the horns for?” asked the warden on his left.

“Spoils,” said Riderch.

The silence that followed was so dreadful that Riderch could have laughed. Instead he kept silent himself, while the Guilur sighed and thumped his foot on the road. Turning about, he thrust a claw at one of his wardens. “Teyrnaswr, you’re in charge until I get back. I’m bringing up one of Pryderi’s, if anyone asks.”

“Aye, Captain,” said Teyrnaswr, pulling down his ear.

“And you,” said the Guilur, wheeling on him. “If you’re going to the Ceinych, it wouldn’t kill you to bow.”

“Much obliged,” said Riderch. He followed the Guilur through the gate and into the searing sunlight, tapping ahead of him with his yellow bow. “Since when do you to tell me to lie?” he murmured, too low for the Guilur to hear, but received no answer.

Of all the many things he had to fear in returning to Gorseth Floyd, it was not hanging, or torture, or imprisonment which bothered him most. Rather it was the prospect of encountering someone he knew: someone from his old band or, more likely, one of the grooms from the Ceinych stables. He might fall flat on his face in dread, he thought, if ever he crossed paths with Master Kyllister. It was a sensation he was unused to. Malmuck’s sodden face beside the Gwydd Gwerthon, ever in his mind, inspired the same dread; he imagined a similar face arriving to announce that someone had stolen Carbit and resolved to walk wide of the Ceinych’s southern side.

He saw no familiar faces, as it happened. Gorseth Floyd had transformed in a few short months, as it always did. Winter's lull had exploded into summer's throngs, all crowding the markets and spilling into adjoining streets as green grocers fanned flies away from fruits and corn exchanges weighed enough grain to spangle the heavens. Their shouts stung Riderch after his long silence; he made them a lance with which he drained his wrath. Soldiers were more prevalent everywhere, he noticed: mostly Anialdir stock, who had no doubt been conscripted in defense of the city now that the tenuous thirty-year peace was hanging by a thread.

In spite of the concealing crowds and his armed escort, there was no shortage of conspicuous disdain for Riderch. Folk kept clear of him as often and as widely as they could, and cringed when they could not. Some pointed and jeered at his horns; others merely stared. He smelled strongly of sagebrush and game and the oils of his own unbathed fur. This, combined with his nakedness, saw them across the bridge without so much as a single hawker's solicitation.

"You never told me your name, brother," said Riderch when they resumed the bank.

"Guilur Rory," said the rider.

"And your pa's name?" Riderch pressed.

Rory glanced at Riderch as they turned west, puzzling over him. "Guilur Rhys," he said.

"A war-band name," said Riderch with a nod. "Your pa must have helped take the city?"

"Guilur Rhys was first to the ramparts!" said Rory proudly, beating his breast with a fist. "And now I'm first to guard them. What about you, brother?"

"I never knew my pa," said Riderch, "but my mother's named Melangell."

"Is she the one who gave you the passwords?" asked Rory.

"No, that was an old sloth named Sawl," said Riderch. "I don't quite know how he'd feel about me giving them to the Ceinych, to talk turkey, but I reckon I don't much care after he tried to kill me."

Rory gave a low whistle. "Thought better of it, did he?"

"I don't know," Riderch admitted. "I doubt it. Sawl hated being alone more than anything else in the world – it's how I got them from him in the first place. Toward the end I reckon he was afraid I'd set him up for just that."

Rory nodded. "And who gave them to Sawl?" he asked.

"You know, he never would spill it," said Riderch, "but I heard they came from Coyote first."

"That sounds like Coyote, all right," said Rory, with a laugh so bright and noble that it would have seemed wholly out of place beneath the gibbet-wall. "The boardlands were his warrens last of all, if you credit the tale. I reckon you must."

"I do," said Riderch. "Don't you?"

Rory paused for a moment, fiddling with his dangling sash. "I don't know," he admitted. "If you're telling me they open at all, I reckon that's a bean in your bowl. But folk say he and his holdouts died in one of them without telling anyone else how to get in, and that's why they've been shut up all this time. That can't be true, if you say you learned them from this Sawl."

"Sure it can," said Riderch. "You'd be surprised how long something can hide in the desert before the Whirlwind digs it up again."

Slackening his pace, Rory fell back to ply Riderch with an inquisitive stare. "Are you talking about the boardlands, or about Coyote?" he asked.

"I'm talking about myself," said Riderch.

They approached Pedwar Ceinych from its eastern side, mercifully out of view of the stables. There Riderch was stopped again, by a pair of Guilurs mercifully unfamiliar to him.

"Halt," said one formally. "State your business."

Rory bowed to them while Riderch stood by. The Guilurs pulled their ears to their fellow, though they looked only at Riderch. “This one was just at the boardlands, brothers,” said Rory, hooking a thumb at Riderch, “or so he’d have me believe. Tell them what you told me, Dinistriol.”

“The boardlands are open now, brothers,” said Riderch, once more removing his falchion to show them. “I came to give My Lord the passwords, and a token of the spoils.”

Boundless, buffoonish hope dawned on the Guilurs’ faces. They glanced at each other, then at Rory, then again at Riderch, seeming to comprehend less every second. “Are you tickling my scut?” one of them asked, divorced from his former formality.

“No, Lording,” said Riderch. “Mydge Boardland’s full of these white stone birds, each about as big as a house. It has eight big doors and that many wells, and that’s only the parts I’ve seen myself.”

“How thick are the walls?” asked the other Guilur.

“A dozen folk abreast,” Riderch answered without skipping a beat.

Their jaws fell open. “But where are the others?” said the first Guilur. “My Lord put Pryderi after it, and I’ll be damned if you’re with his company.”

“I’m not a rider,” said Riderch, returning the sword to his belt. “I’m from out in the Western Waste; I just happened to know the passwords, and I heard that My Lord might want to know them.”

“Well that explains the way you’re dressed,” Rory muttered.

“How in the Hare’s name did you learn the passwords?” asked the second Guilur. “Most folk don’t think there are any.”

“Family secret,” said Riderch. “There’s a lot of old wisdom along the Clegyrau.”

“Aye, and a lot of ghosts too,” the second Guilur scoffed. “Blinda’s eyes, I reckon My Lord would break our necks if he found out we held you up. He come in through Gwyner’s Gate, Rory?”

Rory shook his head. “Blinda’s.”

“Speak of the lucky dog,” said the second Guilur. “Just missed that scrape, in that case. I’ll have to come with you if you’re going to the Gray Throne, brother. My Lord’s at court right now, and they wouldn’t let you in for any reason without an escort.”

“One ear’s as green as another,” said Riderch; and guessing that they would no longer detain him, he passed through the gate and into the long tunnel beneath the Ceinych walls, leaving Rory without a parting word.

The rolling of banjos and the shrilling of reed flutes assaulted him when he stepped out into the palace garden, followed swiftly by the scent of roasting flesh and the faint aroma of brightwine. Sun-veiled does played under parasols upon the flowering grass and out of shaded upper windows. None of them, Riderch thought, were half as beautiful as the sisters of Nawddfa, and yet the gray riders practically drooled to look at them. Walking beside the unnamed Guilur, Riderch received another hail of queer looks, but the Guilurs and Henadurs and visiting dignitaries basking upon their couches largely preferred to avert their eyes entirely. He stopped halfway up the stairs to the king’s white hall, between a pair of spear-bearing stone hares, and tried and failed to catch a glimpse of Rhian’s Shepherd through the Wheelhouse doors. He stared at the engraving of the serpent pinned to the saguaro until the Guilur barked at him to hurry up; bounding after him like a leaping stag, he marveled at the new turquoise set into the enormous hare-heads upon the walls.

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The long, thin highway of sunlight that split Rhuddri’s throne room in half now ran the far southern edge of the floor, marking precisely the length of Riderch’s wanderings since winter. A whole host of folk stood at its western end: riders and wardens in their arms and armor, as well as elderly dignitaries whose decorated falchions and brocade sashes marked them as favored members of the war-

band. The sunlight set steel ablaze wherever it touched, glittering so ostentatiously that the figures more distant from it might as well have been in shadow. Riderch saw a great deal of green among the gray, and an amount of gold that set his heart drumming in his breast.

His escort would not let him explain himself to the dozen wardens guarding the hall, each of whom bore polished spears and flint-knapped faces. He passed along the news on Riderch's behalf, to no less astonishment than the first two times. The warden nearest the door ducked inside to cuff a young buck leaning against a shaded square pillar; when he was standing straight, the warden passed the message along himself, and like a wild hare at the hunting horn the little buck shot off down the hall along the northern wall. Riderch watched him go, fielding another barrage of contemptuous stares while the harefolk waited in pregnant silence.

Voices from the hall, loud and impassioned yet indistinct, had been audible over the garden music since the lowermost stair. They spoke at times in turns, at others all at once, though never more than half a dozen together. These abruptly ceased when the little courier, reaching a steward beside the Gray Throne's dais, whispered his message in his ear, who in turn passed it on one final time to the red-veined ears which bent down from the high stone seat. A tawny palm shot out, draped in glittering gold brocade; and though he said nothing that Riderch could hear, it seemed almost that the musicians below him hushed themselves at his command. Ephemeral stars filled the white hall as folk turned around. The young runner returned to the wardens along the same shaded path, and with reedy clarity shrilled the king's summons to Riderch.

"Don't hesitate now, Dinistriol, whatever you do."

Bringing to mind the sight of Arow's head tumbling down the golden mound, he steeled himself and proceeded down the hall.

Two wardens flanked him in addition to the Guilur who had brought him from the Ceinych gate. They could have pinned his arms if they had chosen to, and no doubt that was by design, for they remained in lock-step with him the whole way. Indeed, Riderch was convinced that they wanted to, and that his knowledge of the boardland passwords was all that prevented them. He might not have gained entrance into Pedwar Ceinych without them, he thought – aye, might not have gained entrance into Gorseth Floyd at all.

The hall itself, though mostly unchanged since his last visit, seemed to Riderch wholly new, as if it had been dismantled and rebuilt of identical materials in the months of his absence. Its great round table was bare of brocade now, strewn instead with off-white maps written in charcoal and covered with pins and cacao beans. The hempen tapestries hanging from the great stone pillars displayed warriors he swore he had met once, as well as Stars whose faces were cousin to those of the ancient Wheelhouse in Nawddfa. He halted before of the image of Dinistrith, startled by his horse's head, but was not allowed to linger there.

Dogs stole his attention, five strapping culpeo mixes who snarled with lips pulled back and barked braggadocious threats the moment Riderch stepped too close. They were held on chains at the paws of as many green riders sashed in pure white, who in turn surrounded a figure whom Riderch knew on sight, though he had never seen him before. He was a white-nosed coatifolk, tall and lithe and relentlessly severe, whose poncho was green and gold brocade cut with white stags' horns and whose helmet was ringed with a circlet of golden brightbush leaves: King Sheen of Gwall, Rhian's spurned suitor. Flaying interest was in Sheen's stare, the same interest that Riderch had shown the ram just before loosing his fatal shaft.

As cleanly as he had sublimated from the darkness in the gwerthon, Malmuck emerged a moment later from the shade behind Sheen's right shoulder, so surprised to see Riderch that he seemed a fiend-haunted wretch. Riderch wished then that the wardens would drag him forward by the ears, for his legs had become the same stone as the floor. Sheen hissed, however, and his dogs fell silent, and

Riderch stepped forward before fear could fetter him. His paw itched to fall to his falchion; he gripped his yellow bow harder instead, tapping ahead of himself like an old blind buck.

The moment Riderch locked eyes with King Rhuddri, his dread, so vivid, so like a choking snare, slackened and fell away. Rhuddri overwatched the whole Ceinych from the Gray Throne, draped in the golden, four-petaled flowers that Riderch now realized resembled those of Godnu – wishfully, he thought, though less and less so. The river cane was in his right paw, gripped so tightly between his eager claws that it seemed it must soon snap. His falchion lay across his lap, and his well-weathered foot beat a bodhran's galloping rhythm on the throne's highest step. His hard brown eyes, for the briefest of moments, seemed to Riderch full of pure, dumb hope, so that Riderch half expected to discover some grand, ludicrous miscommunication which would spare him the gallows. Deadly recognition sparked in them, however, and all such foolish thoughts burned away.

"You!" Rhuddri roars, and like a jaguar pounces upon Riderch from his high throne. He drops his rod to draw his deadly sword before he is clear of the dais, warning Sheen and his entourage to make way for his warpath. A clamor arises, a chorus of warning voices, of skittering claws and hooves, yet none dare to stand before the warlord's wrath. Rhuddri falls upon him. It is all that he can do not to draw his sword against him, but with a mighty movement of will he succeeds, as the king rips the horns from his head and grips his ears in his iron fist, wrenching them back and forth so hard that stars fill his vision.

"Where is my daughter?" he screams, and raises his falchion as if to slay Riderch before he can answer. This, Riderch thinks, is a more fitting end to his life than hanging: a race fumbled at the finish line. He resolves to finish if he can regardless; but before he can reach for his own sword, the wardens on either side of him are shouting.

"Wait, My Lord, stop!" one of them begged.

"This is the buck, My Lord! This is the buck!" cried the Guilur. "The buck who knows the passwords!"

"What?" Rhuddri snarled, snapped for a moment out of his red fit. He looked at Riderch's pitted face again, at his mad eyes and his gargoyle's grimace. His anger swelled again, and his agonizing grip on the buck's ears tightened, but at least for the moment he refrained from his stroke.

"He just opened them for Pryderi, My Lord, and came back here," said the Guilur.

"Pryderi told you that?" asked Rhuddri.

"Guilur Rory told us, My Lord," he answered, "but this buck must have told him first."

"And you believed him?" Rhuddri balked, tugging so fiercely at Riderch's ears that he thought they must be pulled up by the roots. He yelped like a dog in spite of himself. Rhuddri looked at him again, seeing for the first time his queer state of undress and, peering out from the side of his red-furred poncho, the golden, feathered serpent handle of his falchion. His paw sought it before another word was spoken, loosing Riderch's ears for a mad grasp. Riderch would not let it go, however. Desperately he dropped his yellow bow as blade and scabbard slipped from his belt. A paw gripped each, preventing the sword from being drawn and Rhuddri from taking possession of it, even as the king wrenched and kicked and beat him with the flat of his own blade. Riderch's surpassing might, beyond all understanding, forbade him utterly from having it.

"Where is my daughter?" Rhuddri roared again. "Where is she, you snake? Tell me, so I can saw off your head!"

Their tug-of-war persisted until Riderch was battered and bleeding, yet still he refused to let Rhuddri take the sword. He held fast, speaking not a word, until the king's rage moved him to raise his own falchion against Riderch's wrists. "It's true, Lord," he rasped then, struggling to stand upright after a kick to the liver. "We were going to take Rhian back to Mydge and hold here there while we fished

for ransom. I know the password that lets you in, and I'm pretty sure I know the others. You'll never learn them if you don't rein in your temper."

The clamor in the hall fell flat like a dying wind. Rhuddri's struggle for the sword ceased for Riderch's sheer gall. King Sheen stormed out of the circle of his Guilurs, drawing as near to Riderch as he dared, and for the first time the cutthroat had a full look at the king of Gwall. He was far handsomer than Brockwell had been, younger than Rhuddri though by no means as young as Morgwynn, and yet there was a vicious hunger in his face that rivaled Brockwell's own.

"Are you the caitiff who kidnapped Her Highness?" he thundered at Riderch. His voice was a horn that roused his dogs; they whined and growled, though they did not bark again. "That girl is my bride, you base cutthroat! She belongs to me! What have you done with her?"

"Be quiet, Sheen," Rhuddri snapped at him.

"I will not be dishonored like this, Rhuddri!" Sheen blared.

"Stow your tongue, Sheen!" Rhuddri let go the golden sword then, though his own still hung at the ready. Riderch hugged it to his bruised chest, making sure to press the ear against his fur to ensure that it had not been torn loose from its thong. It remained.

"Where is Rhian?" Rhuddri asked again, smoldering with a white rage that sought any excuse to spill blood. "Where is my daughter? Speak!"

"I will, Lord," Riderch assured, glancing from him to Sheen to Malmuck, "but there are some things we ought to talk about first."

"'About?'" cried Rhuddri. The crack of his foot against the stone floor was sharper than Nawddfa's strike-board. "My sword will be about your ears if you don't answer me this second! I'll have the truth from you, by all the Stars in heaven, willingly or unwillingly."

"That's turkey, you will," said Riderch, nodding frantically. "I'll tell you anything you want to know, but it's got to start with the reason I came here in the first place. Bit and bridle, I'm bound determined to do right by your daughter."

"That you, of all the wretches in the Anialdir, would dare to say such a thing is the lowest insult of all," said Rhuddri, quaking with rage. "May my ears wither if I don't cut you to ribbons where you stand. May my teeth fall from my head. May my scut turn white in my sleep."

"But you won't," Riderch dared, realizing then how small a thing stood between him and the warlord's blade. Dinistrith – if indeed it was Dinistrith – had bought him time to say his piece, if nothing else. "Not until I give you the passwords, at least."

"Black Goat kiss your passwords, I want to know where Rhian is!" Rhuddri howled. "What have you done with her? Is she safe?" The desperation in his voice, even as it dripped with threat, was so pitiful that Riderch shuddered to think of how much he would have relished it in different circumstances. This was nothing like the meeting he had imagined last winter, when he would have opened the bidding for Rhian's life. The drunken thrill of holding power over the Anialdir's mightiest lords was gone, dead before it could ever be born.

"Rusty's the first thing we ought to settle, I reckon," he said. "Armored ratfolk, about your age, and some of the bucks he runs with. Did any of them come here looking for a boon?"

"What does it matter to you?" asked Rhuddri.

"Not much matters to me any more, Lord," said Riderch, "but that does, and I'm planting my feet here until I know."

Rhuddri's face folded in half from the strength of his scowl. Lowering his sword to a low guard, he eyed his spear-ready wardens the way Sheen had eyed his dogs. "I remember them," he admitted. "They spun a yarn at me, saying that they had helped Rhian out of Godnu when Prince Brockwell came looking for her. They even brought Newidol as proof."

"But you didn't believe them," said Riderch.

"I had them whipped and sent home as horse thieves when it was clear they didn't know where she was," Rhuddri replied.

"And Newidol?" asked Riderch.

"Back in her stable unharmed," Rhuddri smoldered, "which is the only reason I didn't have them hanged."

Riderch nodded, regarding his fallen bow from the corner of his eye. "Then that's one more thing we'll have to talk about later. We went to Godnu just after we left the road to Gwall."

"Is that where she is now?" asked Rhuddri, kneading the handle of his falchion.

Riderch shook his head. "It was the only place where no one was looking for us, or at least we reckoned so." He hesitated and looked to Malmuck, wondering how much he had told the warlords if they were not already asking him about Nawddfa. Malmuck was already staring back at him, brimming with raw, desperate panic that seemed liable to send him leaping from the high hall at any moment. By this Riderch knew that he had concealed something; and while he was not inclined to help the hunter in any way, he resolved not to speak a word about Nawddfa until someone else did.

He was mindful, also, that what he was about to say could sever the last string of faith between Gorseth Floyd and Ancathair, if any still remained. Brockwell's slavering, fat-cheeked face filled his mind, however, and he found that he did not care. "I don't know how much you've heard since, Lord, but Rusty was talking turkey," he began. "I was made the fool. I didn't know it until Godnu, but the folk who wanted me to bag Rhian was Prince Brockwell. He cornered us in Rusty's shop and tried to take her from me – he would have done it too, if it weren't for Rusty. Him and his bucks stepped in and turned the tables, and I would have killed Brockwell then and there, but Rhian stopped me."

It struck Riderch only then how easily he was speaking. His fever-muted tongue impeded him less than it had in months – less than it ever had, in fact. He had never been a buck of words, though he knew how to wield a lie. This boldness was different, however, more akin to the natural confidence with which he had learned to step under Dinistrith's subtle prompting. "I knew I'd have to come back here someday on his account," he continued. "Rusty's, that is. Rhian promised him and his bucks a boon each, and said she'd send someone to make sure you gave it to them as soon as she could. I'm the only one left who can do it now, so I'm putting it to you to hold up Rhian's word."

"Let her do it herself!" Rhuddri snapped. "Bring her back to me and I'll give her any boon she wants. Why should you be her go-between?"

"That's another thing we ought to settle, Lord," said Riderch, slowly and carefully. "I can't do that, and neither can she."

"Why not?" Rhuddri demanded, hurling the question as a warning. Unease spread throughout the court again. Sheen was biting his own tongue off in a wordless, murderous fantasy. Malmuck was still coiled to flee, hanging on Riderch's every word.

"I'll tell you now that I won't give you the boardland passwords until I've said my piece," said Riderch, speaking to every soul in the hall. "You can string me up by the ears until you're sure they work, I can't stop you, but you won't get them if you kill me too soon."

"Tell me where my daughter is," Rhuddri ordered breathlessly.

Finding that he could not meet the king's eyes, Riderch stared at the floor. "My Lord, your daughter Rhian is dead," he said, conjuring as much of Melangell's cunning sincerity as he could to give the lie a spine of truth to hang upon. "I'm the only one who knows – except for her mother now, I reckon – and you need to know to quit looking for her. It won't do anybody any more good."

Riderch felt then, in a manner altogether unbearable, that he stood once more in the Wheelhouse over Nawddfa. He had become the painting of Dinistrith that Sister Andrasta had modeled after his face, and his snarling, bloody visage looked down upon a Riderch hopelessly, helplessly alone. The other figures in the hall, as still as the Wheelhouse's myriad paintings, were the stars that ringed the

mountain's sky. "Did you kill her?" Rhuddri asked him, and Riderch was surprised to hear that he had not simply asked why.

"No, Lord, I didn't," he answered. "Rhian had made up her mind to bolt as soon as she left the wagon train. She didn't want to marry Sheen, and she wanted to marry Brockwell even less. All she wanted to do her whole life was to pray to the Stars, and she struck off to do it, and I tried to help her – I won't bother telling you why I did, you'd never believe me. She went to Godnu, anyhow, then out west, and everywhere she went folk hounded her, as that catamount there will tell you." He nodded at Malmuck, whose whiskers thrummed with his fretting. "I'd guess it was after Sheen torched Iwan and we had to go back to wandering that she saw there'd be no life for her in the Anialdir, not as long as there were folk alive to chase her, so in the end she cut herself free of it. I couldn't stop her. I didn't have the right. But I didn't kill her, even though I'm sure you don't believe that. To talk turkey, I reckon I loved her. I tried to, at least."

He had not intended to insert this last confession; and yet it was true, so true that it sold him on his own lie. He wiped his nose, expecting to find snot on the back of his paw, only to find half-congealed blood from where Rhuddri had struck him.

"Where is her body?" asked the king, in a hoarse, accusatory buzz that shriveled his battle-born stature. "Show me her body, if you'd have me believe you."

Riderch shook his head again. "I'm afraid I can't oblige, Lord. She isn't in the Anialdir, and I wouldn't dig her up if she was. Let her rest without someone else making a grab for her body."

"What are you playing at?" Sheen snapped. "You don't believe a word from this whining coyote, do you Rhuddri?"

"Is she at that gwerthon out west? The one that sank? Is that where she died?" asked Rhuddri more urgently, turning to address Malmuck, who seemed in the midst of his panic sincerely interested in Riderch's tale. He opened his mouth, revealing stark white teeth in a sable face, then feebly shook his head.

"I was…I was tracking them by myself then, Your Majesty," he said. "I figured I could put the cutthroat under the dunes without much trouble, but that one there fought like a whole pack of wolves himself. I had to fall back."

"Answer his question, Malmuck!" Sheen shrilled.

"She was alive the last time I saw her, My Lords," said Malmuck with a helpless shrug. "She was alive, but…"

"But what?" Rhuddri pressed.

"She was threatening to gill herself the whole time I was there," he continued, "if Riderch didn't let me go. Had a rider's sword to her neck and everything. She said…she said she'd been planning to do it in the coach on her way to Gwall. I didn't reckon she meant it."

Only then did Riderch understand that Malmuck – whether to preserve his treasure or his reputation, he could not yet guess – had not told the warlords about Nawddfa. Indeed, none of the riders who had survived that disastrous raid were at the Ceinych that day, and it seemed that Malmuck was eating himself alive with the desire that they remain unmentioned. So be it, thought Riderch: if Rhian's trail was to go cold at a little gwerthon in the middle of the Western Waste, a gwerthon whose name only he knew, that was all the better.

"That's not where she died," said Riderch. "She did mean it, but that's not where she died."

The croak that seeped from Rhuddri's throat in that moment was more beastly than any wretched moan that Riderch had made in his sleepless nights upon the mountain. In it were grief and rage mingled, shaken until their froth like bile rose and spilled onto the floor. He staggered back, falling to his seat upon the dais's lowest step, and the tip of his sword clattered against the floor. "Oh no, oh

no, oh no," he was quavering, drowning in his gold brocade, until his riders removed their helmets and held them to their breasts on his behalf.

If any in that hall remained unconvinced, they raised no more objections. Sheen, however, remained at the very least unmoved. Gripping his white-hilted falchion in long black claws, he wheeled upon Riderch, and might have drawn on him then and there if not for the gray riders who flanked him. "What sort of mindless beast watches a doe kill herself and doesn't try to stop her?" he blared. "Dog! Peccary! You stink of a horse's shit, you festering cyst upon the Anialdir's face!"

Riderch nodded, unstirred. "You've got me pegged," he answered. "I'm a stray mutt next to one of your hounds, and nothing is going to change that now – but I was loyal to Rhian while I could be, and that's the way I want to be remembered."

"Morgwynn, Morgwynn," Rhuddri was muttering from the floor, ghastly for his lack of tears. He stared at Riderch's golden sword as if trying to conjure a dream half-forgotten; Riderch looked at it himself, tracing the coils of its guard and gazing into its bloodstone eyes, until he saw Rhian as she had looked in the stagecoach. Dinistrith had set to breaking him there as one breaks the mustangs who roam the gwerthons; and now, through his bit, he felt his tongue directed to and fro.

"I grew up on a ranch with about a dozen other boys, all Anialdir stock," he began, speaking to whomever would listen. "These were all boys the war-band pulled from the gwerthons they took, pulled out and sold as spoil. We lived in the hayloft in the barn."

"What is that to us?" Sheen scoffed.

"The rancher rode us like nags and worse," he continued, "and no one ever came around to wash the mites out of our ears. We had to do that ourselves, but most of the time were at each other's throats instead, and we all suffered for it. I turned to theft and murder after I left, and pretty soon I went to the dunes to live as an outlaw so I wouldn't be hanged. I made sure folk feared me, and I did a damn good job of it, but if I'd never met Rhian I would have told you it was all a waste of time."

"Is there no end to this raving?" asked Sheen, looking frantically around the hall for a single rider still at the ready. "Is no one going to stop this wretch wagging his sun-stricken tongue?" The wardens pressed even closer to Riderch, waiting for a word from Rhuddri, but Rhuddri hung on Riderch's every word.

"I kept seeing my own face all over the Anialdir," said Riderch, feeling his tongue leap over his teeth with the lightness of a hart; "in folk who had nowhere to go once they were too old for the hayloft except into bands of thieves; folk without fathers or sons to take care of them; newborn kittens stolen from their mothers and sold as slaves; folk whose whole year's corn was burned or stolen when your riders rode in; folk who didn't get to bury their dead because they hung from the city walls until the coyotes carried off their bones; good folk who quit the Anialdir for good because your hounds ran them to death, only to be beaten bloody a second time when you came back around. I only saw my face there because I never thought about anyone but myself – until I met Rhian. Because of her I know now I was right, the same way I know you'll waste your life like me if you keep on acting like I did."

"How long will you let this drooling felon ramble on before you cut out his tongue, Rhuddri?" Sheen yowled, drawing his falchion as his temper finally prevailed. "He robbed me of my bride, by the sun's eye! I'll do it myself!"

"Let him finish!" Rhuddri thundered. Every eye in the hall fell upon the king, enthralled by his command. He left no room for protest; Sheen cursed under his breath and returned his blade to its scabbard.

Moved then by unseen reins, Riderch held out the sword he had formerly held fast: offered not on open palms as a rider offers his blade to his liege, but gripped in one paw as one would offer a common corn scythe. Rhuddri stood as quickly as he had fallen, weak and stiff with cruel grief, but did not dare to take it yet.

“You want to conquer the Anialdir,” said Riderch, nodding at the sword. “There’s no point in pretending you won’t someday. It’s no shaving my scut either way, to tell you the truth; but you’ll never hold it for long if you don’t conquer yourself first. Folk will only get desperate, and you’ll be the reason they do desperate things. You’ll grind them to dust, and then the Whirlwind will do the same for you.”

Some of Rhuddri’s pride returned. His whiskers fell flat in a scowl, and his shoulders drew back, discordant against his bloodshot eyes. “You come here to crush my spirit, and now you have the gall to scold me like a common Shepherd?” he asked. “Who are you to tell me my business?”

“I’m a dead hare myself, Lord,” said Riderch.

Confusion alighted on the king for but a moment, then flew away, leaving behind what Riderch could only read as revelation. What it was he understood, the king never said; but the tears which had been pounding against the dam behind his eyes now began to show in their corners. He would not sob, though he transparently cracked under the weight of his grief, but only stared at Riderch and the offered sword as if he sought to sear them into his memory.

In the end he gripped the sword’s weathered scabbard, dropping his drawn falchion on the floor with no regard for etiquette. Riderch pulled him in close, proving to the wardens by his nakedness that he concealed no second blade, and put his lips to Rhuddri’s ear. There for a while he whispered, as the music in the Ceinych gardens rose in its dim round, until at last he pulled away to reveal a king astonished beyond words. He held the golden sword to his chest, stroking it like a kitten, but could not tear his eyes from Riderch.

“You’re going to be king of the Anialdir, Lord,” he said. “You ought to have a sword that reminds you to act like one, and that sword there killed a Hellknight, as Dinistrith’s my witness.”

Roused from his daze, Rhuddri drew the falchion: it shimmered as if in an open fire, ribbons running up and down the golden blade, a thing more magnificent than all of the gold and turquoise in the Anialdir. The king’s tears fell back before whelming awe, and all around him folk made quiet gasps.

“I would have sworn that this was the falchion I sent to Gwall with Rhian, but it can’t be,” he said. “The blade is completely different. Where did you get this?”

“It isn’t the same sword,” said Riderch, retrieving his horns and his yellow bow. “It’s name is Dinistriol.”

Rhuddri looked to Riderch again, startled. “That’s the name of Dinistrith’s sword,” he said.

Laughter flitted through the air between Riderch’s ears, laughter that granted him refreshment on the cusp of his impending death.

“Aye, it is,” he nodded.

“That’s well,” said Rhuddri after a pause. “That’s very well.”

“Go now, Dinistriol. You’ve done what you came here to do.”

“What?” asked Riderch, suddenly jarred.

“I said that’s well, son,” said Rhuddri. “It’s a fine name for a sword.”

“You can’t do this to me,” Riderch muttered, rippling with rage. “What more do you want?”

“Don’t tarry, Dinistriol. You don’t belong here. Go now.”

“What are you saying, Riderch?” asked Rhuddri.

“My name isn’t Riderch,” he snarled, and without so much as a bow turned about and began to storm back down the hall.

All of the wardens and Guilurs crowded each other to stop him before he had taken three steps, Sheen at the fore in his wrath. A clamor arose, baying hounds running down a hunted hare, only to be halted in their tracks by another thundering command: “Let him go!”

“On what grounds?” Sheen roared, baring his teeth at the king.

“On the grounds of my hospitality,” Rhuddri answered, his voice a steel fetter binding them all. “Don’t pursue him. Don’t lay a claw on him. Don’t follow him out of the city, and don’t track him, wherever he goes. That one is under my peace as long as he remains in Gorseth Floyd.”

“That foaming dog squats over my bride, and you’re simply going to let him go?” Sheen screamed, storming at the king so violently that his Guilurs were prompted to restrain him.

“I may do as I like in my own city, Sheen,” Rhuddri smoldered, slipping the golden falchion into his belt. “Hang him up by his ears if he ever wanders into Gwall – until then, feel free to go home and lick your wounded pride. Court is adjourned. I’m going to mourn my daughter now.”

Riderch could make out no more through the ruckus of the hall. Swordless, he descended the Gray Throne’s white steps a second time, catching a glimpse of a Shepherd’s woolen mantle through the Wheelhouse doors for one brief moment before it slipped away. No one stopped him at the doors of the Ceinych. No one followed him through its sweltering, crowded, war-burdened streets, and no one prevented him from leaving through the Blinda Gate on the west side of the city. No one bothered the mad, naked, stinking wretch, for they had no reason to bother him. He had nothing to give them, and he wanted nothing from them. Riderch left the city alone.

Alone, that is, until he was just past the gate. There beneath the gibbet-wall awaited Malmuck, somehow ahead of him, alone himself and visibly eager for Riderch’s attention. He stepped in front of the hare on the road, making a show of empty paws; and Riderch, straining ahead in his momentum, narrowly resisted the temptation to bowl him over.

“What?” he husked.

“You didn’t tell them about the gold,” said Malmuck, his black expression nigh invisible in the shade of a wide-brimmed black hat. He removed it, and for the first time Riderch saw the jaguar in the open sun. There was gray in his sable face, as it happened, the gray of age and lines that spoke of years Riderch had never seen. “Thank you for that,” he said with a nod.

“And you didn’t tell them about the girl,” said Riderch.

“Can’t hold one without letting go the other,” said Malmuck. “She wasn’t the first Ceinych kitten I sold, but she sure was the more profitable.”

“If you’re fishing for me to promise I won’t rat you out, don’t hold your breath,” Riderch snarled. “Serves you right to sleep with one eye open.”

“I’m not looking for promises,” said Malmuck guardedly. “I just wanted to remind you that we both have something on the other. Don’t yank my tail, and I won’t yank your ears.”

“You split the gold?” asked Riderch.

“The ones you didn’t kill, aye,” Malmuck nodded.

“I hope they bury you with it,” said Riderch, and pushed him hard out of his way.

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He went southwest after that, skirting the Rinnea’s southern bank without fear of pursuit. Indeed, he welcomed pursuit if it should come, welcomed arrest and sentencing and his inevitable hanging at the paws of one of the many folk of the Anialdir who wanted him dead. Why had it not found him at Pedwar Ceinych, where it rightfully should have? He had thrown himself into the Ever-Waiting Wolf’s open jaws, and in some stroke of spite it had spat him out.

A black despondency covered Riderch as he went, bitterer than even his reddest rages. He passed gwerthon after gwerthon, speaking not a word to anyone, day after day in a slow shuffle interrupted by meager meals foraged from the neglected corners of farmers’ fields. The southern marches of the Western Waste galloped away on his left, broken up by the hulking, weathered walls of the boardlands. Already wandering, he longed to wander that way, to let himself bake in the sun as

Melangell had done until he reached one of Coyote's forgotten forts and could shut himself up in it as a sepulcher. It was only on Melangell's word that he did not do so; he cursed her advice, yet clung to it desperately lest the Whirlwind blow him apart.

"Why do you sorrow, Dinistriol?"

It was just after sunset. The young moon was crowning one of the peaks of Clegyrau. Dinistrith's brutish red face was rising to glare at her from the Greteboga, and all around him the corn was whispering in a warm wind, carrying innumerable strains of song.

"I did everything you asked me to," Riderch growled. "That was the last thing I had to do. Why didn't Rhuddri hang me?" The ease which which he had spoken in the Ceinych was gone now. He rasped and slurred around a thick tongue, interrupting himself at intervals with shrill whines.

"Do you still resent that you live? Even now?"

"She told me I was leaving the gwerthon to die," Riderch snapped, swatting at the air over his ears as if he might strike the voice. "How long are you going to leave that hanging over my head? When is it going to happen? I can't go back to Nawddfa."

"Then where are you going?"

"I'm climbing up to Met Heafod," said Riderch. "If there's no one there, I'm walking out into the Deepwaste. Stop me if you want to."

But no one stopped him. Stripped of even his golden sword, Riderch was an unremarkable wretch among the old stock of the Anialdir, a tall stranger with a blind buck's staff who slept in bushes and clung to trees during storms. He threw himself into the Rinnea to wash whenever he grew dirty, as was his habit, and rubbed white sage and creosote into his fur to drive away mosquitoes.

Early in the Month of the Dragon he found Iwan Gwerthon again, diligently patrolled by Gwall's green riders and marked as its new possession by the white-bellied stag. The signs of its conquest were roughly stamped out: houses were re-thatched, the few wooden buildings had been scrubbed of soot and whitewashed, and what wounds would ever mend were mended. Those that would not were as manifest as the burns on Riderch's face, limps and dog bites and burns like his own. A few charred husks marked the places to which no folk remained to return, including the hut where Carbit had left him. Riderch did his best to draw attention to himself, passing a squat stone jailhouse by noon to search the sketches of wanted criminals on its palm-wood signboard. His face was among them, transformed by poor description and fairer than it was now, nailed up beside Morgwynn's incalculable bounty. Half of the gold in Pedwar Ceinych belonged to the one who would retrieve her, a reward without savor to the riders of Iwan.

Two faces that Riderch recognized stood guard at the jailhouse door, leaning on their long spears. Abandoning the signboard, he circled its squat stone wall to stand in front of them; they stiffened the moment they saw him, powerless to forbid the hoots of haunted despair that escaped their mouths. Riderch stood between them and the lazy trickle of folk on the road, apart from both to great effect, and stared until it seemed that they might muster the courage to spit him.

"What did you do with the gold?" he asked the green riders, just loudly enough to be heard. The seed of courage perished in them before it could sprout. They battered each other fleeing into the jailhouse, striving both at once to squeeze through its single door and succeeding only after one had been sent sprawling into the dirt. The door slammed shut, followed by the bolt, and Riderch passed out of that place as well, receiving no more regard than a tumbleweed.

Gwall had erected a walled and gated checkpoint at the narrowest stretch of the pass over Clegyrau, where merchants and pilgrims alike were scrutinized on their way into and out of the Anialdir. Riderch bitterly admitted the possibility that he might be ignored there as he was everywhere else, and in a movement of morbid curiosity nearly tried it, only to decide in the end that it was pointless. He would not leave the Anialdir yet, and he would not need to use the pass when he did. He

continued straight up the mountainside when the road curved around the top of the highest valley, scaling scarps with fleet-footed bounds, leaping black gorges, and climbing beetling cliffs like a great, hairy spider. Nary the twitch of a whisker gave he to even the most perilous terrain: he had nothing to lose, and the paws which held his reins held them still, unwilling to let him stumble into the death he had been promised. He joined the wild rams on their upward pilgrimage, losing track of the days while growing ever more mindful of the Stars who made them, until a morning dawned when the sun was still in the Dragon and he stood upon a bald peak level with three more very much like it.

Nestled in their midst was a little lake as blue as a polished turquoise against the sky. Palms ringed it, palms and willows and what looked like ash trees, footed by grass greener than anything else that lived in the Anialdir. The Rinnea was born along its eastern shore, glittering marvelously in the sunrise; while a smaller river, almost wholly hidden even from his high perch, disappeared between two mountains to the south. Drawn as much by an adulatory chorus of birdsong as anything else, Riderch climbed down to the lake with the help of his supple yellow bow.

The long grass was as plush as it was green; the air, if not cool, was at least free of the horrible swelter of the shadeless mountains. Beneath the high canopies of royal palms were smaller fruit trees, voluptuous in their maturity, laden with ripe mangoes and tamarinds and nances as fat as suns that smelled, one and all, as ripe as brightwine. There was no corn, as there should have been at any gwerthon known to folk, and yet those trees could not have been pruned by anything less than a master gardener. Riderch ate whatever lay already on the ground, heedless of any worms or insects who dwelt within, while he followed the shimmering quetzals around the northern shore of the lake. No boats played upon its virgin surface. No jetties jutted out from the smooth, tumbled agate shore, no makeshift launches of any kind.

A grackle whistled past him over the water, wings outstretched as it shot a shaft of sunlight. A blue that Riderch had never seen before was in its plumage, a stunning blue that could not have been mistaken for black though it was so much like it. The sunlight seemed to pin it there for a moment, even after it had gone, head and tail and wings cutting the lake into four corners. Moved almost to tears for no reason he could explain, Riderch continued around the shore until he stood at its northernmost edge.

There in the shade of the mountain, no more than a stone’s throw from the water, lay a wide, flat rock, roughly the size of Riderch’s cell over Nawddfa. It was a velvet gray, softly reflective, cross-hatched by whiter streaks and pocked with oranges and yellows. The tiny drumlin risen up around it seemed to Riderch to imply that it had once rolled down from the mountain, though the trees in that direction were too old to tell him whether they had once been shattered. It must have been the lake’s fairest overlook, in any case, and was so lovely a thing in its own right that he decided to climb upon it and rest for a time before moving on. He had not one paw and one foot on its pocked surface, however, before the rock sprouted a gray head and ears.

Riderch yelped and staggered back, groping for a sword he no longer possessed, then fell to his unstrung bow like a quarterstaff. It could not have driven off even an armored rider, so flexible was it; much less would it avail against an ent of stone, another Hellknight returned from its long incarceration at the bottom of the Abyssal sea. Realizing this, however, Riderch was overwhelmed by relief in the wake of his panic: he had no weapon with which to defend himself. His paw, as mighty as it was, could not return to its warcraft. He stood still, awaiting a blow, only to be met with a tawny, outstretched paw.

There was no ent, he realized then. The paw that reached for him was no bigger than his own, and indeed so resembled his that he searched desperately up the arm for a face, expecting to find Morgwynn’s. It was not hers, or really very much like it, and with that realization came two more: that Riderch had hoped to find Morgwynn here, though he had no reason to hope for such a thing, and that he was not disappointed to find that it was not her. He could not be disappointed by anything as long as

he beheld that face, could scarcely remember his bottomless bitterness or the reason for it. Fair and gray, burnished here and there with bronze blush, she seemed to rise from a memory irretrievably deep, a memory rife with the smell of warm bodies and the sound of weeping.

She was a harefolk doe of nomad stock, thrice as wild as he and yet more benign than a fawn. Her great, widely-set eyes were the very same blue as the grackle's wings, hopelessly sun-addled and yet bursting with a joy that shocked Riderch like a pail of cold water. She did not smile, and yet in Riderch's estimation no smile could have added to that joy. A gray woolen blanket lay over her shoulders, or else a mantle much too large for her; her arm stuck out of the front, and through that slit Riderch could see a body that looked as if it had never taken a bite of food.

"Take my paw, child," she said. "I would help you climb up." She croaked almost as pitifully as he did, in a voice clearly unused to itself. Riderch found it inexpressibly beautiful, nevertheless, so that the effort with which he refused her seared him.

"No!" he barked, shaking his head.

"No you won't take my paw, or no you won't climb up?" asked the doe without retracting her arm. "I'm stronger than I look, I'll have you know."

"I won't touch you," said Riderch, shuffling another step back.

"And whyever not?" the doe tutted, only the slightest bit amused. "I may not be as comely as I once was, but surely I don't frighten a buck of your size."

Something about her carriage – or possibly it was merely the height of the rock – made the remark seem a joke. She was much bigger than Riderch, though his eyes told him differently, and she knew it. He could not tell her so, however, and the real reason was no less ridiculous, so that in the end he fell to staring until her amusement melted into matronly concern.

"You aren't afraid, are you child?" she asked, shifting slightly beneath her blanket.

"No," Riderch insisted out of habit, but found the lie so repugnant that he tripped over his own tongue in trying to correct himself: "I'm a brute," was the only true protest he could make.

The doe's amusement returned. "Well I'm no hunter," she told him, "and I fear no brute. You were going to climb up here – let me help you."

The top of the rock was just over the tips of Riderch's ears. Reluctantly, and at first far too gingerly, he took hold of the doe's outstretched paw: her grip tightened on his until it was an infallible anchor, and by it he stepped up the cratered footholds as easily as any ladder.

She was even smaller than he expected when he reached the top, and the rock even higher from the ground. The whole lake spread out behind him, its spring well-hidden beneath the surface and yet reflected in the doe's eyes. She was kneeling, he could see now, sitting on her heels, and he wanted to kneel with her to reconcile some of the distance between their faces. He stood instead, transfixed by her queer beauty while he recovered the breath he had lost in the climb.

The mass of gray wool which had made her seem a mere lump of rock was a mantle indeed, cut for full shoulders and hooded. Her shoulders, however, were nowhere near full, so that she swam in it. It drooped pointlessly from one emaciated arm, revealing what must have once been linen undergarments, but which hung from her now in scraps less than useless. She seemed not to notice – or else, thought Riderch, she cared about her nakedness as little as he cared about his own. There was precious little to expose, in truth; he wondered how he had prevailed upon her arm without pulling her over the edge of the rock. Even so, he marveled at his own serenity: for Hawen's nakedness had always been a drawn sword to him, and he had never dared to look at Rhian's for fear of himself. This doe's nakedness, compared to theirs, might as well have been his own.

"Are you lost, child?" she asked.

He realized then that he was staring, and turned to look out over the lake. "Is this Met Heafod?" he asked.

“Aye, that’s turkey,” said the doe.

“Then no,” said Riderch. “I aimed to come here.”

“But not because you’re lost?” asked the doe. “Are you being pursued?”

“Pursued?” asked Riderch, startled enough that he looked at her again. “Not for lack of trying. You get a lot of outlaws up here?”

“I’ve fielded a few,” she answered, with a smile that Riderch would have cut his own heart out to see a second time. He sat down, feeling that he should not be standing over her, and laid his bow across his lap.

“You mind giving me your name, ma’am?” he asked.

“Melangell,” she said. “And yours?”

The piece of Nawddfa to which he had clung since his exile was alive before him. Being unacquainted with etiquette, he did not think to make a seated bow, but he was very nearly impelled to roll over on his back and bare his belly like a dog. The thought made him flush with shame. “Dinistriol,” he rasped. “You know, I knew a Melangell not too long ago. She lived in Nawddfa, some ways north of here.”

“I know the spot well, Dinistriol,” Melangell nodded. “The other Melangells took their name from mine.”

“That must be awfully flattering,” said Riderch.

“Flattering?” said Melangell, stopping just short of laughter. “Child, why do you reckon they take my name in Nawddfa?”

“You’re gorgeous,” said Riderch without a moment’s hesitation.

“I’m a strip of old leather,” Melangell grinned, pulling the hem of her mantle up just enough to reveal filthy knees bowed and gnarled from long kneeling. “Those girls take the name for my sake, so that I will have company in my solitude. It’s a kindness to me.”

Riderch knit his brow, puzzled. “How long have you been out here?” he asked.

“Not long,” she answered. Riderch thought this a lie, but said nothing.

“I beg your pardon for disturbing your solitude, Mother,” he told her at length; “but if you’re the Melangell who sent Ethniu to Nawddfa, I came here to see you.”

“Because you’re lost,” Melangell supplied.

“Because I’m mad!” Riderch barked; and finding then that he did not care if she understood a single word, stood up to pace the rock and continued: “I’m mad as a wet hen, Mother, and there’s nothing I can do about it. That wasn’t worth a whisker when I was with Morgwynn, since there were plenty of folk around who deserved it – but now it’s just me. I did everything Dinistrith asked me to, did for him until he cut me out of Nawddfa too, and now he won’t even give me the death I was promised. Hell’s teeth, all the folk who wanted to hang me won’t even bother now!”

“Death?” Melangell balked, roused suddenly to indignation. “You want to die?”

“I should be dead already!” Riderch snarled. “I should have died fighting that Hellknight, or pulling the stone from that spring over Nawddfa, or driving off those riders from Gwall. Rhuddri should have hanged me, if nothing else. I was ready for it. Hare’s horns, I more than earned it. But now I’ve got nothing left, and heaven still won’t drop me. What for?”

“Do not be so eager to welcome death, Dinistriol!” Melangell scolded, pounding a fist against her leg. It was not a loud sound, but it rapped Riderch’s skull like a hammer nevertheless. “Death is a gift to be received when one is worthy of it; to seize it any earlier is a perilous, cowardly thing. That you resent living, you who have labored for but a season, is hubris begging for the lash.”

“But she told me I was going to die, Mother,” Riderch pressed, whining as if slapped. “Why would she have bothered to say it if she only meant I’d die someday? Everyone dies someday.”

"Who told you that, child?" asked Melangell. She was facing north now, he south; her weathered body was framed against the shimmering blue water.

Riderch found that he did not know how to answer her; but as he had abandoned all pretext of sense, he answered her anyway: "There was a goose," he said stupidly. "A goose in a gwerthon. I fell in, and she told me I would die if I climbed back out."

A knowing look came to Melangell's face, with a severity to rival her namesake in Nawddfa. "Hubris indeed, then," she sighed. "Arrogance before the Stars. I know that goose, child; that you still live is a testament to heaven's mercy, not its cruelty."

"Who is she?" asked Riderch.

"She kills and eats those who grieve the Stars," said Melangell. "The folk of the Anialdir used to feed their criminals to her. Thank the South Wind that they've largely forgotten her."

Pins pricked Riderch's spine. "Was she lying?" he asked.

"She does not lie," said Melangell, shaking her head. "If she deemed your crimes worthy of death, then your crimes will bring about your death, be assured of that. But for heaven's sake, child, don't shun the merciful forbearance that would give you time to prepare for that death. Look at me," she said, spreading wide her arms to reveal a full rib cage stretched over with hide. "Imagine how unprepared I was for death when I first climbed this rock. I cling to every moment granted me. I fight to be worthy of it. Will you do the same, or will you fester in your own resentment?"

The sun beating upon the lake stung Riderch's eyes. He blinked at her, wishing for the first time in months that he had kept his hat. "You sounded just like her there," he said. "You could have been twins."

She did not reply. After a beat Riderch shouldered his bow, rubbing his pitted face furiously with filthy paws. "What am I supposed to do, Mother?" he begged. "Stealing and killing's all I've ever been good at. I can't throw in my hat as a rider now, at least not in the Anialdir. I don't even have a sword."

"Why stay in the Anialdir at all?" asked Melangell. "You said you wanted to leave, once upon a time."

There had been half a moment, gone before he knew it, wherein Riderch thought he spoke to another folk like himself. That moment was forgotten now, pushed aside by a subtle recognition that grew more awful by the minute. Her eyes, which had formerly reflected the lake, now reflected the never-setting stars. "I always said I wanted to leave with Disma," he said. "He was the one who really wanted to go, you know. I kept him here because…well, because I wanted revenge."

"You can't leave with Disma now," said Melangell, sweeping the thought away with her paw. "Don't let that stop you from leaving at all."

So used to lancing his heart with pain, Riderch could hardly stand the agony of that declaration. He had known it already, or so he had told himself; and yet that hope, like so many things, had been left behind on the gwerthon floor before he realized it. "I told Dinistrith I'd walk out into the Deepwaste," he said despondently. "Should I just pick a direction and go?"

"I expect I can be a bit more helpful to you than that, child," said Melangell, "if only to remind you that you still carry the sign of your wanderings with you."

Riderch hiccuped. "The ear? You saw that?"

"Through your collar as you climbed up," Melangell nodded. "You're feverish, did you realize that?"

"Aye," said Riderch, fingering the ear under his poncho. "It's not as bad as it used to be."

Melangell shook her head darkly. "I could feel it when you were sitting beside me," she said. "It's killing you. Would you like to be free of it?"

Riderch recoiled as if struck, so violently that Melangell must have noticed. “Are you so protective of your spoil?” she asked. “Is the old sibling rivalry still alive in you?”

“No, no,” said Riderch. “I just haven’t been without it for so long that I wouldn’t know what to do if…but I’ll give it to you if you want it. I don’t know what else I’d do with it.”

“It isn’t a yoke made for shoulders like mine, alas,” said Melangell. “But if you would like to lay it down, return it to the place where you stole it.”

Dread sank to the bottom of Riderch’s guts. “I don’t reckon those halsers are still there, Mother,” he said. “They’re dead if they are.”

“They aren’t dead,” said Melangell. “And if they’re no longer there, you know a fitting resting place for it.”

Never before in his life had Riderch been so at the mercy of another’s words. *They aren’t dead,* he mouthed, and his heart soared to the very firmament on a sudden updraft. The ear that lay against his breast was still soft, still supple; given a steady paw, he thought foolishly, he might yet be able to sew it back on. If he could not, the disappointment might kill him. “If I do,” he said, checking his hope, “will he stop talking to me?”

“He may, at least for a time,” said Melangell. “Your reward for it will be more pain, Dinistriol, let me warn you now – a pain very different than the pain of silence. But there must be more pain if you would have a glorious death. I can give you no better counsel than that.”

“I can swallow some pain, Mother, I know that now,” said Riderch.

“In that case, I can give you your bearings, at least,” said Melangell. She stood then, with surpassing difficulty and yet refusing Riderch’s bow, and when she was as straight as she could make herself she turned southward and pointed a claw across the lake. “Do you see the little river on the southern shore, between those two mountains?” she asked, beckoning him over.

“Aye,” said Riderch, standing beside her.

“That’s the Atheling,” said Melangell. “It winds its way down through Clegyrau to the south, and empties in Swalt Gwerthon some miles west of the Swartway. It will take you very near your destination if you follow it.”

“Much obliged, Mother,” said Riderch. “I reckon I’ll get out of your ears now.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry to go, child,” said Melangell, swaying like the palm fronds in a fresh wind. “I would teach you the Hours before you go, if you’re willing.”

“Not to snub my nose at you, Mother, but that’ll be lost on me,” Riderch husked.

“Said the ass to the spurs,” Melangell chuckled. “You won’t pray?”

“Can’t,” said Riderch, “and I wouldn’t if I could.”

“Learn them anyway,” Melangell insisted. “You must have something to steer you when you’ve parted with the ear, and the Hours will do it.”

“I don’t see how,” said Riderch. “But I’m mighty grateful for your help, so I’ll stay if you can stand me any longer.”

“I would be a friend to you, Dinistriol, as I am to all fleeing hares,” said Melangell, lifting her right arm to display her unclad flank and the coarse woolen lining of her mantle. “I’ll sing the Hours until you’ve learned them by heart. Come under my mantle.”

“I’m naked, Mother,” said Riderch, scowling.

“And I have eyes,” Melangell retorted. “You mustn’t fear such things any more. The nights here are cold, even in summer. You may repay me, at least, with your fever.”

Whining like a heeled hound, Riderch laid his bow upon the rock and allowed himself to be snagged in the crook of the doe’s arm. She was much taller now, he noticed, or else he was much smaller, a much more fitting difference either way. He slipped into the folds of her mantle until he was wholly covered by it, pressed against her matted side, and at once the silence of Nawddfa fell. She

smelled faintly of bluebells; and though it was shy of noon, it seemed that he could see the stars through the threadbare weave of her mantle.

She began the Hours at nine o'clock, singing them much like the sisters of Nawddfa had, though at a pace so fantastically slow that he could trace the path of the sun by the rhythm of her words. The sisters, during their marking of the Hours, had always melted into the constant round of heaven, resembling it so perfectly that it defied his comprehension. Melangell, on the other paw, led that round as surely as Sister Aine had led Nawddfa's choir. She sang ahead of it, above it, coaxing it along with a voice that lacked no beauty though it cracked like a chapped lead, and the Hours were living things who followed her as if she were privy to a melody they learned only in the singing.

Riderch followed her just as doggedly: not singing, but hanging on her every word. They impressed themselves upon his mind, changing the very shape of his thoughts in ways at once painful and exquisitely pleasurable. Morning passed, then afternoon, then evening. At nightfall he heard some great, heavy-footed beast approach, passing through the trees beneath the rock by night, stalking and slavering with insatiable hunger. Speaking around drooling jowls, it hailed Melangell in Hareish clumsily wielded. Its voice was as smooth and unctuous as butter, yet something in it filled Riderch with cold horror.

"I'll give you a hundred gold pieces for her," it said. Riderch gasped and began to quake, mortified by an inexplicable, primordial fear that Melangell would – he did not even question that she could – sell him; but the doe only drew her mantle more tightly around him, and the beast passed them by. It was nearly morning before he realized he was clinging to Melangell's waist.

All of this happened twice more, the same Hours passing in the same order, varying only by the order of the names invoked. Twice more the sun passed overhead. Twice more the unseen fiend prowled hungrily beneath their rock, sweetening his deal at each pass. "Make it two hundred gold pieces," it said on the second night; and on the third, "Three hundred, and that's with the cobwebs at the bottom of the coffer." Riderch was no less terrified of being betrayed on the third night as on the first; yet never for a moment did Melangell let Riderch out of her mantle, or so much as cease to sing. She held him, and he her, in a half-unwilling vigil, setting the tempo of his very heartbeat, until by its third repetition Riderch knew the Hours by heart. They had branded him indelibly; by them he could trace the outline of the Wheel of Time with his eyes closed, which is precisely what he did when Melangell opened her mantle and he was blinded by the morning sun.

He was no longer upon the rock when he opened his eyes. Melangell was not beside him. He stood alone on the lakeshore's southernmost end, yellow bow in paw, where the polished pebbles opened up to make way for the Atheling's southward course. A few green herons fished at the headwaters, heedless of the hare mere steps from them. Looking out across the water, Riderch could just make out the gray hump of pitted stone. He waved; but if Melangell was there, he could not see her. Pulling his ear down to her, he turned on his heel and began to follow the falling Atheling into dense, obscuring overgrowth. The Sunneweg streaked across a sky still blue. He listened for any familiar voices in the round, but could make out only his own.

"You were as quiet as a rabbit that whole time," he said to the ear. "I reckon that's the longest you've ever gone without saying something."

"I was bowing, as you should have been."

45

Compared to the Rinnea, the character of the Atheling could not have been more different. Both proceeded from the same headwaters; and yet while the Rinnea was wide and gentle and clothed in corn, the Atheling was narrow and fearsome and overgrown with thorns and cacti and goat-head

brambles. At first it was traversable enough: Riderch followed a deep, lusty flow through a secluded gorge between the two mountains, treading moss and shaded by palms, then pines, then cedars. As he walked, however, the banks grew steeper, the soil thinner, and the green canopy disappeared. The Atheling fell faster down its jagged course, eroding soft soil and leaving room in places for only the stubborn desert weeds. The sun scorched in the few hours when he hung between the lips of the crags, then departed to leave behind an interminable twilight that was only relieved by the appearance of the stars. Following the river became an arduous task after the first day, then downright perilous, and if it were not for his new apprehension of heavenly guidance Riderch would not have found a way forward.

The Atheling, however, was still a gwerthon, if an inhospitable one. Its water engendered growth in its more forgiving climbs, hardy fruits that fed coatis and agoutis and tapirs and chattering hosts of monkeys who in turn fed wolves and prowling cats. Manifold birds sang in the sparse forests surrounding the Atheling's wide runs and falls, striking macaws and wide-mouthed potoos, tiny hermit birds in search of stellar bromeliads and high condors in search of the dead. They surprised Riderch wherever he found them, beast and bird and bloom alike, for many were rare so far to the north, and many that he did not recognize were rarer than he knew. They were creatures of the Deep South, whose greener, wetter gwerthons lay beneath the Sunneweg and stretched down to the great river that folk called the Running Sea. Why they were hiding in Clegyrau, in the farthest southwestern reaches of the Anialdir, he neither knew nor very much cared. Only his journey down the Atheling mattered to him, step after wearisome step, a sawtooth path that bloodied his feet whenever it could and forced sheer scrambles down wet rocks.

At times he was as much a beast as he feared himself to be, every thought absorbed in effort until he ceased to think at all. At others, when he paused to rest and pull the insufferable brambles from the soles of his feet, he thought more and more of Disma. So wretchedly resilient to regret, it was the memory of Disma, of his last betrayal of his only friend, that pricked his heart with a thorn that could not be removed. Disma still lived – Riderch knew this as surely as he knew that he lived himself, although he could not have cited a single reason why. But he had been the courage that Disma had needed to leave the Anialdir, just as he had been the knife that had freed him from Eguin – and he, in his greed and his wrath and his ravenous hunger for revenge, had refused to lend him that courage. He had prevailed upon little Disma instead, had ridden him as one rides a horse until his spirit fell dead from exhaustion, and now he was leaving the Anialdir without him. He howled at the censuring moon on his third night along the Atheling, raising an answering chorus from the mountains; and when he looked into the southern sky, where stood the Great Badger with his soul-severing sickle and the foaming Mad Dog, he could not bring himself to look long. For they seemed to him no longer Stars, but caltrops, a carpet of caltrops that he had sown in hopes of growing bloody war among the corn.

Unable to sleep in his misery, Riderch rose to walk in the dark, following the Atheling by sound and instinct and the seeing eye of his tapping yellow bow. The mild copse of cypresses in which he had intended to spend the night fell soon to tangled roots and tiny hillocks full of holes that sheltered all manner of beasts. Dinistrith gave him no guidance, but he pressed on regardless. His bow stopped him from snapping his ankles, and he was in little danger of stepping on a cactus as long as the trees were so thick. For an hour or more he proceeded thus, feeling his way along the southern bank, until he bumped against a pair of reverend old cypresses growing intertwined where there was insufficient room for each alone. He scrambled down the bank to skirt around them: a reckless endeavor, for the Atheling there broke against a crowd of jutting rocks to spray the searching roots. It was not the water that betrayed Riderch's footing, however; it was a rabbit, startled by the buck's intrusion, who darted out between his legs in a break for its own burrow. Startled himself, Riderch raised a foot to avoid it, only to find that his other stood upon a root slick with scum. It was over his head a moment later, and soon the Atheling was as well.

When Riderch had fallen into Gwydd Gwerthon with Malmuck, his whole will had been bent upon his foe. Bloodthirst had survived the shock of the cold water, and indeed had thrived upon it until disorientation forced him to abandon the fight. Now, however, the abandonment of will arrived first. The Atheling was cold – even colder than Gwydd had been – and its will, stronger than his own, overwhelmed the defiance that had been so brutally beaten out of him. Unable to see or hear or turn upright, Riderch gave himself to the relentless Atheling as he had given himself to Dinistrith, letting it dash him to pieces at the bottom of a fall if it so chose. If Melangell was right, it would not do so until it had broken every one of his bones.

How long he shot the Atheling, he could never remember thereafter. He was vaguely aware of floating for a time, floating like a canoe on roaring white water that would have swallowed even a sheep's bladder; but he closed his eyes against the stars, the only protest he could make, and the sun by day refused to look at him. He fell and rose and fell again until he lost count of the number of times he was swept under currents or over cataracts, only to bob back up like a hungry cormorant.

It was a roaring that stirred his senses in the end, a roaring so deep and so distant that he felt it before he heard it. The Atheling's banks had opened up without his notice, pitching the blue sky over rank upon rank of organ pipes on the steep, flanking slopes. The mountains through which he had woven found an end not far ahead, their scarred red faces turning southward one and all as though summoned. He was spinning in an eddy, but when the current allowed him Riderch looked south with them, and for the first time since falling in felt fear.

The river vanished a few short yards ahead, plunging with its banks over a precipice in a slithering mound of white and sunlit amber. The roaring, still so distant, was immeasurably more horrifying than if it had been at his ears. Flailing like a wounded duck, he burst into motion, convinced by the grand gesture that he did not in fact wish to die just yet. He was no great swimmer, yet even an otterfolk would have struggled to reach the bank in the distance left to Riderch. The jagged rocks, at least, were behind him before he tumbled screaming over the edge, feeling his guts wrap around his spine as he watched the water split into countless rounds of sunstruck gold. He was flying with the runaway stagecoach again, cursed to suffer the same disaster over and over and over, save that this time he was the dead pilot. The buzzards would stand on his floating corpse to pick his bones clean, just as they had certainly done to the pilot's when the Whirlwind had finally exposed it.

Sound and sight and smell were fled before he knew that he neared the surface. He fell in head first, a blow that rattled his brains and stung his ears, yet came well short of a deathblow. By instinct he clapped his arms and legs together, becoming an arrow that shot down, fearfully down toward an unseen bed that might have been as dangerous as dry land. He never met it, however. The roar of the falls fell to a plaintive murmur, and the forest of sun-shafts grew dim, and still he could not make out the bottom. Blue-gray melted into black obscurity far below. To paw, around him and just below the tips of his ears, was a school of spotted guapotes shimmering in the inconstant light; and beyond them, so huge that Riderch supposed it at first very near, was what he could only describe as a goose. Its furled wings were a chalky white, their plumage cast into layered striations by a sun that could hardly reach them. The feathers running down its head and neck, however, plunging down its back to the base of its fanned tail, were crimson fading to gold, as if it were a buzzard who had just glutted itself in the cavity of some fallen beast.

As enormous as it was, Riderch could not make out its eyes. He knew that it looked at him nevertheless, that it regarded him at once with deep hunger and a resolve to abstain. The guapotes swam in front of it, so small though they were so much nearer, so that the fear he had felt in falling paled in comparison to this new fear. One of the spotted fish bit his ear, spurring him out of a stupor to find that he was nearly out of breath. He turned himself upright, scaring the school away, and kicked madly for the surface.

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The falling Atheling was some ways distant when he emerged, still thundering at the northern edge of a wide pool. Its current had pushed him out toward the southern shore, to which he was now very near. Scrub-furred mountains much shorter than those he had just left – the mere foothills of Clegyrau, though he did not know it yet – hemmed in a gwerthon more familiar to him than the plush greenery of Met Heafod. The soil on all sides was strewn with stones and dust; the trees and bushes were guarded and thorny, even those that fruited; and even the grass, he knew, was lined with little razors.

There was a single, hulking stone beside the shore that caught his eye. It might have been a gold nugget by the way it gleamed in the midday sun, too huge and too heavy for a team of draft horses to cart away. Reminded of the rock upon which the Melangell had knelt, he swam for it, only to find that it, like hers, moved when he drew near enough. A speechless face rose on a powerful neck, trailing white hair as marvelous as corn silk. He heard a crack akin to falling stones, then a shrill, whickering cry, before he understood what he saw.

"Carbit?" he called out, so flabbergasted that he forgot about the water. It filled his mouth when he spoke, and he was coughing and spluttering as he pulled himself onto the rocky shore, remembering only now the heavy horns that sat upon his head. They had survived his trip down the Atheling somehow; he wanted to weep at the memory of Nawddfa, but the splashing and clomping of the palfrey's hooves beside his head drove away all other thoughts.

Carbit was up to his elbows in the churning water when he met up with Riderch, and followed him ashore with such spirit that he soaked the parched stones in his prancing and rearing and the tossing of his unshorn mane. He ran tight circles around the poor hare while he lay on his back, panting and dripping in the dirt, too exhausted to rise again for a quarter of an hour. Carbit lipped his ears as Ruddo once had; it thrilled him so much that tears sprang helplessly to his eyes. He stood feebly to embrace the stallion, catching a glimpse of his jagged white scar, only to fall on his tail again when Carbit pushed his head into his chest. Laughing for the sheer joy of a familiar face, he stood again more confidently, and for a long time held Carbit beside the gwerthon.

"Did you trek out here all the way from Iwan?" he marveled, when at last he pulled away. "Who took your tack off you?"

Carbit did not answer, of course; but he was in fact unladen, more naked and unkempt than Riderch himself. It would have seemed unfitting, he thought, if it had been otherwise. Five mere months had put the mustang back into Carbit: his mane was a wild, voluminous tangle as white as streaming cloud, his eyes defiant and implacable, his hooves thick and hollowed out from pounding the stones. A meeting with such a stallion, in any other circumstance, would have been perilous indeed; yet Carbit still regarded Riderch with fierce affection, and by the baring of his flanks would offer even his back if the hare so requested. Riderch wondered if that was not how he had seemed to Morgwynn, when in his wrath he had slain so many for her sake.

It was then that he realized he no longer held his hedge apple bow; and searching his belt, found that his quiver had been thrown open and emptied at some point along the Atheling. His buck knife remained in its sheath, as well as everything in his pouch – but now, for the first time since he had dropped his falchion down the well outside Pedwar Ceinych, Riderch had no weapon to speak of. He sighed, resigning himself to yet another loss, then with a mad suddenness leaped high on sinuous legs to mount Carbit. The stallion reared and pawed the air, then danced for eagerness; Riderch hugged him with his knees, winding his silken mane around his fist, and with the slightest movements guided him southward.

What path had brought Carbit to that gwerthon, Riderch never learned; but even if it had been twice as perilous as the path that Riderch had taken, the stallion must have had no trouble walking it. He was as steady as a bighorn; and while he could not scale sheer cliffs as Riderch so recklessly did, no hunter from Gwall, possessing a lifetime of experience, could have traversed the mountains as skillfully as he. Riderch was more passenger than rider, gently coaxing the beast south and east, but letting him find hoof-holds where only Dinistrith could have directed his own steps. In this way they descended the last sand-blasted slopes toward a barren desert floor, the hateful red sea where the Whirlwind drove unimpeded against the striated rocks. Noon and night they hid from the merciless sun and the failing moonlight, making as soon as they could see it for a black thread stretching to the southern horizon, until three days later Carbit's hooves struck it by dusk.

The Swartway was empty, as it often is in the horrible summer heat. The faint, shimmering outline of Quilla hugged the mountainside some ways east, its broken pillars roosts for so many vigilant buzzards. To the north was the staired and winding pass into the Anialdir, the world to which he now knew himself dead. He searched the rising road one final time for Disma's furtive form, then ground his front teeth and turned Carbit southward.

A few hours, each more dreadful than the last, brought Riderch to the gwerthon he hoped and feared to find. Cyrn, the harefolk called it, a modest green dot amidst the shifting sands. It was just west of the Swartway, by no means an unpopular refuge for traveling merchants and pilgrims. That night, however, it was utterly empty save for the beasts and birds who dwelt there. Dismounting Carbit, he stumbled through coarse brush to where he knew its spring must lay, wishing that he still possessed his seeing bow. The moon was nearly new now, herself a bent bow that mocked Riderch's blind, dizzy staggering. He had no lantern, nothing that would have caught under the sparks of his fire-striker. He would have to pull together a brush fire by feeling alone: a slow, tedious task that might well see him bitten or stung by any number of venomous brands. He desired nothing less, however. In truth, he did not want to see the gwerthon at all, though he knew he must. The sight of it would scourge him more than any mere loneliness, would burn like a thousand adder-bites in light of the last six months. He would find it a relief if the sun never rose again – and yet the sun would rise far sooner than he had when he hung in the Badger, and would lay bare Riderch's mortal hubris for many hours more. He pricked his paw leaning on an acacia tree, then began gathering brush by the waterside.

A fair mountain was piled on the damp grass an hour later, but another hour passed before he could bring himself to scrape his fire-striker. The irony of it mocked him: he who had never hesitated to steal or kill or burn in his life was prevented by simple memory from starting a bonfire. Biting his tongue until it bled, he lifted his eyes to the singing heavens and scraped a single time through bared teeth. A shower of famished sparks feasted upon the scavenged creosote. A flame was born, and ate, and grew, tasting of the thicker branches to find that it relished them also.

Too soon the gwerthon was revealed to his unwilling eyes, terribly familiar. Half a year had done nothing to disguise its winter shape, unseasonably fruiting on account of a halser he should have known was favored by the Stars – should have known and did know, for the rabbit who had walked into Riderch's camp to promise a king's bounty for his head had been more desperate than Riderch had ever been in his life. Aye, he had known it and did not care, for the Stars to him had been no better than the Anialdir's warlords, as deserving of robbery and yet so much harder to rob. What they were to him now, he could no longer say; but what he knew for clean fact was that the rabbit who had hired him to kill the halser and the Riderch who had taken the job were equally contemptible to him.

The gwerthon spring gently bubbled, as many of the deepest ones did. He saw the place on the farther shore where the harefolk of his band had pitched their tents, where they had wined and dined the halsers whose heads they planned to saw from their necks the moment those halsers led them to the treasure of Cair Cunning. Looking through the sleeping trees, he spied the western heaven that

overlooked that last lonely peak of Clegyrau, then followed its setting line as stolidly as if he walked to the gallows.

There was no more blood on the spot. The spring rains had washed it clean months ago, and the stiff grass had healed where their horses' hooves had trampled it. There was a carpet of three-petaled white flowers, however, large flowers of a delicacy unknown to the Deepwaste. Riderch stared at them, hearing nothing but Carbit's grazing and the slow round of the Stars; and finding himself unable to speak, reached into the collar of his poncho, pulled the ear up and over his head, and held it out to the place where he had left the little red halser to die. No one emerged from the darkness to take it. No bodies lay as proof of his failure. No voices spoke to him, over his ears or anywhere else. He stood there until he was confident that the Melangell could not tell him he had not tried, then returned the ear to his neck and passed the rest of the night before the fire.

Morning found him rolling in its ashes, scrubbing his naked body with them before washing himself clean in the waters of the gwerthon. Hours of waiting for Dinistrith's guidance had borne no fruit; he had asked, and asked again, but the only answer was heaven's perpetual round. It was a compass more reliable than the ancient dial he carried in his pouch – yet a compass is worthless without a map, he thought, and without the faintest idea of a destination. Loathing the idea of sitting still, he shook himself dry and decided to go to Cair Cunning. There was no reason to believe that the halsers were there, of course – wherever they had gone, an empty mountain seemed the least likely – and yet if Riderch was going to leave the ear anywhere, as the Melangell had implied he should do, no other place seemed more appropriate. The ancestral home of all rabbitfolk by all accounts, he could at least restore to its long-abandoned halls the one treasure that properly belonged to it. Throwing his poncho over his head, he whistled for Carbit and rode west.

No storms arose to impede him on that second journey as on the first, when the Whirlwind itself had been working against his murderous plot, trying to drive him away from Cair Cunning lest its forgotten tombs be stained by halsers' blood. In the same way, he saw now in hindsight, the Whirlwind had sent a sandstorm to ensure Rhian's escape from Brockwell. Sensing perhaps the hermitess's endorsement of his errand, it did not blow at all that day. The Deepwaste was wrapped in its maddening silence, so different from Nawddfa's, so that for the length of his trek he could hear nothing but the pounding of Carbit's hooves in the sand. Tracing the spine of Clegyrau in the sun-ribboned distance, he spied the lone red nub that tailed it, and the dread crept up his throat again. Folk did not ride so far from the Anialdir, unsupplied and practically unclad, when they wished to return. They did so when they wished to make an end; and Cair Cunning, finally, was the very last place that Riderch knew to go.

The sun was in midheaven when he found the foot of the mountain, and stared into the wide, doorless arches on its northern face. Once they must have been green, long before Arow's imprisonment, must have been framed by fecund, fruiting soil. They were bare sockets now, missing pieces of the Wheel of Time that the sun annually opposed. Like one of the Quetzal's shafts Riderch rode boldly beneath the midmost, halting Carbit in a yawning cave just before the light failed altogether. The liquid lines of a sprawling colonnade resolved into words and images at the slightest inquisition, words that he had never learned to read and carvings of halsers he could not name. More than any place in the Anialdir, the antechamber of Cair Cunning reminded Riderch of the Wheelhouse over Nawddfa. He wondered then if Cair Cunning had a Wheelhouse of its own, or even many Wheelhouses, only to frown when he remembered the thick, stark darkness of the warrens within the mountain. The halsers had had their red lamps to guide them; he had only the chanting Hours, and those would shed no light if the very sun could not penetrate the stone.

Furthermore, he thought, as he slid his naked legs painfully off of Carbit's back, his horse might refuse to enter the warrens at all if he brought no light. Ruddo had only been willing because of the

halser's lamps; but when the sunlight failed altogether, cut off by the interwoven bow-curves that the rabbitfolk had cut into the mountain's guts, no polite coaxing would convince Carbit to continue. As far as he knew, however, Cair Cunning had only one gwerthon at the very heart of the mountain. Carbit would need to drink soon; and if he would not be led to the water through the winding darkness, Riderch would be at fault for stranding him there. He growled a curse, then contemplated leaving him in the antechamber while he went to fetch water in his waterskin.

As it turned out, the problem was plucked from his paws before he could take a single step to solve it. The moment his thickly-furred feet fell upon the scattered sand inside the cave, Carbit's sinews coiled as if at the clarion. He gave a mighty snort; his ears flicked toward the mouth of the cave, and without so much as a glance in Riderch's direction he sprang into a flying gallop, kicking sand in the hare's face.

"Carbit!" Riderch barked, falling at once to spitting and retching for the grit in his throat. "Carbit, stop! Wait!"

But Carbit did not wait. He pounded the sand until he reached the cave's mouth, then shot out into the scorching sunlight beyond. Never slowing, he bore east, and wholly disregarding Riderch's begging and his pitiful pursuit the golden stallion circled the mountain out of sight.

"Carbit! Carbit, you double-damn, good for nothing nag, come back here!" He was whining now, fighting a dumb tongue until his wrath paralyzed it utterly. Up to the mouth of the cave he ran after the beast, yet even his powerful legs held no hope of running him down. Seized by hot despair, he kicked up a great geyser of sand, then fell to his paws and knees, listening to the desert rob him yet again of something he had once robbed himself.

There he knelt, wrestling with his own quaking, until he realized his thirst and remembered his empty waterskin. A moment came and went in which he considered remaining there, giving himself to the deadly sun as he had given himself to the waters of the Atheling; he rose instead, and stalked snarling back into the shade of the rabbitfolk's illustrated hall. The Melangell had given him one last place to look – and she, who alone among does had deigned to touch him, deserved that much at the very least.

The figures on the chiseled pillars were familiar to him, though their names and deeds remained impenetrable. They were dead halsers, the living halsers had said, although certainly many of the oldest were the rabbitfolk who had once lived here. Looking always for the glint of gold, he had paid little attention to their explanations at the time; but the rabbitfolk covering the inner wall, in which stood a great many breathing doorways, were as fresh in his memory as if he had seen them yesterday. The door that the little rabbit had led them down stood out to him unmistakably for the stone sugar apple that graced its keystone, barely visible in the light from the cave-mouth. He peered inside to find only darkness. He had no light, nor anything to burn; but being only too content now to lose himself, he plunged in with reckless eagerness, holding his paws out in front of him to avoid breaking his nose against a wall.

Regrettably clear were his memories of that day when he had planned to slit the halsers' throats. Each faint odor and lonely echo was a remembered accusation. Nevertheless, Riderch had not the arcane mind of a rabbitfolk. He could not keep straight the arcing, intersecting runs, planned for the very purpose of forbidding invading harefolk. Even in full light he would have grown equally lost, turned around again and again as his straightest bearing grew serpentine. As things stood, he had only the sporadic shafts of skylights to break up the blackness, skylights which admitted a new sun to abodes so stupendously old that only their stone fixtures survived. These fixtures meant nothing to him, just as the halsers had meant nothing to him. He wondered as he wandered how his life might have been different if he had shown them the respect due to the holy, if he had not brought the trophy of his hubris into the gwerthon where the goose could judge him for it.

He sighed at a stroke of bitter irony. Conceivably he would still be with his band, he thought, cutting throats and stealing purses if no one had hanged him yet. Disma would still be with him, too afraid to strike off on his own. Certainly Morgwynn would not be in Nawddfa, but with King Sheen, alive in marriage or dead at her own paw. He remembered the hungry look with which Sheen had plied him at Pedwar Ceinych and shuddered, wondering briefly if wolves did not live in Cair Cunning. They feared the dark even less than he, though he belonged to it more.

"I'll never feel sorry about anything again, Dinistrith," he resolved, in a slurred growl only the wolves would have understood. "Maybe I shouldn't have cut off that halser's ear. Maybe that's so; but I'd do it again, knowing what I know now, if it got Morgwynn to Nawddfa. Badger's bones, I'd do it again if you asked me, if it got Disma out of the Anialdir."

Dinistrith asked him no such thing. He heard only the heavenly round, the living Hours singing their counterpoint against the Stars as they always did; but he discovered, in the long echoes of his own vow, that this round supplied him with all the direction he needed. Even blind, it told him in which direction he walked, and where he stood in relation to the whirling welkin. He had veered southeast since entering the mountain. Turning west, he held a steady course toward the place of sunset, and found as he went that the bowed runs no longer confounded him. They matched the circles of the stars exactly, a thousand interlocking rings made so predictable that he might have laughed if his solemn misery had not forbidden him. He felt that he had stumbled upon some great secret a thousand years too late, when all the hope of gain from it was long lost, and found it fitting. Before the end of the next hour he came to the place he had hoped to find.

"Well I'll be a rabbit's pa," he husked, shielding his eyes against a falling pillar of afternoon sunlight.

A door capped by a feathered crown had spat him out in a broad, round concourse a long bowshot wide. Nets of recessed beds and trenches remained alone to suggest the garden which had once surrounded the gwerthon at its center, a stepped pool whose unquiet surface shimmered in a column of sunlight high, high above. Ringing this gwerthon was a three-tiered arcade of flawless, multicolored granite hewn into the likeness of a grove of ash trees, each housing in its branches the crest of one of the seven rabbitfolk clans who had formerly shared the gwerthon. The little halser had belonged to one of these clans, Riderch remembered, but could not recall which. He circled the arcade once, looking for the crest that would jog his memory; but one of them was missing, and the others meant nothing to him.

In circling the gwerthon, the task of half an hour made slower by his own dread and his desire to be thorough, he confirmed at last what he had begun to fear the moment the Melangell had set him on his path. There were no halsers here. No one had been here since winter, since before Dinistrith had set his hounds loose after Riderch; and judging by the dead, barren soil in the beds, it was likely that no one would ever come here again.

At the top of Met Heafod he had expected to be crushed by this confirmation. Dead or alive, it was unthinkable that the halsers should be here to receive what he had stolen from them – or at least what he had not sold to buy Rhian. He had agreed to go anyway, knowing not what else he could have done; and yet here, finally, as his failure was stamped by the leaden weight of silence, he found only relief. He had done all that the Stars had asked of him. Exhausting that, he had done all that the Melangell – who was something else – had asked of him. Morgwynn remained the one good thing he had ever accomplished, and now he was at the end of all things concerning her. He had failed all else; and having failed, Riderch did all he knew to do: he resumed the solitary vigil he had begun in Nawddfa, having nothing and no one to guard except himself, having no sword save for the grating sand and blistering heat and relentless sun. Giving Dinistrith one last opportunity to speak, he pulled

the ear from his collar and over his neck, then hung it from a stone ash branch where he thought the little halser had once sat.

It was then that Riderch's thirst returned to him, a desperate thirst the likes of which he had always been too careful to avoid. Feeling that he would wither away if he did not slake it that very second, he sprang down the steps into the pool, and there plunged his head into the cold, clear, sweet water. It took from him the fever he no longer felt, the dizziness and the double vision. He rose with sharp thoughts and chattering teeth, shook himself violently, then sat upon the first dry step and looked up through the blue skylight high above the arcade.

Hunger followed fast on the heels of thirst. It was surprising, he thought, how much more hunger made one long for the security of home, though thirst was the more urgent need. He had not eaten anything in days; yet it was only now, after he had left the Anialdir, that he felt hunger's bite. Without a horse, two days separated him from any sustenance as far as he knew. He had been in too great a hurry to quit Cyrn Gwerthon to think to forage there. He wished now that he had, although he wondered in the very next breath for whom he was keeping himself alive. If his will, even now, forbade him from shutting himself up in Cair Cunning's quiet tomb, he would have to go back to Cyrn. The thought made him so weary that he lay back on the gwerthon steps and stared up at the sky, satisfying himself at least that he could still hear the heavenly round without the ear.

Riderch was not one to beg heaven for food. This had not changed, no matter how many times Dinistrith had thrown food upon his buck knife since meeting Rhian. He did not do so now, therefore; and yet he wondered in that hour if someone was not doing so on his behalf. For even as he lay there, a shadow dotted the sky over the skylight, slowly growing with a furious flutter of wings until the queerest shape coalesced above his head. A grackle, clad in iridescent blue, fell to circle him with its galloping, full-throated chatter. In its claws was a bundle that must have been laborious for its small frame, though it betrayed no difficulty, round and regular and bound by some kind of green cord. The grackle dropped this bundle straight into his lap, as precisely as any archer; then finding itself weary, alighted on his shoulder and began to preen itself.

Riderch had grown used to being a roost already. Remembering his long nights above the Wheelhouse, he looked down at the bundle in his lap and felt his newly cool face flush when he found there a full stack of flat cornbread tied together with green palm fronds. Paws a-tremble with hunger, he lifted the loaves to his nose, found them fragrant, and cut the fronds free. One of them he tied in a crude knot, which he held up to the bird on his shoulder.

"I reckon you can't thank her for me," he said; "but if you can understand a word I'm saying, I want you to take this back to whoever gave it to you."

The bird hastened to oblige him, bearing away the knotted frond in its beak. Finding himself even lonelier now than before, Riderch wished that he had contrived some reason to keep it there, but ruefully admitted that it would have flown away of its own volition regardless. He ate the whole stack beside the well, more cheered by cornbread than he had ever been by mutton and brightwine, then promptly fell into a deep sleep.

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Another grackle found him the next day, just after Evensong. It too carried a stack of cornbread in its claws, as did one the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. To each of these Riderch entrusted a knotted palm frond, while he reserved a second to mark the number of days he spent at Cair Cunning. It was an idle occupation, one that only he would ever care about, and yet its very mundanity broke up the immutable round just enough to remind him that he still lived on the

mutable earth. He still lived, indeed, and would until his crimes at last caught up with him. Until then he resolved to rule himself, where there was no band to command and no foes to destroy.

Dinistrith no longer spoke to him. None of the Stars spoke to him, in fact, though divesting himself of the ear had done nothing to diminish his keen awareness of their song. Finding himself mute more often than not, he never attempted to sing with them as the sisters of Nawddfa did; but he listened always, and by long listening heard hints of what passed in the Anialdir. Its last rotted threads were snapping one by one; soon they would all be gone, and he suspected that he would not live to see what replaced the old fabric.

What 'soon' meant to the Stars, however, Riderch did not bother to guess. He remained at his vigil in the heart of Cair Cunning for eighty-three days, until the sun sat in the Great Rooster and the late rains fell into the gwerthon with their full, thundering force. Every day the grackles fed him, and every night he watched the stars through the mountain's wide eye, knowing that Morgwynn did the same in Nawddfa. Contentment found him there for the very first time; and while it never announced itself, he recognized it the moment he noticed it beside him.

On the eighty-fourth day, however, the perfect silence of the Deepwaste was broken.

"Ears up, Dinistriol. You have very little time."

He ignored the command at first, being by now so unused to the sound of speech.

"Hop to it, Dinistriol! They're almost at the gwerthon."

Riderch's ears flicked to and fro, his head tilting like a fascinated dog's. "Dinistrith?" he rasped – it was the first word he had spoken aloud in months.

"You must do exactly as I say, Dinistriol. They mustn't be allowed to find the ear."

Riderch's eyes fell upon the hanging limb. "Who?" he asked.

"Take it down from the tree and throw it into the gwerthon. Don't delay."

Pins began to prick Riderch's spine. Dinistrith had given him no orders in months; and yet now – with the halser's ear on the other side of the gwerthon, moreover – he had fallen to urgent pleading. Jarred by his desperation, Riderch sprang over to the stone ash tree where hung the ear from its leather thong and plucked it from its branch, then flung it into the roiling well as if it were a live coal. Dinistrith had told him to do a similar thing once before, when Rhian was starving in the Greteboga; but Rhian was not here, and Riderch was not hungry, and no miraculous fruiting could account for the fraughtness of Dinistrith's voice.

No such miracle occurred, in fact. For one puzzling moment the ear bobbed on the surface of the pool, as red and supple as the day he had severed it; then without so much as a parting word it sank into the water, falling wholly out of sight.

Riderch had scarcely been so alarmed in his life. His first thought was to throw off his poncho, to dive into the pool to retrieve it, scorning even drowning though Dinistrith himself had ordered the sinking. He would have done it, too, if in the next moment he had not heard voices filtering through one of the seven doors into the concourse.

"...Chalked the walls the first time, when the halsers led us in."

"We were supposed to gill them in here once we found the bunny's hoard, so I reckoned we'd need a way out."

"Aye, so quit being such a yellow weanling."

"Call me that again, Dargan, if you want me to gill you right here."

The last voice, so low and booming that it seemed the very stones were powerless to muffle it, gave to the others a sense of creeping familiarity that woke in Riderch an unwelcome wrath. He stood stock straight, reaching for a falchion that no longer hung from his belt; and as the slow clomping of hooves filled the high hall, echoes of an old charge finally catching up to him, he remembered a time when he rode at its fore and felt that he would die of dejection.

Kay was first into the concourse, leading a pair of hopelessly overburdened mules by means of a lantern through the very door the halsers had led them through last winter. Dargan was behind him, leading a similar team, followed by Dedrys and Tennyn, who now walked with a permanent limp. Their mules, puffing and blowing and frothing from exertion, were hung with hempen nets stuffed with as much gold as Riderch had ever seen. Standing in the shadow of the stone arcade, he could not discern the shape of their treasure until they stepped out of the gwerthon's reflected light and into a shaft of blue morning sunshine halfway to the well. Then the gold flared more vividly than a king's parade, a confusion of candlestands, scepters, golden chains, antique swords with jeweled hilts, lengths of brocade, and stacks of plates, bowls, and ewers covered in thin, block-headed figures wholly forgotten in the Anialdir. The indelible red stain of croton caught his eye, just as the mule team and its stewards stopped dead in their tracks. Every disbelieving eye was on Riderch. He stared back at them as a prize buck stares at the hunters just before the horn blast. He could not have called out to them if he had wanted to, could not have moved; and they, it appeared, were similarly petrified.

"Hell's teeth, is that Riderch?" he heard Dargan hiss at length.

"Oh, shave my scut," Tennyn groaned, spitting on the floor.

Riderch's attention was stolen a moment later, when a straggler led his mules into the concourse behind the rest: short, dull gray, and utterly silent, he was nevertheless more blinding to Riderch than the mountain of gold which framed him.

"Why are you all standing there like that?" came his sprightly voice, loud enough to be heard but no louder. "The mules need water, they were walking all night."

No one answered him. Riderch began to tremble, feeling suddenly weaker than he ever had in his life. He wished now that he *had* thrown himself into the gwerthon after the ear, that he had drowned and sank to the bottom where Disma would not have to see him. Heaven was not so merciful, however. The dreaded thing came to pass. He caught sight of Riderch leaning against a stone ash tree, naked but for a wolf's hide and as mad as a spring hare. The leads fell from his paw. His arms disappeared into a new gray poncho. Briefly Riderch wondered if he was not about to draw his sword and rush him, to run him through for abandoning him while they were being scattered like flies; he welcomed the thought, but Disma only gaped at him.

In the end he could not help himself. Forgetful of the others, Riderch peeled himself from the stone arcade and padded haltingly across the floor toward Disma. Kay hissed. Paws fell to their falchions. Carrying none himself, Riderch could not have responded in kind, and so he simply ignored them.

"What are you doing here, Riderch?" asked Kay, in a warning tone more fitting for a stray dog than any folk.

Riderch glanced at him, genuinely puzzled, before turning to Disma again. The raccoon was bristling, his tail sweeping the back of his poncho again and again in steep distress. Riderch's unclad flanks were apparent enough; none of them drew on him yet, but he expected that Disma would be the first. Undeterred, he drew near enough to touch him, and the sunlight that filled his great, brown eyes revealed a bitterness so deep that Riderch himself began to weep.

"You pick up another band yet, Riderch?" Tennyn barked at him, thumping his foot on the floor. "Where are they?"

"There haven't been any horses here in months, unless they found some other way in," Dargan shrilled.

But Riderch scarcely heard them. Only Disma had come to Cair Cunning, Disma and a mountain of gold belonging somewhere else entirely. He opened his mouth, struggling to remember how to speak, and raised feeble arms for an embrace. "Disma," he finally managed, in a reedy, sandpaper drawl unrecognizable for the biting steel it once had been. "Disma, I'm so sorry."

Disma's paw shot out of his poncho, unarmed and yet full of hatred. Untrimmed claws raked Riderch's face with all of the force the raccoon could muster, five deep gouges from his temple to the tip of his snout. A heart-rending snarl accompanied them, as despairing as it was savage. Blades pulled free of scabbards. Riderch yelped, more stunned than pained, until he opened his mouth to speak again and tasted the blood that flowed therein. Then pain found him, pain that began in the belly and coiled up his spine until it had spread to his every member. His head, addled by fever, wept blood like dew that spattered audibly upon the fallow floor. Disma turned away with a lurch, baring his back like a porcupine, and grimaced over his shoulder. His lips were pulled back; one paw was bloody. Dizzy with despair, Riderch stumbled two steps back and found his arms pinned by Kay's vice paws. The might that had pulled the stone from Nawddfa's spring was gone now: it had left him the moment he set aside the ear, and now he did not need it. He had no will to fight, not while Disma stood before him in a thousand pieces.

"What now?" asked Kay, his reeking breath washing over Riderch's head.

"Spit him and leave the gold here like we planned to," said Dedrys. "What else would we do?"

"Why, so the rats can steal it?" Dargan scoffed. "Riderch's got a band here, you can bet your ears on that. Don't you, Riderch?"

Closing one eye against the flowing blood, Riderch glanced at Dargan with the other and feebly shook his head.

"That's a no," said Dedrys.

"That's a lie is what it is," Disma snapped, sounding for a moment ten years younger. "Or it's as good as one."

"He doesn't even have a horse," Tennyn protested. "What would he feed it?"

"Does it matter?" Disma pleaded, wiping the blood from his paw with a bandanna. "Don't trip the same snare twice. He already made off with my mask once, and I'll be doubly damned if I let him do it again."

"Well what are we supposed to do with it, take it back with us?" Tennyn shouted, throwing his arms wide. "We came all the way out here to ditch it, Disma!"

"Keeping it to paw is the next best thing," Disma shrugged, staring at his stained paw with a miserable scowl. "Eventually it'll cool off enough that we can sell it; until then we'll have to keep an eye on it. Sawl isn't the only one who can do that."

"Gwyarc will see red," Kay rumbled.

Disma's clenched fist fell to his side. "Gwyarc should have come with us, in that case," he said. "This mountain's a honeypot now, and in an hour you'll all realize that."

"You want to do for him, anyhow?" asked Dargan, jabbing Riderch's side with the point of his falchion until it bled.

"You're asking me?" Disma balked, sincerely horrified.

All of the harefolk were looking to Disma now, entrusting Riderch's sentencing to him without a word of deliberation. Disma looked briefly at Riderch and grimaced again, then in a blow more painful than the last looked away.

"Disma," Riderch moaned, vaguely mindful that he should formulate some defense but unable to do so.

"Shut up, Riderch," came Disma's black sough. "Do whatever you want with him, but don't make me watch."

Riderch hung his head and watched tears drip down as blood.

"What about your mules, Disma?" asked Tennyn, in something approaching sympathy.

"Water them," he answered, already walking away, "and fill my skins. I'll be waiting where we came in."

“Disma, wait,” Riderch whined, grasping vainly for words he had rehearsed a hundred times but could no longer remember. Disma kept walking; and as the harefolk whom Riderch had once saved from the noose crowded for his neck, he watched his friend’s lantern blink out past the threshold of the door.

“To talk turkey, I reckoned you were long gone, Riderch,” said Dedrys, testing his blade against a blunt claw. “Oughtn’t be too surprised that you turned up to give us trouble again.”

“Gwyarc’s going to feel mighty left out when we tell him we saw you, boss,” Dargan sneered, clucking his tongue.

“Aye, it’s a rotten shame,” said Tennyn. “You put a few of us under the dunes last winter, but the rest of us are still fit to be tied. Anything you want us to bring back to camp? An ear, maybe?”

But Riderch would not answer him, and Kay’s laughter would have rendered him inaudible regardless.

Throughout the agony that followed – the beating, the broken bones, the steel’s cold bite against his most sensitive flesh – Riderch, whose choked and beastly screams soared over the triumphant cackles of his assailants to find freedom in the open sky above the gwerthon, felt himself melt into a puddle of his own blood. He was Gwyarc, lying helpless under a rain of fists which had already broken him once before. He was Eguin and Teyrngar, cut to ribbons for how he had treated his slaves in the hayloft. He was Arow, the ravening wolf whose hubris had at last incurred Dinistrith’s wrath. Whomever he had been before these was dead and forgotten, only now receiving the recompense of his deeds.

One thought, however, proved solid to the end, and this thought he clung to with all of his failing might: that the Melangell had been right. The pain of silence had been surpassed: not by the pain of his vicious beating, but by the pain of seeing Disma still in his old band, still enslaved to the Anialdir. He had never done anything for Disma after all; he acknowledged it with the bitter gall of shrift. The last thing he remembered before the cutthroats left him for dead was a prayer that Dinistrith would cut Disma free.

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How long he lay broken on the gwerthon floor, Riderch could not tell. For unclear periods he passed out of his wits, so that the sound of the Hours and the sight of the sky told him no more than that he still lived. This very fact puzzled him after one of his wakings, when he found himself hideously thirsty and wondered if the souls of the dead could feel thirst at all. The blessed, he knew through the sisters, were deprived of no need; and yet the accursed, those who sank into the Abyss, lived beneath the waters to begin with and could therefore never be thirsty. He could not remember taking up the Path of Souls, in any case, and judging by the dried and crusted blood that matted his fur he had not been claimed by any Abyssal waters. He was still among the living, then; his stale pain proved it, and its throbbing was the laughter of whichever heavenly power still refused to show him mercy. He wept again, wasting what little water he had left, only to fall silent when a queer sound tickled his ears.

It was far from him – achingly far, for how sweet it was, a sound he had relished in camp in those moments when cautious happiness had wandered too near. Someone was strumming a guitar, warmly and cheerfully, playing a song full of vigor and green hope. The Great Hare played a guitar, it was said, given him by the Great Cat to serenade the sun; but why the Great Hare should be playing his guitar now, while Riderch lay dying on the floor, he could not fathom. He could not fathom why heaven did much of anything, in truth, except to deliver Rhian to Nawddfa.

The music ended as abruptly as it began, and after another spell of unwilling sleep Riderch awoke to a much nearer sound of clomping hooves. His old band had returned to stash their stolen gold

after all, now that he was dead – or would be dead soon after they found him. Gwyarc, who had doubtlessly laid claim to his wolf pelt, would brook no disobedience, no matter how reasonable.

There were only four hooves now, however, a single animal that was either a sluggish horse or someone's nag mule. The bright clatter of gold was gone. Riderch tried to lift his head, to look in the direction of the approaching steps, but found blinding agony even in failure. Some pitiful brute moaned, and the steps ceased.

"Who goes there?" someone called out in Hareish, a flat voice out of the Deep South that sounded like someone he knew but could not name. Riderch moaned again, and a moment later he heard the characteristic whisper of running harefolk feet.

His staff appeared first, sun-blonde ash capped by the head of the Great Hare who held a red sun on a golden hook. Behind it followed a harefolk buck somewhat shorter than Riderch, of that brazen gold so common in the lands nearer the Sunneweg. What little he could see of the buck's face through his swollen lids dug at the back of his mind like a pin: its passivity, by no means foolish, was nevertheless unbecoming of the alarm in his eyes. That face hung over him for but a moment, infinitely far, before drawing startlingly near.

"Stars save you, brother," he said, so comically flat that Riderch might have laughed if he could have. "Who did this to you?"

It was by his voice, rather than his face, that Riderch finally remembered him. Here stood one of the three halsers whose throats he had been hired to cut but had spared in the end out of revenge, for Cair Cunning had been empty. It remained empty now, he realized, because of himself. "D…D…" he hiccuped, more and more aware of all the things hopelessly amiss. "Dinistrith," he finally managed through ragged breaths. "For the little…halser."

He could not remember the buck's name now, only that it was another name for Blinda – a fitting enough visitor on the threshold of death.

"Riderch," said the halser; the name dropped like a stone from his lips.

"No," said Riderch. "Blinda?"

"Lugh," said Lugh. "You only call him Blinda in the Anialdir."

"Shrive me, Father," said Riderch with an effort. "I promised Melangell."

Lugh furrowed his brow for a moment, then began to examine Riderch in earnest, gasping as he gingerly pulled aside his bloodstained poncho. "Breathe deeply, Riderch," he said, driving red-hot nails into his body with the gentlest of touches. "As deeply as you can." Lugh smelled strongly of incense; the odor soothed him with the memory of Nawddfa, of Morgwynn's voice among the sisters at vigil.

He did so only with the greatest pain and difficulty, but succeeded stubbornly in drawing something near a full breath. Lugh nodded, his ear pressed to Riderch's breast.

"Very good," said Lugh, spreading his left eyelid open to examine the eye. He could still see, though the blood had crusted all around it. "Any blood in your vomit?"

"The ear," Riderch rasped, pointing a claw foolishly toward the gwerthon.

"We needn't speak of that now," said Lugh, rising to his feet. "I'll do all I can for you, brother. It may be that the blessed Stars have inspired me with this detour."

"The ear," Riderch repeated. "I kept it. It sank."

Halfway to his mule already, Lugh turned to Riderch with a puzzled look, then followed his jutting claw farther to the bubbling gwerthon. His eyes nearly popped from their sockets. His white poncho, covered over with suns, whipped like a flag when he startled. So surprised was he that Riderch himself looked down at the gwerthon, straining to see clearly the sunstruck waters through his swollen eyes, and saw to his astonishment a supple, bobbing band of orange fur. The current had brought it back up. Lugh bounded down the wide stone steps, fished it out by the thong with his staff, and held it up before his eyes. It blazed in the falling sunlight, a tongue of fire, and Riderch wanted to weep again.

“My dear brother,” said Lugh, unexpectedly pained. “Why did you come back here, Riderch?”

“I wanted to return it,” he managed. “Why did you?”

“I carved a crude conclusion into the tale of the Three Ears outside,” said Lugh, kissing the ear and hanging it around his own neck, “the clan to whom this ear belongs.” Retrieving a waterskin from his mule, he pulled out the stopper with his teeth and put it to Riderch’s slashed and swollen lips. “Drink,” he said.

The water tasted of stale blood at first. He spat out the first few mouthfuls, watching the rusty fluid trickle over the dark stains around him. After this he drank greedily, growing thirstier and thirstier the more he consumed, until after Lugh had refilled it and he had emptied half again, he turned his nose away.

“I must get you to a barber if you’re to recover, but you must be strong enough to ride a mule before we embark,” Lugh explained, testing his neck to see if he could coax his poncho off of his shoulders. It ached fiercely, but it was his legs that were broken, his legs and his ribs, and so he endured the stripping of the leather from his scabs. “I’m going to move you out of this blood and wash your wounds – I know that you’ve broken bones, and I beg your forgiveness for how much it will hurt. How long have you lain like this, Riderch?”

“Dinistriol,” he corrected him. “I don’t know.”

“Your name is Dinistriol?” Lugh asked incredulously.

“Aye,” said Riderch. “Why are you helping me?”

“So that you will live,” said Lugh, opening one of his saddlebags to retrieve a great bundle of creosote. “It’s better to heal than to kill, isn’t it?”

Riderch began to weep then, plaintively, pitifully, as Lugh turned him on his side to wash away the reeking blood in which he had bedded. He wept for sheer pain for the first time since kittenhood, since before he had learned that such weeping would mark him as easy prey. He wept as Lugh set the breaks in his legs and lashed them between splits of firewood, as he smeared creosote in his wounds and bound his ribs, as he stitched the deep gouges in his face that would never heal properly, even if he lived. He wept whenever Lugh sang hymns that he had heard echoed in the Stars, warming hymns that stirred the fire in his red lamp into the shapes of the Great Constellations. He could not eat, but Lugh made him drink until his wasted body was supple with moisture that he promptly wept out again. This weeping proved more salutary than he expected; his pain swelled with his vigor, but in two days he was strong enough to cling to the mule’s neck without falling off.

“Shall I return you to the Anialdir, Dinistriol?” asked Lugh on the third day.

Riderch shook his head, eliciting a shock of pain. “They’ll hang me,” he said.

“I feared as much. We’re heading south, in that case,” Lugh announced. “If heaven sees fit that you survive the journey, I’ll consider it penalty enough for the trouble you caused me and my brethren.”

“What’s south?” asked Riderch.

“Sunstone,” said Lugh, “the fold of halsers to which I belong. She lies just beneath the Sunneweg, where the Great Constellations live.”

“That’s where the war-band came from,” Riderch muttered, slipping back into delirium.

The character of that journey away from the Anialdir, its length in days or miles or its course, Riderch could not afterward remember. He recalled his first sight of the vast, open sky after his willing confinement, how impossibly beautiful it seemed, as well as long marches through cold black tunnels full of glass. He recalled thinking that he had been claimed by the Abyss after all, that his soul lay immobile in the very caverns that had incarcerated Arow, only to be corrected whenever he mustered the might to turn his head and saw the halser’s little sun beside him. Beyond this he remembered only the Hours, and Lugh’s counterpoint against them, the song he volunteered so often that it could only

have been for Riderch's sake: *"Doughty Dinistrith, cast down a kindly shaft upon my pate, and pith and power of war…"*

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"Up on the block," Riderch slurred. Blostmath lifted the grison's footpaw onto the solid ironwood knot. Crushed out of shape by a startled mare, unsalvageable, the merciless white windings above the limb would soon be as red as the Wheelhouse floor.

"His sinews are good and tight," said Blostmath, full of the coolness of long experience by which she claimed to be the mistress of the sickroom. They were hurrying, yet not rushing; very soon, thought Riderch, he would have to hurry a great deal more. He was no longer good at hurrying. His limbs complained at any sudden movement, and to stand unaided by his staff like this was a contest of endurance. Summoned again so soon to Blostmath's sickroom, however, he had run down from the Boardland nevertheless, letting the pain lance the resentment he felt at being called out of his solitude. Noon was when the fewest folk were passing in and out of Sunstone. Noon was when folk were asleep, or else hiding from the blistering sun, not when they were wrangling mares and their foals. Folk and beast alike were more irritable in the heat, and this grisonfolk had learned that lesson the hard way.

Riderch snapped a belt hard in front of the grison's creased, half-melted face. He hardly flinched; a string of saliva dangled from the corner of his mouth.

"I gave him something for the pain," said Blostmath, running the blade of a long, curved knife – a butcher knife, though she never called it that – through the flame of her tilted red lamp. "And for the bleeding."

"Water?" asked Riderch.

"It's boiling on the stove," said Blostmath.

"Give me the knife and go get it," said Riderch, feeling for the ankle joint. Blostmath had already singed off the fur, revealing livid purple flesh. She obliged, pawing him the bone-handled knife, then with an urgency free of panic strode out of the room to fetch the kettle.

The job was nearly done before she returned. A few skillful strokes of the knife parted the sinews tying bone to bone. The ankle itself was not crushed, thankfully, and therefore the saw was not needed. Their efforts after that were against the bleeding, and finally against festering – Blostmath scalded the wound, then applied a paste of pine resin, creosote, and sand verbena before bandaging. Riderch, with might still formidable though much diminished, stopped the grisonfolk from squirming. It was the affair of ten minutes, and by the end the silence in the sickroom was full of unseen lightning.

"Thank you, Dinistriol," said Blostmath, as they scrubbed their paws in a basin of steaming water. "These ordeals are a might easier with a good barber to paw."

Riderch grunted, looking into the black bear's eyes when he caught himself scouring her cream linens for specks of blood. They were deep and soft and brown, much like Morgwynn's had been – they had been the reason he had agreed to help her with the first desperate amputation, after Lugh had told her that he had been a horseleech. Blostmath had hated him at first, hated him while he was too delirious with pain to remember her nursing, for Lugh had told her plainly – too plainly – that he had severed the ear of her friend and favorite patient. More than a year later, however, Riderch had pried respect from her broad, unflinching paws the only way he had ever honestly done so: at the edge of a blade.

Her friend was no longer in Sunstone; but because of him, Riderch and Blostmath and Lugh had become, if not friends, at least reluctant siblings. And yet Lugh had left Sunstone a week ago, left after the death of Sunstone's Elder with the express intention of rejoining that friend somewhere far north of the Anialdir, leaving Mother Blostmath the only folk in Sunstone to whom Riderch willingly spoke. To

the rest he only listened, listened and watched from his shabby little guard's booth where the road climbed onto the boardland. Lugh had given him a falchion when he was well enough to resume his vigil there; he had never used it, and did not expect to. He had left it leaning against the wall when he ran down ahead of Blostmath's messenger, in fact, taking only his knobby ironwood staff and his red wolf's hide. He was too feared to be seen down in Sunstone wearing a blade. Folk saw him as a speechless dog who growled at anyone who spoke to him. The tremendous scars across his face repelled children without exception. He considered these things blessings, for they preserved the solitude of his vigil.

"Dinistriol?" said Blostmath, drying her paws on a rag.

"Aye?" said Riderch, rising slowly out of memory.

"Did you hear a word I just said?" she huffed, pawing him a tall, dark ironwood rod from the corner of the little kitchen.

Riderch shook his head as he leaned against the staff and sighed with relief.

"What good are those big ears of yours?" she tutted, clucking her tongue. The fire in the stove was burning low: she slid a cedar split onto the coals for the sake of the kettle simmering there. "You were staring straight through me when I bothered to look, so suppose I can only blame myself. Anything I should know?"

Riderch shook his head again. "What did you say?"

"Mother Meinwen wants to talk to you," said Blostmath, pointing down the hall to the east. "You cut out her cyst two days ago, if you've forgotten."

Riderch's scowl would have scared away a scorpion. "Why?" he grunted.

"Because she thought you looked familiar," said Blostmath patiently. "I told her you were from the Anialdir, and she wanted to talk to you."

"Well why did you do that?" Riderch barked.

"Will you?" asked Blostmath, crossing her glossy arms over her chest. The question was a question indeed, for she knew by now that Riderch was as likely to bolt as anything else, but in it was the venom of disappointment that only she could wield against the wild hare.

He had been down in the gwerthon for too long already. Refusing her the courtesy of an answer, Riderch stormed out of the kitchen and down the hall, toward the corner room where he and Blostmath had laid the halser's delirious body. Her door was ajar, as were the palm-wood shutters on the opposite window, admitting the faint, sweet sounds of the chanted Hour that filtered down from the Wheelhouses in Sunstone's sunken walls. The halsers were as dependable as the heavens in Sunstone, holding their round with admirable consistency; he relished it a great deal less than Nawddfa's, but the resemblance meant that he relished it more than he ever expected to.

The hare was in bed when he entered unannounced, propped up on pillows and draped in linens herself. Great chocolate eyes blinked, surprised by the intrusion, only to spark with eagerness when they recognized his torn face. She was beautiful, just as Riderch remembered – all the more beautiful now that the contortion of agony was gone. Pain lingered still, buried in her bright red cheeks, and she would bear a scar for the rest of her life; yet even so, hers was a beauty so fierce that he knew many bucks who would fight over her, though she was twice his own age.

"Not even the courtesy of a knock?" Meinwen asked, playing up her indignation.

"You're dressed," said Riderch, standing at the foot of her bed.

"Aye, lucky for me," Meinwen sniffed; and then, more playfully: "Aren't you going to ask me how I feel?"

"You sound better," said Riderch tersely.

"Because I'm not screaming like a howler monkey?" Meinwen asked, braving a short laugh that left her wincing. "I should hope so. Anything would be better than that."

She sounded much livelier already, as a matter of fact, lively enough that Riderch suspected Blostmath would let her return to her own cell soon. There was a musical quality to her voice, a decisive ringing that he found he quite liked and an accent he missed hearing – many of the older members of the war-band had sounded like her, those who had not been born in the Anialdir. Blostmath, lovely in her own way, was simply too big to supply the airy, reedy tone of a harefolk doe. His heart ached; Meinwen must have seen it, for she beckoned him over to the side of the bed.

"Come here, please," she said more apologetically. Riderch obliged, and she looked up into his face with such keen intensity that his scars itched. "Mother Blostmath tells me that you aren't fond of other folk."

"Sounds like Mother Blostmath told you a lot of things," Riderch smoldered.

"Some of the older halsers are like that," said Meinwen, smiling. "Quetzal's feathers, Elder Albithwell was like that – all of the ones who stand vigil atop the boardlands. I'm sure you understand, brother. I'm sorry to do this to you, truly I am, but I know that if I don't talk to you now, I'll have to wait until I've recovered enough to climb onto that sea of glass."

"One ear's as green as another," said Riderch.

"Are you really from the Anialdir?" she asked, leaning in as if divulging a secret. "Blostmath said so, but the only pilgrims I've ever met from the Anialdir were so much…" She paused, searching for diplomatic words. "…shorter than you."

"You're fixing to tell me I look like a nomad," said Riderch.

"And you're a true sungazer," said Meinwen, nodding eagerly. "Of course, so do I, as well I should. All of the harefolk do, down here. How did you come to live in Sunstone, if I may ask?"

"I don't want to…" Riderch began, only to trail off uneasily.

"Don't want to tell me?" offered Meinwen. "What if I tell you about myself first? Tale for tale."

In truth, Riderch simply did not know how to tell her that he feared falling mute before he had said five words. He did not want to tell her about his late career in the Anialdir, that much was so – he had not recounted that tale to anyone in over three years – and yet to his chagrin, he found that he liked the sound of Meinwen's voice so much that he was willing to tell it again in exchange for her own. Resolving to turn around and walk out of the sickroom if his tongue betrayed him, he nodded.

"First of all, don't be afraid that I'll ramble all the way around the wheel," said Meinwen, playing with the tip of her ear. "The only reason I offer at all is because you remind me of my sister – I suppose I want to talk about her more than I do about myself."

Riderch grunted.

"We grew up in a nomad clan, of course," said Meinwen. "Clan Macha – I don't suppose that name means anything to you?"

Riderch shook his head.

"I didn't think so," said Meinwen. "Regardless, my sister and I had always promised each other, ever since we were kittens, that we would grow up to be halsers. It was our great dream: to enter a fold at some gwerthon together. I expect we would have done it, too, if the war-band hadn't swept through."

Riderch's eyes widened, but he said nothing.

"We weren't attacked, mind you – the war-band didn't attack the smaller clans, although I've heard they often kidnapped does," she continued. "They were much too numerous to bother with petty clan warfare by that time; they came up from the south, seeking any he-folk they could find who would fight in exchange for spoil. Some of ours went with them – none of my hot-headed brothers, strangely enough, but they convinced my sister."

"To fight?" Riderch balked.

"No, although she was a Hellknight with a falchion in her paw," Meinwen grinned. "One of the warlords fell in love with her – or rather I should say that three of them fell in love with her. Rhuddri

was the name of the first: big, strapping buck with a gray chin. Many from his clan had gray chins like that. I can never remember the names of the other two, I'm afraid."

"Sheen and Cyngen," Riderch supplied falteringly, finding the names clumsy in his mouth after so long.

Meinwen's eyes widened. She sat up straighter in bed, bracing her paws against her belly through the sheets. "You know them, good!" she chirped.

"I've met them," Riderch confirmed. "Or, well, I met Brockwell, Cyngen's son. Cyngen's dead now."

"I didn't know that," said Meinwen more softly. "We haven't had visitors from the Anialdir in this Hour of the World, or at least none that I'm aware of. What I was going to say – and I promise that my feet are pointed forward, brother – was that those three fought over my sister like wolves over a rabbit. All three of them wanted to marry her. They showered her with more gold than I had ever seen before, but it was really no use in the end. She was tail over ears for Rhuddri. She would go with no one else. Her last words to me were an apology, as much as I hate to say it."

The fur along Riderch's spine bristled, causing him to shudder. "What was your sister's name?" he asked, wishing that she had given it without his asking.

"Morgwynn," said Meinwen. "She may have changed her name, however."

Riderch closed his eyes and nodded, imagining Rhian standing beside Meinwen and admitting for the first time that their resemblance – a resemblance he saw at times in other does, always illusory – was more than wishful thinking. "Queen Morgwynn, aye," he grunted.

"I wanted to ask you how she is," said Meinwen, fidgeting with her whiskers. "I used to ask when I was able to, but the things I heard always conflicted. My hope is that someone who knows her will have more reliable news."

It was all that Riderch could do not to erupt into a string of curses. He considered turning tail then and there, limping out of the sickroom and back to his booth atop the boardland without another word. Knowing that she would find him eventually, however, he resolved to lie, only to find that he had lost the talent for it. Her eyes, so fretful, so eager, were just like Rhuddri's had been.

"You double-damn, giggling rat," he muttered under his breath. His grip tightened upon his staff, and he butted his horned head against it as Melangell might have. "I didn't know her," he answered tersely. "I met King Rhuddri twice, but Queen Morgwynn died before I was born. He's married to someone else now – I can't remember her name."

Given the wretched, teeth-grinding agony Meinwen had been in a mere two days ago, Riderch half expected the news to kill her. It did not, although her face became that of a corpse for several indistinct lines of the chanted Hour. Grim resignation bled slowly into it thereafter, a hard, sharp sorrow so like Morgwynn's that he felt the urge to touch her with a tenderness he had not shown when she was under his knife. "I knew it," she breathed.

"I wish I didn't have to be the Great Badger's errandghost," Riderch added. "I'm surprised you haven't heard it already. Most of the folk in Gorseth Floyd know of her, or at least the war-banders do."

"I haven't met a war-bander since the day Morgwynn left," came Meinwen's black response. "Pilgrims know the name Cigfa, whom I suppose is the living queen."

Riderch nodded.

"How did she die, if I may ask?" she pressed.

"Childbirth," said Riderch reluctantly, turning to frown as deeply as he could at Blostmath when she passed them in the hall.

Meinwen sniffed, and Riderch pawed her a clean rag from the chest at the foot of the bed. "She bore kittens, at least," she whispered, willing it to be true. "Alive?"

“Aye,” said Riderch; then vowing that it would be the last thing he said, added: “Sorry to pain you, Mother.”

Meinwen shook her head, fixing him with a sharp stare as soon as she had dabbed the tears from her eyes. “Life is full of pain, Dinistriol,” she said shakily, with the same rehearsed conviction that Morgwynn had always made so compelling. “I sought you out knowing that; and I won’t have you, of all folk, sorry to deliver it. Someone must, or we would all die of toothaches.”

Riderch remained by her bedside for another pawful of moments, silently awaiting another barrage of awful questions, or else a dissolution into tears. Meinwen seemed on the cusp of both; but when neither came, he turned from her at last and began his cripple’s lope toward the hall.

“Wait,” Meinwen quavered. “You were going to tell me how you came to live in Sunstone, weren’t you?”

Riderch froze in the doorway and looked over his shoulder, surprised by her persistence until he saw her face again. Very nearly he invoked Morgwynn’s name, wondering if it might not summon her to the bed where Meinwen now lay, only to cut himself free of the fantasy with a sandpaper growl. “I stole one of Rhuddri’s horses,” he rasped, just before he stepped out into the hall. “I reckon you can guess how that went for me.”

A great sea of haze was rising from the agate boardland when at last Riderch mounted the highest step out of Sunstone’s sheer crater. He was no longer the leaping ram he had once been, owing to his late-set bones and the persistent dizziness born of his long fever. Sunstone’s endless stairs, therefore, forced him to stay fit in spite of his pains, to which he added the lifting of the great, loose stones he had carried years ago to his booth. Cutthroats did not dare approach a gwerthon as large and thickly-walled as Sunstone, that sat at the bottom of a green caldera in a boardland made of streaked chalcedony; Riderch kept himself formidable nevertheless, just as he had on his perch over Nawddfa.

Father Lugh had set him watching the boardland’s northward road by day and by night, repelling by his scarred face and a ready falchion any folk too much like himself. Riderch knew, though neither of them had ever said, that Lugh had done so that he might watch the sky over the Anialdir.

That sky was a churning blue sea in the afternoon haze, boiled by the sun’s unblinking eye. Folk were not out at this time of day, even in the Month of the Badger where the sun now stood. Their horses shied away from the searing face of the boardland, whose polished stone Riderch trod now without a second thought. His unwashed feet had long ago grown thick with matted fleece, and the pain of its heat, though significant, no longer felt real to him. What did feel real – increasingly, excruciatingly real – were the endless, chanted vigil of the Stars and his own interminable waiting.

The heat persisted for a distance of three bowshots, until Riderch staggered into the shade of the cleft which created the winding road down through the hills to the desert floor. There he collapsed against the crude frame of his palm-wood booth, scarcely bigger than a broom-closet and tucked against the slouching agate wall like the forgotten wrack of a sandstorm. It had no door, only a portal too short for his ears and a floor just spacious enough for him to sprawl out upon. He sucked eagerly from the waterskin hanging at his side, then splashed a pawful on his face, peering around the corner to ensure that Lugh’s falchion remained there, atop his mound of stones and beside his water urn. It was too early for anyone to bring him supper; he counted it good luck, for he had no appetite, and the Whirlwind funneled sand into the cleft – and therefore into his food – every time it rose. The boards of his booth were not sealed. They did not need to be, for the cold never touched the land that lay beneath the Sunneweg, where the Stars sang loudest.

He passed the afternoon in restless listening, playing Meinwen’s words against his memories like a bow against a fiddle-string. Names he had not spoken in three years lingered on his lips, their faded faces so newly vivid that he traced the falling road to find them. They were not there, of course.

The sea of glass and sand that marked the burning sun's path was empty, awaiting pilgrims by night; and besides, he thought, the day that the Anialdir's warlords made pilgrimage to Sunstone would mark the end of his worries. He had not seen a single war-bander since taking up his post, and he had kept a watchful eye.

When Evensong was over, then, and the sun had ceased to boil the boardland, Riderch emerged from the shade of his booth and climbed to the top of the cleft to spend the night as he always did: pacing up and down the road, watching the pilgrims stream into and out of the gwerthon, and listening with singleminded attention to the subtle counsels of the Stars as he leaned against his inflexible staff. Every now and again a merciful wind would carry strains of the Little Gray Ones, to him the very model of the heavenly round. Morgwynn's voice was always among them, the sole comfort he found in his exile; yet of the Anialdir he heard only fragments, scattered, hissing sparks of war that sounded less and less like the land he had left. Many times he had sought their meaning from Dinistrith, supposing him familiar with all that passed in war; but he never received an answer, to that or any other question.

Only the waiting remained to him, a waiting that grew more feverish with the fires in the Anialdir until the mere tenor of the Hours warned him that his time in Sunstone must be drawing to a close. The thought of wandering again, of stumbling as a cripple into the alien waste, was both frightening and disappointing; but he had consented to the bit and bridle at the bottom of the gwerthon, and would wear them until they wore him out. Yawning, he searched the sky for the moon and found that she had set. The black hours of early morning had arrived, to be concluded by the Mornsong bell. He sat down on the edge of the boardland and looked north.

Riderch scarcely slept in those days, by day or by night, and when he slept his dreams were of sound without color. That night, however, he slept more deeply than he had in years, and in that sleep discovered that he had become a wild hare. She was coursing the rocks, fleeing some stubborn pursuer that chewed up the mountain peaks like grass and sent them tumbling down into the valleys. This chase continued until she was certain that her lungs would burst at each new desperate breath, until her longsuffering legs burned and threatened to betray her. Only then did she see Meinwen kneeling upon the rock, holding open her mantle to reveal a star-spangled door where her incision had been. The hare sprang inside to find herself enfolded, just in time for the beast that had stalked the Melangell to finally close the distance. It was Arow, the Ever-Waiting Wolf, holding three blind rabbit-hounds on iron chains in his grasping claws. His head was gone, replaced by a writhing mass of fat, white worms; nevertheless he shouted at Meinwen, demanding his quarry in a shrill chorus of voices. When Meinwen would not relinquish her, Arow let loose his hounds, who in their blind striving proceeded to bite and devour one another. The largest of the three, with the help of a second, tore the throat out of the third. Its head fell free of its shredded neck; and seeing this, the second hound rolled over before the first, baring its belly. Disgusted, Arow scoffed and stormed away, dragging his chains behind him.

Riderch awoke with a start to find his legs dangling over the edge of the boardland. Gasping, he clawed his way back to solid ground, then rose at once to climb down into Sunstone.

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Dawn had come to the gwerthon, that too-brief window when the soft light and pleasant heat brought folk out of their homes to labor until noon threatened to ignite them. Unclad crowds gathered beside stepped wells to chatter in Old Talk while they filled urns for themselves; anglers cast lines into the cold spring beside farmers who fetched water for their animals; halsers labored over fragrant incense gardens in the dry shade of tiered galleries cut into the crater's chalcedony walls. Low, square houses of that same chalcedony flanked packed streets overhung by latticework, providing both shade

for folk and structure for a glut of passion fruits, lamb's tails, and wild green muscadines brought down from somewhere north of the Anialdir in the distant past.

Riderch avoided Sunstone by dawn and dusk. The sound of so many mingled voices filling the air, competing with the heavenly round and often with the Hours chanted by the halsers in the galleries, made him dizzy and disoriented. He had lost his easy skill among crowds, appearing now too queer and too uncomfortable to avoid the prying stares of myriad strangers who made too much room for him wherever he went. Many of them assumed him a halser, one of those who stood upon the boardlands by day to commune with the sun until they inevitably went blind. The rest assumed him a beggar, and these were only cured of their goodwill through howls and snarls.

Mornsong, at least, was over now. That much Riderch considered a mercy, as he limped down the stairs hugging the gallery's shaded outer wall. He would not have to listen to the halsers singing in the Whirlwind of other voices, and with any luck the Wheelhouse would be empty. The smaller, lower ones often were, for they received less sunlight than those higher up.

Taking care not to let his lame legs catch the edge of every step, Riderch scanned the wall that stretched ahead to his left. On it was a procession of vibrant, well-tended frescoes, frescoes by the same halsers who had spread out early in the last Day of the World to the Anialdir, where they had painted the Wheelhouse over Nawddfa. The same Stars were in those frescoes, as well as many of the same halsers, waging war against fiends the likes of which Riderch had scalped with his own weathered buck knife.

He descended to the tier just below the highest, mercifully unpopulated at that time of day, and followed the wall clockwise toward a destination he could see across the gwerthon through the gallery's ash tree columns: a stepped tower half set into Sunstone's wall, crowned by a golden half-dome where its pinnacle met the easternmost edge of the boardland. Folk were still streaming out of the great Wheelhouse beneath that dome, descending interminable steps toward the gwerthon's green grass – with any luck, thought Riderch, the crypt below would be overlooked.

Folk called that domed Wheelhouse the Hearthhouse, he recalled, named for the enormous brazier at its eastern wall that never stopped burning. It was the fire from which every halser's lamp was lit for the first time, and was therefore the most important Wheelhouse in that part of the world. Riderch had set foot inside of it only once in three years, when the halser who had since become the Elder of Sunstone had hallowed the golden chest that Riderch now went to see. It was the single biggest structure that he had ever entered, barring Mydge, overfull of the aversion he felt for all Wheelhouses and far too many folk. Elder Cyrre lived in the cell attached to it, the anchorite cell which had once been Riderch's in the Wheelhouse over Nawddfa.

The crypt was entered most often by means of a spiral staircase in the Hearthhouse, its every step the same translucent carnelian of its floor. Thankfully, a second, smaller door admitted the curious through a recessed alcove in the tower's north wall. It was this door that Riderch cracked open, peering around its thick ash-wood leaf as he had peered around the doorway of Nawddfa's own lower Wheelhouse. The sweet fragrance of copal found him, tempered by the reek of fish oil burning in dozens upon dozens of jeweled lamps. Skylights as deep as any in Cair Cunning admitted shafts of early morning sunshine, rendering invisible the flames of many such lamps and glittering upon a host of golden chests and coffins resting on recessed shelves. A few figures swayed in these sunbeams to the rhythm of chanted verses:

"…and our Elder Eall-Bith-Wel-In…er, ah, He-Faederan-Heortan-To-Heora-Bearnan-ge-Cyrre"

Riderch opened the door wider, and saw against the eastern wall a mere half dozen folk. They were halsers, to judge by their staves, five of them singing an uneven antiphon while the sixth, head

and shoulders taller than the rest, incensed a golden chest upon an ashen pedestal. He wore the starry mantle that the Elder always wore for the Hours, yet Riderch would have known him without it by his long arms and the jet black mane that spilled down his neck. Seeing no other folk within, he waited at the door for them to finish, realizing only at the end why they were in the crypt at all:

"…there the Great Rabbit awaits to embrace the departed
And listens with vigilant ears for the plea of his kittens: 'Come quickly!' they say,
And with burning affection their glittering guardian leaps from the heights and comes soon to their aid."

The remembered sound of flesh parting under his falchion blade compelled him to step back from the threshold, but the hymn was nearly over already. The halsers reached their cadence, and in its wake the silence of the crypt crept out to contend with the voices filtering down from the Hearthhouse's balcony. Five of the six halsers left the crypt through the lower door; coming face to face with Riderch, they yelped, then bowed apologetically.

"Oh!" one of them hiccuped, a very pink-nosed mouse no more than half his height. "P-pardon us, Lording, the Wheelhouse is…is there something you need?"

"Get," Riderch snapped at him, and they hurried by without a word. He stepped inside a few moments later, supposing that the Elder had taken the stairs up to the Hearthhouse.

The very chest he sought still sat upon that polished pedestal, a sign as certain as any that heaven might have given him. It was no bigger than a cornbread box, similarly round, hanging on its side from a golden crook so that its myriad rays of hammered, undulating gold and carven chalcedony could remain suspended in the air. A pane of flawless crystal admitted mingled light into the cavity of that chest, revealing the familiar relic that the Elder had been bathing with incense: a severed rabbit's ear as red as the rising sun, resting on a lining of gold brocade. Riderch had never quite understood why the halsers of Sunstone treasured that ear so much, why Lugh had kissed it so often until it was interred therein. He gathered only that the halser to whom it belonged, whom his enemies had nearly tricked Riderch into killing, was a holier thing than he had ever guessed. It was no wonder that heaven had broken him for his theft, had made him the steed that bore Rhian to Nawddfa and the ear itself to the one place where folk would understand its worth. Lugh had left Sunstone the very day after the old Elder's funeral to be with the little halser; why he had not taken the ear, Riderch chose not to ask. He was glad that it remained, and that was all that mattered.

The crypt was less than half the size of the Hearthhouse above, its ceiling so low that Riderch might have touched it given a heroic jump. Its opulence of gold surpassed that of the Hearthhouse, however, for here were interred the remains of many reverend halsers: those who, like Riderch and the sly Coyote, had lived to do battle with Hellknights. Sighing for the blessed silence, Riderch padded up to the ear; and as he always did at such visits, pulled down his own ear toward it.

The sound of wood tapping stone arose at once from the spiral staircase in the far northeastern corner. Irritated, Riderch looked into the stairwell at its base, and after half a minute the white staff and long black legs of Elder Cyrre appeared. The rest of his spindly form followed too slowly, accompanied by low mutterings that told Riderch the Elder believed himself alone. He startled much more impressively than the mouse the moment his head cleared the lintel and his eyes fell upon Riderch's scowling face in the middle of the room. Sweeping the whole crypt, he could not spy another soul, and so he made straight for him with strides any hare would have been hard-pressed to match. Riderch took up his own muttering, shooting a glance at the ear in its chest.

Elder Cyrre had shed his starry mantle, revealing a coat of vibrant, ruddy fur and a black mane that spilled halfway down his back. Finished for the moment with his duties, the maned wolf was

unclad, as was the wont of all the folk who lived beneath the Sunneweg – save for a belt, a blonde leather satchel, and a broad-brimmed straw hat that hung behind him on a string. Riderch had always thought of him as a spider, given especially his squinting amber eyes and his tendency to retreat into corners where he would not be noticed. He approached Riderch eagerly enough now, however, smiling at him in the chary, nosing way that all folk – save perhaps for Blostmath – smiled at him. He bowed low when he was near enough, his fur breathing the scent of copal, but Riderch would not turn away from the chest to acknowledge him.

"Good morning, Dinistriol," he said, in a voice so demure that Riderch wondered if he feared to wake the dead halsers. That voice was mature, yet uncracked by age, thick with the antiquated accent of the Sunneweg to which Anialdir speech was a backwater drawl. "This is a rare privilege for me. I was going to visit you on the boardland to thank you for helping Blostmath with poor Bulamaht's paw, but I suppose I don't have to now. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart." He bowed again, and Riderch was reminded of the stagecoach pilot tumbling through the air like a child's doll. He thumped his foot hard on the woolen rug covering the agate floor, only to receive a spark of pain up his leg for the effort.

"I reckoned you went upstairs," Riderch rasped.

Cyrre blinked, then grinned meekly. "To shrug off my mantle, aye," he said, running his thumb over the carven Dragon that coiled up his staff. "I prefer to return to my cell through the crypt when I can – fewer folk to field when I take the stairs outside, if I may be so brazen about my shame."

Riderch grunted. A moment of silence stretched on, broken when Cyrre cleared his throat. "I'm disturbing you, aren't I?" he asked. "Forgive me, you were waiting for me to leave. I won't keep you."

"Much obliged, Father," said Riderch.

"Is there anything you need, before I go?" Cyrre added, to which Riderch groaned. "You won't take a cell."

"I don't want a cell," Riderch barked.

"I know," said Cyrre, nodding more vigorously. "I know that your vigil is dear to you – heaven knows how protective Elder Albithwell was of his, until they made him take the Dragon's staff – but is there nothing else? Nothing at all, even a mat? You sleep on the ground, my son. Poor Blostmath at least would be more comfortable if you were more comfortable, given how helpful you've been. A round dozen serious surgeries in three years, by the Wolf's howl, and not one dead of infection-"

"I don't want to be more comfortable," Riderch said emphatically. "I want to be ready to go. I'm leaving soon, I reckon."

Cyrre's white brows shot up. "Leaving?" he balked. "To go where? Dragon's mane, Dinistriol, I expected that you would want to settle down after everything you've endured. Three years ago you couldn't walk ten steps without falling over."

"I always was a rambler," Riderch snickered, returning Cyrre's gaze for the first time to find deep concern there. "Don't get me a bed, Father," he added. "I'm good and used to the floor."

Cyrre bent closer to Riderch then, burying his eyes beneath his brows and glancing at the doors. "Where are you going, Dinistriol?" he whispered.

"I don't rightly know," Riderch admitted, regarding the ear from the corner of his eye. "To talk turkey, I don't know where I *can* go, but it doesn't add an inch to my ears, pretending I'll be here long."

"You've heard something," Cyrre guessed. "From the Stars?"

"I told you my tale, Father, don't act like I didn't," Riderch smoldered. "That judge brought the hammer down on me at the bottom of that gwerthon. It's bound to catch up with me sooner or later, whether it comes to me or I go to it."

"So let it come to you!" said Cyrre, heaving high his slight shoulders. "Why let it steal your peace when you've only just found it?"

“Peace?” Riderch scoffed, thumping his foot hard against the ground again as he found himself growing angry. The pain checked him, though he snarled the next few words. “I’ve never had peace for an hour my whole life, Father. I sure as hell haven’t got any now, and I won’t until I’m under the dunes. Let me look for it where I can find it.”

Cyrre paused, then bowed his head, hanging his tail for shame. “I was a wayfarer once myself,” he said gravely. “Clearly I’ve been too long a homebody, if I can’t recognize doom when it drives you. Forgive me, my son.”

“I’m not a halser,” Riderch reminded him, rapping his knuckles against his dark staff. “I never wanted to be. I’m a dog on a good day, and a wolf on a bad one. Leave me alone to guard the door, it’s all I’ve ever been good at.”

“Blostmath would beg to differ, I think,” said Cyrre, making for the crypt’s north door, “but very well. Pray for me, Dinistriol.”

“Rabbit’s lucky foot, I will,” Riderch mumbled, as the ash door swung shut on silent hinges.

He waited there before the chest for five minutes before speaking again, picking through the heavenly round for any more mundane sounds. “Well?” he said when none came. “What do you want?”

“Since when do the Stars want for anything, Dinistriol?”

“Don’t play the fox with me,” Riderch snapped. “I don’t hear two words about the war-band for three years, and suddenly I’ve got the girl’s aunt under my knife? I know which way the wind’s blowing. I can hear it, the way they’re singing out the northern sky like that.”

Laughter like the rare golden bolt of a brightbush filled the crypt, laughter whose impishness Riderch had greatly missed. “And since when have you cared about portents?”

“Since I dreamed about the Melangell,” said Riderch.

“Whose advice to you supersedes my own. I can tell you nothing better than she: to prepare for death. When the time comes to face it, however, I would happily reward you once more for your help.”

“My ears are up,” said Riderch.

“When you find yourself in need of a swift mount, go to the top of the boardland and whistle as loudly as you can.”

“Lucky for me you’re fond of horses,” said Riderch.

“I love horses because you love them, Dinistriol. In truth, I prefer to walk.”

“Is that it, then?” asked Riderch, beginning to shift impatiently for his aching back. “Don’t you have anything more to say?”

“You’ve waited so patiently, Dinistriol. Wait just a little while longer.”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before,” Riderch grunted, surprised by his own disappointment. He had not expected to hear anything, in truth; on the other rare occasions when he had returned to the ear, to inquire about Morgwynn or to seek a conclusion to his interminable waiting, he had been met only with silence. And yet now, in the wake of an answer adjuring him yet again to hold his course, he wished for no answer at all. Disgusted, he turned sharply and swept out of the crypt through its northern door, resolved to retrieve the urn from his booth and collect water on the gwerthon floor. He ached already – a little more aching would not kill him.

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There were landings at each floor for the stairs that coiled around Sunstone’s galleries, by which folk mounted and dismounted their climbs. In their busiest moments, these landings were swarming anthills, trodden by a hundred paws seeking to go up or down or to turn aside to the shelter of cells or Wheelhouses or libraries or workshops hewn into the boardland wall. That morning, however, the landing beside the crypt was host to only a few milling folk, all of whom were stragglers climbing

down from the Hearthhouse after Mornsong. Riderch would be walking against the current, but he hardly cared; folk made room for him wherever he went, whether he demanded it or not.

As he neared the agate steps, however, and a cluster of chattering pilgrims parted to hug the wall and the stone yucca banister, a single folk crested the steps below the landing and began to walk beside him. He was framed against a fresco which Riderch stopped to stare at every time he visited the crypt, a scene of a young Star uprooting a mashua plant at the top of a hill. In his frothing consternation he would have left it altogether unnoticed, if the folk in lock-step with him had not caught his attention. Sleek and lithe in his jet black fur, he was, unlike the rest of Sunstone, dressed to the nines in a white shirt, a black waistcoat and trousers with fringed chaps, and a long, black duster coat. Something nibbled at Riderch's thoughts: no one dressed so in Sunstone unless they hailed from far to the north, and even those brave pilgrims promptly abandoned their trappings when once they were exposed to the intimate sun. A black tail swept out through a slit in the duster, and Riderch jerked his head around to look at him.

Malmuck recognized Riderch at the same moment. Both gasped. Riderch's paw shot to his belt, grasping for a falchion he no longer wore. Malmuck's paws flew up, palms out and claws spread as if to grapple, even though Riderch could see the falchion's hilt protruding from his unbuttoned coat. Burning yellow eyes bulged; Malmuck began to shout something, but Riderch did not hear him. All of the hare's old rage returned with a thunderclap, red rage roaring in his ears with every blast of his pulse. Knowing that he was unevenly matched and cursing himself for his carelessness, he did the first thing he could think to do: dropping his staff, he bent down and charged Malmuck with his horns and outstretched arms, throwing him against the fresco as hard as he could. His foe struck it with a cry and a solid crack, too stunned to recover himself.

"Stop!" he wheezed, scrambling to pry the hare's arms from his waist. "Wait, Riderch!"

But no voice would command Riderch. Provoked by the screaming of his own crippled members, he made a desperate grab for Malmuck's belt, pinning his neck to the wall with his wicker-bound horns. To his thrill he found purchase; and pulling the belt away from his waist, he plucked both falchion and scabbard from their loop. Folk were screaming now, running up or down the stairs to flee the sudden assault. A few of them were shouting his name, a choir of which Malmuck was the loudest member.

"No, Riderch, don't do it!" Malmuck choked, finally gaining a hold on the hare's ear and pulling as hard as he could.

Lightning flashed in Riderch's head, a lance of pain he found wholly fitting. Leaning into it, he lurched around toward the gallery's breezy colonnade, pulling Malmuck with him. There, on the far side of the polished floor, ash tree columns admitted the sight of the open gwerthon, the wall and farther tower of Sunstone, and the cloudless blue sky. A pair of halsers stepped in front of the stone railing with arms outstretched, fearing that Riderch would try to throw Malmuck over the edge, only to flinch when Riderch raised the sheathed falchion over his head.

And threw it – not at the halsers, or at Malmuck, or at anyone else, but simply over the edge of the balcony, between two ash trees and down to the gwerthon floor.

The pair fell to grappling a moment later, a fierce struggle in which Riderch felt – to his bafflement – that Malmuck was hobbling himself. Limbs were wrenched. Heads were rubbed raw against the floor. Riderch's horns, their wicker apparently cracked in his charge, broke free and fell away. A few well-minded intercessors were kicked or thrown. Riderch fought around his ill-healed limbs to pin the jaguar, summoning all of his strength, and yet his opponent would not do the same. His vicious claws remained in his velvet paws. He neither scratched nor bit, but between his curses struggled instead to speak.

"Let me go, Riderch!" he yowled. "I don't want to fight you! Gwyner's spots, use your ears!"

But Riderch would not be deterred. The stellar might granted him for a time by the ear was gone; but years of diligent, painful toil stood by to serve him, and that earned strength he used to overmaster Malmuck. Throwing him flat on his belly, he held the jaguar as Kay had once held him, slipping his sinuous arms under his armpits and behind his neck. Pulled jerkily up, Malmuck howled and flailed, pounding fruitlessly at Riderch's sides, but in the end found no recourse. The pair of halsers had gone to fetch more help; while he still had the chance, Riderch dragged Malmuck's execrating body up the stone steps, beating his back against their edges until they crested the lip of Sunstone's highest tier. Behind them was the Hearthhouse, already blinding in the sunlight. Riderch heaved his captive toward a little door far to its left, a cell as unassuming as the one he had occupied over Nawddfa. Declining to knock, he kicked the door open so that it struck the opposite wall, and was satisfied to hear a sudden cry within.

"Stars! Stars, Dinistriol, what are you doing?"

The modest cell, deeper than it was wide, was softly lit by shaven agate windows and a skylight in the middle of the front room. Woven hemp mats were swept aside by Malmuck's kicking paws as Riderch dragged him in, beneath the bald sunbeam and through a cloud of tobacco smoke that Elder Cyrre was blowing into it. His pipe fell from his paw in an effort to pry the two apart; its burning tobacco scattered on the stone floor, and Riderch snuffed it out with his broad foot.

"Take a gander, Father," Riderch grunted, shaking Malmuck like a dog with a dead duck in its mouth. "I leave the boardland for five minutes and a rattlesnake slithers in."

Malmuck was both breathless and bloodless by now, choking and gagging as Riderch's arms squeezed the sides of his neck harder and harder. Clawing at the hare's arms until the blood flowed, he managed with an effort to hiss out a plea to the Elder: "Tell him to put me down."

"You heard him, Dinistriol," Cyrre snapped, grabbing his staff from the wall without moving from his place. "Let him go!"

Like that same dog, Riderch dropped Malmuck unceremoniously at Cyrre's paws. The jaguar righted himself with characteristic deftness, then tried to stand; but finding his head swimming, promptly fell gasping to his paws and knees.

"You know who this is, Father?" Riderch snarled, more impassioned than he had been in years. "You know who this yellow-bellied, blood-sucking flea in my ear is?"

"Chew pellets," Malmuck coughed, then added: "Sorry, Father."

"I would like to know why you've dragged him by the neck into my cell, certainly," said Cyrre, full of a wrath thrice the size of his voice. His hackles were raised; Riderch could see the fur bristling down to his tail.

"You remember Malmuck?" asked Riderch, stretching out his arms toward him. "The mole who bought those halsers' tokens from me? Looks like he tailed me all the way to Sunstone."

Cyrre knit his brow at Riderch for a long moment, until Malmuck had taken enough breath to rise shakily to his paws. Riderch stepped toward him again, ready to restrain him, but Cyrre threw an arm across the hare's chest. "You're that Malmuck?" he asked, in a voice that would not have been out of place at Mornsong. His eyes brushed the stranger's black coat, noting the drooping waistcoat where the buttons had been torn out. "The one from the Anialdir?"

"What did you feed him about me, Riderch?" Malmuck smoldered, rubbing his neck with both paws.

"What do you reckon I fed him?" asked Riderch. "I told him you were a greedy, double-dealing snake."

"Oh, that's rich coming from you!" said Malmuck, baring his teeth.

"Begging your pardon, but who is Riderch?" asked Cyrre.

A purring, acidic laugh escaped Malmuck's lips between labored breaths. "I should have known you'd lie to slip in here," he said. "It's a good thing you're easy to spot."

"Not easy enough, I'd say," said Riderch. "What, did you reckon you could get the drop on me like you did back at Gwydd Gwerthon?"

"As a matter of fact, I wa-" Malmuck began.

"Rode all the way to Sunstone so you could take my head back to Sheen?" Riderch continued.

"Damn it, Riderch, I'm trying to tell-"

"Or is it Brockwell again?" Riderch snapped. "Which one's paying you more?"

"Would you be quiet, Dinistriol?" Cyrre demanded, rapping him smartly over the head with his staff. "Can't you see he's trying to say something? Stars in heaven, he doesn't even have a sword."

"He did," Riderch muttered, looking around the floor for the first time to realize that he had left his own staff downstairs in the scuffle. His head felt tremendously light without his horns, almost drunkenly so.

"Aye, and you threw it away," said Malmuck, suddenly puzzled. "Why'd you do that? I figured you would spit me."

"I didn't want you swinging it at anyone on your way up here," said Riderch.

"Did you…" Malmuck trailed off, looking from Riderch to Cyrre and back again. "Did you drag me to this halser so you could *tattle* on me?" When neither of them answered, Malmuck began to laugh again, a dumbfounded cackle interrupted by more coughing. Cyrre offered him a waterskin hanging from the wall, but he pushed it away. "That's turkey, isn't it?" he marveled. "String my guts on a banjo, maybe you're not as easy to spot as I reckoned."

"If you came here to kill him, Malmuck, then Dinistriol was right to defend himself," said Cyrre, standing now between the pair. "He's been living in Sunstone for three years – if he belongs to anyone, he belongs to us."

"You know what he did back in the Anialdir, Father?" asked Malmuck.

"Well enough that I should have known someone would come to collect his bounty eventually," Cyrre sighed, glancing solemnly at Riderch. "He warned me about it more than once."

"I'm not after his head," Malmuck growled, sweeping Riderch away with the back of his paw. "His bounty's not worth the weeks I spent crossing that sea of glass."

"Then perhaps you should explain yourself, my son, before tempers flare again," said Cyrre, bending down to move his spilled pipe to a little round table against the wall.

"You mind if I sit down, Father?" asked Malmuck. "I'm mighty dizzy from being thrown around."

"I insist upon it, as a matter of fact. Both of you sit down," said Cyrre, clumsily sliding a pair of weathered wooden chairs to the middle of the floor, where they sat facing each other inside the glow of the skylight. A few folk were hurrying about on the gallery outside, calling urgently to each other. With unflappable coolness that rather impressed Riderch, the Elder crossed to shut the door.

"Much obliged, Father," said Malmuck, "but I don't reckon I should take your seat."

"Sit!" Cyrre barked, so forcefully that both of them sat down at once. Crossing then to a deep chest in the far corner, over which hung a shelf displaying a carven relief of the Great Dragon, he retrieved a small cedar canister and a few wands of fatwood pine half the thickness of a claw. These he placed atop the table; the canister lid flew loose with a pop, and for a fretful minute the halser paid mind to nothing but the packing of his corncob pipe. A hanging lamp on the wall lent fire to a pine wand. With this he lit the strong tobacco; and pulling it to life, he filled his cheeks with fragrant smoke, then blew it toward the open skylight.

“You next,” he said, holding the pipe out to Riderch. Riderch snarled at him, but accepted it eagerly enough after Cyrre swatted his aching ear. The tobacco was sun-cured, potent and peppery. Riderch held it in his lungs until it began to stir his blood, then blew it at the skylight as Cyrre had.

“Now give it to Malmuck,” said the Elder.

“What? Why?” asked Malmuck, regarding the pipe like a glowing brand.

“Convince me that you haven’t come to prey upon my flock, Malmuck,” said Cyrre perilously. “Your reputation precedes you – unless you would have me believe that Dinistriol was lying about that as well?”

“You’ve got him by the whiskers, don’t you?” Malmuck muttered to Riderch, leaning forward to pluck the pipe from his paw and sticking it in his own mouth. “How’d you manage that?” He puffed a few times to enliven the bowl, then blew a cloud of his own behind the first two.

“There!” Cyrre exclaimed, taking the pipe from him and returning it to his own teeth. “Are we friends now? Are we finished clawing at each other’s throats? Say aye, by all the Stars in heaven.”

“Aye, aye, friends,” said Malmuck, holding up a pair of open palms.

“What do you want, Malmuck?” asked Riderch, crossing his arms.

It seemed then that some hastily woven spell was rent asunder. Malmuck’s thorny defensiveness, hanging like a shield about him, fell to the floor. Weariness was left behind, weariness and a terrible dread that gave even Riderch pause. He bent down in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees and rubbing his face. “I’ve got news for you, Riderch,” he said. “Too little and too late, but I didn’t know who else to tell.”

“What did you do?” asked Riderch, struck by the many black rosettes that the sun teased out in his graying fur.

Malmuck grimaced, sitting up straight and tilting his head back and forth as if he were a stalking rattlesnake. “I need to know that he won’t be on me again as soon as I tell him,” he said to Cyrre.

“You’re asking me to restrain him?” the Elder scoffed. “Let him restrain himself; I know he’s quite capable.”

“I know otherwise,” Malmuck muttered, eyeing the deep, white gouges running across the buck’s face. “You know I was a spy for Sheen, Riderch, ever since Rusty’s. I reckon I don’t need to tell you that.”

“Nope,” said Riderch.

“You remember Guilur Hwyrfeth? Tamarinfolk, big white mustache?” asked Malmuck, tugging at unseen locks. “He was up at Nawddfa.”

Riderch’s scowl deepened, but he said nothing.

“Aye, you remember him,” Malmuck nodded. “Sheen sent him to take Iwan Gwerthon from Godnu a few Quetzals back, and he’s been in charge there ever since the war picked up again. I’ve been under him to anyone who asks, even if I get around. Anyhow, he was fielding the war-band bounties. That’s how I wound up on that goat rope to Nawddfa – someone found Rhian and told Hwyrfeth about it, and I was the only one who’d seen the girl’s face before.”

“The Anialdir is at war again?” asked Cyrre, puffing anxiously at his pipe.

“It’s been at war for the last thirty years,” Malmuck sighed, fidgeting anxiously with his unbuttoned waistcoat. “Those badgers were just sitting in their holes, waiting for someone to stick his neck out. Well it’s good and hot now – Godnu and Ancathair still have everything north of Elksand, but Gorseth Floyd and Gwall took everything south. It’s just a matter of time, now that they have the boardlands and the upper Rinnea: Godnu can’t get enough supplies from the Swartway.”

“Hack it up, Malmuck!” Riderch barked.

"I…pardon me, I don't know how else to say it," Malmuck fumbled, looking once more to Elder Cyrre as if the halser would speak for him. "We took all that gold when we left, the ones who lived."

"Stole it, you mean," said Riderch, shifting in his seat for the sake of his aching ribs. "I hope someone stabs your back over it."

Malmuck winced, and something in the gesture made Riderch's skin crawl. "We split it up between us," he continued. "Hwyrfeth told us to say we'd won it on the roads if anyone asked – he never told anyone else where we were going, and riders die on the Swartway all the time now, so there was no way to prove him wrong. As long as we all kept our mouths shut, it would never come back around to bite us."

"Surely a spy, of all folk, would have the wisdom to know better than that," Cyrre tutted.

"Which is why I buried my share," Malmuck nodded. "To talk turkey, I expected you to blow the whole thing out to Sheen when you stormed into the Ceinych. I'm still surprised you didn't."

"I wish I would have," said Riderch.

"Well then you'll be happy to know that he heard about it anyhow," said Malmuck, "that we'd plundered a whole lot more than we told him – I couldn't tell you who sang. I knew he'd be fit to be tied, as greedy as he is – Gwyner's spots, Riderch, you saw how he was at the Ceinych – but I didn't reckon on him calling for the whole haul."

Riderch leaned forward in his chair. "All of it?" he balked.

"Down to the last ring," Malmuck nodded. "Had one of his other Guilurs round it all up – all save mine, since they couldn't find it – and carry it to Gwall with Hwyrfeth in tow. He wanted to humiliate him, I'm sure you understand. Sheen likes to twist the knife when he can."

Malmuck was staring at the unswept tobacco on the floor, regarding it almost mournfully. "That was the last anyone ever heard from that Guilur, or from anyone in his company."

"They were attacked?" said Cyrre.

"Ambushed by a pack of cutthroats," said Malmuck. He nodded stiffly at Riderch, and the hare's heart splashed into his stomach. "They put the whole company under the dunes, and would have done the same for Hwyrfeth if he hadn't taken off on a horse while they were loading up the gold. This was on the Swartway, mind you, halfway between Iwan and Gwall.

"Anyhow, Sheen never saw a piece of that gold, and since there were bigger fish to fry by then I reckon he forgot about it. But Hwyrfeth took it hard; he sent me sniffing around for those thieves, and since I knew they worked the Swartway it was only a matter of time before I followed them back to an old ruin on the south face of the Greteboga."

"Quilla," Riderch supplied, almost too low to be heard. "Rows of fallen pillars on a cliff."

"You know it?" asked Malmuck, arching his brows. "Well then I reckon I don't have to tell you who the thieves were."

Riderch shook his head, listening to the heavenly round as he willed away the sounds of his own cracking bones.

"Now I never saw the gold, I want to make that real clear," said Malmuck. "But there were enough of them there, and armed enough, to take on a company of riders if they wanted."

"The gold was there," said Riderch. Cyrre glanced at him, but did not interject.

"I guessed the same," Malmuck nodded, sinking into a slouch. "See now, this is where I backed my horse, Riderch – the wrong horse, even though I didn't know it for a while. Hwyrfeth wanted to split the gold with me – just between the two of us, or however many folk we needed to steal it back. We shook on it, but when I found those thieves down in Quilla I remembered that I still had a fat load of gold waiting for me whenever I wanted to dig it up and sell it. I reckoned that knowing where the rest of it was would be worth more to me in the end – it's the kind of instinct you pick up in my line of

work – so Great Cat take my tongue, I kept it quiet. That gold was hot, and so queer compared to anything else in the Anialdir that you could spot it halfway down the Swartway. No folk with any sense would sell it any time soon – and a clever one wouldn't sell it in the Anialdir at all – so I reckoned it was safe to sit on."

"But you reckoned wrong," said Riderch.

"It was tomfoolery," said Malmuck almost pleadingly, "some powerful tomfoolery."

"You were greedy, my son, and now you're suffering for it," said Cyrre, thrusting the stem of his pipe at the jaguar.

"Not me, Father," said Malmuck. "I wish now that it was me."

"Then it's even worse," Cyrre sighed.

"This was all a few years ago," Malmuck continued, so visibly uncomfortable that Riderch expected him to leap from his chair at any moment. "It never came up again. I kept on working for Gwall, and from time to time I'd sell some of my gold to traders passing through Iwan on their way out of the Anialdir, but I never told Hwyrfeth about the rest of it. King Rhuddri was whipping Godnu hard – nobody could think of anything else.

"That's at least until one day – this was about three weeks ago, at the end of the Ox – I'm sitting with Hwyrfeth in the wardenhouse barracks in Iwan when Atiwung comes knocking – Atiwung being one of the riders who went to Nawddfa. He was a kid then, and he's still a kid to look at him – looking all sheepish, you know, like he'd been scratching at the doorpost and wanted to get his licks out of the way before anyone knew to give him more.

"He'd been out drinking the night before, caterwauling with three strangers at an inn on the riverbank. They were buying him rounds of brightwine, getting him good and pickled, and trying to top each other for boasting. Tall tales, you know? You've been there. Anyhow, one of them slips this queer gold bracelet across the table and starts talking about some foreign gold making its way around the Anialdir. They start gossiping about where it came from: inside the boardlands, at the bottom of some gwerthon, Cair Cunning itself, all of the usual hogwash. And this kid, this stupid kid, he says…he says…"

"What did he say, Malmuck?" Riderch rasped, suddenly thankful that his staff was not in reach.

"The one thing we told him not to say," said Malmuck miserably. "He said he recognized it. Whispered in their ears about this holler way up north in Clegyrau where he struck it rich stealing a mountain of gold from some Hellknights, only to lose it all to some thieves on the road. Said there was more gold in that holler than anyone could cart away, talked and talked and talked it up. He spilled the whole damned thing – stopped just shy of telling them where the holler was."

"You black rat!" Riderch roared, springing up from his seat so fast that his chair fell clattering to the floor. "I should have run you through the guts when I had the chance! Dinistrith's bloody sword, you just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?"

Elder Cyrre, who until that moment had been leaning back against the edge of his table, shot forward with a look of cold shock. "This is Nawddfa?" he asked. "Where those stargazers live?"

"Aye," Riderch choked, balling his fists until his claws pierced his skin.

"Ram's crown, are you not content to destroy yourself by your greed?" Cyrre exclaimed, raising his voice in anger for the first time that Riderch had ever heard. "Must you destroy everyone around you as well?"

"Those three strangers got up and left after that, all of them at once," Malmuck continued with much greater haste. "Walked straight out of Iwan in the middle of the night, didn't even rent beds at the inn. That's what told Atiwung he'd kissed the cactus, he said, so I went down to the inn myself and started asking around. Turns out that the bartender had never seen them before. No one knew them, and they didn't live in town. There were folk farther downriver who'd seen them at inns and taverns doing

the same thing, but none of those had recognized them either. I couldn't…I couldn't catch up to them. I reckon they took a canoe."

"Do you know who they were, Malmuck?" asked Cyrre.

"I worked for Brockwell before I worked for Sheen," Malmuck replied. "That's the kind of thing he liked to do, fish for gossip in taverns. I'm a tom and a half at it myself, so I know it when I see it. But the kernel here is that if there's a mountain of gold sitting in the Anialdir, Brockwell would want to know about it – Fox's brush, anyone would, and now the cat's out of the bag."

"And you pointed their greedy noses at Nawddfa," Riderch snarled, trying with all of his might – though he could scarcely remember why – not to murder Malmuck where he sat. He wracked his addled brains, sifting through shifting sands until Rhian's voice returned to him: *"I will not kill to be rid of the Anialdir, do you understand me? I won't climb out of here on a mountain of corpses, and neither will you."*

"Aye, that I did," said Malmuck, "and you'd be right to do for me like you did for the rest of those riders."

"I just might," Riderch seethed, trembling so violently that he could hardly stand upright.

"What did you do next, my son?" Cyrre pressed. "Surely you didn't ride straight here, you would have no reason to."

"That's where you're wrong, Father," said Malmuck, standing from his chair with a resigned gravity and smoothing the front of his blood-spattered white shirt. "I didn't ride straight here, although I wish I'd known to. First things first, I promised Hwyrfeth my share of the gold if he rode straight to Gwall and told Sheen about Nawddfa."

"What?" cried Riderch.

"Call me sun-stricken, but I knew he'd hear about it sooner or later, and I figured Sheen would slow Brockwell down if nothing else," said Malmuck, tripping and falling over his words. "I don't know if he ever did it. What's turkey is – and this sounds so foolish to me, even now – what's turkey is that the only thing I could think to do was to go looking for Riderch. I guess you call him Dinistriol now, but I knew him as Riderch."

"Me?" said Riderch. "Why come looking for me? You want to rub it in?"

"No." A stillness entered the cell, so thick that the very pipe-clouds hanging in the sunlight ceased to move. Malmuck seemed truly helpless to Riderch for the first time, more helpless than he had been when he lay sodden upon the gwerthon shore. His empty paws found each other behind his back, and he leaned into Riderch's reach. "Out of everyone that girl ever met, I reckon you were the only one who cared a lick about her," he said. "I know she's still in Nawddfa. I know that's why you were there; but if I'd gone there looking for her, trying to warn her, she would have never gone with me. She has to run – if it isn't too late already – and you're the only folk I know who might get her to do it."

Riderch's trembling ceased as suddenly as it began. He stared at Malmuck as if the cat had slapped him, so stunned that he forgot his rage.

"But how did you find him, my son?" Cyrre pressed, chewing his pipe-stem to a gnarled mass. "I was given to believe by the halser who carried him here – and with good reason – that no one knew Dinistriol had come to Sunstone."

"Lugh," Malmuck nodded. "Father Lugh of Sunstone, if I'm remembering right."

"Where on earth did you learn that name?" Cyrre marveled.

"I went to see Riderch's old band," said Malmuck, pointing to Riderch's chest. "I reckoned if they didn't know where he was, I'd never find anyone who did.

"I knew I'd die first, of course – I was never more certain of that in my life, but I did it anyway. I left my horse and my falchion and my purse by a creek on the desert floor, then I climbed the steps to Quilla waving my white shirt over my head. They took me to Kay – that real big buck who came into

my shop under your nose, Riderch – and the first thing he did was laugh at me. ‘He duped you too, eh?’ The rest of them laughed too – I was too shaken up to laugh myself, but I tried to grin at least.

“I told them I wanted to kill you. They were happy enough to tell me I was too late, that they’d already done for you, broke your legs and left you in a gwerthon cave in the Deepwaste. I had no reason to think that they were lying, but I was already half mad with guilt and I knew I’d never be able to live with myself if I didn’t see your body. They told me where they’d done it, and after they went feeling around for my purse I ran straight back to my horse and rode for the place, straight west of Cyrn Gwerthon.”

“But Riderch was three years gone by that time,” said Cyrre.

“And trails don’t last that long, out in the Whirlwind or anywhere else,” Malmuck nodded. “But stone carvings do, and that was the first thing I noticed when I found the cave: a new stone carving against the back wall, loose chips on the floor and all, by a Father Lugh of Sunstone. I went nosing around for a while, following some chalk marks by the light of my lantern, and wouldn’t you know it? I found a gwerthon cave, just teeming with grass and fruit and green vines, with the biggest bloodstain I’ve ever seen on a bald patch of rock next to the water. No body, no bones, no scat – no Riderch.”

“And so you came to Sunstone,” said Cyrre breathlessly. “Hare’s horns, if I ever underestimate Father Lugh again.”

“I’ve always been good at finding folk,” said Malmuck, so heavy with conviction that it sounded to them both like he had just realized it for the first time. “I don’t know if it’ll do that poor girl a lick of good, Riderch; but if Brockwell or Sheen or Rhuddri or Osging go nosing around Nawddfa, they’re going to find Rhian there, and it won’t end well if they do – for her, or for the other sisters. I don’t know another soul who cares about them. I wish I did. I wish I’d cared more when it mattered.”

By the way Malmuck was standing there, eyes closed, chest puffed out, paws clasped firmly behind his back like a rider before his lord, he had no doubt that he was about to die. The sly, slaten inquisition that lived in his face had fled, replaced by a resigned remorse; and yet neither Riderch nor Elder Cyrre carried a sword. Riderch still wore his buck knife, the first blade with which he had ever killed, as sharp as the night he had used it to pin Eguin’s neck to his pillow. His paws hung limply at his sides, however, neither clenched nor grasping, for as long as it took both Cyrre and Malmuck to look at him again. To their surprise, what they saw in his scarred and pitted face was not wrath, neither hatred nor despair, but rather the queerest species of joy they had ever beheld. He did not smile – indeed, he would have seemed the less joyful for it – and yet they both swore in that moment that the buck had grown to thrice his height. He was a stray dog, torn and mangy and starving, who had gone about all his life with his hackles raised and his head hunched beneath his shoulders, only to stand straight in half-remembered happiness at the voice of his old master. “I did this,” he rasped to neither of them. “This is all because of me.”

He bolted before they could say another word, out of the sunbeam and through Elder Cyrre’s door, sprinting with a painful, limping lurch that he scarcely felt. He did not return for his staff, did not waste a moment either in fetching Lugh’s falchion or filling his waterskin. A single wasted moment would mean nothing now, he told himself – aye, whole weeks saved would almost certainly be insufficient – and yet so strong was the summons that he could not pause to make the slightest preparation. Riderch ran across the burning boardland as fast as his broken body would carry him, past his shaded booth and to the place where the cleft made way for the open, falling road. The Sunneweg was before him, a river of sand and glass that he would have to ford in order to return to the nearer bank. To brave it without a map was death, without a week of water and a team of mules and mercenaries; but the Hours were entering their cadence overhead, a map more certain than any made by folkish paws, and he had once before survived the trackless wastes on similar directions.

Jamming his claws in his mouth, he failed twice to whistle through his shredded lips, but on the third summoned the shrill trumpet of a blade of grass. It skipped across the golden sands and sun-polished hills to the horizon in every direction, then fell away. Silence answered him, a silence clearer than any spoken word, and in its wake arose the rolling thunder of hooves. A shooting star appeared in the east, a speck of gold bounding across the desert floor from between a pair of nearer boardlands, making straight for Sunstone's northern road. Riderch ran down to meet it, panting and riddled with pains, and in his mad joy mounted a Carbit even wilder than the one he had left. The palfrey's white mane was polished silver now, his coat superbly lustrous, his hooves as hard as iron. Where he had been, why and how he had crossed the Deepwaste to Sunstone, Riderch declined even to wonder. It hardly mattered now; Carbit had borne Dinistrith as well, and the coaxings of his bridle were at the best of times inscrutable. Rhian's words returned to him, words she had spoken the very hour he had accepted that bridle himself: *"Dinistrith is the roaming knight, fearless in the face of any battle into which the Stars send him, even when he's all alone – especially when he's all alone."*

At the time those words had meant nothing to him. He had imagined Dinistrith dashed against impregnable doors, nearly laughing at the thought; and yet now he really did laugh, for he understood Dinistrith. Allowing himself a single breath to bury his face in Carbit's mane, he caressed his long, pink scar, then together the two flew off across the desert toward the Anialdir.

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That day scorched, as well as every day that followed. Riderch, for his part, had grown accustomed to it by whipping himself fiercely with the boardland's blaze, until fortitude beyond even the measure of harefolk was his. It had made him thinner and feebler, and his eyesight was no longer what it once had been, but he could hold water better than a cactus now.

That Carbit should be even hardier than he, therefore, was a relief so surprising that Riderch wondered for their first three days upon the road if both he and his horse were not already dead. Carbit was a roadrunner in the scrub, scarcely touching the ground under a gallop full of their shared, unspoken urgency. Miles of sand-strewn road vanished beneath his winged hooves. Sunstone was out of sight by the end of the first cloudless day, and yet he would neither stop nor slow until he had carried Riderch to the first modest gwerthon within sight of the red road. There they rested just long enough to drink and catch their breath, before Riderch – at Carbit's own persuasive prompting – mounted again to ride through the night.

Carbit was not his horse, Riderch reminded himself at twilight on the third day. Carbit had never been his horse, just as the ear had never been his ear: both had been thefts in service of heavenly ends he had not known and still felt he hardly knew. Carbit was heaven's horse, that much was now beyond doubt. He never slept, even when Riderch slept upon his back. He knew where to find water and rough forage even before Riderch's nose caught wind. He never panted and hardly foamed, even when they were forced to traverse shadeless basins beneath the scouring sun. Why heaven had lent him a steed fit for Dinistrith himself – he who was no more than a crippled cutthroat – to deliver him to the most disastrous disappointment of his life, he knew that he would never understand. He let Carbit bear him nonetheless, and not for a moment did he consider turning back.

Riderch had been delirious with pain and hemorrhage during his journey from Cair Cunning to Sunstone, and for long stretches entirely unconscious. He had, therefore, gained no sense of the distance between Sunstone and the Anialdir in his own travels, and could only rely upon reports from pilgrims taking the southbound road. A fortnight and a little more would see him there in the winter, so they said, given perfect weather, a full train of supplies, and no harassment from highway robbers. Malmuck's own report corroborated it. But Riderch had already been denied the first two, and without

a sword and his old strength had no way to ensure the third. He could only ride blindly through the wasteland that Black Goat, the old arch-fiend, had made through his insatiable greed, hoping that the Whirlwind, his jailer, would spare him until he arrived to witness the end of still more insatiable greed.

A single road led from Sunstone to the Anialdir, a road of which the sword-straight Swartway was a short, uniquely well-preserved stretch. That road disappeared so often, however, that Riderch refused in the end to call it one, sinking beneath sand or scrub or between the entish corpses of charred and shattered mountains. By the end of the seventh day, in fact, he could no longer be sure that he was on the same road at all, that he had not diverged at some fork which all pilgrims knew through shared tales and was now riding far afield. He knew only that he rode due north, that Carbit kept the never-setting stars between his ears without his rider's goading. Whether the Anialdir was due north at all, he dreaded too much to doubt. Carbit knew his home by heart – if he did not, Riderch's unhappy fate was carrying him somewhere predictably unfathomable.

Doubts and fears assailed him so for fourteen days, until the moon which had been young at the outset was swelling toward the full. Her face was fretful, Riderch found, as if she too dreaded to discover the fate of the gray doves who so faithfully sang to the rhythm she set. As subtle as they were, as perfectly as they melted into the heavenly round, Riderch thought that he could hear them still; and yet the songs of the Stars were never more inscrutable than when he tried to hear them singly. His thought became a wish, therefore, and from the ardor of that wish was born something altogether different which he could not name, a shared hiraeth between himself and the Stars that climbed the heavenly ladder to its uppermost warden.

No sooner was his hope shared than the moon lent her sympathetic light to Riderch's desert drifting. The Whirlwind was still that night, preparing to rise from his seat in the uttermost South when he would bring the early rains, and the unclouded sky held rank upon numberless rank of the vigilant Stars. It was in this stark clarity, in the sobriety of Carbit's labored breathing and the drumming of his dogged hooves, that Riderch saw a thin silver line hanging over the black horizon. Jagged and inconstant like the rest of the Deepwaste, it was nevertheless familiar in a way he could not deny, a lover's teeth whose contours he knew as well as his own. Carbit found a patch of softer scrub for them to collapse upon, both starving and riddled with aches they were too determined to heed, and Riderch watched that silver line until the sun rose to crown it with gold. They had diverged from the road only a little, only at the very end, bearing east to avoid places already dead to them. The Greteboga lay ahead, north and a little west. On its farther slopes he had walked with Rhian, on the dusty sands of the Anialdir basin and along the green banks of the Rinnea. He pulled viciously at his own ears, certain that he was already too late, that she was the sole caged spoil among a flock of dead doves, but roused Carbit and rode on anyway.

The remains of the Swartway were less obvious in the Deepwaste, its black faded to rusty brown and obscured often by sand. Nevertheless, Riderch knew that he was nearly upon it when he spied the familiar prow of a jutting cliff upon one of the Greteboga's southern slopes. Broken pillars standing defiant against the Whirlwind were gnomons for the relentless sun, casting shadows north and west to show Riderch where his own end lay. He had made no plans while he rode, for he was powerless to enact any plan in the face of the war-band's mustered might. One thing alone he thought to do, a gamble surpassingly foolish and almost certain to fail, and yet his merciless hours of riding left him certain that there was no other recourse. King Sheen and King Brockwell could not be allowed their run of Nawddfa uncontested. Malmuck had done it, and he would rather die than be more cowardly than Malmuck. If Dinistrith had indeed deigned to use him again, he would see that Riderch remained useful, or else let him fail for the very last time. The thought was freeing; he pointed Carbit toward Quilla, and the stallion bore him thither without complaint.

They found a stream at the foot of Quilla's windworn steps, a stream pitiful both for its size and for the memories attached thereto. It fell from some permanent spring high in the Greteboga, thin and stubborn, only to disappear into the earth again without the slightest pool to mark it. Like that stream, Riderch had once climbed down from Quilla empty-pawed, spilling his last ounce of goodwill into the dust with Gwyarc's blood. He returned now with even less, with a knife, a fire-striker, and a compass he no longer needed. Slipping from Carbit's back and falling to his knees, he drank downstream of his ragged mount, recalling the morning they had both awoken in Rhuddri's stall to slake their incredible thirst in Carbit's trough.

There was a chance, thought Riderch, that the palfrey would be gone when he returned, if by some wonder he survived what awaited him in Quilla. To walk all the way to Nawddfa would cost him more time than his heart could bear to part with; but the same had been true of Cair Cunning, when he had washed up on Swalt Gwerthon's stony shore. Carbit had lent Riderch his back as many times as he had required it, in free thanks for his life. No gold could buy the beast, and certainly no force could compel him. Their friendship, alone across Riderch's whole life, was pure gift. Filling his waterskin, he rose shakily from the stream and kissed the horse's nose. "Wait here?" he requested, then began the climb up the mountainside.

There was no way of telling from below if his band still lived at Quilla, or if they had posted a watch at any point along the climb. At every step he fully expected to be transfixed by an arrow, cracked open by a sling stone, or stormed by an ambush. The silence of the Deepwaste remained unbroken, however, following him on a gallows-walk free of hecklers. The steps to the scaffold were mercilessly long, broken and hedged by goat-heads and little cacti. Desperately Riderch wished that he had remembered his ironwood staff, or at least had taken Lugh's falchion to lean upon, every time his crooked legs forced him to kneel or his ribs ached with the swelling of his lungs. He knew, even so, that it was well he had left them behind – if he had not, he would no doubt be tempted to use them.

The first cry did not come until he had crested the highest step, when by noon he began to tread Quilla's long forecourt of ruinous red rock. Its south-facing spur was empty, as usual, a heap of shattered stones and cracked pillars where folk must once have looked out toward Sunstone the way he had looked out toward the Anialdir. The cleft in the mountainside, however, was swarming with sound and motion, with answering shouts from familiar throats and the glitter of approaching steel. Riderch stopped. Six of his old band members ran him down in a straggling mob, dun-clad and dirty, arrows knocked and falchions at the ready. Dargan and Dedrys were at the fore, having apparently been standing watch at the mouth of the black cave.

He knew them before they knew him. Indeed, none of the six betrayed any recognition until they were all near enough to cut him down. Then Riderch spread wide his arms, displaying empty paws, and they halted as if they collided against a wall. Falchions turned in to guard. Arrows drooped between claws. Eyes bulged out of skulls, mouths fell open, and whiskers thrummed like plucked strings. A few more faces appeared at the mouth of the cave, curious and uneasy.

"Dinistrith's bloody sword, it's Riderch," Dargan marveled.

"Don't be so sure," Dedrys snapped.

"Ears up," Riderch rasped, finding that his parched voice no longer belonged in his own mouth. "I want to talk to you. All of you, as many as you've got left."

For several beats it seemed that none of them had heard him. They looked to each other instead, confirming the horror of their fellows, before gaping at him again. Dedrys beat Riderch's side with the flat of his blade, rattling his sore ribs; the hollow thump seemed to convince them that he was neither ghost nor mirage, and a measure of hatred mingled with their fear.

They led him at the points of their prodding swords into the cave to which he had once led them. No longer was it empty; wind-breaks of foraged wood and white stones flanked the wide,

pillared passageway, unswept drifts crowding their bases. Crude lard lamps burned poorly-filtered fat from niches in the white walls and shelves chipped out of existing fissures in the twin rows of columns, illuminating the ghoulish faces of a dozen of Riderch's former fellows. They had come running at the first cry from farther back, it seemed, for some were breathless and others were only just arriving. They thronged Riderch as soon as they recognized him, taking up a crazed whispering like sand blowing through the scrub. A few laughed in disbelief at his gall, at his mad, scarred face, at the smell of his unwashed fur. That laughter was sparse, however, and died early past every pair of lips. Horrible, cruel silence reigned, the very silence that Riderch had heard around the gallows more than once.

"Go back and get Kay," Dedrys barked to Dargan, cuffing him hard enough to send the spindly hare sprinting toward the back of the cave. Shafts of sunlight played upon the stone there, spilling down the steps to the higher courtyard a stone's throw ahead and farther on from apertures Riderch had never noticed. It struck him then that they had cleared the sand from the cave, and by its echoes he judged it far more spacious than he had ever guessed.

"Get everyone!" Riderch called after him. He felt the tip of a falchion prick his back, and found as he went on that folk were unwilling to touch him.

"Where are your horses?" he grunted a few moments later.

"There's a gwerthon farther up," said one of the harefolk. "Are you really here?"

"What did you say?" Riderch frowned, but the hare would not answer.

Tennyn began limping down the flight of sun-washed steps when Riderch was nearly to it; black astonishment seized him halfway to the floor. "I would have lost that bet," he said to Riderch; then turning around, he practically screamed to the courtyard: "It's him! Get down here!"

But Dargan was returning with another four folk before anyone could follow Tennyn. Hawen was at their fore, almost outpacing Dargan even in a long, flowing gown of white and red that reminded Riderch of a coscoroba. Ferociously, and with startling ease, she pushed him out of her way when they came to a narrow gap between the side of the staircase and a pillar. Dargan slipped and scraped against the wall, then shrilled a hail of blistering curses at her.

"You'll pay for that, you broodless bitch! Pull out your sax and watch what happens!" he dared from the floor, before falling suddenly silent.

A hulking shadow fell across the top steps then, splitting into three as Kay and two more of the Anialdir hares descended. Lit from above by the high sun, their disbelief was transparent, and they too halted halfway down to stare at Riderch. He swayed resignedly at the bottom, surrounded by a mob over whom he had once thought himself a king.

"That you, Riderch?" Kay boomed, letting one great paw rest upon the pommel of his sword.

"No," said Riderch.

"You look like a corpse," said Kay. There was no mockery in his witless bass, as Riderch had expected – indeed, no joy at all.

"Never felt better," said Riderch as coolly as he could.

"He's real, boss," said Dedrys.

"I know he's real!" Kay snapped, recommencing his descent two steps at a time. "I should have known not to trust that black stain of a catamount. Can't read his double-damn face."

Stopping once more just over his head, Kay sat down upon the steps, forcing Riderch to look up at him. "But you couldn't have been lying in that gwerthon until yesterday, could you?" he asked, digging in his ear with a claw. "You sure you're not a ghost? You was bleeding like a gilled peccary."

"I told you to bring everyone," said Riderch to Dargan, who was brooding over a scrape along the side of his muzzle.

"This is everyone," Kay growled, looking over his shoulder to ensure that the two bucks were still standing behind him. "All thanks to you."

“Where’s Gwyarc?” asked Riderch.

“Dead,” said Kay. “Got lassoed in Ancathair trying to fence some things. Hanged him for it.”

Riderch had never once felt sorry for Gwyarc; the bush dog had seen to that through his bottomless rancor. A memory of him kneeling in the scrub returned, however, bound and beaten before his dead fellows, his lips cracked and bleeding, and something almost like pity germinated finally in Riderch’s heart. He closed his eyes and ran his claws along the scars on his face, certain now that he had made the right choice in coming. Was it any wonder that heaven kept him alive when he had so much to atone for?

“I reckon that explains some things,” Riderch muttered, scanning the bloodthirsty faces just out of reach. “What about Sawl?”

“We never saw him again after you left us to the dogs. He might still be in Mydge for all I know,” said Tennyn, leaning against the right wall of the stair. It reminded Riderch of how sore he was, of how badly he wished to sit down on the floor. He resisted the urge.

“Rhuddri’s riders would have found him in there by now,” said Dargan. “Dinistrith knows what they did with him.”

“Aye, I reckon he does,” Riderch nodded.

“And Gwesgyr and Gwaeolaf and Fabunig are under the dunes because of that gray wolf’s little slattern,” said Kay, counting on his claws. “Don’t look like you got much for her.”

“Is Disma here?” asked Riderch, peering between folk to no avail.

“Dead too,” Kay grunted, a little too fast.

“Riderch, he’s-” Hawen interjected, only to be cut off by Dargan.

“Button it!” he snapped.

“You like those buck teeth?” Hawen bleated back, wheeling on him with a fist. Dargan flinched and backed away.

“I know he’s not dead,” said Riderch, holding up a paw. “Don’t tickle my whiskers, Kay, you’re not clever enough to get away with a lie like that.”

Kay’s fists clenched. “Everyone cheered when we told them you was dead,” he smoldered. “How clever is it to show your face here again?”

Riderch ignored him. “You’re down four folk – five, if Disma left. Haven’t you picked up any more?”

Hawen scoffed. “Who would we pick up?” she asked. “All the other likely bucks are riders now.”

“But not you?” asked Riderch.

“The war-band’s desperate,” said Tennyn. “They’re looking the other way for outlaws, so long as they steal from Godnu and Ancathair. Amnesty for everyone – everyone but us.”

“Aye, boss, you left us horseless in the desert,” said Dargan from the shadows at the rear of the stair. “There isn’t a gray rider in Gorseth Floyd who doesn’t know to gill us.”

“And Brockwell already wanted us under the dunes,” said Dedrys.

The time for the gamble had come mercifully soon. Meeting as many eyes as he could, he straightened his creaking back and assumed the closest thing he could muster to a commanding posture. “What if I told you there was a way to wipe the slate clean?” he said. “To get Rhuddri into your debt? He’ll be king of the Anialdir someday, so he’s the only one who really matters.”

Indistinct scoffing. Kay’s thunderous laughter filled the long hall from end to end. “I’d say they hit you over the head too hard,” said Hawen.

“Not hard enough,” said Kay.

“Where’s Disma?” Riderch pressed, struggling to be heard over the chatter.

“What do you care?” asked Dargan.

“I’ve got something to say, and I want Disma to hear it,” said Riderch. “If you’re not going to finish killing me, I’m going looking for him.”

This proved compelling enough, as Riderch had hoped. Dargan was pushed aside again by a pair of willow-wand arms. The sunlight failed past the staircase, yet even in the glare Riderch knew the pale frame that stepped out from behind it. Hawen moved aside to admit him, and with a weary reluctance Disma stalked into the light. “Spill it!” he barked, eyes fixed to the floor.

Not even the pain of their last meeting could compare to the sorrow Riderch felt at seeing Disma still among the cutthroats. His five deep gashes burned, washes for rare tears dug by one of the only folk over whom he had ever wept; and yet he would have gladly accepted five more if only it had ensured that Disma would not be here. He did not approach this time, did not hold out a paw or dissolve into apologies. Ten thousand words evaporated in the sun of his guilt. He tore at his own chest beneath his poncho, knowing that the folk on either side of him could see it.

“What do you want, Riderch?” Disma shouted, baring his teeth.

“I don’t want a thing from you,” said Riderch, cursing the tremor in his voice. “Nothing will ever make up for what I did to you, Disma, keeping you here in the Anialdir. I can’t make amends. By the Melangell, I can’t – but let me tell you what someone told me, and you can do whatever you want with it.”

“Talk to that halser’s ear, for all I care,” said Disma, shaking his head and turning to walk back down the passageway.

“Wait!” Riderch called after him. “Please Disma, wait.”

Disma’s paw was gripping his falchion when he turned sidelong to glare at him. “Wait?” he spat venomously. “I did wait.”

“You hate me – that’s dandy, I hate me too,” said Riderch, refusing to weep for the sake of the others and finding it a bitter abstention. “But you wanted to leave with me once, and you’re still here even though I’m not. I’m a dead hare, Disma. Don’t let me stop you from leaving at all.”

Disma’s eyes grew wide. His tail began to sweep the floor, and the corners of his mouth twitched, hooked by the helpless hatred Riderch had so expertly cultivated in him, only to disdain. He was angry; Riderch relished it, for anger spurred folk to act.

“As for the rest of you, I saw the stash of gold you brought to Cair Cunning,” he continued more confidently. “I know where it came from, and I know it’s too hot to sell. Do you want to earn that gold?”

“We did earn it,” Dargan piped.

“You’re dead wrong,” said Riderch, once more reaching for a falchion he no longer wore – not to draw it, but rather to signal his certainty of the scheme he was about to propose. “You didn’t earn it, and neither did the riders you stole it from. They stole it from a Wheelhouse, looked after by a flock of perfect gray doves. One of them is a halser.”

Disma seized as if struck, and the anger smoldering beneath the surface swelled into seething rage.

“That gold brought the hammer down on those riders, and it’ll do the same to you,” Riderch continued. “You can’t steal from heaven and get away with it, at least if you’re going to pretend you own what you stole. It’ll kill you, or it’ll change you. Disma warned me of that, and I didn’t listen, and look what it did to me. If you want to make up for it, do something worthwhile once in your lives.”

“Worthwhile to you, I’ll reckon,” Kay grunted.

Riderch shook his head and coughed, but would not reach for his waterskin yet. “I wouldn’t take that gold if you offered it to me,” he said. “I’m leaving after this, assuming you don’t stab me in the back on my way out.

"Now ears up, all of you: out in the Western Waste, up north where Clegyrau bends west at the salt flats, there's a green tower that fell and a well underneath it. Climb the tower and look west, and you'll see a gwerthon at the top of a holler. Someone named Morgwynn lives there. Ride as fast as you can, every last one of you, and warn King Rhuddri that Dinistriol says that Sheen and Brockwell are going there to fight over her, and that you're going to lead him there. He'll thank you for it. So will I."

Another pregnant silence stretched on, full of red wrath and black suspicion and a hundred other beastly inclinations that found themselves thwarted by the sight of Riderch's broken body standing in all of its old confidence. His tongue had fallen mute again; he could feel it sprawled uselessly out against his teeth, overtaxed by more talk than he was used to. Sensing that he would have no better opportunity, the hare turned tail and walked down the corridor toward its mouth, straight for the falchions and broad-headed spears trained against him. They parted like grass beneath the wind, the folk and their weapons alike, and Riderch strode out with his pitiful limp. He held his breath the whole way, but no one stopped him.

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Carbit looked as blown as Riderch when the two reunited at the petty stream beneath Quilla, hunched and swaying under exertion that would have killed any lesser horse thrice over. He straightened the moment he saw Riderch, however, and the sheer regality of his effort spurred the hare to do the same. They were burdened alike by pain and care, by their speechless consensus that they would die running to their destination if they could not make it there alive. Sharing that burden together, they left Quilla to climb to the top of the pass leading into the Anialdir; and looking down once more into its wide basin, dotted with corn-green gwerthons and the ruins of the churning ages, the last of Riderch's long restlessness died. He would no longer be estranged from her. Singleminded urgency drove him down the Greteboga, and with speed he could no longer pretend was merely mundane they struck off across the Western Waste.

Speed he had in spades, aye, and yet it was all he could do to make that speed serve him. It would have been far faster to take the Swartway north, and over the Rinnea's farther bank to turn west and fly to Nawddfa. But war was on the Swartway; Malmuck had warned him, and he could hear its clashing in the incessant song of the Hours. Under no circumstances could Riderch afford to be detained by riders or delayed by a battle when he was too far north to choose a different bearing. He decided, therefore, to bear west at the outset, to brave the most barren desert in the Anialdir and make a straight charge for Nawddfa. If he would be late, he swore to Dinistrith, if he would arrive to see the mere smoke of a fire already burnt out, he would by no means let heaven accuse him of being indirect.

And yet the straight shot was, as it had always been for Riderch, crowded on all sides by pain and struggle. Hunger and thirst were overtaking them both now. Riderch had neither the strength nor the tools to hunt, and the rare, sparse gwerthons they found in the wasteland were insufficient to supply them. By day the sun fixed them with his deadly arrows, and by night the full moon was barely enough to keep Carbit trotting without snapping his ankles. Even so they pressed on, past the point of misery and into the queer endurance of the fasting. Boardland fortresses broke up the rolling scrub stretching eastward away from Clegyrau, their broad, flat tops shimmering in the heat with the phantom forms of Hellknights who had perished therein. Riderch felt himself one such phantom, lingering long past his Day, and wondered if the fear he had seen in his old band's eyes had not been justified. Perhaps the Melangells had been wrong, he thought. Perhaps he had died already: at the bottom of the gwerthon, or in his fight with Arow, or in his unstopping of the spring. Perhaps he only lived now – lived as Rhian had meant it – to do the work of the Stars that he had failed to do in life. Her words came vividly to mind, as clear and sweet as he had first heard them: *"It means that you're remembered forever, by folk*

and by all of the heavenly powers. That you're remembered no matter how many Great Days come and go, and that you live always to aid the folk who supplicate you."

There was a flat palm bridge spanning the Rinnea on the west side of Iwan Gwerthon, joining its greener northern bank to the gutted cornfields and stone-flanked huts of the southern. Riderch and Carbit found it by early morning when the waning moon was overhead, when the ram's horns were bleating at the changing of the guard and folk were just rising to perform their winter labors. Farmers stared at the pair as they drank and crossed over, all the more frightened by wartime of what the mutilated rider portended, but Riderch scarcely noticed them. He led Carbit straight for the tall wooden wardenhouse beside the stone jailhouse, where gathered five of Gwall's green riders by the door. They leaned upon their long spears until they saw him, then snapped to attention, braced against the ghoulish figure who overlooked them. One of these wardens, a young chinchillafolk more scarred himself than when Riderch had last seen him, dissolved into pale fear the moment their eyes met.

"You just break out of an Ancathair jail, lording?" asked one of the senior riders, a thick-whiskered nutriafolk with a white sash hanging down past his knee.

"Where's Guilur Hwyrfeth?" asked Riderch, snarling despite his best effort.

"You missed him by a mile," said the nutria, glancing at his fellows but receiving only shrugs. "He rode out weeks ago now, and won't be back any time soon by the sound of it. I'm Guilur Rhyddhawr."

"Why?" Riderch barked. "To do what?"

Rhyddhawr's beady eyes almost disappeared beneath their lids. "I'm afraid I'm not obliged to tell you that, lording," he smoldered. "Maybe you ought to explain why it is you want to know?"

"You're obliged," said Riderch, jabbing a claw at the chinchilla. "Where'd he go?"

"If you reckon for one corn-shucking second that you can order around my riders-" Rhyddhawr began.

"He rode to Gwall!" The chinchilla squeaked. "He went to find King Sheen!"

"Atiwung!" Rhyddhawr shouted, wheeling on the younger rider.

"To bring him to Nawddfa?" Riderch pressed. "The holler over the salt flats?"

Rhyddhawr regarded Riderch over his shoulder, bristling with alarm. Orange teeth flashed in his gaping mouth. "Now how in the Goat's tar pit would you know that?" he growled. "I've never seen you before in my life."

"When did he leave?" asked Riderch. "What day is it now? I need to get ahead of him if I can."

"Three weeks ago exactly, Hellknight, on the nineteenth of Badger," said Atiwung, only to be reward by a cuff so forceful that he fell sprawling onto the dirt road.

Riderch had left Sunstone on the very same day. His mind raced, starved and sun-stricken. Hwyrfeth would have followed the Rinnea as far as he could, he guessed, then circled Mydge on one side or the other – Gwall would be twelve days on a fast horse, if not more. If King Sheen had been at home, and they had ridden out at once, they would be-

"Are you one of King Rhuddri's?" the nutria demanded. "Explain yourself, scarface, I'm getting long in the tooth."

"I'll drop dead if I stop to explain myself," said Riderch. "I need food before I move on, for myself and for Carbit here."

"And I need to know what you want with Guilur Hwyrfeth, since you seem to know his business already," said the nutria darkly. "I'll pry it from you the hard way, if you won't volunteer."

"If you want me to prove I'm one of Rhuddri's, I can always start screaming the boardland passwords," Riderch dared him.

Rhyddhawr blanched. He turned to order his riders, only to see Atiwung already halfway through the wardenhouse door.

They brought Carbit corn and quinoa, enough to fill his shrunken stomach without overfeeding him. To Riderch Atiwung pawed a stack of half-stale cornbread from the wardenhouse larder, seeming startled by the solidness of the hare's flesh. He ate as much as he could before Carbit finished, then flung the compass and fire-striker from his belt-pouch onto the ground and stuffed the rest inside.

"You mind telling me what's nipping your heels, that you can't stop for an hour?" Rhyddhawr asked, puzzling over the scar across Carbit's neck.

"Send someone to Gorseth Floyd," Riderch demanded with his mouth full of bread. "If Rhuddri hasn't gone yet, tell him that Brockwell's headed to Nawddfa too. He might be there already."

The winds changed, falling in the west to make way for the southerly Whirlwind. The short pause of a rider fielding an ambush came and went, before the wardens fell snappily to formation under their master's command.

"If you wait here, I can pull together a company or two and ride out with you," said Rhyddhawr.

"You couldn't do her a lick of good," Riderch grunted. Seeing that Carbit was finished, he clambered onto his back again amidst the war-bander's protests, finding himself wretchedly weak, then rode northward out of Iwan as he had failed to do on the night that the war-band had burned the gwerthon.

If the green-clad wardens ever rode for Gorseth Floyd, Riderch never learned. Down the screes and steep washes of Clegyrau, over its blue, shrub-veiled cracks and folds, Carbit's relentless steps were as certain as Riderch's had been when Dinistrith had ridden him in the very same way. Even so, the palfrey's weakness was worsening. They would both be stronger if Dinistrith were riding him now, Riderch thought bitterly, strong enough perhaps to carry Morgwynn – willing or unwilling – out of Nawddfa. Stronger, aye, and yet he suspected simultaneously that the ear would have killed him if he had continued to wear it. He was a mount unworthy of any Star, though the Stars had given him a mount of which he was similarly unworthy. Once more he resolved to do all that he could, if only to behold at the end of his life the folly of folkish avarice, and howled toward Met Heafod in the thin hope that the Melangell might hear him.

And just as the ear had been to Riderch, Riderch now was to Carbit. The steed was slower on that last stretch, the weight of his own legs more and more burdensome. On the night before they entered the forest of pillars, Riderch was forced to dismount and hobble along beside him, both of them frigid and shivering in the pitiless wind. The moonlight was failing now, so that the hare could scarcely see the ground on which he trod. He relied upon Carbit's seeing hooves to keep him from thorns and pitfalls; but possessing no such hooves himself, remained unaware of the hunting rattlesnake until his foot was upon it.

Arow's wand could not have inspired such agony. Riderch's whole leg was ablaze before half a minute had passed. Thinking to press on regardless, he sucked in a breath and took a step, only to cry out when a thousand nails fresh from the forge were driven into his leg. His burning foot proved numb. He fell hard onto a clinging cactus, and would have crawled if Carbit had not stepped in front of him, offering his bent neck. Even then it was some time before Riderch could rally his members. Carbit lipped his ears emphatically, reminding him of his resolve in the midst of his wretchedness. As weak and sick as he had been when Father Lugh had found him, he clung to the stallion's neck and managed – he did not know how – to mount, knotting the silver mane around his fists as he lay moaning and shivering. His fever returned. He could not tell which way was up, for the heavens were everywhere revolving and he was pinned to the firmament with a constellation of nails.

"His wont was once to wander all unwilling o'er the Whirlwind's wastes,
Behighted by his hubris to wage war until in blood his red wrath did abate;

And he himself did dire deeds full many, Dinistrith, and many more endured,
Yet dwells in merriest delight amidst a gwerthon's e'er-enduring verdure"

Morgwynn's voice was so near that he could feel her whiskers brush his ears, could smell the copal smoke steeped in her coat. She was gone when he opened his swollen eyes, replaced by a tall, flat pillar shouldering a second which had fallen. That pillar was joined by many, stretching to the horizon on a white plain skated by queer clouds of dust. Disgusted by the taste of salt, Riderch reached a feeble paw for his waterskin, waking the nest of scorpions that lay beneath his skin. He spewed bile over Carbit's side, then drank, groaning for the pleasure of the water and the pain of the coursing venom. This done, he poured a little into his burning eyes; and having rubbed them, looked out over the salt flat again.

The green pillar was where he remembered it, fallen and forgotten, but Carbit was moving away from the covered well to the north. He would have directed him to turn around, if in that moment the clouds of dust had not caught his eye again. They were much smaller than he had first thought, kicked up by no wind, for the Whirlwind had fallen flat in the night. Rather they were rolling westward under their own power, converging upon him with speed he knew that he would never enjoy again. Blinking his bloodshot eyes, he shielded his forehead with a paw and stared until something hard and bright sprang from the fore of both: the one green, the other yellow. He could hear the pounding hooves now, the cries of wrath and confusion and the jangling of steel scale.

Shaken out of his feverish stupor by fresh fear, Riderch turned his stiff neck to the left and found just ahead the mouth of a holler's bald wash. Carbit was making for it, bearing west at the corner where Clegyrau bent away from the Anialdir. Only too slowly. Gritting his teeth, Riderch rasped a beastly roar through his swollen throat, and with a kitten's weakness kicked Carbit's flanks as hard as he could. He screamed again, and Carbit took off like a loosed arrow.

They struck upon the wash mere moments before the hosts clashed at its mouth. As swollen streams suddenly converge under the early rains, churning and spreading out to flood their beds and flatten reed and river cane, so was the meeting of Gwall and Ancathair upon the salt flat. They strove, both of them, to crowd into the wash, and in so striving prevented each other from entering. Spears met shields too small for pitched battle. Falchions clashed like sliding scree. Horses screamed and kicked and bit. Their roar was the roar of the Whirlwind, rising up the holler to lick at Carbit's ankles. He carried Riderch with the last of his strength up the slope, a true mustang born after all for the wilderness. The clamor of battle died slowly away, leaving only the sound of his drumming hooves, his wheezing breaths, and Riderch's chattering teeth.

It had taken Riderch almost two days to climb the holler on foot with Rhian. The wash was steep, and in some places scarcely wide enough for Carbit's broad shoulders; yet the stallion saw fit to prove his pedigree to the war-band's chargers, and by galloping ceaselessly made the climb in one. Riderch's venom-addled brains melted with delirium. The songs of the Hours were utterly unanchored from the turning of the sun, and yet he could not mistake the sound of the strike-board when they flew past the nance trees and the lower well. The sun was behind him. The sisters were being called to Mornsong.

Burning copal hung sweetly in the valley of Nawddfa when at last they crested the top of the holler. Riderch could hear the sighing of long grass against Carbit's legs, the homesick silence already fretted by pursuing hosts. He wanted to weep for joy, but had no tears to do so. Lifting his head instead, his eyes swept the breadth of the valley, searching for signs of fire or piles of bodies. He found neither. The barn still stood as it had, weathered too soon by the Whirlwind. The garden was wintered, though not dead as it had been at his first arrival. Coursing down sheer slopes, spring water fell ultimately from the mountain peak wherein was concealed a Wheelhouse as old as the Anialdir. Hope lashed despair

with every throb of his labored pulse; he stared into the valley again, straining to see in the pre-dawn light.

Something like a flock of quail condensed upon the stiff blue grass, just as the rhythm of the strike-board changed. Its hopeful gallop stopped short, replaced by a sharp, drilling alarm that seemed to wake the whole of Clegyrau. The quail began to cry out to one another, joining up in clusters between the barn and the lower Wheelhouse. A few of them took off running in either direction, toward the Wheelhouse or the northern cells. One of them ran toward Riderch, however: no quail, but a fleet gray hare holding a long staff with a swinging red lamp.

Carbit made it halfway to the garden before stumbling to a stop. Seeing his quaking legs and the pink foam falling from his lips, Riderch pulled his rigored paws from the silver mane and let himself fall from his back into the grass. From there he looked up to see a Melangell much younger than the one he remembered, her tamarillo cheeks framed by a gray wimple and her flawless chocolate eyes awash with fear.

"Dinistriol? Dinistriol! Ram's horns, Dinistriol, what happened to you?"

Riderch smiled, happy for the first time in his whole wretched life, and reached out a paw to caress her face. She took it in both of hers and squeezed it, beholding with horror the grizzled remains of his body. A few more of the sisters were running up to join her; she turned her head to shout at them, summoning Sister Airmed and Sister Imona. Tears wet her eyes when she looked at him again, and his joy gave way to urgency.

"You need to run," he croaked, only to find half of the words inaudible.

"What?" she asked, bending her ear to his mouth. She smelled as he remembered, inexpressibly sweet.

He tried and failed to rise, then coughed until the pain of the spasms sprayed sparks in his eyes.

"Here, drink," she said, pulling him up to lean against her and slinging his waterskin from over his shoulder. Feeling the spout at his lips, he took only enough to wet his dry, cracked mouth. "We're going to carry you inside, Dinistriol. Stars, your fever is dreadful."

Other hurried steps were drawing near, trailed by hissing habit hems. "What's wrong with him?" asked Sister Andrasta, her strong alto rapturous in its nearness.

"I don't know," she replied. "He's terribly dry, and his foot is swollen. He may have been bitten by something. Where is Sister Airmed?"

"Fetching her things," said Sister Aine. "I have a stretcher here, Mother."

"You need to run away," Riderch rasped more forcefully.

She stiffened. "Run away? Why do I need to run away, Dinistriol?"

A tremendous thump startled the sisters. Riderch turned his head to see Carbit lying in the grass, perfectly still. His urgency swelled, overcoming some measure of his weakness. "They're on my heels," he said. "They'll be here any minute."

"Who will?" she demanded, pressing the waterskin to his lips again. He pushed it away, and with an effort turned to stare into her eyes.

"Sheen and Brockwell," he said, as close to a shout as he could muster.

New panic seized the sisters. "The warlords?" Sister Aine cried. "But why? What do they want with us?"

"Three guesses," Sister Andrasta growled.

Melangell sprang to her feet, plucking her staff from the ground, and looked across the valley toward the holler. "Sister Aine, take the other sisters up the mountain," she ordered, in a voice positively martial. "Sister Andrasta, help me carry Dinistriol into the Wheelhouse. We'll hide him behind the roodscreen."

“You need to run now,” Riderch begged, cursing the weakness that kept him sitting like a kitten at her feet. “I’m sorry for bringing trouble again. You need to run away.”

“Dinistriol, look at me,” she snapped, pulling him close by the chin. Her face was steel without seam, as sublimely beautiful as Meinwen’s had been. “Can you hear my voice?”

Riderch nodded and regretted it.

“I will not run away,” she said. The sisters behind her were similarly resolved; Sister Andrasta waited beside her with the stretcher, while Sister Imona ran up with Sister Airmed, their arms laden with healers’ satchels. Riderch wanted to thank Sister Imona for the cornbread, but found that he could not.

He would have wept then, torn in half by joy and despair, if in that moment the thunder of approaching hooves had not trampled the shoot of hope when it was halfway out of the earth. The sisters looked gravely to the mouth of the holler, holding in themselves a silence soon slashed by a hundred swords.

Ancathair’s black tapir waved over the fore of a host of yellow riders, its long fangs bared for beastly work. Beneath it were grisonfolk and deerfolk and a few bearfolk, imposing fighters with their mirror-polished, wide-brimmed helmets and long, bloody spears. Behind the vanguard was a high crown of hammered golden cypress leaves, ostentatious in any battle and positively malevolent now. Threescore scowling riders poured into Nawddfa together, with a stream of stragglers following behind. They spread out to fill the breadth of the valley, looking high and low until the middle vanguard spied the gray flock gathered beside the garden. A shout arose, bleating and contemptible, followed by an answering pack of howls.

Seeing Brockwell’s face straining forward now, as fat and insatiate as ever, Riderch’s anger overmastered his pain and weakness. He stood, despite the distant agony of his foot; and failing to find a falchion at his side, he moved to stand in front of Melangell and threw his arms wide.

Brockwell’s gold-fringed poncho was thrown back over his shoulder when he approached, revealing stiff scale over a corpulent frame and a falchion that looked pitifully unused. He and his black-sashed Guilurs seemed puzzled from atop their overeager mounts, almost overlooking the sisters as they searched for more substantial threats. It was Riderch’s belligerence that gave the new king pause in the end; as his host formed up behind him he stared into the hare’s slashed face, until a wicked grin split his cheeks from ear to ear.

“I was given to believe that there were Hellknights in this valley,” he trumpeted, already so giddy that Riderch expected him to clap his calloused hands. “If I had known that the river rats were speaking of you, I would have believed them.”

His Guilurs laughed. Brockwell laughed with them, and the feeling of his mass squirming in the corn sack returned to Riderch.

“What are you doing here, Brockwell?” Melangell shouted, side-stepping Riderch’s dogged guard to glare at him. The hare could have cuffed her in his rage, but his weakness prevented him.

Brockwell startled so badly that his horse stamped. He stared at her, and for a moment the face framed by its gray wimple eluded him. A moment later he was dumbstruck, mouth agape for sheer stupidity. So long did he sit motionless atop his steed that his host began to mutter amongst itself, seeking clarity from one another that none could provide.

“He’ll be hard on our tails, Lord, if they haven’t driven him off,” one of the Guilurs warned. “What do you want us to do?”

But Brockwell did not hear him. Dropping heavily from the saddle, he drew his sword, summoning a dozen riders to dismount and flank him as he closed with Melangell. Riderch snarled at him. He flinched; but finding him unarmed and half dead, did not retreat.

“My bride,” he said breathlessly, beholding her murderous ferocity. “My prize. My stolen birthright. Was he keeping you here all this time? You and the rest of these hens?”

“Go home, Brockwell,” Melangell demanded. “There’s nothing for you here.”

The king’s grin returned, revealing a few gold teeth in place of those which Riderch had knocked out. “Oh, but you’re wrong, Your Highness,” he said. “Happily, happily wrong. Everything is here for me – everything stolen by your father and this recalcitrant cutthroat.”

“I won’t have you laying a single claw on my sisters,” she declared to the whole host. “You may have me if you won’t be dissuaded, but no more.”

“Morgwynn!” Riderch snapped, overwhelmed by something he could only call betrayal.

“After the toil and travail that I and my poor departed father endured to have you, the Hellknight’s gold will be mine in simple restitution,” said Brockwell. “I’ve no great thirst for your sisters, however. I would give them to my Guilurs as brides for their trouble instead, if Riderch hasn’t spoiled them first.”

“What do we do, Mother?” asked Sister Imona, brimming with black fear in spite of her stillness.

Melangell turned to her sisters, full of that same fear. “Pray,” she said thinly. “Pray for Dinistrith’s requiting sword.”

“I see no sword but mine,” said Brockwell, then started forward to grab her.

Another chorus of cries stopped him cold, starting at the mouth of the holler and spreading up the host. Brockwell’s vanguard crowded him in and turned around, straining to see, but Riderch already knew by the baying of hounds who rode into the valley.

They were among the horses before the hosts clashed again, tearing at legs and throats with a speed that defied Ancathair’s spearheads. The riders were thrown into disarray, staggering apart to make room for the green lance that split them in half. Gwall’s archers made sport of the shaken formation, prying it open until King Sheen and his own Guilurs had a clear lane all the way to Brockwell’s vanguard. They met there, menacing each other with spears and falchions, while the riders took up the struggle all around. Sheen leaped deftly from his white charger to confront Brockwell himself, snarling and hurling curses only half heard over the clamor until they were near enough to stand at guard.

“Did you also come here to steal my bride?” Brockwell bellowed at him, making a halfhearted cut that was swiftly parried. “Will you always be Rhuddri’s loyal mutt, obeying his every whim for the sake of a willful bitch?”

“Your bride?” Sheen shouted, uncomprehending in the face of his rage. “I’ve come for the gold, you fat-cheeked sow!”

Riderch stood less than three paces from Brockwell now. Behind him was Melangell, standing similarly over her sisters as they poised to flee from riders they could not possibly outrun. Even in despair she stood defiant, and it was this defiance that knocked Sheen flat with impossible understanding. “Rhian?” he said; and then a moment later to Riderch, full of his own venom: “You. I knew you were a liar the moment you opened your mouth. Dead and buried, by Black Goat’s beard.”

“Will the two of you fill Nawddfa with blood over nothing?” Melangell cried, stalking back with her sisters as the press of the fighting moved westward. “Will we never be free of your greed?”

“Free?” Sheen balked, puffing out his chest. “Am I your jailer, Your Highness, that you believe I would fetter you in chains? I would be your husband. Surely I would be a better one than this mad dog.” He thrust his falchion at Riderch, who glowered at him silently.

“This mad dog has been a prince to me, alone among all the sons of folk,” said Melangell, to the transparent disgust of the two kings. “You will leave him in peace if you’ve any fear of Dinistrith.”

"Then it's a pack of mad dogs," Sheen scoffed, spitting on the ground. A nearby green rider fell hard from his horse, wrestling with one of Brockwell's yellow Guilurs. "I will not be deprived of what is rightfully mine, Rhian. You're to fall to my side this instant; your meaningless exile ends today."

"Do you expect me to roll over and let you geld me?" Brockwell bleated, halting Sheen's advance with a more daring foin. "She was promised to my father first, and so she falls rightfully to me!"

"And you poisoned your father's brightwine, you petulant child," Sheen spat, checking him and circling around to make a cut of his own. "You've less than no right to any gift of Rhuddri's, ever since you defected for the senile grandfather of Godnu."

Melangell was pulling hard at her ears now, guiding her sisters away from a skirmish which quickly dissolved into bloody confusion. Riderch matched her every step, feeble and clammy and sick, but the quarreling kings would not be parted from their mark.

"You're already old enough to be her father," Brockwell sneered, feigning for his neck and putting himself between Sheen and Riderch when the coati stepped back to parry. Riderch might have tackled Brockwell then, if he had still possessed any measure of strength; instead he could only watch their circling standoff, wondering if he could stand upright until it was over.

"And she will be mine regardless when next I ride through the gate of Ancathair," Sheen vowed, catching Brockwell's inner edge and moving in to grapple.

He was repelled a moment later, when in the shifting tide of bodies one of his own horses was pushed sidelong into him, sending him staggering. Wheeling then on Melangell, Brockwell stormed at her through the stiff-necked grass, falchion raised to menace. "To heel!" he screamed at her; and yet it was not she, but Riderch who obeyed. Staggering forward, he thrust himself between them, stumbling on a dead foot as he raised a brave paw to catch his wrist. He had no hope of repelling a foe so heavy. This he knew, and yet he strove to do it anyway, for there was naught else to be done and no one else to do it. Brockwell checked him hard with the hilt of his falchion; and when Riderch tottered, certain to fall, he dealt an uncontested cut. Riderch's head fell to the earth, lopped cleanly from his shoulders, a moment before his body followed.

Melangell's scream was louder than the howling Whirlwind and thrice as ghastly. So keen was it, so pregnant with despair, that every heart in Nawddfa melted behind its ribs. The fighting ceased at once, for the fighting spirit had flown from every upraised paw. Falchions fell limp halfway through their cuts. Wrestling riders rolled apart and scrambled to their paws, transfixed by horror they had hardly heard at any gwerthon raid. Horses reared and shook their heads, unwilling to be driven into the fray. Nawddfa fell silent save for that scream, a scream that rose until it was granted speech and became a wail.

"You Hellknights!" Melangell railed, falling to her knees and pulling Riderch's headless body to her breast. His blood soaked the front of her habit, but she did not care. "Look what you've done! Will you never be sated? Will you rob the Anialdir of everything good?"

Brockwell was panting while she clung to him, bright blood dripping from his blade. His every sinew strained toward her still; and yet even he, in all of his fiendish greed, could no more have moved than he could have sprouted wings and flown. Melangell's screaming sobs continued unrestrained, joined by a chorus of weeping and howling from the sisters who ran in from every corner of Nawddfa. A few picked up rocks to drive Brockwell away from the disconsolate halser; one such missile, thrown by Sister Imona's own paw, struck the king between the eyes. Convinced of his peril, he turned to melt back into the company of his own Guilurs, only to stop short when the rumble of approaching hooves swelled to join the lament. He looked about him, confounded. Both Gwall and Ancathair were as still as stones, attending only to the awful scene before them. One by one, however, they too heard this

rumbling, until with arms utterly forgetful of warcraft they turned to behold the mouth of the holler under a newly risen sun. A ram's horn bleated, followed by fifty more. Every sinew came unstrung.

A third host of riders poured into Nawddfa, a foaming spring jet black against a red and wrathful sun. Their falchions were high, their spears trailing turquoise, but framed against the greater light only one thing betrayed them until they were upon the brawl: their ears, high and stiff, sprouting from their polished helmets. So few were willing to fight now, either of Gwall or Ancathair, that the line broke upon the instant. Seeing the gold and turquoise circlet, Sheen's green riders made way in friendship, leaving Brockwell's host to flee or perish. They chose the former, parting neatly down the middle to admit a churning gray river of steel.

At the uttermost fore rode King Rhuddri, terrible in his wrath, clad in golden, four-petaled flowers and holding aloft a great falchion gold from tip to pommel. It flamed in the early sun, alive with the menace it had stolen from the Hellknight's blood, and lent an incontestable command to the crown that sat upon the harefolk's head. Behind him rode a motlier band than the others, Ceinych gray mingled with vermilion over a haphazard patchwork of colors and styles. They were a hundred and more, every bit the match for Ancathair's gutted raiders; and given the green riders already among them, Ancathair knew it. Those who had not fallen to the first onrush of spears threw down their arms and knelt, corralled at once by the gray riders at the rearguard.

Rhuddri himself rode on, motley mercenaries trailing behind him. His eyes, a pair of live coals, saw one thing and one thing only: a fat tapir standing apart from his Guilurs, bloody sword forgotten in his pampered hand. The wailing cry had summoned him; refusing to rein up, he bore down on Brockwell without a word, letting fall his golden falchion as he passed. Brockwell's head rolled into a patch of prickly pears, forever after gaping in disbelief, as his body was trampled by the trailing host.

King Rhuddri with his mercenaries rode wide of the sisters, circling around near the Wheelhouse, then formed a line in front of them to find the battle already over. Brockwell's riders were on their knees; Sheen's hung back like disobedient dogs, fearfully awaiting punishment. Wiping his blade clean with a bandanna, Rhuddri dismounted and turned to Melangell.

No one present in Nawddfa on that day had ever seen the warlord so dismayed, not since he had shut himself up in his chambers for a week upon the death of the first queen. Sorrow and horror and awe and relief fought tooth and claw upon his face when he beheld the weeping halser clinging to Riderch's broken body, the dead palfrey lying golden upon the stiff blue grass. Groaning pitifully, he sheathed his sword, then approached as gently as he could.

"Forgive me," he said, with ashen coolness born of countless battles. "If only I had arrived sooner…but I've been a fool."

"He was better than you," she sobbed, washing his red body with her tears. "He was the best of you, and he was all alone."

"I know," he said thinly. "But no more."

"Will you drag her back?" asked Sister Andrasta, still brandishing a heavy stone.

"No," said Rhuddri, holding up a conciliatory paw. "By Dinistrith, I won't. But I would give him a tomb at Pedwar Ceinych, if you would let me. I'm obliged to do that, at the very least."

"Let us keep his head, at least," Melangell begged, moved by an impulse she only half understood. "This was his home, before you drove him from it."

Rhuddri frowned and rubbed his face hard, then shook his head until his ears snapped like flags. "Much obliged, Mother," he choked, then turned on his heel and cleared his throat to address the crowd.

"Ears up!" he roared. "Let it be known that from this day forward, any caitiff caught molesting the folk of this valley – be they my own subjects or anyone else's – will be put to *my* sword." He

slapped the hilt of his falchion. “As Dinistrith is my witness, they are under my peace. If any still object, let him take up his arms and settle it with me now.”

The silence of Nawddfa returned, vast and brooding. Every eye was turned earthward; those who still dared to look were so clearly not of the Ceinych that Melangell could not help but meet their eyes. They were hard and guarded, much as his had been, yet full of an eagerness they could not conceal.

“Very well,” said Rhuddri. Regarding Melangell over his shoulder with glistening eyes, he said more quietly: “I’ll bear him on my own horse. He should have more, but he’ll have nothing less. Alas for Carbit, that he can’t bear Riderch himself!”

“I think he bore Riderch all the way here, from heaven knows where,” said Melangell. “He’s earned his rest.”

“And so have you,” said Rhuddri, then passed through the host to fetch his charger.

Behind the rest, still in a line before the sisters, the motley band draped in red ponchos remained, fifteen strong and mostly Anialdir harefolk, striving to appear peaceable and failing miserably. They kept their paws as far from their weapons as they could, plainly in sight of the sisters and their mourning mother. At the fore of the group, a little removed from the rest, were a pair of folk, both in thick linens and riding chaps overdraped by their ponchos: the one a raccoonfolk, the other a small, fair llamafolk with a golden coat. They had been weeping, and began to do so again when they approached Melangell to find Riderch reclining in her bloody lap.

“Forgive me, Mother,” the raccoon stammered, unable to look away from the headless body. “My name’s Disma, and this is Onhafen. Are you Morgwynn?”

Melangell sobbed again, wishing that she could rise to embrace the little raccoon. “Mother Melangell,” she said, nodding to her staff lying in the grass and realizing that it very likely meant nothing to them. “Morgwynn is dead.”

“That buck was our friend,” Disma squeaked, raising a trembling claw to point at him from the folds of his poncho.

“And you were his, clearly,” said Melangell.

Onhafen shook his head vehemently. “We hesitated,” he said in a flawless tenor. “We couldn’t agree to go to Pedwar Ceinych. We were afraid that…Bull’s harrow, it doesn’t matter. He would have lived.”

But Melangell shook her head, watching as the sun’s full face crested the top of the holler. “He was bound to die all along,” she sighed. “You couldn’t have stopped it.”

They did not know what to say to that, the pair of mourners or the band behind them. “We were talking about it on the way up, Mother,” said Disma at length. “Until the war’s over, cutthroats will be looking to lift from whoever they can. We reckoned you might want some folk to field them if they wander this way.”

“Are you…are you offering to be our bodyguards?” asked Melangell. “All of you?”

“Most of us,” said Disma. “I reckon the rest will come around, the ones who don’t want to ride for Rhuddri. We can behave ourselves, if you’re worried about it, and we don’t have to stay close by.”

“We got nowhere else to go,” Tennyn volunteered from the rear of the crowd. An ent beside him scowled and tugged at his ear.

“And I’ll be leaving the Anialdir if you say no, Mother,” Disma added. “I don’t know about the others.”

“I’m going with Disma,” said Onhafen.

“In that case, stay a while,” said Melangell, watching as King Rhuddri beat and berated King Sheen in front of his riders. “We may find some donkey work for you in Nawddfa, if you’re willing to master yourselves; and if not here, there’s a valley a few days south that you may find amenable.”

Soon after this the dead were borne home. And while Riderch's body was washed and buried with war-band honors in a tomb beneath Pedwar Ceinych, his sisters interred Dinistriol's head in a wall of the Wheelhouse over Nawddfa, behind the portrait of Dinistrith that bears his likeness. The two are the same, as corroborated by the wonders worked by both to this day.

People, Titles, and Stars in Riderch the Red

Elder Albithwell (Eall-Bith-Wel-In-The-Ende): the deceased Elder of Sunstone, a coyotefolk

Sister Aine: the choir director for the sisters of Nawddfa, a bighorn ewefolk

Sister Airmed: the healer for the sisters of Nawddfa

Sister Andrasta: the stonemason for the sisters of Nawddfa, an armadillofolk

Arow: the Hellknight squatting in the ancient Wheelhouse over Nawddfa

Atiwung: a young rider from Gwall stationed in Iwan Gwerthon, a chinchillafolk

Awdurdodus: a groom at Pedwar Ceinych's stables, a harefolk

Awen: the driver of Rhian's stagecoach

Blinda: the Star of twins, children, heralds, scribes, blindness, the underworld, and quicksilver

Mother Blostmath: a halser in Sunstone, mistress of the sickroom, a black bearfolk

Prince Brockwell: the son of King Cyngen of Ancathair and suitor to Rhian, a tapirfolk

Bulamaht: the groom in Sunstone whose paw Riderch amputates, a grisonfolk

Calonblaidd: a groom at Pedwar Ceinych's stables, a harefolk

Queen Cigfa: the current queen of Gorseth Floyd, King Rhuddri's second wife

Coyote: the trickster who stole the Anialdir from the Hellknights

King Cyngen: the king of Ancathair and father of Prince Brockwell, one of the warlords attempting to conquer the Anialdir under King Rhuddri, a tapirfolk

Elder Cyrre (He-Fæderan-Heortan-To-Heora-Bearnan-ge-Cyrre): the Elder of Sunstone, a maned wolffolk

Dargan: a member of Riderch's band, a harefolk

Dedrys: one of a pair of twin harefolk in Riderch's band

Deepwaste: the wilder, more exposed desert country outside of the Anialdir

Dinistrith: the Star of bloodshed, barbers, metalworking, destructive fire, and iron

Disma: a member of Riderch's band and his best friend, a crab-eating raccoonfolk

Eguin: a rancher and horseleech in Ancathair, a harefolk

Ethniu: a harefolk doe who once consulted the Melangell

Fabunig: a member of Riderch's band, a harefolk

Fordredder: a barmaid at Islawr in Gorseth Floyd

Great Day: also referred to as a "Day of the World"; the period of time in which the sun rises with all eleven Great Constellations on the morning of the spring equinox, returning ultimately to where he began

Great Hour: also referred to as an "Hour of the World"; the period of time in which the sun rises with a particular Great Constellation on the morning of the spring equinox

Guilur: a member of the nobility among the war-band, a housecarl

Gwaeolaf: a member of Riderch's band, a harefolk

Gwesgyr: a member of Riderch's band, a harefolk

Gwyarc: a member of Riderch's band and formerly the leader of his own, a bushdogfolk

Gwyner: the Star of corn, marriage, beauty, song, and copper

Guilur Gwyrthlass: a Guilur at Pedwar Ceinych, a harefolk

Halser: one who speaks for the Stars; a prophet, an exorcist, an augur

Hawen: a member of Riderch's band and a prostitute, exceptionally tall for a vicunafolk

Hellknight: a giant born of both folk and fallen Stars

Henadur: an earl, an aldor

Guilur Hwyrfeth: the Guilur from Gwall who burned Iwan Gwerthon, a tamarinfolk

Sister Imona: cook for the sisters of Nawddfa, a raccoonfolk

Kay: a member of Riderch's band, exceptionally large for an Anialdir harefolk

Master Kyllister: the stablemaster of Pedwar Ceinych, a harefolk

Kyntaw: the young groom at Islawr in Gorseth Floyd, a harefolk

Little Gray Ones: the sisters of Nawddfa

Father Lugh: a wayfaring halser, one of the three robbed by Riderch's band, a harefolk

Malmuck: a dealer in imported goods in Gorseth Floyd, a melanistic jaguarfolk

Mother Meinwen: a halser in Sunstone recovering from an ovarian cyst, a harefolk

Melangell: the mother of and co-laborer with the sisters of Nawddfa

Queen Morgwynn: the deceased first wife of King Rhuddri, a harefolk

Nicestre: an angler whom Riderch meets at Iwan Gwerthon

Onhafen: a llamafolk in the band that was once Riderch's

King Osging: the elderly king of Godnu, a coyotefolk

Pryderi: the rider from Gorseth Floyd in charge of opening the boardlands

Princess Rhian: daughter of King Rhuddri of Gorseth Floyd by his first wife, a harefolk

Rhodri: a distant relative of King Rhuddri and a member of the war-band, a harefolk

King Rhuddri: the king of Gorseth Floyd and leader of the war-band attempting to conquer the Anialdir, a harefolk

Guilur Rhyddhawr: the Guilur from Gwall overseeing Iwan Gwerthon in Guilur Hwyrfeth's absence, a nutriafolk

Riderch: the leader of a band of thieves in the Anialdir, a harefolk

Guilur Rory: a Guilur in Gorseth Floyd, the Captain of the Guard, a harefolk

Rusty: a fence in Godnu, an armored rat

Sawl: the member of Riderch's band who taught him the passwords for the boardlands, a slothfolk

King Sheen: the king of Gwall, one of the warlords attempting to conquer the Anialdir under King Rhuddri and suitor to Rhian, a white-nosed coatifolk

Taranwr: the Star of judges, oaths, Shepherds, fathers, and tin

Tennyn: one of a pair of twin harefolk in Riderch's band

Teyrnaswr: a warden in Gorseth Floyd, a harefolk

Teyrngar: the innkeeper at Islawr in Gorseth Floyd, a harefolk

Western Waste: the portion of the Anialdir north of the Rinnea and west of the Swartway, barren and uninhabited

Guilur Yeuaf: a Guilur at Pedwar Ceinych

A Note on Hareish Pronunciation

ch: pronounced like the ‘ch’ in the German composer’s name, Bach, and the Scottish word loch
dd: pronounced like the ‘th’ in ‘the’ and ‘this’
th: pronounced like the ‘th’ in ‘thin’ or ‘thick’
ff: pronounced like the ‘f’ in ‘friend’ or ‘foe’
f: pronounced like the ‘v’ in ‘of’
ng: pronounced like the ‘ng’ in ‘sing’
ll: pronounced by placing your tongue into the top of your mouth, with the tip of your tongue almost touching or just touching your top middle teeth, and then blowing out gently
ph: pronounced like an ‘f’, or like the ‘ph’ in ‘phrase’ and ‘phobia’
rh: pronounced as if the ‘h’ and the ‘r’ were reversed – ‘hr’
u: pronounced like the ‘e’ in ‘me’ and ‘she’
w: pronounced like the ‘oo’ in ‘mood’ and ‘food’
y: pronounced in three different ways, depending on where it is in the word. You have heard it pronounced like the short ‘e’ in ‘the’
si: pronounced like the ‘sh’ in ‘shop’