

Deadly Journey
by Kim J Cowie

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Smashwords Edition

Starsin, an army cadet and minor member of the nobility, has escaped from a prison colony in the far north of the Virnal-administered Empire. He hopes to contact supporters by traveling south, but disaster strikes, and his physical and moral courage is tested to the limit.

The sequel to “Deadly Relics”.

Deadly Journey

Chapter 1

The attack on Ob was a success. Our friends in the North deployed their dug-up devices and linked with the forest barbarians to launch a joint attack. They defeated the Imperial defenders and set parts of the town on fire with the secret flame weapons. As they were about to occupy the town, large parts of it started to collapse as if into sink-holes.

(Secret Journal of Lannaira Hajan)

A thousand paces from the town, they topped a slight rise, and Starsin reined in to look back. A faint yelling and clash of arms reached his ears as the Northerners engaged with the Imperial formation. Neither side yet had victory.

A cold wind from the icefields bit into his face. Dark clots, the forms of fleeing merchants and escaped prisoners, spread like scattered chaff across the icy

waste to the south. He was sure that most of them were doomed to freeze, but he could offer them only pity.

A dark cloud came from the south, and with it the sound of cawing; as the dark mass came closer it resolved into thousands of winged forms; rooks, crows and carrion gulls come to feast on the dead. He shivered. How could they have gathered so soon?

"Hurry up!" Lannaira called.

"I should be helping in the fight," he said.

"What are you talking about? You're not armed and have no armour. And what an I supposed to do on my own?"

The woman had a slim sword but was wrapped in a thick leather coat with the fur turned inside. Lannaira was tall and lean, short-haired and with an unmemorable face. She was right. He should escort her to the camp.

"We have to find the Northerners' camp before darkness falls," she said.

Shivering, Starsin kicked the flanks of his animal and plunged after Lannaira as she followed the tracks. Soon the rise of the land behind them hid the battle and the burning town. The tracks of wheels and hoof prints of ponies, and prints of many marching feet undulated across a white landscape broken only by low hummocks.

Four times they passed white *golims* left where they had fallen. He closed with Lannaira to ask about these man-sized mechanical warriors. To his left, a fading mist revealed a group of armed riders some way off. They were riding *timalts*, six-legged riding beasts. As he watched, the group turned toward them and increased their pace.

"Lannaira?"

She looked back, and he pointed.

"Imperials? Dammnation!" She set her heels to her *timalt* and urged it into its fastest gait. Starsin, stomach tightening, did the same, and for good measure whacked the animal's flank with his gloved hand. The animals pounded along the trampled-down track, throwing up lumps of compacted snow. Neither he nor Lannaira had weapons.

Behind him, the pursuers were also at the gallop. Six of them. He should have realised they were Imperials - *timalts* and dark fur coats. They waved spears and shouted for him to stop. Lannaira's *timalt* maintained its pace. He glanced behind. The pursuers had gained little ground.

Starsin kept his eyes on the track ahead, hoping his animal would not stumble or break a leg. Whose animals would tire first? The pursuit was carrying more weight and in trying to cut ahead of them had been riding on uncompacted snow.

"Camp!" Lannaira shouted.

Ahead was a cluster of dark tents, and the dots of people moving around them. The short Northern day was still bright.

Behind, the pursuit broke off and turned away. Lannaira's *timalt* changed through its gaits till it slowed to a walk and trudged with neck low, trailing a cloud of vapour.

A trodden trail led to a gap in a hastily thrown up wall of snow that surrounded the camp. The way was blocked by a group of armed men, bearded, swathed in furs and wearing crude peaked helmets of iron. They remained, hands close to their weapons, as Starsin and Lannaira rode up.

"Who are you?" asked one, readying his long-hafted axe.

"This is the young noble we rescued from the town," Lannaira explained.

"Chief Ursus sent us here."

"Oho. You mean to ransom him, woman?"

Lannaira shook her head. "No, no. The young man wants to fight against the Virnals."

"That is good. But how goes the battle?" the bearded one asked.

"Your side won the initial attack. The town is in flames and the Imperial troopers and traders have been driven out."

"Are you sure? It looked like you were pursued."

"Some stragglers came after us," Lannaira said.

"Many dead?"

"Numbers on both sides."

The warriors waved them on, into the camp.

Inside the warriors' camp, lines of ponies and timalts stood tethered alongside long tents of black leather. At one end of the camp, grey tents had been erected, and humped objects lay silent and covered in canvas, with the surrounding snow trampled by hundreds of feet. Starsin turned his timalt's head toward these, but a scowling warrior held up a spear to bar his way.

Lannaira called him back. They rode by an irregular row of dark tents, made of old animal skins sewn together and held up by internal struts. A few older and grey-whiskered men moved to and fro carrying fodder, haunches of meat and snow-speckled logs.

One grey-beard barred their way with a pole-axe. Lannaira tried to speak to him in his own language, but he ignored her and shouted at them brandishing his axe. The only word Starsin understood was 'spy'. This didn't bode well.

A grey-whiskered fellow came out of a tent from which a trail of smoke and a smell of cooking emanated. He claimed to recognise Starsin, and quieted his

compatriots with a few words. Starsin dimly recollected he had met a Furan at Calah.

Furan struck Starsin's arm in a friendly gesture. "Our men win?"

"We hope so."

Furan did not seem reassured.

"The Imperials regrouped outside the town, but your people and the white things were attacking them."

"Good." Furan urged them to dismount and enter his tent. With gratitude, Starsin got down from the timalt and ducked his head into the cook tent. Inside, it was warmer and an array of smells of boiling and roasting meat met his nostrils. He sank onto a stool near the round metal stove, with gratitude.

Furan filled wooden bowls with stew and handed them to Starsin and Lannaira. The dark brown liquid steamed. Starsin sipped at it, and a taste of gravy and grease filled his mouth.

Tribesmen crowded in and fired off questions about the fighting. Lannaira tried to answer while Starsin used his fingers to deal with the solid items in his stew. He wiped his hands on a lump of snow and used a sliver of firewood to scratch a diagram of the fighting at the town on the trodden slushy floor.

At last he satisfied the questioners, and Lannaira finished her stew. Starsin sank back on a pile of brushwood at the back of the tent, and almost at once sleep claimed him.

Then he awoke. Intense noise ripped through the tent walls, a clamour of shouting and clashing metal. He felt chilled as though he had slept in a draught. The tent was in darkness, save for the yellow glow of a lantern and the red glow of the stove's mouth. A smell of burning wood filled his nostrils.

He sprang to his feet. "An attack! Where?" He stumbled over a body. It stirred and complained, and he realised he had tripped over Lannaira.

"Sit down, it's just the fighters returning," she said.

"It's not an attack? Did they win?"

"That's what they're saying."

Starsin subsided. The noise continued, making sleep impossible.

As a bluish dawn light filtered into the tent, the clamour diminished. They arose and sought out Chief Ursus.

Lannaira led the way into the largest leather tent, where she saluted the black-bearded Chief. The reek of burnt oil, skin clothing and old sweat assailed Starsin's nostrils as he followed. Oil lamps made a token effort to heat the tent; it was warmer than the windswept ice-plain.

"Congratulations on your victory, Chief," Starsin said. This much he had ascertained.

Ursus talked volubly and with large gestures of his victory. A charge by his pony-riders, and another by a dozen golims, had broken the Imperial formation and forced them to flee southwards.

"So, what's happening with the Imperial troopers now, Chief?" Starsin asked.

"We chase them south. Make sure they go away."

"Do you think they'll harry and kill the Imperials or just let them run?"

Starsin asked Lannaira.

She shrugged. "I don't know. You could ask him."

Young warriors filled drinking horns and wooden mugs with mead and fiery liquor, and passed them around. While the cooks prepared more meat stew and roasts, the Northerners toasted their victory and the exploits of various heroes. The drink burned his throat but warmed him.

"Was this battle anything to do with events at Calah?" he asked.

"Later," Lannaira said.

There was a rush to get stew. Starsin got another bowl of it, and a lump of boiled fish. Then they talked of what had befallen Starsin. Many listened to a translation of his account of the walrus hunt.

"We should find out if those two Virnals have got away, or if they're among the dead," Lannaira said.

Starsin nodded. If they survived, those two would want to know if he had escaped or perished. He would not be sorry if Lord Kathan or the other died in the snow.

Lannaira had a request. "We require another small service, Chief Ursus. Exalt Starsin cannot remain long with you. I must take him to the south, for which I need the two *timalts*, provisions and camping equipment. And, best if nobody learns the Exalt is still alive and has been with you."

Ursus sighed. "We have so few friends in the Empire - we would be churlish fellows not to honour one who has suffered so much for us."

Lannaira folded her arms. "Chief, the Overlords probably tried to assassinate Exalt Starsin back there. Let them think he died - we don't want them to hear your tribe has celebrated his rescue."

Ursus' eyes narrowed. "We of the Bear don't take orders from women, and a woman not of our tribe at that." The listening warriors murmured approval.

Starsin kept quiet. In Ob the guards had told him a lone journey south was impossible. Staying with the tribe seemed a more appealing option than being dragged south by a woman he barely knew.

Lannaira appeared to realise she was on unstable ground and changed her tactics. "Of course not, Chief. I apologise. If I may ask, how long will it take your tribe to celebrate your victory?"

The chief merely grunted.

Lannaira had not finished. "It would also be helpful if we call the young man by the name 'Falcon' rather than his real name."

Starsin was startled. The name meant something to him. Who had told her that? She must have talked to the Northerners at some previous time. It would be less revealing if they honoured him under an alias.

Ursus, meanwhile, appeared quick to take the hint. "Ah yes, we remember 'Falcon'. I couldn't say; we are a hospitable folk, but you say the business is urgent?"

"Even a day may be important, Chief."

Ursus made a noncommittal noise. "Don't worry, Lady, the *timalts* and supplies will be made ready. But the night is young. Come, Falcon." He turned to his warriors. "This man's name is 'Falcon'. No other name has been mentioned, you understand?"

The warriors grunted and bowed their heads.

None of this answered any of Starsin's unvoiced questions. If he didn't speak up, he might be spirited off being none the wiser. "My pardon, Chief, but what

were those white warriors? What was the raid for? What are those strange weapons?"

"The outpost of the vile Southerners has been levelled," said Ursus. The warriors grunted approval.

"But who ordered it? Was it Chief Gerferaxus?"

"Gerferaxus knew of the raid, and gave his permission," Ursus said.

"So who planned it? And what for? Lannaira rescued me."

Ursus gave Lannaria a look, then turned away to order that food be made enough for all. While tribesmen tramped in and out in response to bellowed orders, Lannaira and Starsin sat in the tent on bundles of furry pelts.

"There are various people who don't like the Virnals," she said. "The Northern tribes, the supporters of the former Emperor Menthu, and various free-thinkers who want change. Then there is a group which digs up relics of the Old Peoples and tries to put them to use. They mounted the attack, with the Northerners."

"But why were you interested in me?" Starsin asked.

"Well, you are the elder son of Menthu," Lannaira said. "The Sharynites, the supporters of Menthu, will be interested in you. This is why I was in Calah, looking for Menthu's missing son, among other matters. You were one of several

youths I suspected could be him, but the Virnals confirmed it during your trial. So I traced you to Ob and used the raid as an opportunity to get you out."

"I see," Starsin said. "What were those white golim things?"

"Something that was found."

"The Virnals have nothing like that. With those, you'll soon defeat them!"

Lannaira shook her head. "The rate of attrition seemed rather high."

"That reminds me now," Starsin said. "The Virnals in Calah had strange things of that ilk."

"Oh?" Lannaira said. "Go on?"

"I'd forgotten, but before my arrest, I lost my head one day and intruded into the chambers of a Virnal mage, whose name I forget--"

"Marloc?"

"Yes, that was it. He had strange stuff in there, and he was furious that I'd seen it."

In front of him, tribesmen danced on a rug.

"Can you remember what you saw?"

Starsin tried to describe the bizarre machines and experiments.

Lannaira looked concerned. "We had no idea what they did in there. I want you to describe that stuff to my people in the South. They might know what you saw. It sounds like follies, but might not be."

"And what of that spell-caster? Did he really fire Natron's chambers by self-combusting? Is that possible?" Starsin asked.

"I was interested in him too. Effective magic is very rare, but the Virnals clearly believe that's what happened, and I don't think anyone made it up."

Starsin stared at her. "And what of those ovoid things, the *regers*? Were your people collecting them?" In Calah, he once had one in his possession.

Lannaira nodded.

"What were they for?"

"They're part of the ancient world. When they still work, they can be used for various things. Like controlling the golims."

He shivered, remembering the battle.

The Northerners revealed, much to Starsin's surprise, that Ussha, the hostage girl, was back in the North.

"But I thought she was brought back to Calah."

"The Virnals returned her to her tribe not long ago," Ursus said.

"I want to meet her," Starsin said. He wanted to know if she was interested in him at all after what had happened to her.

"No decent man would associate with that person now," Ursus said in a sharp tone.

With thoughts of the corrupt Larash and Natron, Starsin held his tongue for the present.

He turned to Lannaira. "Whyever would the Virnals release her, after demanding a hostage in the first place, and recapturing her?"

"Why does she still have her head, you mean? It does appear that they had a change of plan. We think they concluded that holding her was not having the desired effect on the Northerner's behaviour, and so they could either execute her in reprisal or try something else. We know that she became the mistress of that high-born Vernal, Larash--"

Starsin nodded as a painful memory of seeing the two together returned to him.

"So that might have given them the idea of sending her back, to subvert the North."

"One girl?" Starsin was incredulous.

"They could have thought that she would be a civilising influence. Or spread dissatisfaction among the womenfolk."

"And is it working?"

"Probably not as the Virnals hoped, but her presence is proving divisive."

So the poor girl was a dishonoured pawn. He still wanted to see her, if only to see what kind of woman Ussha was now, and attain a closure of his earlier folly.

Starsin, replete with stew and sedated by strong drink, slept through the latter part of the night. The morning was cold and bright, but Lannaira's travel plans were no further forward. Chief Ursus insisted that the tracks were still dangerous, infested with Imperial stragglers and cut-purses from Ob.

"Cut-purses?" Starsin queried over a breakfast of boiled fish.

"I think he means the fur traders," Lannaira said.

Starsin was content to stay in the camp for the present. He ought to go south and do his best, but Lannaira had not made it clear what he was expected to do. He was a cadet, not a great general, and could not see himself as a leader. What if they were disappointed in him?

Their travel plans did not progress at all that day. He spent some deciurnals trying his hand with various weapons and hearing tales of the past battles for the riches of the North. Throughout the day, a few golims returned on their own feet, to be deactivated by clean-shaven men wearing face masks, and Northmen brought many others back on sleds and stacked them in heaps under cover. Lannaira and Starsin looked on from the main camp.

"What's with those unnatural things?" Starsin asked. "The whole North will know soon."

"Our people discovered relics of the ancients, under the snow. As well as hitting back at the cursed Virnals, the purpose was to try them out. Getting you out of Ob was a bonus."

"So I'm part of this?"

"The name of Menthu still stirs a few hearts and minds." Lannaira pulled her fur-lined coat around her.

So faraway people he had never met were interested in him? Perhaps he wasn't such a worthless person after all.

The daylight of the first day after the battle was fading. Lannaira, pacing around in the snow, looked discomfited by this delay to her plans.

For the evening meal, the cooks prepared meat and flat bread to eat, and brought out more strong drink. The drink, a pale fiery liquid, came in flat bottles and was drunk from small glasses or tumblers. Warriors invited Starsin to tell his tale at length, and he struggled to piece together what he could remember. He had to tell it many more times and found that on each retelling he remembered more. He remembered how his brother had died, and Zandra, who if she had lived should have had the baby by now. Such thoughts made him want to numb himself with drink. After a while he made things up, being too drunk to care if he was being scrupulously truthful or not.

Lannaira kept close by Chief Ursus, looking displeased and refusing most of the drink. Around them, warriors sat toasting each other and singing vulgar songs that made Starsin smile despite himself.

As tribesman after tribesman sought him out to offer him a tumbler-full of spirits and ask him to repeat part of his tale or describe life in Calah, Starsin divined how boring life on the bleak Northern plains must be. Time to think of moving on?

One black-bearded young man leaned close and asked Starsin if he wished to see Ussasah Boroughsdottir.

Starsin confirmed that he meant Ussha. "Where is she?"

"In our women's camp, two hours away. The elders despise her, but she's not a bad person. She has heard you are here. If you wish to see her, 'Falcon', she shall be fetched."

"I don't want to cause a lot of trouble."

"You are our honoured guest. She shall be brought, but we'll do it quietly, eh?" He clapped Starsin on the arm.

Chapter 2

The morning was cold and bright, with a low sun pouring a white-hot light through a gap in high cloud. While nobody was looking, Starsin fumbled inside his coat and brought out the wallet of medicine. He swallowed one of the grey tablets and sucked on a small handful of snow to help it down. It would help him resist the cold.

A young Northerner had promised that Ussha would be brought to see him. Starsin felt a glow of hope that his idiocy and suffering might have some happy ending.

Starsin ate a breakfast of warmed-up fish, washed down with weak sour milk. Shortly afterwards, four riders on shaggy ponies approached from the south. Camp guards stirred and ran to the edge of the camp, but relaxed on seeing it was their own folk. Starsin went to find who they were. At the edge of the camp, the riders halted. One had a black beard and the other three had hairless faces, half hidden in furs.

The ponies puffed clouds of vapour that swirled away on the wind. Black-beard saluted and spoke to a camp sentry, who nodded and leaned on his pole-axe.

Starsin had a hopeful suspicion of who the visitors might be. The black-bearded one beckoned him with urgent movements of a gloved hand.

He hurried over, his boots crunching on the trampled snow. The riders were dismounting. Seen close up, two were women and one was a small, shaven-faced man. The black-bearded one, Starsin's friend of the previous night, stepped forward with a grin and struck raised gloves with Starsin. He pointed to one of the fur-wrapped figures.

"Here's the lady you wanted to see, my friend."

The younger-looking and shorter woman, evidently Ussha, thrust back the hood of her outer coat and shook loose a mass of curly hair. She smiled at Starsin.

He stared. Not only was she prettier, with pale skin, oval face and a snub nose, and a little older than he remembered, she had a vivacious quality not in his recollection.

A glow of pleasure swept him, and he forgot his chilly limbs and aching head. She had come, and looked pleased to see him. He tried to frame suitable words.

While Starsin hesitated, she said: "It is you? That young noble? I suppose I should thank you. You didn't achieve all you intended, but you tried, and I thank you for that."

This speech, delivered by a barbarian girl in the Imperial accents of Calah, left him unable to think of anything to say. *This is Larash's mistress.*

"Why don't you speak?"

"You're a very pretty young woman; I was struck dumb."

"How can you tell I'm pretty in these furs?" She grinned, and they touched gloves.

Starsin smiled, but a half-memory troubled him. "Chief Ursus said that the Virnals released you? Did you not escape the city when I was trapped?"

"For a few days. I was with old Furan and some other men - we had separated the troop into two groups. The Overlords got word ahead and trapped us. One of the men was killed resisting them before we gave up. I didn't leave the city again till a whole season later."

"You survived their vileness so long?"

"I was better treated the second time. Lord Kathan was displeased that the scandal devalued me as a hostage, led to violence and endangered the peace treaty with the North. He didn't approve of the way Varnoth left me to his cronies; Kathan had me treated like a princess."

He found himself unable to mention the name Larash. Ussha was unsmiling; from the emphasis she placed on these words he deduced that she had not enjoyed the treatment overmuch.

"But they released you again?"

"Those Virnals are a devious lot. They're convinced that in the long run, they will own the North. Larash showed me the jewels of Imperial civilisation, the ease, the luxury, the arts, so you can guess what role they hoped I would play here."

"Did the Virnals ask you to spy?" he asked.

"Not in so many words. But they said I was free to return at any time."

"If you did, they would ask you what you saw and heard."

Ussha shrugged.

Starsin pressed her for details, it became apparent that she regarded various Virnals as acquaintances rather than as oppressors.

Ussha introduced her companions. "You know the young warrior."

Blackbeard grinned. "This is my personal servant and chaperone, and that small fellow's my minder."

Starsin felt shame that he should desire this girl, this Northern princess, when he had so recently heard that his own lover lay murdered in Calah.

As they talked, more Northerners ambled over and stood looking or listening.

A string of words shouted in the Northerners' language startled Starsin. He spun around. A middle-aged Northerner, his beard speckled with wires of grey, had come up behind them. At his shoulders were two followers. Starsin recognised him as one of the leaders, red of face and shouting. The chieftain shook his fist and hurled words at Ussha, then pointed to the south.

Ussha leaned forward and addressed a string of impassioned words in Northern to the chieftain, raising her forefinger to him.

The chieftain replied with a short string of violent words.

Young black-beard swore and put his hand on the hilt of his sword, drawing it by a hands-breadth. The small man, Ussha's minder, flinched back and fumbled inside his coat for a weapon.

The chieftain uttered a couple of words and half-drew his sword. His two men did the same.

Ussha's face registered alarm.

Starsin thrust himself between the opposing men, reaching out for their sword hands. "Don't fight!"

The men sheathed their swords, but stood glowering.

"What's this about?" he asked Ussha.

"They don't like me coming here. But I will if I want."

"I don't want any bloodshed. It's great to see you, but you should go now."

Ussha frowned, but nodded. "Till later."

"Later," Starsin said.

Ussha turned away and aided by the male servant got back on her pony. The other two mounted while the watching Northmen muttered. Young Blackbeard was engaged in a glaring contest with the chieftain. Starsin, still between them, pointed to Ussha's attendants. With alacrity, the young man sprang into the saddle and spurred off after the others.

The chieftain shouted two clipped words, then regarded Starsin with a scowl.

He raised his hands. "Sorry."

"That woman no good," the chieftain said.

Starsin waved as Ussha looked back.

When she was out of sight he returned to the warmth of the cook-tent, where he described the incident to Lannaira in detail.

"What did you expect?" she said. "You should forget her. The Virnals probably knew she was dishonoured and of little value as a hostage when they sent her back."

"I can't forget her. Why would she visit me here?"

Lannaira stretched her hands toward the cook-stove and gave him a pitying look. "To make trouble? Some women like to have men fighting over them."

He knew another reason. If Ussha was not happy here, or with the Virnals, she might be looking for a sympathetic protector. He put this idea to Lannaira.

"You can't live here with her. Either you'd be defending her honour every day, or they'd be calling you something rude."

"And in the South?"

"Is that the summit of your ambition, Starsin Estevan?" Her tone was sharp.

"I don't know."

"What about your other women?" Lannaira looked at the stove.

Starsin took a breath, let it out and hung his head.

"Look, that woman probably just wants you to take her out of this Arctic hell and back to somewhere civilised."

He looked at her. "Why don't I do that?"

"I don't want you offending the Northmen. We're their guests here. You barely know the woman."

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Only towards dusk of the short winter day did the tribesmen tire of partying and asking 'Falcon' to repeat his tales. Chief Ursus also announced that his men were near to completing their task of sweeping Imperial troopers and other Southerners out of the area, and clearing up all traces of the use of ancient weapons.

Starsin went to the edge of the camp and looked out at the grey tents where the arcane weapons had been stored. A lot of war material had now disappeared. Soon the Northmen would be ready to make the long trek back to the Bear Tribe's normal winter quarters.

He returned to the evening meal, where the talk over the meat stew and rye bread turned to travel. Starsin washed the unappealing meal down with a mug of mead, followed by a shot of fiery liquor. Lannaira got her wish and was promised two timalts loaded with a tent and enough provisions for ten days' travel.

"It grows dark. Perhaps you should wait here till dawn," Ursus suggested to her.

Lannaira frowned at the prospect of further delay. "Thank you, Chief. It will be well to set off now, and travel by moonlight. We are less likely to be seen by Overlord spies or accosted by fugitives from Ob. We will be less visible, yet I can find our way from the stars."

She had a point, of course, but was clear she did not want to sit through another night of carousing.

"Why should I go?" Starsin objected, waving his drinking-glass. "I should be happy to stay with you and your men. At least until dawn."

Ursus nodded. "That would be better. In the morning I can send out men to escort you for half a day's travel."

Lannaira made a face, but gave in. "Thank you, Chief."

Sozzled, Starsin mumbled that he would be happy to stay and fight alongside the great Chief.

Ursus accepted the compliment but was unmoved. "You must go with Lannaira Hajan," the chief told him. "This has been agreed."

Starsin tried to argue, but realised that he was too drunk to think clearly.

He woke during the night with a throbbing head, in a black unlit tent, lying on a pile of brushwood and smelly animal skins, with an urgent need to urinate. Around him was the soft sound of snoring.

Outside, the dull glow of the sky gave enough light to see by. The area of the grey tents had been cleared, leaving only scoured and trampled snow, and many tracks leading eastward. All trace of the mysterious golims and alien equipment had been removed.

He weaved his way to a yellowed bank of snow and relieved himself.

At breakfast he still was nauseous and had a headache. He felt a little better after downing a mug of icy water. After a breakfast of warmed-up fish and thin milk, Starsin was propped on his timalt, and tied into the high wooden saddle. Many of the Northmen gathered to give him a cheery send-off. He had unfinished

business, but Lannaira warned him not to mention Ussha again, lest the Northmen turn much less friendly.

"Tch-k-k!" Lannaira said to the timalt. "Come on, Falcon!"

They set off, into a bright morning. The glare of sun on snow made Starsin's eyes ache. A cold wind from the icefields bit into his face. The timalts lowered their flat heads and made a lumpy trot over the snow, to keep up with the six ponies of their escort. Parties of mounted Imperials had been sighted, scouting around and watching the camp, as if they were looking for fugitives. Chief Ursus had offered an armed escort to get them safely away.

Watching the six legs of Lannaira's mount, he recalled with throbbing head that a timalt had five different gaits depending on the animal's speed, and whole books had been written on the subject, most of them only fit for timalt fodder.

Dropping out of sight of the camp, they picked up the road to the South. Starsin glanced over to his right. Somewhere in that direction lay the womens' camp, and Ussha. He said nothing.

The six Northmen, all wrapped in white furs and armed with spears and swords, sang and told unintelligible stories. By the road lay occasional snow-dusted bundles of abandoned goods, and once the frozen corpse of a lightly clad man. The Northmen did not stop.

At midday the Northmen had travelled as far as they could, were they to return to their camp by nightfall. They took their leave of Starsin with clumsy embraces and banging of gloved fists. With Lannaira they were more reserved, merely saying, "Good travel, lady."

"Thanks for escorting us," Starsin said.

The Northmen turned and rode off, with shouts of farewell.

"Let's go," Lannaira said. The road stretched southward through the snow, churned by the passage of scores of feet. The sky had turned grey.

Starsin kicked up his timalt to ride alongside her.

"Those golim things that were in action at Ob - you said they were supplied by a group that dug up old relics? Someone mentioned a Dwarf?"

"I did," Lannaira said. "I didn't mention any Dwarf. We don't talk about him."

Not to people you don't trust, he thought. "Can't you tell me a bit more? He must be a magician, to conjure up an army of artificial men. Do your people have whole armies of these things? How can this be? Where do they come from?"

"The past lies under the earth," she said, "but it takes rare skills to bring any moment of it to working order."

"If you have more of them--" he began with excitement. His timalt stumbled into an unseen hole in the snow, throwing him forward.

Lannaira looked back.

"If you have more of those golims, the Virnals' armies won't last long," he said. "What use are swords and axes against weapons such as those?"

He spurred his timalt to catch up with Lannaira's.

"You're wrong," she said. "Our supplies are limited, and as you saw the golim attack was not a great success; the Bears had to finish the job."

"It certainly terrified the Imperial soldiers."

"Yes, Starsin, but the Dwarf lost equipment that took months to prepare. We'll need to think of using them in a more limited role."

A sense of disappointment crept over him. This was not the first act of the crushing of the Virnals after all. "So you're not attacking again in the North?"

"Not anytime soon. You'll be of more use in the South. The Virnals are trying to infiltrate their influence in the drylands. A son of Menthu will be useful for rallying the people."

"What do you mean by that?"

"People remember Menthu. And there are still Lords in the south-eastern Empire who were sympathetic to your father."

The light dimmed, and the snowfields were overlain with shadows of grey. Starsin's body and thighs ached from sitting in the jolting saddle all day. He hoped that they would stop, rest and eat soon.

A dark obstruction on the road ahead resolved into a group of walking figures, too many to count at a glance.

"People," Starsin said.

"Yes."

As they got closer, the people turned pale faces in their direction. They spread across the road in a line that spanned from the unbroken snow on one side to the other.

"Damn," Lannaira muttered. "Let's avoid them."

"No, let's speak to them." Surely they would be grateful for a few encouraging words.

"Don't get too close."

Starsin reined in at forty paces from the men. They wore fur coats and various sorts of thick trousers, and caps or fur hats, and bore knapsacks or backpacks, or carry bags. They looked like civilians, traders, from Ob. He saw no weapons, other than sticks. He and Lannaira had spears and knives.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"We want food, water, anything," the tallest shouted. The line edged forward.

"Have you seen any Virnals on this road?" he asked.

"Saw the bastards this morning. Half a dozen of them. Wouldn't help us. They're looking for someone," the tall one said.

"Who?"

"Some escaped prisoner. We need food and water."

"We have nothing to spare," Lannaira shouted. "If you are thirsty, eat snow."

"Our feet are done," shouted another, fatter man. "We need to ride."

A wave of fear gripped him. They coveted the timalts as much as any provisions he and Lannaira carried. He did not like the way they were edging forward. If he got too close, they could pull him off the timalt and attack him.

They made a rush, abandoning all pretence. He spurred his timalt and tugged the animal's head to the side. It lunged forward and off the road. With shouts of anger, the men ran after him, stumbling in the loose snow.

"Lannaira!" He glanced back. She had spurred up her animal and was evading the men, in a wider arc. His animal ploughed through the snow, sending up a spray of loose flakes. When he was far enough past the ambush, he regained the road, and set the timalt to a canter, faster than a man could run.

"I told you," Lannaira said, catching up. "We'd better make distance."

He glanced behind. "They've stopped." He was sick, sick of his fear and his inability to help. Were the armed Northmen still with them, the desperate men could have been given a few bits of food, and a ride.

The land grew darker, and still Lannaira did not want to stop. The timalts carried them on at a slow lope, their hooves thumping on the compacted snow, and their breath panting.

"What about those Virnals those men say they saw?" Starsin asked.

"Keep a sharp lookout. If they're ahead, we'll be approaching them from behind."

He looked ahead. There was no cover beside the track where armed troopers could hide.

Lannaira kept her timalt ahead of his, discouraging conversation. A thin moon gave enough light for them to make their way over the firm, featureless snow without trouble. The moon set, to be replaced by the eerie pink glow of northern lights, snaking above the northerly horizon. In the Northlands they were known as the witch's skirts or the witch's shawl. Looking at them, Starsin thought that if he had his bright watercolour paints, here was a scene to paint with floods of wetness, and swirls of colour across the paper.

When a slow dawn signalled an end to the long, cold night, he had long sobered up and was chilled and resentful.

"Are we never going to stop? Why are we going at this pace?"

"We'll stop when these animals are too tired to go on," said Lannaira. "This isn't a safe area. If we camp while the sun is up it won't be so perishing cold and we can sleep a little."

"Could we not have got an armed escort?" He stared with resentment at her back. After surviving the Virnals he might be killed by random bandits or Imperial stragglers.

"We'll turn off the road now," she said. The timalts ploughed through snow that came halfway up their legs, leaving a trail a blind man could follow. There was nothing ahead of them save undulating whiteness.

The sky, much brighter now, was covered with bars of cloud.

Wind chilled Starsin. His posterior ached from sitting, his thighs ached from gripping the saddle, his back ached from holding a position, his feet were numb and his fingers were stiff from gripping the reins. If he just fell off and lay in the snow, it would be a relief.

As the sun rose above the horizon they found a dip in the ground, tethered the timalts with a long line, and made camp. The sail-cloth tent was propped up with a couple of sticks, and they had sleeping-rolls fashioned of bits of furred animal skin sewn together.

There was no safety here. He hoped, if anyone was in this waste and meant them ill, they would have to crunch through the snow, trekking out of sight of the

road, and disturb the timalts. He crawled into the tent and still fully clothed rolled himself into welcome warmth, exhausted. He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to Lannaira's movements. When he opened them, her homely face was only an arms' length from his. Who was this woman? She wasn't like any other female he had known. He would be spending a great deal of time with a woman of whom he knew nothing.

So he asked, and learnt that she had a comfortable childhood, but had begun a wandering life at an early age. She had for a time become apprenticed to a man who dug up buildings and relics of long-dead peoples, and had studied various languages, some of them no longer spoken. She was acquainted with various people who didn't like the Virnals. In the course of her wanderings, she had visited many towns and cities of the Empire, and become proficient with the sword.

She answered a couple of questions with monosyllables, and as he searched for another question, she had one for him.

"In Calah, they tortured you?"

"I don't remember. But they torture everyone. I suppose in my case they only dared use tortures that left no mark. Some of those are the worst of all."

"They must have done something to you. You're so passive, and hopeless, I can't understand how you had the will to stay alive."

"I hate the Virnals," he replied in a flat tone.

Under her patient probing, he at last broke down. It was a long time before he was able to articulate what had happened, and the cause of his despair.

"It's a perfectly natural and involuntary physical reaction," she said kindly. "It doesn't mean that you're as they are."

He wept again and sobbed angry tears. He could not come to terms with the inappropriate sensations he had felt when being dominated by Virnal torturers, and wanted to block out his feelings of shame. He could never tell a man these things. He had to prove to himself that he was a real man, a warrior, even a leader.

Lannaira lay with her cheek propped on one hand, as if she had more to say, but Starsin fell into an exhausted sleep.

They awoke at sunset. The sun, falling on the dark tent, had kept it warm enough for them to sleep. Now a cold breeze arose and dusted the tent with a powdering of snow. The sky was a deep blue, punctuated by the crescent moon and the wandering planet Venera, and there was a pink glow in the West.

The timalts squatted low in the snow. On hearing the humans come out of the tent they raised their flat heads and snickered.

"The bags!" Lannaira exclaimed. "They're open!"

Various pieces of equipment lay on the ground, half covered in drifted snow, or broken. With dismay they counted the extent of the damage. The two timalts had

explored each other's panniers and eaten most of the two weeks' supply of dried meat and flat bread that the Northerners had given them. Anything the brutes couldn't eat had been nosed out onto the ground.

Tears swelled in Lannaira's eyes. "There's only one or two days' food left!"

Chapter 3

Starsin stared at the mess left by the greedy timalts. Was this a punishment from some nameless gods, for not giving food to the refugees? But the refugees would have taken the timalts as well.

"We'll find something to eat on the journey," he said. "If we must, we'll eat one of the timalts."

"They said the brutes eat almost anything," Lannaira said. She laughed weakly. "You're coming with me, then?"

"I have no better plan."

Made hungry by the cold, they crouched in the tent and ate much of the remaining food. Starsin, more fastidious than Lannaira, cut away bits of bread and meat marked by timalt teeth. He threw the discards at the timalts, which gratefully ate these morsels.

They packed up the tent and repacked the knives and the unbroken bowls.

"Let us rejoin the southern road," he said. "There may be dead refugees from Ob along the road. We can take their food."

"And if they're not dead?"

"Then I'll deal with them. We've got weapons."

"Trust a man to think like that. Are we bandits?"

"You'll modify your views when the food runs out."

"I'd rather eat a timalt," she said.

The twilight cold bit into him. The effort of packing up the camp had warmed him only a little, and a chill wind whipped at him as his timalt picked its way through the untracked snow to the southern road. Ahead, the road showed as a blue-white shadow, and here wooden poles stuck in the ground marked the way. The timalt whinnied and shook itself on reaching the easier going. A light dusting of snow covered the road surface, filled footprints, and coated a few pathetic bundles that had been abandoned here.

Lannaira caught up with him, and they rode in silence. A snow-speckled lump lay by the track.

"Another body," Starsin said. A little further on more dark objects lay on the track. Boxes, bags, rolls and bundles had fallen or been dropped on the way, and they stopped to search through these.

"I wonder what happened here," Starsin said. "I don't see any food."

"Here's a couple of good drinking-glasses."

A little further on they came upon another body, a lightly clad man who had expired from cold. Starsin relieved the corpse of its insulated boots.

Lannaira found jewellery in a bundle and sat running a necklace through her gloved hands. The jewels glittered even in the twilight. "This is lovely!"

"We don't need that." They couldn't eat stones.

"We can sell it for food," she said, and stuffed necklace and rings into her pouches.

They remounted. A little further on another corpse lay, and more bundles, but after an hour on the road they had found only a roll of bread and some fish. Starsin found a useful monocular.

Soon after, they sighted movement ahead, as the moon was setting. He looked through the monocular and concluded that these were walking figures.

"Let's turn off the road," he said.

"No need." Ahead of them the road forked, and a more lightly trodden trail went off to the left. Several wooden poles marked the junction. "That's the road to the south-east, and Chazu," she said.

"We're not heading for Calah?"

"They'd kill you there."

To his eyes the new route, dusted by blown snow, looked singularly uninviting. It appeared that nobody had passed that way for some time. He followed Lannaira with reluctance. Reason told him that on the more lightly travelled road they would be safer, but after a while he had the sensation they were being followed. He looked back, but nothing stalked there except shadows, cold and wind.

The night grew darker, with no moon or stars visible, and the timalts stumbled on the drifted trail.

Lannaira raised a gloved hand. "This is far enough. Let's make camp."

Starsin did not argue. He just wanted to get off the animal and lie down out of the wind. As before, they moved out of sight of the trail before setting up their tent. He helped drape the sail-cloth tent over the sticks and peg it out.

They secured the timalts and put the saddle-bags inside the tent. Curling into their sleeping-rolls, they lay face to face. Lannaira's eyes were half-open and a lock of red-brown hair hung over her forehead. Her face was calm. What was this woman like, who didn't mind robbing the dead? He could just smell her breath, over the smell of old fur. He should talk, but about what?

"We'll follow the road in the morning," Lannaira said. "It's too difficult to ride at night over open country."

Starsin did not answer this. Instead he said, "So your contact Ovlar suggested a raid on Ob, and this Dwarf person allied with the barbarians to carry it out?"

"The Northmen."

"And you thought you could rescue me during the attack?"

"Mm."

Had he thanked her already? He wasn't sure.

"Thank you for getting me out. Did you follow me from Calah? I never saw you there."

"Why would you? Do you remember attending Lord Nissalpan's grand party?"

"I'm not sure." His memory was fragmented.

"I was there. They all thought I was a servant. I saw you flirting with that hot-looking strumpet, Achis Koramvis. If you'd had her as your bedmate, you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble."

"I remember the Northern girl was there. Or at the Palace. I tried to save her. And the Virnals detained me."

"Sorry about that."

"Sorry?" A coin dropped in Starsin's mind. "You mean it was your group who encouraged me to try freeing Ussha?"

"You never guessed? Are you angry?"

Starsin sighed. "If I wasn't a rash fool, I'd have kept my nose clean and got engaged to Achis and pleased my guardian. But what was it all about?"

"It was for the Northmen, to encourage Gerferaxus to fall in with our plans."

"You could have re-started the Northern War," he said.

"The Virnals didn't want that because the War Office is short of money.

Kathan didn't want a hostage crisis, which was why he quietly let her go and kept two Northern warriors locked up instead."

When he woke, light was seeping into the tent through the fabric and a few lashing holes. The fabric flapped in the wind.

Daylight dawned, cold and overcast. They broke camp and rode south along the snow-drifted track.

A day later they reached the fringes of the northern conifer forests. The air blew colder and Starsin's stomach ached with hunger. On the way they had seen only a few snow-hares and ptarmigan they were unable to catch. When the timalts halted, it was quiet, very quiet. He imagined that he heard voices.

"Do you think we're being followed?" he asked Lannaira.

"It's possible. Why?"

"We're leaving a trail anybody could follow." He nodded at the deep line of timalt prints they were leaving in the snow.

"Yes, but who'd know they're ours?" She ducked a branch. "If any timalt riders try to creep up on us, the timalts will make a noise."

He was not convinced by this logic.

#

Starsin's timalt followed the tracks Lannaira's animal was leaving in the snow. They were making their way among isolated low conifers, little higher than a mounted man, and set in a flat landscape. He stared at her back with resentment. Cold numbed his hands and feet, and his body cried out for warming food, mounds of rice or greasy tubers, that would help it fight the chill.

Since the timalts had gobbled most of the travellers' food, and with no edible plants or wild animals in sight, the two of them had gone without food for two days. Why was he still following this woman? He could die here.

"Lannaira," he called.

She looked round. "What?"

"Are we going the right way?"

She halted her timalt and beckoned him to come alongside. He stopped beside her. Her face was reddened and pinched by the freezing air. "You have something to say?"

"Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"I see." Lannaira's shoulders slumped a little.

Starsin felt a modicum of regret for his outburst. "I'm just cold," he said.

She looked up at the sky. "I'm using glimpses of the sun and the lichen on the north side of these dwarf trees to keep us headed southward. You agreed to head across country after we took the Eastern road."

"We might have met soldiers."

"I agree, we might have run into desperate people. But we're here. Have you any more ideas about finding food?"

"No fruit or berries, you said. I saw animal tracks earlier. Big; some kind of deer."

"And how are we to get close to a deer?" Lannaira asked. "We don't have time to dig a trap and wait by it."

Starsin shook his head. He had no idea. He looked around at the tree-studded landscape. A large brown bird sat on the top of a small tree, a mere thirty paces away. If he got his hands on it, he'd eat it cooked or raw. Maybe it was waiting for them to die.

"If I had a birding bow, I could pot that bird," he said.

Lannaira looked doubtful. "How long would it take you to make one, and the arrows?"

"A while. I have a knife."

"Don't you need seasoned wood?"

It seemed a lot of work even if he could find or improvise all the parts. "Or I could throw a spear."

He looked down at the stout iron-headed spear lashed to the side of his timalt.

Lannaira followed his gaze. "Birding spears are lighter."

She was right. "But I could try it now. Haven't you got some crumbs we can use as bait?"

"I'll look." She dismounted and worked at the straps of one of her saddle-bags. The timalt nickered.

"This should do." She held out a piece of bread. It had large tooth-marks on it.

He took the half-frozen bread and stifled the desire to stuff it in his mouth.

They spread a bait of crumbs on the snow in an open space and took cover behind a pair of dwarf trees. Starsin, spear in hand, judged the range at about forty paces.

The brown bird still sat on its tree. Starsin salivated at the thought of sinking his teeth into its warm roasted flesh. The bird flew off.

They waited. Chill crept into him as he crouched. He could not feel his feet. He thought of standing up and stamping around to warm himself, but he was tired. So tired. And hungry.

Lannaira poked his arm and pointed to the sky.

A large, plump bird with white and brown markings circled over them and the bait. It dropped to the snow. Starsin gripped the spear and called to mind how his body had felt when he made the test throw.

He threw. The spear arced through the air. The bird opened its wings wide and sprang upward. The spear landed a forearm's length from where the bird had sat. The bird flew on, and out of sight.

"You came close," Lannaira remarked.

He felt deflated. "I did my best. I could make a dozen throws like that and miss every time. You're right; the spear's too heavy."

"Try aiming where it's going to leap."

"Good idea." They waited, but the sky was empty.

"This isn't working," Starsin said, with chapped lips. He had remained immobile long enough for the cold to seep through his thick clothing. "We could die behind this bush."

"Agreed." Lannaira stood up and stamped her feet. She slapped her arms around her body to warm herself. "We might have better luck further on." She gathered up the scraps of bait and put them in a cloth pouch. The timalts had found clumps of low, tough plants with stiff stems under the snow to chew on. Starsin envied them.

The track, marked by the feet of men and animals, and thinly dusted with fresh snow, led onward among the dwarf trees. Starsin glanced behind. "We're laying a trail here."

There were tracks of various animals in the snow, but no further signs of humans.

A movement among the trees caught his eye. "What's that animal?" A small brown animal limped away from them, leaving a two-toed track.

"Looks like a deer," Lannaira said.

Starsin sensed food. He spurred his timalt and chased after the deer. It made a good speed, even on three legs, and twisted and darted among the low trees, more agile than the long-backed timalt. But his mount had a good straight-line speed and

more endurance. Lannaira helped by turning the deer when it tried to escape in her direction.

After churning a section of forest into twisting tracks, he rode the deer down, and speared it. "Food at last!" He dismounted, took out a knife and hacked at the carcass.

Lannaira rode up and stopped him.

"Let me do that." The deer had been a pretty creature when alive. With no show of sentiment, Lannaira disembowelled it, beheaded it, half-skinned it and split off the haunches and rib cuts from the carcass. Blood stained the snow.

Her competence at butchery was a little unsettling. This woman with the pretty earrings was a stranger, and he wondered what else she did with as little emotion as she showed in cutting up the deer.

They lit a fire to cook the meat, using up half of their precious tinder and kindling to get it going with snow-smearred sticks. Starsin feared the smoke might attract unwelcome attention as it swirled away in the wind, but they were very hungry, and despite the exertion of the hunt, suffering from the penetrating cold. Neither was used to eating raw meat. With the meat, they roasted a handful of winter roots Lannaira had dug up in a clearing. Among the trees there was a deep silence,

broken only by the snuffling of the timalts noses in the snow, and the faint crackle of the fire.

The heat from the fire warmed their hands and faces. Starsin felt better.

When they had finished eating, and singeing the remaining meat, a long dusk was falling.

"Should we travel on a little further, away from this spot?" Starsin asked. He waved a hand at the mess they had created.

"We could. But we're leaving a trail."

"That's true." Neither made a move away from the warmth of the fire embers. After checking the timalts were secure, they pitched the tent under the trees.

Starsin got out a bottle of the Bear clan's booze. With a few sips, it went to his head.

In the tent, he asked her if she had any news of his father. "The officer I let die said he was kept prisoner in a place called Yuka Kron."

"Yes, we've heard that rumour too."

"That's great news. How do you know all this?"

He was looking at her nose, a forearm's length away. It was rather large, with freckles.

"We have our sources, dear boy," she said.

He imagined many like her in the Empire, scattered yet, but in communication with each other.

As he heard the unseen trees whispering around the tent, an unease crept over him. He had never entirely regained the use of his frostbitten left hand, injured in the terrible journey north. But it ran deeper than the cold, for the silent ranks of forest made him think of dead people.

Though the night was miserably chill, the fire, tent and the warmth of another human body made it bearable. Outside, it was so cold that trees crackled, and icicles hung from the timalt's nostrils.

#

The journey was the same the next morning, except they had cold roast meat to eat. He still had an illusion they were being followed, but repressed it.

Lannaira hauled hard on the reins of her timalt, halting it, and put a finger to her lips. Starsin looked back, heart thumping, but could see nothing. She nodded to the scrub beside their route, and rode behind a snow-laden bush.

"I heard voices," she said. "And I think I hear--"

He interrupted her. "How soon?"

She held up three fingers.

They had a short time to wait.

"Shall I fix our tracks?" he said.

Lannaira nodded.

Starsin, remembering a trick from his military training, went further on to make a trail and then made the timalt back up before joining her. It left a pair of tracks past their hiding place. He broke a conifer branch and brushed out the turn-off tracks to their hiding place as best he could. It would not fool a skilled and wary tracker for more than a few moments, but that would be long enough for himself and Lannaira to gain an advantage of surprise.

Sounds of movement and the rattle of harness filtered through the dwarf forest. They waited. Lannaira had talked earlier of the timalts braying to their kind, and he hoped they wouldn't start up.

Part hidden by the trees came two riders on ponies, following the trail the timalts had left in the snow. He trembled with fear and anticipation. Both riders were swathed in furs, like Northerners. One was a head shorter than the other.

Starsin gripped his spear and glanced at Lannaira. She held a pointed stick, and she was holding it at the ready in the style of a mounted trooper. In a few moments the riders would be abreast of them. Starsin's hasty trail-masking would not fool them for long.

A curl of dark hair showed beside the hairless face of the first rider. Starsin was disconcerted. A woman or long-haired boy?

"Stop where you are!" Lannaira yelled, and she urged her timalt forwards, barring the trail.

The riders halted in disarray. Ussha, for it was she, pulled her hood back. Starsin, heart leaping, spurred forward keeping one eye on the other rider.

"Ussha? It's good to see you, but what are you doing here, by the gods?" Starsin asked. "How many men have you brought with you?"

Lannaira turned to look at Starsin while pointing a finger at Ussha. "This is Ussha? The hostage-girl? What the devil's she doing here?"

It dawned on Starsin that Lannaira had not been present when Ussha was brought to him at the barbarian camp, and the two had probably never met.

"Yes, it's her."

Lannaira appeared annoyed. "What's she doing here? Was it your fool idea, Starsin?"

"No, it's my fool idea," Ussha said, facing them. "I came to be with Starsin."

"Is that so?" Lannaira said. "And who's he?" She pointed a finger at Ussha's escort.

The other rider, dressed in dark, worn furs with a hood over his head, sat on his pony, making no move, with his hands in plain view. Starsin recollected seeing him with Ussha at the Northmen's camp.

"This is Rurnik, one of Chief Ursus' riders. I brought him for protection, I didn't dare ride through the forest alone."

Starsin didn't like Rurnik's sallow, almost hairless face, he wasn't sure why. The fellow had a prominent nose, reddened by cold, and Starsin thought the brown eyes were rather close together. "Why have you come after us?" he asked.

"I wanted to be with you," Ussha said.

Starsin felt himself grinning like a fool. Now they could be together as he had dreamed. He reached out and grasped her gloved hand.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Lannaira asked in an annoyed tone. "I expect there's a mob of angry tribesmen chasing after you to fetch you back."

"I don't think so," said Ussha in a small voice. "I'm not going back there."

Lannaira snorted, and kept the point of her spear lowered.

Ussha stood her ground. "Who exactly is this woman, Starsin?"

Starsin opened his mouth.

"I'm Starsin's escort to his friends in the South," Lannaira said. "That's all you need to know, for now."

"I'd inferred that already," Ussha said. "So you're Lannaira Hajan."

"I want her to come with us," Starsin said, looking at the frowning Lannaira.

"If you insist, but if her tribe comes after her, she'll have to go back."

Starsin glanced back up the trail. "I thought someone was following us. So it wasn't my imagination."

Ussha gave him a look. "You're right. You are being followed. There's a group of armed men some ways behind you."

Starsin's guts froze. "What? How did you get by them?"

"We were behind, and saw all the tracks, and marks where they had cut at a tree and left it. Then at nightfall we heard them ahead, shouting about fires and bivouacs. So we made sure they did not see or hear us as we detoured around their camp."

"You didn't see them?" Starsin asked.

"Not likely."

"What language were they speaking?" Lannaira asked.

"Common, it sounded like. And they left timalt tracks, several sets."

"What makes you think they were armed?"

Ussha shrugged. "They were noisy."

"Did you make out anything they said? Or what they want?" Starsin asked.

Ussha rubbed her nose. "I heard something like 'We'll get him' - as though they were hunting someone."

Starsin shivered and, despite himself, glanced up the trail.

"How far behind are they?" Lannaira asked.

Ussha patted her pony's neck and yawned. "A good long way. Most of the night."

Starsin tugged at his timalt's reins. "We'd best move on, and quickly."

Chapter 4

Ussha, Ussasah Broughsdottir, had a great deal to say, in contrast to Starsin's first meeting with her in Calah, when she had hardly said one intelligible word. She explained that she found living as a tribal woman intolerable, and after being brought to meet him at the Northern camp, she had resolved to get away and travel with the Exalt to some more agreeable and more southerly place. Most disconcerting to Starsin, even more markedly than at the camp, she spoke the common tongue with the accent of the Calah nobility and officer class.

Later, Starsin was able to talk to Lannaira privately, as she let her timalt drop behind at a walk. "I don't like the look of him."

"Oh, I don't know, all his tribe look like that. He's an Urgurlik." Lannaira smirked. "But if you want the girl, make your intentions clear, before Rurnik claims her."

"What do you mean? It's freezing!"

"And?"

Starsin felt his face reddening. He wanted Ussha.

Soon Starsin caught up Ussha and questioned her about how she had lived in Calah after her recapture. Seemingly she had been assigned rooms in the Palace, a slave and guard - and a protector.

"The rooms were in the Northern wing," she dimpled at this slight irony.

"Off the Courtyard of the LinYan Victory."

Into Starsin's mind came a vivid picture of this courtyard, sometimes filled with hot dust, sometimes with snow, so that he almost forgot the dark snow-girdled conifers.

"Who ordered this? Who was your protector?" Starsin did not trust his memory of the first day of his transportation.

"A high Lord, one of those you call the Virnals."

Starsin wondered how reliable his recollections were. "What was the name of your protector?" The call of an owl echoed in the silent woods.

"Exalt Larash was made my protector."

Starsin snarled. "Him!"

"You disliked him." She turned in the saddle to look full at him.

"I hate him! I suppose he forced his degenerate attentions on you?"

She turned away, shaking and making a strange sound.

Starsin flushed, tongue- tied.

Rurnik, who had shown no sign of understanding the common tongue, said not a word.

"You wouldn't understand. I didn't like him, and I could have refused. But it didn't seem so important. I could see in the eyes of other women that they envied me. And I was almost happy when we looked at beautiful things together, and he explained them to me.

"Oh, I hated him, for he treated me as his thing. Yet he was beautiful. He made me a Calah lady when I was a barbarian girl." "But now here we are."

Images of Larash enjoying her filled his inner eye. Her overt move fanned his jealousy. He struck her hand aside as harsh words seethed into his brain. He had seen Ussha as an ignorant hostage, but back in Calah she had been part of a circle of wealth, privilege and culture that was beyond him.

"You're rather forward, for a lady."

He spurred his timalt hard. The animal squealed and bounded forward.

"You are not gracious, sir," she called after him.

He turned. "I'm not used to being pursued."

Ussha kicked her heels into her pony's sides, soon outpacing his timalt.

Starsin looked back at a sound. Lannaira had thrust her glove across her mouth and was swaying from side to side in the saddle, vainly trying not to laugh.

"Did Ussha tell you what went on between her and Larash?" Starsin asked

Lannaira later.

Lannaira smirked. "I suspect Larash seduced her as a way of getting at you."

Starsin clenched his fists.

Lannaira smiled. "Ah, he succeeded?"

Starsin looked away, toward the ranked trees.

"You enjoy her company?" she said. "Ussha's an educated and cultured young woman. Larash schooled her well. I don't think she belongs in a rough barbarian camp."

Smiles and eye-contact encouraged Starsin to think Ussha did indeed favour his company, but he was not ready to make a move and follow Lannaira's advice.

Starsin overheard more as Ussha and Lannaira rode side by side and talked.

"It was impossible to keep the circumstances of my misery in Calah and my return secret from the tribespeople, and talk soon spread. People whispered behind their hands, and I found decent young warriors did not want me for a wife, and mothers did not want me for a daughter-in-law."

"They didn't?" Lannaira said.

"They whispered that I was a trollop who had been a mattress for every Lord in the Palace. And the way I spoke, and the things I wanted to talk about, made many of them think I looked down on them and had pretensions to be a city Lady. And I was groped by smelly young warriors."

"Typical males," Lannaira said.

"Larash was a nasty man, but he dressed me well, and introduced me to many lovely and interesting things, and well-educated people. When I returned to the dreary hag-ridden camp from visiting Starsin as 'Falcon' after they rescued him, there was more snide talk. That was the end. I did not belong there any more, and was determined to get away to a better place."

"And Rurnik?"

"As a chieftain's daughter I deserved a bodyguard. The men appointed him because he was small and had low status as a warrior. They looked down on him. It was easy to persuade him to come with me when I decided to run away. He was always stealing things, and folk were starting to suspect."

#

Darkness came on. They shared a cooked meal of deer meat and Ussha's Bear tribe provisions. Ussha and Rurnik had their own tent-shelter, which Ussha rigged to

make two sections. Starsin eyed it with feelings of envy and suspicion, but held his tongue.

After another day and a half in the conifer forest they emerged onto a cleared plot of ground, where a few tree stumps stuck up above the snow. Beyond was a great expanse of open water over half a league across. To left and right it stretched into the far distance. The surface rippled in the sunlight, a few grey rocks stuck up in it, and on the far bank more forest could be seen beyond. There was not a sign of human activity anywhere. The riverbank was silent save for the lap of water, the faint rustle of branches and the calls of a few birds.

"What in the name of sorcery is this?" Starsin asked.

"It's a river, the Turgyen," Lannaira said.

"A river can't be this size!"

"I assure you it is; it's the Turgyen river."

The trail they were following ran across the open plot and ended at the water.

He looked at Lannaira. "Are we supposed to cross this?"

"Yes. There should be a ferry."

There was no sign of one at the road's end. Lannaira kned up her timalt and headed for the river's edge at an easy trot.

They stopped, looking at the water. No ferry boat waited here, but a wooden dock below the earth bank extended out into the rippling water. A section of planking was broken near to the bank. Nearby stood a small wooden hut with a capping of snow. Lannaira dismounted, walked over to it and forced open the sagging door.

"Starsin."

He dismounted and walked over, to look over her shoulder. Inside, the hut had a small drift of snow on the floor, and the remainder of the inside was bare, save for a few smashed bits of wood. The wall bore fresh axe marks.

"Looks like it's been smashed up and looted," she said.

Starsin had a bad feeling. "No ferry service."

"It might be at the other side. Can you see it? Use that monocular thing you found."

Starsin stood on a high part of the bank and peered through the metal and glass device. Ussha and Rurnik looked on expectantly.

"I can see where the other dock is, I think. But there's no boat there."

"What about further up or down?" Lannaira asked.

Starsin tracked the round view upstream and downstream on the far shore, seeing only water and trees.

"Hurry up," Ussha said.

He lowered the monocular. "There's no ferry boat over there."

"We have to cross this," Lannaira said. "Maybe it's on this side, moored out of sight." She was holding her arms across her chest.

"I'll climb out on the dock," Starsin said. "I'll get a better view from there." He descended the bank, slipping on the packed snow, and set foot on the snow-covered planks.

"Don't fall down that hole," Ussha called.

River water flowed swiftly below a large hole hacked in the planking. Pale axe marks shone fresh on the wood. On hands and knees he crawled over the support log that lay under the edge of the structure, till he reached the undamaged section. At the outer end he stood and looked up and down the riverbank. Even with the monocular, he saw only water and trees.

The other three were staring at him.

He shook his head. "I don't see any boat." He climbed back onto the bank.

"Now what do we do?" Ussha asked. "Can we go to another ferry?"

"I've no idea," Lannaira said. "Even if I did, there's no road along the riverbank. We'd have to hack our way through the forest."

"There has to be another crossing point," Starsin said.

"There is an easier crossing point, a long way south," Lannaira said. "But if we go back, we risk running into the men following us."

Starsin squatted on his haunches and lobbed a lump of snow into the grey water. "I don't remember being taken across this river."

"I don't suppose you were. You came from Calah, in the west."

"I hope we're not going to swim it with the timalts; it looks freezing. Deep, too."

Rurnik looked at Starsin with a sneer. "Not swim. Too far." This was almost the first time Starsin had heard him say anything in the common tongue.

"So we'll have to build a raft," Lannaira said.

The others stared at her. "That'll be a lot of work," Starsin said. "If we spend time here hacking at timber it will make noise, and make plenty of time for anyone following to catch us up."

"This is true." She shrugged. "The alternative is turn back and head south, or to sit here and wait to be killed."

As one, they turned and looked at the silent, dark woods behind them. The trees were quiet save for the twitter of an unseen bird, and the creak and sough of branches moved by the wind. The woods could have hidden an army.

"The Virnals seem to be pursuing Starsin. Any men who are tracking us will kill us and throw our bodies in the river." She was holding her long sheath knife in her right hand. "I don't want to die either." She tossed the knife up so that it spun twice and returned to her hand. "But I think this is our best plan."

"Where are you headed?" Ussha asked.

"I'd prefer not to tell you. Not while there's any chance of you being captured."

They might capture you, Starsin thought.

"I'd be a tougher nut to crack," she said, looking at him.

Can she read my mind? "Where does this huge river go?" Starsin asked. He pointed to his left. "Isn't that north?"

"Through empty lands," she said. "It's a long time since anyone tried to explore it. It must flow out into the ice." She turned and pointed. "There's fallen timber there. You can start cutting it up into pieces of three man-lengths."

"Have we time to make a raft big enough to bear us and the animals? And drag it into the water? In half a day?" Starsin asked.

"Not if you all stand here yapping," Ussha said. "Rurnik has his axe. Can we just get on with it?"

"No, wait." Starsin stood and spread his arms. "The timalts are tough things. They should be able to swim. Make the raft smaller. Ponies swim, don't they?"

Ussha stroked the muzzle of her pony. "But it's so far, and the water looks freezing. They could die."

"It's a risk. But we could double up on the timalts, if we have to."

"So are we all agreed?" Starsin asked. "We start cutting timber for a smaller raft."

"Agreed," the others said in turn.

Starsin drew his knife and looked at it. It was small for the task. "I'll help Rurnik."

Ussha spoke several words in the Northern tongue to her servant. Silently, Rurnik unlashed his axe from his pony harness and handed the reins to Ussha. He turned toward the timber.

Starsin handed his timalt reins to Lannaira. "What will you be doing?"

"Looking for materials we can use to fasten the logs." The sun showed tiny wrinkles around Lannaira's eyes.

Starsin followed Rurnik to the edge of the forest. Here, he knocked brown branches off a fallen conifer, while Rurnik applied his axe to the base of a standing tree.

Lannaira led two of the riding animals back the way they had come, where she tethered them out of sight. He supposed she hoped the animals would make a noise if enemies approached.

The work went quickly. In what seemed less than a deciurnal they had cut and trimmed a pile of logs. Next they laboured to drag them to the river bank.

Lannaira said she had seen rafts on other waters. The design was simple enough, just roughly de-branched conifer trunks laid in the water side by side and two cross-logs fastened below to prevent the logs drifting apart. The fastenings were a difficulty till Ussha found some shiny-leaved creepers growing by the river to serve for lashings.

The work of assembly took a long time despite the crude design for, besides from Rurnik's axe, they had between them only one knife heavy enough to make much impression on the wood. Starsin was conscious of the noise they were making. Each stroke of the axe echoed back from the woods. Any enemies would hear them a long way off.

"So how do we launch this?" Ussha asked.

"We pick it up, drag it to the water and slide it in," Starsin said.

They gathered around the raft and heaved, but the raft did not budge.

"Lift it," Starsin shouted.

"I can't," Ussha said. "It's too heavy."

He was forced to admit they had under-estimated the weight of the assembled raft, even a smaller one. He hung his head, panting, and kicked at the raft in frustration. All that work and now this, just lost time. Fear sidled up behind him. All the time they worked, unseen pursuers came closer. "Now what?"

"Drag it," Lannaira said.

They soon found this did not work either. The cross-logs, with the weight of a score of logs on top, dug into the snow, immovable.

"The armed men will be coming soon," Starsin said. The others looked at him, but nobody answered.

"Can we put something slippery on the ground for it to slide on?" Ussha asked.

Rurnik said something in the Northern tongue..

"He says it needs sledge runners," Ussha said.

"Branches," Starsin said. "Gather the green branches we cut."

They ran to collect armfuls of the branches that Starsin had stripped, still with green needles on them. With all four of them lifting at one end, they were able to kick branches under the raft. At last, the raft slipped nearer the water, over a carpet of green pine cuttings. They had to stop several times to lift it and kick branches underneath.

One end of the raft dipped into the grey water, and lifted. Ussha squealed as icy water entered her boots.

"We need to tether it," Starsin shouted. Lannaira fetched a pair of lines made of creeper. With a further heave, the raft floated, tethered to the bank, and resting against the piles of the wooden dock.

Lannaira sent Starsin to collect the two timalts. His imagination unnerved him as he entered the shade of the dark trees. He could not see where Lannaira had

tethered them, but there were footprints in the snow. He pulled out his knife and crept from cover to cover, with his heart thudding madly. He heard distant voices, and crouched for a hundred heartbeats, in a thicket of dead brown conifer branches, convinced Vornal trackers were near. Every tree-trunk and shadow watched him as he crept forward. He sighted the timalts but dared not move, till he realised the footprints had been made by himself and his three companions.

He untied the bridles with trembling fingers. Behind him was a crunching. He turned with his hand on his knife. It was Rurnik, come for the ponies.

Rurnik looked at him and said, "You have the wood-fear, I think? Did you see a spirit in the trees?"

Starsin hated him.

Back at the river, there was more work to do, besides loading up the raft with their baggage. They made four long poles, trunks of ten-ring saplings, for poling and for improvising a mast and sail. The animals were tethered to the land side of the raft by long reins.

By leaning on the poles they thrust the raft out into the slow current. At last, they were under way and leaving the dread shore. Ussha squeaked with excitement. The animals splashed into the water and swam strongly, with only their heads and necks showing. They looked rather wide-eyed. Starsin felt sorry for them.

"We're going downstream as fast as we're going across," said Starsin.

"Faster," Lannaira said, with a faint shrug.

"So hadn't we better change direction?"

"No, it doesn't matter where we land, does it? It's quickest if we aim straight across."

The poles dipped two, three spans into the grey water before hitting bottom. It was slow, tiring work. A wind picked up, from the northern side.

They pulled the poles inboard and set up the tent-sail at the front end of the raft, with three poles and a steadying rope. Within moments the raft was making a noticeable way through the water and waves were lapping over the front end. Behind them, the two timalts, the only warm-blooded land animals that tolerated such icy water, swam strongly. The ponies floundered in distress at the end of their reins.

They soon put a few hundred paces between themselves and the bank, but the far bank seemed as far away as ever.

"This is better than poling. I hope this wind keeps up," Lannaira said.

Away from the trees the wind strengthened, driving the raft on.

Lannaira was smiling. "I wouldn't miss this for the world. Isn't it exciting?"

Starsin, who had been wondering if the raft could stand another decurnal of buffeting, and wishing he was warm and dry ashore, felt a little ashamed. "Ob never offered such sports," he admitted.

Lannaira had a broad grin on her face. She stood on the raft, clinging to the mast-rope as the raft bounced over a swell that marked hidden shallows. The evening sun came out behind them, brightening up the dark green forests and making the grey water of the Turgyen sparkle.

Starsin clung onto a corner of the sail as the raft pitched over waves. The logs at one end were shifting apart. One of the creeper lashings had broken and unravelled. Fear ran up his spine. If the raft broke up, it would pitch them and their baggage into the icy water, far from the banks.

"Look out, this is coming apart." He flung himself down over the logs as the outermost swung away.

The others exclaimed in dismay. Ussha gave a small shriek.

Hands gripped his legs as he reached out his arms and pulled the shifting outer logs back into place with all his strength.

"Can't you stop it driving through the water?" he shouted.

"Hold on, I'll get the sail down." Lannaira grappled with the improvised sail, and the pressure of the raft through the water instantly eased. The raft drifted, slopping water over the top of the logs and soaking his belly.

Holding the logs with one arm, he dipped the other into the icy water and grappled for the loose binding, trying to find where it had failed. "Is there any more rope?"

"There's the mooring line," Ussha said. She passed it to him, and Starsin struggled to secure the logs, soaking his arms and bare hands in the frigid water. The others shifted themselves and the baggage to the back end of the raft.

He tied the mooring line around the logs and to the submerged cross log. At last it was done.

He rose to a sitting position and looked at Lannaira. "Do you know any spells to stop this raft from falling to bits?" His question was only half serious.

"You think I'm a witch?" she said.

"I'm not sure you're not."

"I'm not sure I'm not either." She raised and set the sail, and the raft wallowed onwards.

Starsin protested. "It's the movement through the water that's caused the trouble,"

"We have to drive it, or we'll end up in the Arctic Ocean."

The far bank was still a long way off. Starsin looked back to the bank they had left. Six riders on horseback had ridden their mounts to the water's edge. They sat still,

watching the raft, and from their bodies and gear, too far away to resolve clearly,
came the glint of arms and armour.

A shiver ran through him. They had been followed.

Chapter 5

Lannaira shaded her eyes and looked at the six riders Starsin had spotted on the west bank. "This day gets better and better. I wonder how well they can see us."

"You think they're Virnals?"

"As likely as not. The Northerners say the Virnals of Ob are not all accounted for. So that could be them pursuing you."

"Let's hope we can land and get away before they build a raft and cross after us." Starsin had been looking forward to a night's rest on the far bank.

"Won't they track us?" Ussha asked. She and Rurnik were also looking at the riders.

Lannaira hung on the mast rope. "They'll have to make a raft, like us," she said. "It's likely to be dark before they have it ready, so they might wait till morning."

Starsin got out his monocular and tried to steady himself against the mast tripod. The round field of view of the device swung over water and forest.

"What are those riders doing?" Ussha asked.

"I can't see," Starsin said. "They've dismounted and spread out. Maybe looking for logs, or some way to cross." His good mood had vanished and now fear and foreboding gripped him.

The two timalts swimming behind the raft moaned in the cold water, and the ponies whinnied. Ussha shuffled across the unstable logs and tried to calm the animals by talking to them.

Dusk had fallen before they reached the far bank of the huge river, two leagues downstream, and the landing proved troublesome. They poled till exhausted to make a landfall and ran aground where swampy shallows merged into the forest.

Starsin tied the raft to a root with a short length of creeper. He led a timalt around the raft and ashore, while the others collected their gear. He coiled the long rein and looked for somewhere to tether the animal. It shook itself, covering him with icy spray. The second one, led by Ussha, shook itself, then lunged shoreward, dragging her off her feet. With a cry, she let go the reins. Both timalts bolted up the snowy bank, among the trees and out of sight.

Starsin stared after them in shock.

Lannaira voiced what he was thinking. "Someone better get after them. If they don't come back, we're in serious trouble."

"Let's get the ponies," Starsin said.

The ponies climbed out of the water and stood on the bank, dripping and making small whinnies of distress. At least, they weren't running off.

"I'm sorry," Ussha said in a small voice. She got up and wiped dirty snow off herself.

"It's not your fault," Lannaira said.

At a word from Ussha, Rurnik found spare bits of cloth and fur, and rubbed down the ponies.

"Rurnik and I will go after the timalts," Ussha said.

"All right," Starsin said.

Ussha and Rurnik mounted up and rode into the woods at a walk.

Cold, wet, and muddy, he and Lannaira sank down on a dry bank. Was she thinking the same, that if the other two did not return with the animals, he and Lannaira would be stuck on a riverbank in the middle of a trackless forest?

"We need to get away from the river," Starsin said.

"What for?" Lannaira said. "It'll be dark soon, and we can't avoid leaving a trail in this snow."

Starsin nodded. "Let's at least get out of sight of the river. I hope those timalts come back, otherwise we're in serious trouble. I can't even hear them crashing about."

"I expect they will. I've got the brutes' favourite berries here."

"That's all those hexlegs ever think about - food." He shouldered a tent bundle. "When we get to the end of this trip, I'm going to sell that timalt to the lowest bidder."

"It probably feels the same about you."

As a slow dark fell, Ussha and Rurnik returned, leading the timalts. Ussha, smiling and waving, had a triumphant air. "The lead ropes got tangled up in the trees," she said.

"We can get rid of the raft now," Lannaira said.

Starsin looked at the now cleared raft, moored to the bank, and at his blistered hands. "After all that work?"

"We don't want to go north. And it's just marking our position here."

"All right."

Starsin and Rurnik pushed the raft out with the poles till the current caught it. He watched it go with misgivings. But as Lannaira said, it was marking their landing place.

They pitched the tent-shelters well out of sight of the river. It was impossible to travel onward through the forest by night. After some argument, they allowed themselves a fire of dead wood, as they were all chilled, with wet clothes, and

hungry. Lannaira thought the prevailing wind would blow the smell of smoke away from their pursuers. Starsin insisted they take turns at keeping watch, to avoid being surprised by the six riders.

"That might be wise," Lannaira said. "But if the gods are with us, even if they can cut logs and make a raft, they won't cross and find us in the dark." Later, lying in the tent, they heard a crackling and snuffling. Starsin scrambled to his knees, heart pounding.

"It's just the animals," said Lannaira. "Go and feed them something."

The sky had cleared, to reveal above the tree branches a black bowl sprinkled with tiny white stars, and it became very cold. Starsin took another of his medicine tablets, to protect himself from the silent fingers of frost. The small shelter occupied by Ussha and Rurnik lay silent in the shadow. Nobody observed him. The store of tablets, that he had purchased from other prisoners at Ob, had now diminished by half. In the gloom he felt his way to the animals, fed the timalts a few berries and threw them and the ponies some coarse fodder gathered earlier.

At first light they packed up their camp, making as little noise as possible, and hurried away. They pressed the animals hard, hoping the Virnals would not pick up the trail they were leaving in the snow and forest litter. Whenever they found an unfrozen stream, they waded the animals in it for some distance.

The day ended without any contact with the pursuers. Neither had they found the south-eastern trail. As he chatted with Ussha during the day, Starsin's thoughts had been filled with visions of her and a two-person tent. During a brief break in the journey, they slipped away behind a screen of bushes and Starsin was encouraged enough to embrace and kiss her.

As the baggage was unpacked, Starsin stood his ground. "I was thinking, Ussha and I could share a tent tonight."

There was a silence. Lannaira was tight-lipped.

"Did you?" Lannaira said. "What does Ussha say about this?"

Ussha was tugging a strand of her hair with a gloved hand. She shot a glance at Lannaira. "I wouldn't mind, if it was necessary, but-"

"I've no desire to share a tent with a man I don't know," Lannaira said in a sharp tone. "And I see no need to change the previous arrangement."

"Don't worry, then," Ussha said. She turned to Starsin. "Rurnik's my servant. Nothing's going to happen. He knows his place."

"Oh, very well then," Starsin said, with ill grace.

Lannaira gave him a look. Starsin shrugged.

"Why not put the tents closer together?" Lannaira said.

Nobody objected to this.

Before he slept, Starsin listened hard, but heard nothing more suspicious than Ussha's murmured voice and Rurnik's heavy breathing. He was tortured with suspicion of what she had let Rurnik do, despite her assurances that the tribesman knew his place and would not lay hands on a tribal princess.

#

That second day after crossing the Turgyen, they had still not regained the trail. They struggled in a southward direction along winding tracks made by animals. Dead twigs snapped off the trees as Starsin pushed among them and snagged on his clothing. He ducked to avoid being scratched across the face.

"Is this the right way?" he asked, not for the first time. "I think we're lost. We're losing time here."

"If we're lost, then equally our pursuers have lost us," Lannaira said. "Just keep going."

"Is the trail to the left or the right?" he asked.

"It should be on our left." Lannaira's voice came from behind. "But keep heading south. Our hunters could be using the trail."

With a curse, Starsin kned his timalt and crashed onward. He came out onto a long glade, that in summer might bloom with grass and flowering plants, but was now covered in snow. To the south a veil of cloud thinned, and beyond it loomed

the pale shapes of mountains. High peaks made a vast, jagged barrier, while dark green and white masses of forest straggled up their flanks. The view stirred his soul.

Lannaira halted beside him and studied the snow-topped crags ahead. Here and there, the flanks were scarred by fields of scree. "We need to head for that pass, I think," she said. She pointed to a place to their left where the jagged outline was lower.

"You think?" Starsin did not want to become lost among mountains. "Aren't you sure?"

"We're off the trail. I have not seen the pass from this angle before, but that's where it ought to be."

They angled their course toward the pass. Trees often blocked it from view, and they skirted around thickets. The animal hooves squelched in marshy ground. Later, the ground rose relentlessly through foothills.

"No track?" Rurnik complained.

"There's a track through the pass," Lannaira said. "We should find it soon."

No track appeared. Starsin feared that this was the wrong pass. At last, long after he was sure they were going the wrong way, they came upon a faint trail through the woods, a trail trodden into the brown mess of fallen leaves and twigs on the ground. Lower branches beside it were broken off the trees.

"This must be it," Lannaira said.

The track continued upwards at a brutal angle Starsin had not encountered since Calah. The *timalts* slowed and complained, and Lannaira called a halt to let them rest. Behind them, Ussha and Rurnik halted their ponies. Starsin shifted in his saddle, trying to see through the trees. "Why haven't we seen any other travellers?" he asked. Soon they were in cloud, that beaded their clothes with damp, and obscured the trail fifty paces ahead.

"Not many want to cross between the drylands and the northern territories," Lannaira said. "We'll have to camp again on this side before making the final ascent."

They walked, to give the animals a rest. The steep slope soon made Starsin's legs ache, and his lungs burned with the cold. They camped for the night among rocks, high on the flank of the mountain. Wind shook the tents, but exhausted by the climb, Starsin soon fell into a deep sleep. During the night snow plastered the windward side of rocks and shelters. The morning dawned bright and sunny.

The wind at the saddle of the pass probed his clothes with icy fingers, and plants struggled to grow among the rocks. Mountain shoulders, a waste of rock part grown with small woody plants, reared up on each side of the trail. Fingers of shadowed snow reached down to the track on one side. Clouds massed in the sky to the west, and within a decidual a damp, chilly mist had enveloped them.

"What if we meet our enemies here?" Starsin asked. "There's nowhere to go."

"We'll worry about that if it happens," Lannaira said. "Anyway, aren't you the tactician?"

They rested the animals again before making the descent. The *timalts* and ponies were panting in the thin air. The wind rushing through the pass remained bitingly cold.

Several deciurnals later the wind blew less and warmer, and the trail continued steeply downward. They came on signs of habitation, summer huts, and patches of ground where trees had been cleared.

"Look," Lannaira said, pointing. Far below, grey roofs showed among the trees. A range of buildings stood on a bluff that fell away steeply on three sides. A section of trail, emerging from the trees below, ran past it.

"What's that?"

"It's the northernmost of the Oneist monasteries. They're found throughout the drylands."

"The drylands? Why do you call them that?" Ussha asked.

"Because they're dry. The country is drier and warmer south of the mountain range."

Starsin looked around him and at the overcast sky. "There's no mist."

#

They descended to the thinly wooded spur on which the Kijjin monastery stood, gaining ever clearer glimpses of it through gaps in the trees. Close to the buildings the trees were small and parched, and there were stumps where dead ones had been removed for firewood.

"We're stopping here?" Ussha asked.

"For one night," Lannaira said.

"So what is this place?" Ussha asked. "I've never seen a monastery."

The hooves of their animals thudded on a litter of dead leaves that covered the trail.

"It's a religious house of monks from the Oneist faith, mostly found in the south-east lands."

Starsin saw a dark mass of buildings with pointy roofs behind the trees. "So who rules here? I don't mean the monastery - the whole country?"

"Nobody does," Lannaira told him. "It's too big, too thinly populated. The Virnals claim it as part of their Empire, but their writ does not run here."

He turned his head to look back at her. "So we won't run into any of them here?"

"I can't guarantee that. There's little reason for any of them to be here, but this is a major stopping point on the north-south trails."

Starsin did not find this answer reassuring. He shivered. The weathered stone walls and tilting stone-slate roofs visible above the trees looked less inviting than before, more menacing.

"What if Virnals are there now?"

"I doubt if there'll be more than one or two, and they won't know at once who we are. If we're careful, we can slip away. Also, I have uncompleted business," Lannaira said.

"Oh, what?"

"The library. I want to visit it again."

A stony track branched off from the trail and climbed again to the rocky spur where the monastery stood, poised above a plunging valley. Above them a few people dressed in loose pale robes descended the trail from the monastery gates. Lannaira greeted two of them, a middle-aged, bearded man and a woman, to ask if there were any interesting visitors within. The pilgrims stared in confusion, and their answers didn't help.

"There are many visitors," said one.

"All visitors are unusual," said another.

A wall of roughly cut grey stone, twice the height of a man, blocked off the neck of the rock spur. It was capped with long flat stones. In the centre of it a great log formed the lintel for a gate, the two halves of which were flung open. Weathered carvings decorated the wood.

Inside the gates, noise and activity surrounded Starsin. Canopied stalls bore plates and urns of prepared food, with visitors and yellow-robed monks moving around. A smell of spiced cooking was in the air. Starsin was hungry. After so many days of subsisting on what they could hunt or gather, his stomach yearned for different and more palatable food.

But if he could reach here, so could his enemies.

"Can we be sure there are no Virnals here?" he asked Lannaira.

"Only if we look and listen," she said.

On the far side, the courtyard was bounded by buildings with roofs tiled with wood slats that swooped down to deep eaves forming a shelter along the courtyard edge, propped on carved posts.

"I'll look around," he said without enthusiasm. Enemies might lurk here, in the shadow.

He skirted around the courtyard, keeping by the wall and glancing around him. Next to the buildings, doorways and an arch led to other parts of the compound. Timalts were tethered under an open roof.

The red-painted doors to the main temple buildings stood open. He glanced into the dim interiors as he passed. He completed a scout of the courtyard, and threaded through the throng of monks and visitors, but saw nothing to alarm him.

Lannaira shot him an enquiring look.

He shook his head. "I'm hungry," he said.

Lannaira pointed to a line of stalls with yellow-robed figures standing behind them. "There's food over there. Just give the monks some money, and eat as much as you want." She doled out money from her waistband. "Keep a look out for any Virnals, but don't panic if you see any. They won't know who you are."

He scratched his beard. He had been a foolish, pale, clean-shaven young man on trial in distant Calah. Only the pursuers from Ob would know him now. "Aren't we going to enquire?" He didn't like it here. He felt exposed.

"I'll do that inside, while I'm asking about books."

Starsin and Ussha approached one of the stalls and got platefuls of food, a mess of white grains and stewed spiced vegetables. The strongly flavoured food was delicious and easy to wolf down. As they stood eating it from wooden plates topped with a large leaf, he kept a lookout for any blond arrogant strangers, but did not see any. Rurnik had disappeared, and Lannaira had gone off through a door to find the library and get permission to browse through it.

Ussha poked him in the side.

"What?"

"Isn't that one over there?"

Starsin turned his head. Crossing the courtyard was a blond man clad in dark, travel-stained clothing. His bearing was arrogant as he pushed through the crowd of monks and pilgrims. Starsin flinched. He wasn't sure, but he might have seen the man at Ob.

"Damn." His heart pounded. Where to hide? Rurnik had disappeared somewhere and Lannaira had gone in search of the library. He gripped Ussha's wrist. "Quick, let's go inside."

Chapter 6

They passed through a carved doorway topped by a semicircular arch of dressed stone.

Drums thumped, and monks were chanting. They entered a large, dimly lit hall. The walls were painted in yellow colour with crude murals of grotesque demons, and the pitched ceiling was held up by red beams, carved and painted.

"Calah Virnals aren't religious, so he's not likely to come in here unless he spotted us."

"It'll be a new ethnographic experience, at least." She took his hand.

Ussha had certainly learnt some long words in Calah.

Standing at the back of the large shadowy room he finished his food and watched strange scenes. For an hour the chief monk chanted, beating a drum with one hand and holding a wheat-sheaf in the other, while before him sat silent rows of bowing monks. The effect was mesmeric. His eyes slowly adapted to the dim light. On the walls behind the seated monks were old faded tapestries embroidered

with threads of silver and gold, and the chief monk's red-painted chair was set with little clumps of jewels.

Starsin checked around for Virnals, and saw Rurnik for a moment, moving past ceramic offering bowls, but there was no sign of Lannaira.

"Isn't it wonderful!" Ussha whispered. Starsin had no words to pray. He was accustomed to a different name of god, a different ceremonial. His mind returned to the destroyed town of Ob, and the far-away village of Swampfeld, where his disaster had begun.

Ussha chattered on in a low voice, contrasting the ceremonies with those of her own tribe and the jaded ceremonials of Calah.

How much longer did he need to hide in here? He could not leave the monastery without Lannaira.

When the drumming finished, a crowd of villagers came in, chattering and laughing. They lined up to be touched in turn by the chief monk, who sat calmly through all the irreligious disturbance, though even the people at the front were talking to their friends as though they were in a market place. He found the contrast between these two ceremonies incomprehensible.

Ussha poked him in the side. "Over there."

He looked in the direction of her discreetly pointing finger. His guts froze on seeing a tall, pale-haired figure. It was the Vernal again, who had entered the room and stood by the door looking around.

He glanced around for an alternative exit, but there was none. He had a short while to act, before the Vernal's eyes adjusted to the gloom. Dared he try brushing past the man?

His eyes fell on the waiting line of pilgrims. He grasped Ussha's hand. "Pretend we're worshippers," he said in a low voice. He pulled up the hood of his jacket. They joined the line, holding hands.

Slowly the line shuffled forward.

"Is he still there?" he asked, head down.

Ussha looked. "Yes."

They came closer to the chief monk, the one with the red cord around his neck. The wrinkled face regarded him severely while he blessed another pilgrim. This was not what Starsin had intended at all. He had no interest in their religion, but it would attract attention if he backed out now.

Starsin knelt. The touch of the papery hand on his hair was like an electric shock. "Unknown young man, you have suffered much, for trying to aid others."

The hand lifted. Shaken, Starsin feared his obscurity had been penetrated, and this monk knew who he was. He got to his feet. The monk called him back,

tugging at Starsin's coat, something he had never done with the other worshippers. "Don't be sad, young man. Your friend loves you," the monk whispered in a voice like rustling manuscripts, before dropping his hand and turning away. Dazed, Starsin glanced around, but nobody was paying him any particular attention. Ussha was kneeling.

The monk placed his hand on Ussha's dark hair and mumbled words to her inaudible over the chatter of other visitors.

Ussha rose and rejoined him.

"That monk spoke as if he knew who I was." He glanced at the entrance. The Virnal had gone. "I think we should find Lannaira." He felt more prepared now to dodge any Virnals.

"All right."

He took Ussha's hand, and they made their way out of the room. "How was it?" Ussha asked. "The laying on of hands?"

"It was strange. He said things about my past, and I sensed a kind of psychic energy, then he said that someone loved me."

She smiled. They were disturbed by footsteps nearby. A slap of sandals on the old cool stones.

"What did he say to you?" he asked.

"That I had a hard road ahead. That might be true."

"Not so hard, I hope." He squeezed her hand.

"Let's not get sentimental," she whispered.

Starsin turned aside, confused and rebuffed. What he'd imagined as an intimate moment had passed. Why had he left the hall? The Virnal had checked it and gone. They entered an inner courtyard, shaded by the wide eaves on four sides. He had something to think over. Which friend had the monk meant? Lannaira? Ussha? Presumably Ussha. He inspected the crowd drifting around stalls. No Virnals.

Wine was for sale in the courtyard. He bought a bottle of white wine, a labelled variety from the Empire, and wrenched off the stopper. The wine was a good one, with a faint fruity flavour. The stars were now glinting in velvet and the air was cooler.

Lannaira appeared among the thin crowd, carrying fresh bread and fruit. He rushed over to her. "We saw a Virnal," he said. "A man with ash-blond hair."

"Oh? When? Did he look at you?"

"A deciurnal ago. No."

"If you met another, avoid conversation."

"You're not taking me seriously."

"I am, but let's not panic. Where did you see him?" She glanced around at the stalls and shuffling pilgrims.

"In the prayer hall."

"Let's not go out there, for now," she said.

He offered her a cup of the wine.

"Good idea," she said. "I couldn't even get in the main part of the rat-cursed library. Get another bottle."

"What are you hoping to find in there anyway?"

"Old texts. Part of their religious life is preserving and copying old texts. Some of them are older than anything else we know of. Older than the kingdoms that preceded the Empire. If I can find a really old one and get it translated into common tongue, who knows what I might discover."

"But what? Tales of dead kings nobody remembers?"

"We found an ancient one last year, and it crumbled as we turned the pages and transcribed it. It described *machines*."

Starsin's mind spun. "You mean like Virnal experiments? Golims? Beam weapons?"

"That sort of thing. Yes."

"You mean everything was different *before*?"

"Yes."

"So the burning pits, regers, deadly pots, it's all ..."

"Yes."

He gulped the wine. The world was not as he had imagined it.

Lannaira looked around her, at a robed monk, at a pair of Eastern pilgrims, at a fat trader from the South. "Enough of that for now." She held out her wine glass.

He sat down beside Ussha, who was fanning her cleavage.

Lannaira poked his shoulder "I know how your thoughts run. Don't misbehave inside the monastery. Stay here and eat a bite of this." Lannaira sat at Starsin's other side and offered him a wrinkled fruit.

"Where's Rurnik?" he asked. "I saw him earlier." Starsin bit into the soft red fruit, and the juices ran into his stubbly beard.

"God knows. He'll be lurking about, don't worry."

"Are we going to move on? Assuming we can get the animals and leave without running into the Virnals?"

Lannaira stared at him. "You need a rest. We all need a rest. And I want to get into the library. It's a rare opportunity."

"Why couldn't you get in the library already?"

"They say I have to see the chief monk. But he's busy now leading services. Also I found out that a Vernal was allowed in the library only a few days ago."

Starsin flung down a fruit stone. "Which Virnal? Did they give a name, or describe him?"

"He's gone now. I didn't get a name."

"I wonder which pervert swine it was. One wonders what he found."

"He couldn't have found much during one prayer cycle."

"One what?" he asked.

"That's how they measure time here. They can do four prayer cycles during daylight."

"What are we doing now?" Starsin asked.

"The day grows late. We'll eat and spend the night here. I'll try again later to gain access to the library."

"I'd rather leave. They might try to surprise us during the night, search the sleeping places."

Lannaira scratched her scalp, and sighed. "Let's find out if any of them are still here. If they are, we'll figure out how to hide from them, or get away this evening with our animals."

Starsin nodded, with reluctance.

"So go outside and see if they are still here," Lannaira said.

He and Ussha went out to the courtyard and bought more food. They strolled around the courtyard while eating it and drank small beer. Out here, the light was

fading, and the monks had lit hanging oil lamps that gave a warmth to the yellow walls and red beams.

They did not see any Virnals, or any animals in military harness.

Indoors, the drums and cymbals crashed monotonously and saffron-robed male dancers swayed and pounded their bare feet. Lannaira had not spotted any Virnals either.

Ussha was yawning, and so they left and found the pilgrim dormitory upstairs where they could rest and try to sleep, along with dozens of other pilgrims and visitors. It did not look like a space where the arrogant Vernal officers would want to sleep.

They had their furs, and lay on a lumpy straw-filled mattress. Flea-ridden, he thought.

Starsin awoke, in a room lit by a single lamp. Snoring and coughing disturbed the silence, and the reek of unwashed bodies filled his nose. A shrouded figure was picking his way between the sleeping bodies, headed toward him. Heart pounding, he reached for his knife.

The figure stooped, lay down. Starsin let out the breath he had been holding. It was just a visitor who had gone out to urinate.

In the morning, Starsin inspected the monastery courtyard with care, fearful lest more Virnals or other enemies had arrived at first light. Monks were setting out food for pilgrims and lighting cooking braziers. He found a yawning Lannaira, who had a fresh piece of information.

"I have a description of the Vernal who visited the library two days ago. He had yellow hair with threads of grey, a scarred cheek, and walked with the aid of a stick, as though he recovered from an injury."

"Was he travelling alone?"

"No, he had a small entourage of soldiers or servants with him."

Starsin felt a chill. "That could be a description of Lord Kathan, but does that make sense? Could he have got here from Ob so soon, and why? He was injured."

"Someone else with a duelling scar, then. It's popular with them? You've spoken of duelling more than once," Lannaira said.

"There's a Vernal at the gate," Ussha said. She pointed.

A fair-haired man stood in the main entrance gateway of the monastery courtyard. He wore dark, dusty travelling clothes. Starsin's heart hammered.

"It looks like the same man," he said. "He's checking the people coming in and out. What do we do now?" His voice rose.

"Carry on getting breakfast, while we think about this," Lannaira told him.

"We need to find Rurnik."

The Virnal stood watching the gateway while they ate. Rurnik appeared and grunted a greeting. "We're leaving soon," Lannaira told him.

"How can we leave with him there?" Starsin asked.

"We ride past," Lannaira said. "That's the only exit that will take the animals. If we're challenged, we can spur them up."

"Are there more of them outside?" Starsin asked.

Ussha beckoned Rurnik over and spoke to him in the Northern language, pointing to the gate.

Rurnik grunted assent and ambled off.

"I'm not riding past that Virnal," Starsin said.

"Maybe you shouldn't, then," Lannaira said. "You could climb over the wall and meet us at the bend in the road."

Starsin nodded, in relief.

"Rurnik can take the animals out," Ussha said. "They don't know him."

"Are you serious?" Starsin said in a low voice. He did not trust Rurnik not to make off with all four animals.

Lannaira shook her head. "One man with four animals? There should be at least two people."

Rurnik returned, and gave a shrug and a shake of his head.

"Let's eat. We're travellers getting breakfast. Virnals shouldn't be interested in us. If we wait, he might go away," Lannaira said.

Starsin tried to eat his breakfast of rice, vegetables and cold meat. He wanted to hide inside the monastery buildings. Whenever the crowd in the courtyard thinned, he could see the Virnal standing watchful by the gate.

A man in a dark furred coat approached the Virnal, sketched a salute with raised hand, and spoke to him. The Virnal turned his head, appeared to listen, and gave a curt nod. He spoke a couple of words, then the second man turned away. He moved through the crowd, and passed quite close to them.

Starsin buried his face in his food, not daring to look the man in the face.

"He's wearing a reinforced leather jerkin under his coat, has a long dagger, and cropped hair," Lannaira said in a low voice. "Looks like an Imperial or Virnal trooper. I wonder how many more of them there are."

Starsin forced a bolt of food down his throat. How could Lannaira remain so calm? Ussha was white-faced.

Another trooper made his way through the crowd and reported to his boss.

"That's two," Lannaira said. "There's another by the stable area. They have some animals there with matching harness and panniers."

"There's another one buying food," Ussha said.

"How could they have got ahead of us?" Starsin asked. He felt even more threatened now.

"I'm not sure they did," Lannaira said. "The troopers could have arrived this morning. And we spent a lot of time getting out of the forest."

"We shouldn't have stopped here," Starsin said, in a low voice. "We should have kept moving."

"Well sorry," Lannaira said. She did not sound contrite. "Seems like they're not leaving right away. Let's move out of their sight for a while." She pointed to the monastery buildings.

With alacrity, Starsin followed her indoors.

"Let's look around the back, see if there's any kind of postern gate," Lannaira said.

Drums sounded, and devotees walked slowly around, counting strings of dark beads. Starsin did not see any troopers in the worship halls.

A small door gave access to a patch of ground at the rear, rather weedy, part dug over in preparation for spring vegetables, and enclosed by the outer palisade. Starsin glanced around, to check that they were unobserved. Nobody was watching. There was a small gate, but it was nailed shut.

"It doesn't look difficult to climb," Starsin said. He peered through a crack in the palisade. There was sloping ground on the far side.

"All right, let's go back," Lannaira said.

Back in a hall passage, Lannaira moved with care, checking around them.

Starsin did not see any troopers.

Lannaira and Rurnik went to buy provisions for their onward journey, and check the courtyard. Starsin endured a nervous wait till they returned with bulging cloth bags.

"They're still there. It doesn't look like they'll move anytime soon. I think we should make our move," Lannaira said.

Starsin's stomach tightened. He nodded.

"Rurnik and I will leave with the ponies and timalts. Rurnik should take off his fur coat and raise his hood. Can you make sure he knows what to do, Ussha?"

Ussha spoke a few words to Rurnik, who nodded. Starsin wondered why Lannaira couldn't instruct the Northman herself.

"What about you?" Starsin said to Lannaira.

"They'll not recognise *me*," she said over her shoulder.

Lannaira turned to Starsin. "You and Ussha get over the palisade and work your way around to the main track, till you can join us out of direct sight of the main gate. If there's a lot of shouting, I'll turn back and get you."

Starsin nodded.

"Alright, go."

He pushed open the small door. The vegetable plot was still untended.

He helped Ussha over the log palisade, then followed. The unexpected longer drop caught him unawares, and he grabbed at a bunch of weed to stop himself sliding. The ground on this side fell away in a steep slope. They worked their way round, below the palisade, where they could not be seen from inside.

"Hey!"

Starsin looked up. A man wearing a hood was looking over the log palisade, and looking down at him.

"What're you doing down there?"

Starsin's stomach cramped. Ussha's hand tightened on his fingers. What could he do? He turned away and scrambled onwards across the slope.

"Hey!"

Starsin came across a dried stick, picked it up and waved it at the figure above. This seemed to satisfy the fellow, for he waved back. Above, the fellow called to unseen but audible companions. Just what he didn't need when trying to escape, a noisy idiot.

He pointed down. Ussha nodded, and they scrambled lower down and among bushes, hoping to hide from those above. Further on, they climbed hand to hand along a steep wooded slope among trees that bordered the road.

"Do you think the Virnals will come out?" Ussha asked.

"I hope not."

Beyond the neck of the bluff, Lannaira and Rurnik were waiting, while the two *timalts* and two ponies chomped on roadside weeds.

Lannaira saw Starsin among the trees, waved him back, and moved the animals round a bend in the road. Starsin and Ussha ran through the undergrowth before reaching the others and mounting up.

"Hurry!" he said. "Someone saw us climbing along the slope."

They were out of sight of the monastery gates here, but drumbeats and chanting came from ahead. Starsin spurred his *timalt* on, hoping the Virnals had not the foresight to ambush the road.

Around the curve they came upon a mass of people, a pilgrimage of religious fanatics, all dressed in grey robes of cheap cloth. They carried the emblems of their sect above them on poles, and chanted and drummed as they walked.

Starsin reined in. "What the hell?"

Lannaira reacted to the shaven heads with a frown and shudder. "This province seems to be full of religious madmen!" she said to Starsin once they had gone by.

He glanced at her and grunted. "I hope they tolerate disagreement."

"Who were they? Why were they doing that weird ceremonial in the road?"

Ussha asked.

"They looked like a splinter of the Oneists who run the monastery and are popular in Chazu," Lannaira explained.

"Did you recognise the Vimal?" Starsin asked.

"No," Lannaira said. "I got a good look at him. Large nose. No insignia."

The morning was cool and a gibbous moon was still visible in the sky.

As they emerged from among trees, Rurnik dropped coins and dismounted to retrieve them.

As the Northerner picked small coins from the dirt, Starsin circled back to watch. "Where did you get all that coin?" He guessed the answer.

"Found it," Rurnik said.

"I'll hand you over if we have to go back there," Lannaira said.

Rurnik confessed that he had occupied himself by palming small relics, and stealing small sums from many offering bowls, so that the loss would not be noticed. He was very pleased with his haul.

"Aren't you afraid the gods will punish you for stealing from a holy place?" Starsin asked him.

"Not my gods, no," said the short Northerner, grinning behind his whiskers.

Chapter 7

"So what's the plan now?" Starsin asked.

"We head for one of our settlements further south, and then we'll see what we can do for you, and you for us," Lannaira said.

Starsin stood on a rock and looked back over the dusty trail. A warm breeze whipped at his shirt. "There's no sign of anyone following," he said.

They had not sighted the Virnal and his followers since the monastery, and had no way of knowing the movements of those men. They could have been on other business and gone back to the Empire, or having re-found their trail be galloping in pursuit a mere league behind. Or waiting in ambush ahead.

"Come down, then," Ussha called.

He climbed down the brown rocks and rejoined the others. On the far side of the track, water trickled from an underground aquifer and made a stream that trickled onward to disappear into the dry landscape.

"This is the last water we'll find for a while," Lannaira said. "So make the most of it."

"I will," Starsin said. "My water-bottle's low and I need a wash." They got out the water-bottles from the panniers, and he and Ussha held hands as they picked their way over stony ground to the watercourse.

He knelt and cupped up water with his hands. It was cool, with a faint mineral flavour.

"How is it?" Ussha asked.

"Better than Calah water."

"Good. We'll wash lower down." She dropped her bottle beside him.

He held his leather water-bottle in the stream, to fill it.

Lannaira and Rurnik came and watered the ponies and timalts.

Further downstream, Starsin balanced on a stone by the side of the water-hole, and wiped at himself with a wetted rag.

"And I'm not washing your clothes," Ussha said. She stood a few paces off, looking with evident interest at his naked body. His clothes lay on the ground beside him. The sun warmed his back, making him think how far they had come, from the region of permanent snow through the cold forests into this drier and warmer landscape.

"I'll do it," he said. His clothes were grimy and smelt bad, and his trows were worn thin by constant rubbing on the timalt saddle.

They had descended wind-blasted passes in frost-rimmed jagged mountains, ridden across freezing deserts of rock and sand where only thorns and harsh scrub grew, skirted salt marshes fed by disappearing rivers, and lost themselves in black stony plains where they saw no-one.

His clothes would dry here, unlike a few days earlier when he had rinsed his smelly underclothes in a stream that ran off an icy mountain.

During the trek, Starsin tried to reconstruct part of his past by questioning Ussha about the tendays and months she had passed in Calah during his imprisonment there. She could talk little of the city, however, without driving him into jealous resentment by mention of Larash.

Their pace slowed when they no longer had snow to provide them with water. Now they had to follow trails from water-hole to water-hole while looking out for fodder for the animals and anything they could eat themselves.

"Lannaira enjoys this dismal landscape." Ussha gestured at the dessicated plain around them. "How much longer till we reach Chazu?" Scrub hid Rurnik, who was digging for edible roots a little way off.

Starsin disliked the emptiness, but he too sensed Lannaira took enjoyment from this monstrous geography.

"Chazu is a long way south-east, but she says we are near the rebels' southern camp now," Starsin said.

"It's still a day or two away, but there is something I'd like to show you first," Lannaira said.

"What's that?" He turned to look at her.

"It's a well-known relic," she said.

She refused to elaborate further, even when they turned away from the established trail next day, and followed a thinner track across the sandy waste. By degrees they approached a pimple, which became a mound with a lump on the top. The lump became a stone tower. Only when they reined in at its foot did Starsin realise, with a chill, that the mound was a conical pile of white bones. From its centre, many spans above the ground, rose a tower, seemingly made from a single grey stone, and so worn and rounded by time that it looked as if it had been there from the beginning of the world.

"Ugh," he said. "I see why it's well-known, at least. But what is this? Is this huge pile all bones? Who made it?"

"Not many people have climbed this," Lannaira said, "but if you do, you'll see something that changes your opinion of what this world is, for ever. And by then you may have the answer to your other question, how did the bones get there."

"You want us to climb it?" Ussha asked. "This horrible looking thing?"

Lannaira turned to face her. "No, I want Starsin to climb it. It's important he sees this."

"I don't want to climb the nasty thing anyway," Ussha said. Starsin glanced at Rurnik, who as usual had said nothing. The Northman had backed his pony off and was looking at the mound out of the side of his eyes.

"You still haven't told us what it's called," Starsin said.

Lannaira looked up at the tower top. "It's called the Dead Tower. But those who have climbed it call it something else."

"Creepy," Ussha said.

Starsin dismounted and handed the reins to Lannaira. He walked over to the mound. Lannaira's words intrigued him, and he'd show the others he had the guts to accept the challenge of climbing the unpleasant mound.

The pile, over fifty forearm-lengths in height, was a mass of bones, but when Starsin pulled one out, it moved with stiff resistance. An infill of packed sand, windblown, formed a solid mass with the buried skeletal pieces. The surface bones were whitened by the sun, worn and weathered, jumbled and broken.

He turned and looked back at Lannaira. "What kind of bones are these, anyway?"

"Most of these are rat and bird bones, quite old," she said.

Starsin pointed to a large bone and a half-buried skull. "Aren't those human?"

"They are."

"Ugh," Ussha said. She let her pony back off a pace.

"Is it bones all the way through?" Starsin asked. He knelt and pulled out bones, finding sand and more bone beneath.

"We believe so," Lannaira said. She dismounted from her timalt.

"How-?" Starsin began, then stopped. She'd already answered that question.

Lannaira gestured upward with her free hand.

Starsin climbed two steps up the bony surface and found the matrix of bone and sand supported his weight.

"I can climb this," he said.

Lannaira didn't reply.

Starsin climbed higher, till he had ascended about forty feet and was closer to the aged tower in the centre. A high view over the plain would help him be sure there were no pursuers. He kept slipping back and loosening small slides as though the material despite its age was still at its original angle of rest.

"Be careful!" Lannaira called. She shaded her eyes to watch as he crunched up the mound. Ussha and Rurnik, still mounted, had ridden further away.

A dead bird lay just above him, near the top. It smelt putrid as though it had recently died there. Beside it was a dead desert rat.

Below, Lannaira beckoned him to climb higher. He reached the tower, and touched the grey, rough stone. Inside a worn irregular opening he found a stairway, so worn it was almost a ramp.

"Climb to the large openings," Lannaira called.

He did so, stepping with his toes on the back of the spiralling steps. Gaining a small level section, he turned to enjoy the view.

He was looking at a city. Tall, airy buildings of stone and glass whose like he had never seen, catching an evening sun. That was wrong; it wasn't evening. An orange glow flowed over the bases of the buildings, burning and collapsing them. He saw moving machines, and people, many people, in clothes such as he had never seen, a complete world. He saw a flame that crawled over the buildings and destroyed them. It was as though the buildings and the ground were melting with fire.

The fire burned and lit up the buildings so they crumbled into pieces. It caught the machines and melted them. It set fire to the clothing of the people. Even the ground heated up and flamed as the burning crept across the pavements.

There was a woman a few yards from where he stood. In his eyes the ground was just below his feet. She was alive till the ground heated and glowed under her. Fire burned her shoes, then consumed her legs. She was screaming.

He tried to climb out of the tower, but when he put a leg through, there was nothing below his foot. He pulled himself back and crouched, unable to look as the corpse burst into flame. Below, Lannaira was shouting to him.

Head down, he ran around the platform and up another section of worn stair. The horror stopped abruptly as though it had never been. At his feet was a litter of small animal skeletons. Far below, Lannaira shouted at him.

"For God's sake Starsin, stop climbing and come down."

He stopped, and looked up at the sky through one of the irregular openings. The heavens were blue up there, with a wisp of white cloud. Far off on the horizon was a roiling brown mass. A vulture glided out of the sky toward him. Without warning, its wings folded up and it fell as a black lump of feathers to land with a thump and a clatter of sliding bone some way below him.

Lannaira's shouting made sense now. He could die here; he had to get down. With shaking legs he stumbled down the treacherous stair where his feet slipped on blown grit. He reached the piled bones and crawled out onto the heap, sliding downward on his backside.

At the foot of the mound, he landed in a shower of dust and bone fragments. He crouched, shuddering, with his hands over his face.

Above his head, Lannaira's voice registered both anger and concern. "I told you not to climb higher!"

"You told me," he mumbled.

He felt Lannaira's hand on his shoulder. There was a smell of timalt. The animal nickered.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Where are Ussha and Rurnik?" he asked.

"Messing around on the desert," she said. "They didn't like being near that."

"What was that city? That fire? It was so real." His mind shuddered with the recollection of what he had seen.

"You saw that? It's an image of the ancient world, and of its destruction. It perished so long ago, but there are still bits of it lying around, still killing people."

He raised his face and looked over his hands. "The tower kills anything that goes too high? Why?"

"I've no idea. I don't even know if it's a weapon or a malfunction. At the least we should try to shut down all these deadly relics. At best, if we recovered their secrets, what couldn't we do?" She was looking up at the sky.

He wiped wetness from his face. "That's insane. If what you say is true, it's already destroyed the world once, and most of its people."

"Yes, but what if the Virnals are taking an interest in this? We can't let them master this first. Either way, it would be the end of all freedom, perhaps the end of our lives."

"Is that why you showed me that horror? So I'd help you?" A worm of resentment twisted.

"I'm sorry." She touched his shoulder again. "How do you feel?"

"Like my eyes have been torn open, or torn out. I thought the world was made of earth, wood, stone and water. But it's not."

"No, it's not," she said.

"I'd rather not have known." A thought struck him. "You spoke of the *regers* earlier. Are they connected with this?"

Lannaira paused as if choosing her words carefully. "We hope to find out. In some regions, the *regers* are inert. In many other places, we can show that they are responding. I expect that they will work here."

"Like at Ob?"

Lannaira nodded. "Let's get the others." She passed him the reins of his timalt. They did not mount, but continued to talk.

"The whole land is still infested with the magic of the ancients; it still works. Come, let's catch Ussha and Rurnik."

"It looked as real as this." He gestured at the plain. "But there was no sound. And I saw the desert and the vultures through it, like ghosts."

"Hurry. We're losing the others."

She glanced at him, but said nothing for a moment. She shuddered. "Those bones! That's what's so horrible; it's been there so long, so terribly long, and it's as deadly as ever. That burning you saw - it seems to be the same as the fields of unnatural fire, only more intense. That's what destroyed the ancient ones; we think."

A gust of wind buffeted his face. He looked around. The low brown wall of cloud he had seen from the tower was much closer. "Is that a dust-storm?" he pointed.

"Yes, damn it." Lannaira mounted her timalt. "We need to close up."

Starsin also mounted, and kneed his animal into a trot.

"And you think the fields of fire are the same thing returned, to destroy us?" Starsin spoke loudly.

"It's the same power-sorcery. And it will destroy us if it continues to spread; not in our lifetimes perhaps, but if it keeps growing for long enough, the doom is certain."

"But why, and why does it return now?"

"We may never know that, I fear. I think the old bardic legends speak true; they did use magic in place of animals and mechanisms, and toil. But something went wrong; war, or an accident, and the power-sorcery consumed everything. It's as if you saw their last moments."

Sweat burst out on Starsin's body as the full implications of this sunk in.

"Why has it come back now?"

"It responds to who knows what, the wearing of rocks, the movement of wandering stars, or just the passage of time."

Ussha and Rurnik had seen them, but were cantering off. "Hey, stop," Lannaira shouted.

"Are they going the right way?"

"Near enough." She urged her timalt into a canter.

Starsin drew alongside, and shouted, "That destruction - that makes me think 'weapon'. What do you say?"

"I don't know. But we need to understand. Those stone-burning-fields that appear in the west - they are increasing. They look dangerous. But if we mastered these ancient things, we would be more powerful than the Virnals. We would need nothing from their Empire."

A blast of wind hit Starsin's back, and dust swirled around him.

"Stop, you idiots," Lannaira shouted. She increased her pace, and Starsin followed. The visibility was becoming bad.

He had a notion of what Lannaira's dream was - the recreation of an ancient world of wonder and plenty. But he had a simpler vision. *Find the weapon. Fry the Virnals.* "I'll support your work," he shouted. He flicked his reins, and they rode hard after Ussha and Rurnik.

#

The wind strengthened, and loose dust clouded the air. A speck of grit stung his eye. He blinked, trying to dislodge it.

Ussha and Rurnik were lost in the swirling dust. *Ussha.* In alarm, he struck his *timalt* with his whip, spurring it into a gallop toward where he had last seen them.

"We can't see. Come back, you fool," Lannaira shouted. He glanced behind. She was slowing.

A gust of wind pushed him half out of the saddle, and more dust got in his eyes. He recovered and looked around him. The dust in the air obscured the landscape, and smoky streams of sand swirled across the ground and under the *timalt's* hooves. Wind roared and tugged at his clothes. No longer sure of his direction, he continued at the same furious pace.

He looked back. Lannaira was no longer with him. He reined in and waited for her to catch up. He shouted, but the howling wind drowned his voice, and sand got in his mouth and throat. Lannaira did not appear. Starsin kicked the *timalt* in the ribs again. The imperative of finding Ussha and Rurnik drove him on. He did not want to be separated from Ussha, or leave her with Rurnik.

He stopped when blown grit hit him in the face. Either the wind was shifting, or he was going in a circle. All around him was nothing except swirling brown-ness. Under the *timalt's* nose, he made out the mark of a trackway, and followed it in the direction Ussha should have gone. As the choking dust rose, he covered his face with a cloth.

Later, he thought to use the slope of the ground to fetch him back to the hill of bones which could not be far off.

When nightfall came and eased the storm, he found himself alone in an unfamiliar world of dunes and rock, recognising nothing, knowing no direction.

#

With sickening self-blame, Lannaira realised she had lost Starsin after guiding him for so long, not to mention losing Ussha and Rurnik. She couldn't see or hear anything in this noise and swirling sand, with wind gusts that almost pushed her off the *timalt*. Useless to keep chasing. She stopped the *timalt* at once and covered her face with a cloth.

To let the other two ride ahead in the treacherous drylands had been a slight risk, and now it had undone her. It was entirely her own fault for being too wrapped up in her enthusiasm for ancient relics and not paying enough attention to the land.

Time passed. The squall did not abate, and the others did not reappear. She had to think of surviving the storm with some hope of finding the others afterwards. A ridge had overlooked the trail. She lay low across the animal's neck and caused it to walk upwards. She could at least feel which direction was uphill. This was a survival technique an old man from the Rodan had taught her. There would be less dust and flying stones at a higher elevation. Wind pulled at her and dust scraped her exposed skin.

After an age of this, in the tilt of the timalt's saddle she felt the animal cease ascending, level and start to descend again - she had reached the spine of the ridge. She turned the hexlegs and followed the ridge line which rose, as she remembered, to the right till she reached the highest point. The wind, mixed with pellets of hail, roared and buffeted and tried to push her off the timalt. The air remained so thick with dust that she had to breathe through the cloth and it was foolish to keep her eyes open.

She dismounted rapidly and took shelter behind a rock on the lee slope, hoping Starsin would have the sense to come to the same point when the storm passed. She had no tent-poles and in any case the wind blew too strong for her to pitch a tent. Chilled by the wind and very tired, she saw nothing more to be done. She took her bedroll off the timalt, unsheathed her dagger, rolled herself in the bedroll, blinked grit from her eyes and slept.

Dawn glowed in the east, sending blue shadows across the dunes. Lannaira unwrapped herself from her dust and grit covered sleeping roll and looked around her. The bone-pile and the tower were still visible below, with the area scoured clear of sand, but fresh drifts and dunes made the landscape strange from this new perspective. There was no sign of Starsin, nor any sign of any human presence anywhere. A numbing emptiness settled in her chest.

"If I'd found him in that storm, it would have convinced him I was a sorceress."

She worried over Starsin, who might not have found the other two. She also fretted about Ussha and Rurnik as she did not believe that either had any experience of surviving a dust-storm.

The timalt had been secured by a halter pinned under a rock. It had got loose, but shuffled its hooves nearby, no doubt not out of animal devotion but

because the creature owned just enough intelligence to remember it depended on Lannaira for its favourite tidbits.

She sipped sour-tasting water from her flask, and with an empty belly attacked the supplies of dried meat and wild fruits. She would wait a few hours in case Starsin showed up. If he came back to the ridge or the death mound, she would be able to see him approach. She beheld no sense in attempting to search many square leagues of desert. While searching, she might miss Starsin as he made his way back to her present location. She had no wish to go onward another day to the town of the stone towers, present her unwelcome self, and ask their aid for a general search. With a heavy heart, she waited. The harsh sun grew hot and climbed higher into a deep blue sky.

Chapter 8

Starsin fell from the timalt's back and lay in a drift of sand. The hot midday sun blazed down upon him, for it was spring in this dry land and already the sun stood long in the sky. Thirst baked his tongue, making him desperate for water, but there was none to be had. His water-flask had cracked, and most of the precious liquid had run into the pannier and evaporated.

For three days he had attempted to find his way by the sun and stars, and regain the trail in the hope of finding Ussha, but it had been in vain. In that time he had not eaten, save for one of his medicine tablets, and when he had chewed at the damp leather for water. His head throbbed and his eyes were sore from the glare. As he lay with the reins trailing from his fingers, he tried to shade himself from the sun, but found even that effort too great and soon lost consciousness.

Hands gripped and shook him, and a cool wetness ran into his mouth, eased his cracked lips and trickled down his cheeks. He coughed. A dark face bent over him, and harsh voices murmured. His hands were too weak to steady the water-skin, and

he spluttered as they poured water into his mouth and down his dry throat. They lifted him up and strapped him over a beast of burden that swayed as it moved; he was too feeble to resist.

Some time later he had recovered enough to call for more water. In his squinting upside-down view he saw white-robed desert men, his rescuers. They led timalts laden with bundles of goods and tent-rolls. One rode a long-legged humped beast. He blinked to clear his eyes and twisted his head, but the oddity remained. He supposed it was a camel, a rare beast he had never seen. Behind the animals toiled lines of men on foot.

Starsin shuddered. He remembered well the old verse telling the cruelty of nomads.

I do not have a farm with shade trees

I have a horse and knife

I will kill you and go.

#

A swarthy man, clad from head to foot in a dirty white robe, cantered his timalt up to Starsin. Without dismounting, he untied Starsin and pulled him upright so he could drink, and thrust at him a skin of sloshing liquid.

Starsin put an ivory teat to his mouth and sucked. To his surprise it was not water but a white, sour-tasting liquid. He guessed it was timalt mare's milk.

"Where have you come from?" the desert rider asked. He spoke the universal tongue of the country, so Starsin grasped what the fellow said despite his barbarous Eastern accent.

"From Ob."

"Where is this Ob? What land?" The fellow gripped Starsin's arm and his swarthy and weathered face loomed close.

"In the far North." Starsin pointed northwards, away from the sun. They were travelling in a southerly or easterly direction; it was not possible for him to be more precise.

"Why have you come from this Ob?"

Suspicion warned him not to reveal his true identity to these strangers. "I was imprisoned there, but raiders attacked the place, and I escaped."

The rider smiled, not a friendly expression. "They want you back, eh?"

Starsin read his thought. "Who knows? The reward would be small and the journey far."

The milk helped refresh him from his dizzy and fainting state. In time, they halted to shelter from the heat of the day. The desert men had tents of dark felt erected by

an economical arrangement of poles, cords and flexible withies into low half-dome structures. Meanwhile the timalts and camels were tethered in lines. Beyond them, scores of ragged men and women, tied up in lines, squatted in the hot sun. The sight did nothing for Starsin's peace of mind.

They brought him a meal of cheese, butter, bread, dried meat and figs, which rumbled in his empty stomach. He washed it down with more milk. Revived, Starsin faced his questioners again. Their leader was a swarthy, hook-nosed man whom the others called Yarcon.

This Yarcon probed him on his tale of being a prisoner. "What did you do? How urgently do they seek your return?"

"I spoke against their rule," Starsin said, shaving the truth. "They don't like that."

"And are they searching for you?" the hook-nosed one asked.

He did not care for the implications of this question. On the other hand they were many tendays' travel from Ob, moving away from it and unlikely to return there. "I doubt it. Many escaped, many died."

He realised he had lost an important possession, his long knife.

"My knife - where is it?" he asked. The desert men laughed softly. Yarcon smiled, thin-lipped, in a manner Starsin found untrustworthy.

"What people are you?" Starsin asked.

"We are the Mainyu - we are traders." Yarcon smiled.

"In what do you trade?"

Again they laughed. Yarcon pointed to the lines of ragged men and women who squatted outside in the hot sun. A chill crept over Starsin, deeper than the shade. It was what he had feared. He wondered how long he was going to suffer for his folly in Calah.

"How did you find me?" he asked. "I have not yet thanked you."

"I felt your vibrations from afar," the hook-nosed Yarcon murmured. "I have certain powers ... sorcery." The dark eyes held Starsin's in a near-hypnotic grip.

Starsin turned his head away. "I thank you for your kindness, but may I take my timalt and go?"

At this the desert men murmured together in their liquid dialect, grinning, and touching each other's hands. Yarcon's sinewy fingers gripped Starsin's shoulder in a vice-like grip. "Young nobleman! You will travel on with us until we find a good home for you!"

His men laughed in a mocking chorus.

Starsin's eye fell on the line of slaves. He stood up and tried to run towards them. The slavers seized him and threw him to the ground. "He cannot wait for the rope," said one. They howled with laughter.

He struggled to his knees and pointed to the slaves. "Have you found any people lost like myself - in the past few days?"

"Eating sand?" said one of the slavers. They howled with laughter.

Their leader cracked his riding-whip and ordered them silent. "Yes. Perhaps they know you."

They dragged Starsin over to the lines of slaves. His heart hammered with a mixture of hope and anxiety. He did not know if he wished to find his companions here.

"That one." Yarcon pointed to a line of female slaves.

He recognised Ussha's cloud of dark hair.

"Ussha!"

She turned slowly, then her face lit up as she recognised him. She looked little harmed, her clothes more ragged, her skin burned by the sun. Her hands were bound by cords, and a rope securing the other slaves was looped around her neck.

Relief she was still alive flooded over him, followed by sorrow that she too was a captive.

"You know her." Yarcon nodded, and wet his thin, dark lips. "Her family rich?"

Starsin guessed the slaver's thought.

"No. They're tribesmen, in the far North."

The slaver grunted. He turned to Ussha. "This man's family rich?"

Starsin tried to catch her eye, implore her to be discreet. Ussha was quick-witted.

"He has no family. All dead or exiled."

He had no chance to speak to Ussha again. The slavers dragged him over to the line of male slaves. Yarcon asked one of the others a question. The man went to the end of the line and kicked at a leather-clad figure slumped on the sand. The man sat up. It was Rurnik, bruised on the face but otherwise not visibly harmed.

Of course, he must have been captured with Ussha.

"Is this one of your group?" Yarcon asked, speaking to Rurnik.

Rurnik nodded.

"This man's family rich?" Yarcon asked him.

Rurnik shook his head, after a pause. "Don't know."

Yarcon considered this. "You know him. Tell us more."

Rurnik was silent, more out of hatred of his captors, Starsin realised, than any desire to help his mistress's lover.

A slaver hit Rurnik with a riding-whip, making a red mark on his cheek.

"They say he from big town, Calah. Exiled to Ob," Rurnik said, without looking at Starsin.

"Exile? Must be important, otherwise kill him," Yarcon said. His men laughed.

Dismay, fear and resentment streamed through Starsin's mind.

The slavers threatened Rurnik with the whip again.

"They call him Exalt. Prince."

Yarcon looked very pleased. "His name?"

"Falcon."

Being called Exalt no longer felt good. His guts cramped with apprehension.

Yarcon hurried off, and returned with a man who wore the same long sun-excluding robes as the slavers, but had the fair hair and blue eyes of a Virnal. His hair was bound at the sides of his head into short braids.

"See, Lord, I have an Exalt from the North. An exile. You pay much for him?"

"Oh yes," said the stranger. "I think we may want him. I'll pay you something for him." The man stared at Starsin.

A shiver of dismay swept over Starsin. He had recognised the voice at once, as the masked man from the walrus-hunt, and he had seen that distinctive large nose waiting at the monastery gate. That man had been pursuing Starsin across the forests and deserts. Now the Virnal would have him returned to the Empire for punishment.

"He's pretty boy?" Yarcon offered, with a leer.

The chorus of slavers laughed and made obscene gestures.

"Not now," the Virnal drawled. "And you leave him clean. He's mine."

Starsin stared at the Virnal in cold apprehension. Such activities disgusted him. In Calah he had brushed off approaches from inverters attracted by as they said his handsome face and body, but here these men could do what they pleased.

The Virnal turned and strode off. Yarcon, a dog before the master, hurried after, dragging Starsin. "How much, Master?"

The Virnal paused. "A good price. If you keep him ... alive."

They were close to the female slaves. Ussha heard this exchange and shouted at the Virnal, abusing him and the slavers in the filthiest terms and demanding they be set free. Starsin had been silent, for nothing he said could help him.

"Be quiet, Ussha! Stop this! They'll beat you!" Alarm at the thought of what they might do filled him.

Their captors were not amused. A slaver set about Ussha with his whip while Starsin struggled in the grip of two of them.

"Leave her alone, you bastards," he shouted.

The voice of the Virnal cut over the commotion.

"Cannot you keep that slave silent, Yarcon? And her ears are too sharp."

"Yes, Master," Yarcon said. "Filthy insolent female. Yes."

The Virnal stood over Starsin with an unpleasant smirk. "That's your woman, is it?"

Starsin could not speak. His impulse was to plead for Ussha, but that might not help her.

"How convenient. Your punishment starts now, you little shit." The Virnal went over to Yarcon and addressed him with instructions Starsin could not hear. The slaver was making some objection, that a snarl and gesture over-ruled.

Rough hands dragged Starsin away. He glimpsed them untying Ussha from the slave-line. Moments after she was taken out of his sight he heard her screaming, an awful, tearing sound that bespoke of terror and agony. His heart tore at hearing her faced with torture, and he dared not think what maiming they were inflicting to wrench that sound from her. The grinning, pitiless faces of the slavers swayed around him as he tilted in their grasp.

Half-mad with anger and fear for her, he bit and struggled, desperate to get to her, till one of the desert men kicked him in the genitals. The pain, worse than he had ever experienced, tore into him and half paralysed him. It drove tears into his eyes, hurting so much that despite his will to fight and save her he could hardly move. He let himself fall in a heap, abused by kicks and blows, and in the middle of his agony, Ussha's screams cut off, to be replaced by a horrible gurgling sound.

He dared not think what this meant, or even if she lived. He abused them as torturers and murderers as they tied him securely with ropes.

The tents were taken down with a great bustle and strapped on the pack animals. Rough hands placed Starsin on the saddle of a camel, which they tied by a line to the animal ahead of it. At the head of the column Yarcon brandished a curved sword, and they set off.

Starsin endured the hours of discomfort sickened by thoughts of her suffering, and with his eyes damp with tears. These slavers and the Virnal were capable of any acts, however vile, and he could do nothing. This had to be the same Virnal he had assaulted at the walrus hunt, and no doubt the man meant to have a thorough revenge.

At nightfall rough hands took him off the camel and pushed him into a tent. The night was freezing and his sleep was broken by nightmares. He prayed then feared that Ussha whose screams and gurgles echoed in his mind still lived.

#

Starsin awoke to pain. Another violent blow thudded into his side. He half raised himself and cringed back. The blows stopped. A boot with a turned up toe and sewn with blue beads rested in the sand at his side. He looked up to the opening where the warm blue light of dawn flooded into the tent.

Yarcon stood over him. "Slave, you look recovered from thirsting in the desert. I not have idle men in my caravan."

"What?" His body ached.

"You must work." Yarcon scowled down at his captive.

Starsin shuffled forward. His hands were still tied. "What have your brutes done to Ussha, the Northern girl?" His horror made him bold.

With a sneer of contempt, Yarcon ignored the question.

"What have you done to her?" Starsin shouted. For reply, he received more kicks, then lashes from a whip.

"Slaves don't ask questions," Yarcon told him. At a gesture, a dark-skinned man untied Starsin's hands.

"I can't work," Starsin said with dull defiance. "I half died in the desert before being beaten up."

Yarcon's face twisted with rage. He gestured to men who had appeared behind him. "Take this one out and beat him!"

Four slavers dragged Starsin into the open and beat him with their riding sticks. Bruised, battered and bleeding, and humiliated, he crawled back to the shade of the tent to recover.

All too soon the tents were struck and repacked. Yarcon came to where Starsin lay and stirred him with the toe of his boot. Starsin felt a plaited leather handle thrust into his hand. From it trailed a long lash of leather.

"What's this for?"

"You will keep the male slaves moving," Yarcon growled. "Get up!"

"Are you serious? How can I?"

"If you don't obey, we will punish the Northern girl."

Chapter 9

The threat against Ussha crushed him. At the slaver chief's impatient gesture, he struggled to his feet, sweaty and weakened by nausea. Aching from the pain of dozens of welts and bruises, he staggered over to where the slaves sat in rows, tied by cords around their necks. The slaves, a motley collection of central and eastern races, stared without expression at Starsin as he gave them the order to move on.

"Move!"

Starsin wondered why the slavers were forcing him to do this. Perhaps in their alien minds, herding slaves was what nobles did. Or was it some slimy plan to corrupt him and make him as guilty as them? Perhaps they knew he could not run off and leave Ussha. Whichever it was, he no longer had the will to resist, or run. He did not want to be tied up with the slaves at night; the thought of being chained to a mass of men filled him with sexual fear.

Harsh laughter sounded behind Starsin. He turned, to see the Virnal standing with Yarcon.

"He's doing it, is he?" the Virnal asked. "What a weakling." He laughed again.

Starsin looked the Virnal in the face. "Why are you doing this?"

"You think you're so good and noble, Starsin Estevan. But you're no better than anyone else."

Starsin flinched at the man's venom.

"What have I done to you?"

"You informed against me, you shit. I'll make you pay, then I'll hand you back to my masters."

What was he talking about? Starsin backed away, afraid to ask lest he inflamed the Virnal's hate and malice further.

The slaves still had not moved. He had complained about the Virnals, but informed? Against whom? Who was this man?

"Get them to work, shit," Yarcon shouted.

As he raised the whip, Starsin saw Rurnik in the slave line.

The Northerner's sallow, narrow-eyed features mirrored surprise and dismay. He obviously had not expected Starsin to be freed and made a slave-controller. He shrank back behind another slave as if fearing the whip and Starsin's malice.

Starsin cracked the whip clumsily along the ground. The slaves sat still, waiting to see what he would do.

"Lash them!" a Mainyu shouted at him.

He did not want to be hit again. His fear and frustration boiled into anger at the slaves. "Get up!" he screamed at them. He cracked the long whip above their heads. They stirred, and one or two got to their feet, but the rest stayed where they were.

For a moment he wanted to use the whip on Rurnik, but the Northerner appeared terrified of being lashed to a pulp for his betrayal of the Exalt's identity. Starsin rejected the thought as unworthy, unwilling to use the lash on a fellow captive.

One of the desert men jeered and cracked his whip near Starsin's shoulders.

Starsin snaked the whip through the air again, still reluctant to use the long whip on the slaves. At length, furious and afraid, he brought down the lash lightly across their shoulders, avoiding Rurnik, and they murmured resentment and began to rise. He lashed again, at the other line, this time.

The slaves had their hands tied and were secured by a cord to a long rope that ran alongside them. They glanced at Starsin as they walked, trying to catch his eye. One raised his bound hands and tugged at his tattered clothing, widening a rent and showing sores beneath.

"How did you get those?" Starsin asked. Should he ask the slavers if the sores could be treated? They probably wouldn't care.

Seeing his reaction, other slaves pulled at their sun-bleached clothing, showing him their sores and minor wounds. They had whip marks, some surrounded by reddened and puffy skin, and scabby cuts, dirty with sand. It distressed him.

A slaver shouted at Starsin. "Get them moving!"

Starsin held the arm of one of the slaves, showing an infected sore. "Don't you have a medicine-man? These need treatment."

The slaver looked, then aimed a kick at Starsin. "Don't tell us our business."

Starsin stared at the thin-faced man. The slaver cursed and cracked his whip over the slaves, narrowly missing Starsin.

The line of slaves jerked into movement.

Some while later, a slave slumped to the ground, falling under the feet of those behind, who dragged him along by his arms. Starsin called a halt.

"Can't you walk?" Starsin asked the man. The slave shook his head.

A few paces a way, a line of spare *timalts* trudged onward alongside the line of slaves. Yarcon had intimated that they could be used to convey slaves unfit to walk. Now Starsin beckoned to the Mainyu herding the animals. Without comment, the man helped Starsin untie the fallen slave and heave him onto a *timalt's* back.

The march continued. More slaves slumped to the ground, whispered that they were exhausted, and were loaded on a timalt. Still the timalt herder made no comment.

Yarcon came riding back from the head of the march. "Why is this so slow?" he shouted at large. "Why you keep stopping?" His eye fell on the line of timalts, now fully loaded with two slaves each. "What is this shit?" he yelled, pointing at the slaves riding the timalts. The *timalt* herder shrugged and pointed a finger at Starsin.

Yarcon spurred his mount in a part-circle and confronted Starsin. "Is this your shit?" he shouted, pointing at the mounted slaves.

"They couldn't walk," Starsin said.

"Get them off!" Yarcon ordered. The timalt herder grabbed a leg and tipped one slave off into the sand. The rest scrambled down with alacrity. Yarcon dismounted from his timalt and drew his dagger. "You clown," he said to Starsin. "Watch this."

Yarcon grabbed one of the loose slaves by the arm. "Walk or die?" Yarcon suggested.

"Walk, Master." The slaves moved swiftly to unfilled positions on the rope, and Starsin, with the timalt herder and other Mainyu, clipped their bonds onto the

rope. Yarcon cracked his whip twice, and the slaves started off at a trot. Yarcon cracked his whip again. A sharp pain burned across Starsin's shoulders.

"Don't do that shit again, you clown," Yarcon told him.

Starsin trudged onward. The line of slaves kept walking at a good pace and caught up to their place in the line of march. The stinging whip cut fed Starsin's anger and humiliation. Those slaves had tricked him to get a ride.

The female slave line was some way off, and he could not see Ussha.

For the rest of the day, till they stopped for the nightly camp, he ignored wheedling for medical attention and for rides on the timalts. One man collapsed and lay unconscious and quivering. Starsin lashed at him with his whip, and when this brought no response, beckoned over one of the Mainyu. He did not want to be shouted at and whipped again.

The slaver examined the fallen man while the rest of the slave line waited in silence. He shook his head. "No good," and drawing his curved knife, cut the slave's throat with a swift movement. Starsin cried out in shock.

Next morning it was the same. The slaves wheedled for attention to their hurts, and for rides, but stopped when Starsin paid no attention. On the first few occasions when he had to whip up the slaves, Starsin avoided lashing the part of the line where Rurnik was. Rurnik realised this, but instead of seeming grateful he stared at

Starsin with a dark-eyed contempt. After that, Starsin was less careful where he plied the whip.

"Water!" one of the older slaves gasped. Starsin ignored him.

The morning grew hot. Other slaves begged for water. The water for this line of slaves was carried by one timalt in tall clay vessels, tied on by cords through their looped handles. A few clay cups dangled on cords, clacking as they swung. Starsin beckoned to the Mainyu in charge of it, and the man brought it over. Starsin placed it next to the head of the line of slaves, unstopped one of the water-vessels, cool and damp to his touch, and gulped a cup of water. The drink soothed his parched throat. Several of the Mainyu had reined in their mounts to watch. He wondered why.

A smelly body jolted Starsin's arm. All the slaves were around the timalt, on both sides, and pairs of hands reached out for the water-vessels. The slaves fought each other and shouted, "Water! Water!" The water-vessels tilted.

"Stop that!" Starsin punched and shoved till he had ducked under the linking rope and got clear of them. He lashed at them with his whip, shouting. The watching Mainyu moved in to restore order. When the slaves were at last forced back, most of the water had been taken or spilled, and several drinking cups were broken.

Starsin sent the water-timalt away.

"Clown," said one of the Mainyu.

Starsin, under the eyes of the Mainyu, had to lash at the slaves to get them moving. He dared not be free with the water again. The slavers brought no more water for Starsin's line of slaves that day, saying the ration had been expended. At the midday stop, he watched how the Mainyu watered the slave lines, while menacing them with drawn swords. Yarcon came up to him and without warning, fetched him a painful buffet on his ear. Starsin's resentment grew.

The march continued. The slaves murmured for water. One collapsed, and two Mainyu examined the fallen man before tossing the body over a timalt.

"Needs water," one of the Mainyu explained, scowling as if the collapse was Starsin's fault. The other aimed a kick at him, which he dodged.

On the third day the Mainyu column stopped at a water-hole. As the Mainyu marshalled the lines to fill the water containers and water the animals and slaves, he contrived to get close enough to the female slaves to look for Ussha there.

He spotted her cloud of dark hair and called to her, but it was plain that she did not hear him. Moving closer, he saw bloodstains under her mouth and a rough bandage placed around her neck, in addition to the rope. Her hair hid her ears from his view. The other female slaves watched him approach, and their movements got Ussha's attention. At last she turned and looked up at him from a face devoid of hope. Timidly she raised a hand in greeting.

The devils had mutilated her to stop her tongue.

He raised a hand in reply, sick at heart. Before he could attempt to communicate with her, Mainyu converged on him, mounted and on foot, shouting. Two riders on *timalts* blocked the way to Ussha. They forced him back, kneeling their mounts sideways, shouting and striking at him with their folded whips. He turned. Mainyu on foot blocked they way to left and right. Brown hands reached for him. Wild with rage and horror, he attacked the nearest man with his fists.

The back of Starsin's head exploded with pain. An extended leg hooked one foot from under him and he fell into the sand. Kicks and whip lashes descended on him as he protected his head with his hands.

The beating stopped. A voice spoke above him in a Calah accent. "Shit boy, stop misbehaving and do your work!"

Starsin looked up. It was the Virnal he had seen with the slavers three days earlier. "You seem not to learn from punishment. If you don't behave, we'll have to punish the Northern slave woman instead."

Starsin lowered his head. He knew that they had him. "What have you done to her?"

"Just made sure she can't hear and tell tales. Don't worry, there's a market for deaf-mutes."

"You fiends," Starsin said. Fear of more beatings, or worse, prevented him from attacking the Vinal. He turned his head, trying to see Ussha, but many legs blocked his view.

"All those who defy us are punished," the Vinal told him.

Brown hands seized Starsin, picked him up, and dragged him toward the slave line he was meant to be managing.

Starsin trailed the hated whip along the flank of the mangy timalt they had given him. It was his task to feed and lash the motley collection - Khandarians, Kushites, Dhikr, Volans and Asnians - into movement each morning and keep them moving throughout the hot day. It was hard not to hate and despise these sly malingering slaves who were always inventing ways of making him look foolish before the desert men. They obeyed him now, but stared at him, and behind his back murmured remarks he could not interpret.

The slaves needed watching, but the task still gave him too much time to think - about the face of his dead brother, about Ussha's screams and what might have been done to her. Neither task nor thoughts gave him any relief from torment. He was nauseous and his hands trembled. He would have taken the last of his medicine, but the wallet had gone.

The slaves' efforts to engage him in conversation filled him with shame. He was worse than them, and rejected these efforts to make him feel one of them.

#

Yarcon, the slaver chief, raised his bared sword, and pulled up his camel, with its richly enamelled harness and silken saddle-cloth. The slaves had seen the signal too and stopped at once. Meanwhile the Mainyu moved to close up on their leader. One of them shouted at Starsin and cracked his riding whip.

Starsin flinched. He was feeling nauseous and bad-tempered, and did not want to be beaten because the slaves failed to move. "Move up, you filth!" he shouted. He lashed at the slaves till they were moving again at a trot. A short while later he had caught up, just too late to hear what Yarcon had been saying. He looked at the blood-smeared whip in disgust and shame. This was no work for the son of a great ruler. It was as the jeering big-nosed Vernal had said - he was becoming as vile as the oppressors.

For the rest of the day he wondered at his feelings of malaise and ill-temper. There were reasons enough, one of them being that he had no more of the tablets he had been taking since Ob. Perhaps consuming them had been a mistake. Toward the end of the day, he saw some white berries on a spindly bush beside the track they followed. Lannaira had spoken of white berries with medicinal properties. He dismounted and stripped a handful of the soft berries off the bush.

They lay in his left hand. Were they the right ones? He didn't care. They might cure him, but if they were poisonous, he could just die and end this. With a swift movement, he stuffed the berries into his mouth and gulped them down.

The next morning, after another sleep on the hard sand through the chilly night, he was much worse. His joints ached, and an unfocused rage gripped him. The desert, lit by the low morning sun, crawled and shimmered before his eyes, and the poles and cords of the tents writhed like serpents. Instead of weakness he possessed a feverish energy. He stood at the tent-mouth and scowled. The lined faces of the slavers disgusted him. One of Yarcon's minions returned his look and swore.

"You! Get busy! Feed the slaves!"

Stung into rage, Starsin grabbed for his knife, then remembered he had not worn it for many days, and plunged back into the tent. He groped around for the whip as his vision exploded in the gloom into coloured lights and strange moving patterns. After a frantic search his hands felt the smooth sweat-stained leather. Outside, he found the slaver he meant to lash had gone, and with repressed rage he went off in the direction of the slave lines. He found the food preparation area and picked up the first bucket of grain mash that had been soaked overnight.

As he reached the slave line, he looked down at the bucket. It was filled with writhing green maggots. With a cry, he sprang back, overturning the bucket into the

sand. Soon, ape-like shapes crept forward and picked at the food. Filled with unreasoning panic, he lashed out wildly with the whip, striking slaves, tents, ropes, the dusty ground. For one moment he glimpsed Rurnik's face, with a line of blood on it.

Now he halted, seeing the slavers circling around him with drawn swords.

"He's gone mad with the sun!" said one.

"Maggots!" Starsin cried, pointing to the spilt food.

"He's mad, let's kill him."

"He's berserk; he has the scent."

"No!" their leader shouted. Starsin barely recognised him. A green lizard crawled in the slaver's beard.

The Virnal ran up and motioned the slavers back.

"Are you seeing things?" he asked with a sneer.

Starsin grunted.

"Do you feel menaced? Are you feverish and angry?"

Starsin nodded, and glanced around, lest they try to close in on him.

"Have you been indulging in whities?"

"In what?" Starsin was baffled

"Drug shit," the Virnal prompted.

Starsin stared at him, angry. "I don't take drugs."

"The happy drug?" dark-faced Yarcon said. "The drug that is hard to let go?"

"No! I never take drugs. They disgust me." He swayed, fighting the impulse to lash out with the whip. The morning sun glittered on the raised swords.

"Don't you understand? You've been fed with *sennis*," said the Vernal.

"Yarcon showed me your wallet. You have all the signs."

"It is so. He smells of it," said the desert man who had earlier mentioned this.

Starsin groaned, as doubt and confusion seeped through his mind. He had heard of this addictive drug, but could not guess how it had been put into his diet.

Yarcon gave orders in desert dialect to one of his men, who sheathed his curved sword and ran to the tents. "I think you are an addict. Your body has passed all the drug you have taken and you are suffering from drug hunger. Take more and you will be well."

"No! No!" A burning pain swept through Starsin's body. He fell to his knees.

"Do you burn? Quickly, take this now. No one is ever stronger than the vision sickness." The slavers smiled.

"Swine! Bastards! Animals!" Starsin howled, in his pain. "You did this to me!" He clenched his fists.

"No!" Yarcon shouted. "No, slave! It takes months! Months to reduce a well man to your state!"

The tribesman ran back from the tents with a wallet which he handed to Yarcon. The slaver chief shook out a grey pill from the wallet and held it out.

"Please take it now. Quickly."

"No! Poisoner! You want to make me an addict!"

"You are an addict," the Virnal sneered. "Can't you understand, you must take *sennis* now, at once, or your mind will fall to pieces! Take his pills now and you will be well."

"Liar!" Starsin lunged forward and tried to hit the Virnal, but slavers grabbed him and held him back.

Yarcon's grey-white garment hopped with huge lice. His face writhed in a way that disgusted Starsin. He popped the pill into his own mouth and swallowed it.

"See! It is safe. If you want to suffer, fool, then suffer."

The symptoms became worse. He crouched, struggling with himself and his pain, and lost all sense of time, while his mind wandered around a vegetable plot from his childhood, trapped in old hedges. Who were the grey-thighed sexless girls? Round and round his thoughts churned in tedium, throwing up fragments of old memories, old humiliations. He struggled with immobilising armour, tried with aching fingers to pick up damp books rotting in deep stony streets.

He gave in at last, crushed by the painful symptoms and his terror of the madness that gibbered and rummaged in his own brain, and allowed the slavers to force two pills between his lips. To him it had taken an age, but the unchanged positions of the slavers and their gear showed that only a short time had passed.

The bitter taste of the pills still in his mouth, he found the symptoms receding as rapidly as Yarcon had promised. The visions and the rubbish churning in his brain went away and the burning pain and nausea vanished to be replaced by an ache in his limbs.

The misery was replaced by a strange euphoria, which made him feel strong and vigorous. How long would this last? He tried to conceal his mood from the slavers who were watching. He remembered now, how the addicts managed their habit; they would flirt with the visions and then experience the euphoria.

He thought of his willingness to dominate the slaves with a whip. Was that Virnal-like contempt part of him, or was the drug to blame? Perhaps it was part of him, and the drug had numbed his better nature.

Chapter 10

Starsin saw the tents packed away and loaded on the beasts. The armed slavers moved off and surmounted a ridge, leaving their baggage to follow. They were at the fringes of the desert, a region where plants grew and dried-up watercourses told of a rainy season at another part of the year.

On the horizon was a thread of smoke, and the outlines of huts. Yarcon was pointing them out to the Vernal as Starsin came up.

"That village is not friendly to us," said Yarcon. "It will be fitting to raid it for slaves."

His men objected. "It is risky, Master; we may suffer losses and gain nothing. They may be armed."

Yarcon was contemptuous. "Yellow pigs! If I thought like you, we would have nothing!"

The desert men made further objections, saying that the village people might have seen them already.

Yarcon faced them. "If a yellow-haired man was with us, they would be less suspicious."

"Don't involve me in your grubby business," the Virnal said. "Just do what you're paid for. And don't even think of using the Exalt captive."

"What risk, Master?" the Mainyu wheedled. "He's sure to return, for his drug, or his woman. And if he doesn't, we'll capture him, or I will compensate you."

Starsin listened with disgust and unease.

"Don't you see, fellow, he's too drug-addled. You can't rely on him to do anything. Leave him here."

Yarcon looked at the Virnal. "As you wish, master."

Yarcon's eyes fixed on Starsin. "We need you to help mind the slaves while we raid that village. You look well enough to work. You'll do that?"

"Why should I?" Starsin said. Euphoria swirled in his head.

"You can't escape," one of the tribesmen jeered.

"If you don't co-operate, we won't give you any whitey when you need it," Yarcon threatened.

They threatened the sense of well-being he had enjoyed since being force-fed the tablets. He would not tolerate this. Defiance stirred in his brain. "You camel's dung! Give it to me now!"

Yarcon slapped him hard across the face. "Not unless you do your work, slave."

The pain of the sudden blow shook him and he shivered with rage. He flung himself on Yarcon and knocked the desert chief to the ground. The hilt of the slaver's curved sword winked at him. He dragged it hissing from its scabbard and springing to his feet whirled the blade in a glittering arc.

The slavers backed away in alarm. Then they drew their swords and moved with caution to surround him. Their fallen leader rested on the ground, watching.

He focused his eyes on the distant lines some fifty paces away. He was certain he could escape once he got there. Two of the slavers moved in, swords raised. He sprang forward, beat aside the guard of one with a clash of steel, and slashed at the other. He knew no fear. The second man dropped his blade with a cry and clutched his gashed arm while blood streamed down his fingers and into the sand.

Starsin stepped back and placed the tip of his blade on Yarcon's neck. "More *sennis!*" he called. No more words were necessary.

"Give him what he wants!" Yarcon said, with a hiss. There was a brief stalemate. Two of the desert men backed away to the tents. Starsin looked around at intervals to make sure that none of them were creeping up on him. Yarcon prudently lay still.

The slavers came back and offered Starsin white pills which he took and pocketed. He prodded Yarcon with the sword. "Get up and walk towards the timalts!"

Yarcon obeyed, and his men went with them at a distance of several paces, heads turning as they glanced between Starsin and the timalts. He was sure that his plan would work.

The Virnal watched from one side, eyes narrowed and hand on sword hilt. "What about your girl?" he called.

Starsin halted, confused for a moment, for this was a complication he had forgotten in his sudden plan of escape. He looked for the female slaves, and took his eyes off the slavers for too long. As he opened his mouth to give further orders, a whip's lash curled around the blade he held and snatched it from his hand. He saw the sword spin and land in the grit several paces from him.

When the slavers swarmed over him and flung him to the ground and commenced to kick him with their soft-toed boots, he struggled, sure he could throw them off and continue his escape. Only when four of them held him down at each limb and Yarcon leaned over him with drawn knife, did he know it was over.

Angry, Yarcon cut cords and pulled down Starsin's treads. Starsin felt the sun and air on his bared skin, and half felt the cut of the knife.

He cried out.

The Virnal caught the Yarcon's knife arm and pulled him away. "You dog! You'll not do that!"

Yarcon shook him off and stood. The two men, Yarcon and the Virnal, dark and fair, squared up to each other.

"He struck me!" Yarcon said with a snarl. "I cut any slave that dares strike me, if I let it live. I'll make him quiet!"

"He's mine! I have promised you good gold for him!"

"You oppose my revenge? Take care, I have many men, and you are alone, Virnal!"

If the Virnal was afraid, he did not show it. "And you oppose mine, Master Yarcon. You forget your profit, and your interests," he drawled. "How will you speak to the Virnal Order without me? Where will you take your cut slave?"

Yarcon hesitated and several times raised and lowered the dagger, torn between cupidity and the desire for revenge.

"The drug has made him over-excited. If he has offended you, you can beat him a little."

Yarcon nodded.

"The arm of the Empire is long," the Virnal said. He bent over Starsin and stared hard at Starsin's genitalia. "You'll make a fine bum-boy when sufficiently broken."

Starsin shivered with disgust and humiliation. The Vernal pulled up the trows to cover him.

"Beat him!" Yarcon ordered his men at last. "Then peg him out on the sand!"

His body shuddered under the white-hot impact of knouts and riding-sticks breaking his half-healed skin. Then rough hands stretched him out and tied him at hand and foot to stakes driven into the sand. The pain diminished to be replaced by intolerable itching as small insects explored his body. Several times Yarcon stood over him, chewing a joint of meat, or sipping from a cup, and smiling. As Starsin met his eyes, the slaver chuckled.

Briefly, Starsin wondered what had become of the raid on the village. Most of the slavers were still nearby.

Yarcon's features became lizard-like. He reached between Starsin's legs, gripped hard and squeezed. Starsin screamed.

As the pain ebbed, he lay crushed with despair and wept, wondering how he had come to this, from Exalt to rebel, to captive, fugitive, slave and now addict to an unspeakable drug that could never be shaken. Whenever the level of the chemical in his body fell below a critical level, he would become an animal, racked by intolerable pains and tortured by hallucinations that threatened his sanity. Anyone who supplied the evil muck would be his master. How could he ever escape, except in the oblivion of death?

#

Starsin, still pegged out on the hot sand, became aware of the brushing of wind on his bare skin. The wind rose further and flung grains of sand up onto his face. Clouds obscured the sky, and the sound of the wind made an eerie roaring and hissing. He pressed his eyelids shut to keep the grit out of his eyes. The slavers were shouting as they ran to and fro to secure their goods against the storm.

"Why aren't you watching the slaves?" Yarcon shouted to one of his followers.

"I chained them to stakes, Master. They'd be mad to try and escape into this!"

Starsin felt an object being forced between his lips, and opened his eyes to see a desert man bent over him. The slaver pulled up Starsin's head by the hair, forcing him to swallow a drink of sour milk.

"You may knock down that devil any time you like," the Mainyu said in his ear. Starsin assumed he meant Yarcon.

The man hurried away. Wind whipped at Starsin. Soon, sand was shifting out from under his arms, and he opened his eyes to look. Wind was scouring out the dry sand on which he lay. A lizard ran past, seeking shelter. He pulled at the stakes. They were immovable, but after more wind scour they might not be. The sand was moving, and tents were sagging under the weight of the sand that was piling up

against them. He began to see how, after such storms, landmarks were changed and dunes shifted.

Above the hiss and shriek of the storm there came a snuffling and grunting. The slavers came stumbling out from their tents. He tried to distinguish what they were shouting but only made out the word 'Lizard'.

The snorting and grunting grew louder, and a long scaly head loomed over a tent. Its size shocked him, for the monster's head was as long as a man, its eye tiny and dull. A claw burst through the tent cloth, and then the monster lowered its head and a long red forked tongue flicked out over the remains, turning over cushions and poles. Slavers ran, tripping and trampling over Starsin.

He pulled hard at his bonds. This time the stake securing his right hand moved. In a few moments he had it out and was using it to dig out the left arm stake and then the other two.

A balding Mainyu screamed and struggled as the monster's tongue tightened around his body and drew him towards the toothy jaws.

A slaver resembling Yarcon jumped forwards with a curved sword in hand to attack the lizard. His blade cut into the stringy tongue and half severed it. With a grunt, the lizard released the terrified slaver and lurched backward.

Sand stung in Starsin's eyes, and for a moment he was unable to see. He stumbled over a collapsed tent and caught a shirt that blew against him, then ran

towards the timalt lines as fast as his stiffened limbs could carry him. The two stakes tied to his ankles flailed and encumbered his feet as he ran. He glanced back. Behind him, most of the slavers clung together, stumbling in the drift with hands linked. The giant lizard, led perhaps by vibrations in the ground, had found the chained slaves. Even as he looked, one fell crushed under its claws, and the long jaws closed their thick scaly lips on the body of another slave and chewed, dribbling blood and saliva. The other slaves were screaming in terror and tugging at the chains and stakes that held them.

He glimpsed the line of timalts ahead and his hopes of escape grew. He patted his trews to check that he still had the drug with him. He cared not where he went, even lost in the storm so long as he got away from the slavers.

His hands closed on the bridle of a beast he knew. The greyish timalt had borne him all the way from the snowfields to the central desert. He felt in the panniers and found them almost empty. The slavers had stolen most of his things. He tugged free the slip knot securing the bridle. Still encumbered by the stakes tied to his limbs, he climbed into the saddle and kicked the animal in the ribs. It needed no second bidding, and the other timalts were now trampling and squealing with fear.

He made a last glance over the camp. Over there, the slavers were trying to drive off the giant lizard and save their merchandise from its depredations. Two

thoughts battled in his mind, to escape while the slavers were distracted, and *Ussha*. He spurred the timalt and rode at a gallop into the storm. Sand whirled about him and inflamed his eyes as he plunged on. He held a piece of cloth over his face. The swirling wind obliterated all tracks, but he feared that Yarcon would be able to track him by sorcerous means. When they caught him, he was sure of merciless punishment.

He had to circle around and find *Ussha* on the female slave-lines. If the *Mainyu* were still distracted, he had a chance to find her, release her from the line, and ride away.

He looked back. The camp, a stone's throw behind him, was hidden by swirling dust. Before trying a rescue, he had to get rid of the stakes, each as long as his arm, that encumbered his arms and legs. The tight leather cord offered little purchase for his fingers, and he had no knife. There was nothing of use in the saddle-bags.

His teeth closed over a loop of cord. It tasted gritty as he bit and pulled on it. As it loosened, he tugged at it with the fingers of his other hand, snapping his thumbnail. More of the knotted cord came loose, till the knot came free and he could unwind the tight coils. He let wood and cord drop to the ground.

The second took longer. He twisted his wrist around, swinging up the stake and bit. His teeth strained. Leather shifted. He broke another fingernail. The cord

slackened, and the stake fell away. The soreness on his wrists remained. The two stakes on his legs, tied with slip-knots, came off more easily. Under him, the timalt shifted and turned till the wind was at his back.

He gripped the last stake, the only weapon he had, and urged the timalt back toward the camp. Two stone-throws further on, he had not found it. He turned and tried again, but found only stones and sand. The swirling murk hid the camp and all landmarks, and particles of dust irritated his eyes. Again he tried, riding in an arc, but had to stop, clenching his fists in frustration. As like as not, he was heading away from Ussha, but he had to keep trying. If he waited till the storm abated, the alert Mainyu would have noted his escape and be watching Ussha.

He thought of how he had got lost days earlier, at the start of this horror. It was useless to keep moving. He dismounted and with impotent rage and fear crouched with his back to the wind. If he could not find the Mainyu camp, they could not find him.

Time passed. The wind and swirling sand diminished. He saw nothing beyond the dust, nor heard any pursuit. The wind dropped, and in a very short time the air cleared.

He found himself within recognisable landmarks - the same empty hills on the horizon and the same clump of trees out on the plain, now seen from a different

direction. He rubbed his swollen wrists and ankles to ease the discomfort of flesh marked by the cords. The camp, wherever it was, lay out of sight.

His eye caught a movement a few hundred paces distant - a human figure emerging from behind a rock. It was the Virnal, who now stood on the rock, watching as Starsin approached. How could he have got there? There was no riding animal nor any other people in sight. However, the Virnal carried a riding crop in his right hand.

Starsin circled, checking that no slavers were hiding anywhere nearby. The Virnal turned to face him, shifting his footing. As Starsin came closer, the Virnal shouted, "Surrender yourself to me! I am armed, and you are not!"

"Why should I?" Starsin shouted back.

"When the slavers capture you, they will not be merciful. I'll not be able to protect you from their malice a second time. They will follow your tracks; you cannot escape them!"

He could not surrender. This fellow meant to drag him back to Virnal territory, where he would be tried again, this time for complicity in the death of Balig and assaulting the other officer - this man - at Ob. They had the perfect excuses to justify his execution.

He could ignore these threats, ride away and try to rescue Ussha, but the Virnal could rejoin the slavers and punish Ussha for his escape. A slow rage burned within him.

He had to kill this vile Virnal now, punish him for the horrible mutilation of Ussha, whatever it took.

"Surrender yourself to me, you young fool!"

To buy time, Starsin asked the Virnal one question. "What's your name?"

"You've forgotten?" The Virnal sneered. "Branhard's my name."

He spurred the timalt. The animal bounded into a lumping trot, then into a gallop, its six legs working furiously. The Virnal drew his sword as Starsin closed on him. Starsin raised the wooden stake and struck the sword as he swept past.

He turned the timalt and rode at the Virnal again. The Virnal held his sword low, then parried as Starsin swung his stake. The blow jarred his arm. The stake now had two nicks in it and was in danger of becoming shorter.

A sharp pain stung his hand. The tip of the blade had slashed the thin flesh of his middle knuckle. Blood ran down his fingers.

If he landed a blow on the Virnal's head or face, he might knock him down, but the Virnal's sharp sword was getting in the way. He could try trampling the man if the timalt could be induced to jump or scramble up onto the rock. If only it were a horse!

The stake was a poor match for the Virnal's sword. Starsin resolved to try riding the man down. One side of the rock, which was almost the height of a man, had an easy ramp. He aimed the timalt towards it and spurred it into a gallop. The Virnal stood his ground and held his sword forward, pointing straight at Starsin. Starsin raised himself in the stirrups. The timalt's forelegs bounded up the rock. At the last moment however, the animal shied to one side, so that its right legs trod on air. It swept past the Virnal, who ducked, and fell on its side. The animal tumbled off the rock to the sand below, taking Starsin with it. He landed with a bruising impact that half stunned him. The timalt squealed and writhed beside him. Starsin scrambled clear, limping on a right ankle that had been caught and twisted under the animal's side.

The Virnal jumped from the rock, and circled towards Starsin, sword raised. Starsin stood his ground and gripped the stake in anticipation. With both men on foot, the Virnal, armed with sharp steel, had the advantage. Near Starsin, the timalt was shaking its head and struggling to its feet. The Virnal did not press his attack.

The timalt regained its footing, with a wriggle of its long body. Too late, Starsin realised that the Virnal's attention had been on the animal, as the man seized the harness and vaulted into the saddle. As Starsin rushed forward, the Virnal urged the animal into a canter, till it was out of Starsin's reach. The Virnal now had the sword and the timalt. Starsin ran back and climbed up onto the rock.

The timalt walked around and around the rock, at a distance of thirty paces. At intervals the animal snorted and shook itself, as though resenting its unfamiliar rider. Starsin found he dared not rest but had to keep shifting his position to keep the rider in view.

"Surrender now, you fool!" the Virnal shouted. "I have the advantage!"

Starsin wondered why the man didn't press an attack. As if he wanted Starsin alive to be tried or questioned.

"I'll kill you first."

"No, you won't. You'll surrender. You've no water."

Another circuit of the rock, turning to watch the timalt. The Virnal cursed, turned in, rode at Starsin with sword drawn. The blade snaked over the rock. Starsin parried the blow. A piece of the stake came off and spun into the sand below.

Timalt and rider went off, turned, charged again. Starsin stood, watched blade and man, needing to try something different. As the Virnal came abreast of the rock, sword swinging, Starsin dived. Metal parted his hair. He grappled the Virnal's waist, momentum pushing them over, reached for the sword-arm, and pulled. Both men fell to the ground, a few paces from the rock. The timalt ran off, hooves pattering in the sand.

Starsin fell in the upper position, holding down the Virnal with his weight. The Virnal's face below him distorted with effort, face lined and bristling with stubble.

Starsin gripped the Virnal's right arm, held the sword away while he struck at the Virnal's head with the stake, drawing blood. The Virnal swung his free hand to ward off the blows and stab at Starsin's eyes. Starsin jerked his head back as a fingertip thrust into his right nostril.

"Die!" Starsin shouted.

"-curse you-" the Virnal said.

Starsin saw a hand-sized stone lying near the Virnal's head. He released the stake, leaving the Virnal holding the other end. As Starsin snatched up the stone, he heard and felt a stunning blow on his forehead from the stake. Lights flashed before his eyes. He struck the Virnal's face with the stone.

"Aah!-"

He struck again and again. The Virnal smashed the stake into Starsin's face. He felt his nose break, and blood dribbled down his upper lip. The Virnal's face grew bloodier, his cries weaker and his blows with the stake less effectual. When the Virnal ceased to resist, Starsin staggered to his feet. He wiped his face and tried to stem the blood dribbling from his nose. His nose and forehead throbbed, and he

had several minor but bloody cuts. He felt a dull relief that he had killed this brute, stopped his mouth and preserved his own escape.

Still gripping the sword, he limped towards the timalt which pawed the sand not far off. "Tch! Tch!" He caught the animal, and led it back to the rock, where he held the rein and kicked sand and stones around the Virnal's body, till it was hidden from the view of anyone not standing above it.

There was no sign of the slave column. He kneed the timalt into motion and directed it toward the trees, hoping to find the column or some landmark. Now he had a sword, he would try to rescue Ussha.

Beyond the trees, the land was empty, but he had some notion the trees were a trail mark for the village the Mainyu had wanted to raid. His face hurt, and he was faint with exhaustion, hunger and lack of water. If he got himself patched up, he would be better prepared to look for Ussha. He had to risk the slavers being at the village, for the alternative was to skulk in the desert till he died of hunger and thirst.

A while later, he was approaching a line of trees and had sighted cultivated ground and a line of green that marked a watercourse. The straw roofs of buildings crouched further on. On the open ground beyond, he saw movement. The distant figures looked like half a dozen mounted men. Who were they?

Heart thumping, he dismounted and held himself and the animal still like a rock. He dared not challenge six mounted men. The men moved to the right till the lie of the land hid them.

Now, afraid to enter the village he cast about for an alternative plan. Near him, a well-trodden trail ran across the open ground. It appeared to come from the village, and if he followed it in the converse direction, it promised to lead him sooner or later to another settlement. Better to seek help there than to wander at random, looking for the slavers in his weakened state.

Chapter 11

Starsin had to free Ussha, if they had not already killed her in revenge for his escape. The thought filled him with guilt and misery. He might sneak back by night and rescue her, but not while the slavers were stirred up like hornets. He had already failed at confronting the slavers, he couldn't attempt a rescue till dusk, even if he was able to find the camp, and he was weak and in pain from his beatings and face injuries. And he had no food or water. He needed help.

There might be aid at the next village. What else could he do? He led the *timalt* below the skyline and toward the sun. When certain he could not be seen by the menacing riders, he remounted, joined the beaten trail and urged the *timalt* into a gallop. The animal pounded onward through a dry landscape empty of help or threat. What was he doing here?

Useless thoughts tortured him. If he had caught up with Ussha? If he had stayed with Lannaira? The slavers had not captured her. If only they had kept together when that first dust-storm started. They had almost reached the rebel town

of Newhope. If he found Lannaira's rebels, perhaps he could persuade them to attack the slaver band.

He rode until dusk fell. There was no sign of any pursuit, and he had not yet reached the next settlement. Inside the saddlebags, he found a shirt and his padded jacket, which he wrapped around himself for warmth. He lay on cold and hard ground a few hundred paces from the trail, fearing he might wake to find Yarcon's malign features grinning over him. The pain from his beatings and fight injuries kept him awake until stars sparkled in a black sky and he chewed one of the drug tablets, enduring no more.

The next morning, ground mist beaded the webs of a spider. It had spun its fly-traps in the twigs of a spiny plant, near his face. He stood and breathed in the chilly air. On top of the nearest rock, a beetle, head lowermost, was drinking the water that condensed on its carapace and ran down to its mouth parts.

The desert was quiet. To ease his thirst, he licked drops of dew from twigs, before untying the timalt and re-mounting.

#

As the ground mist burned off, he approached a village. It lay in the long shadow of a grove of trees that grew around an artesian spring. Water trickled in a streamlet

for a short distance, feeding irrigation channels that stretched into the dry fields. Winter vegetables grew in rows. Here he could ask for help to rescue Ussha, or barter for equipment or weapons, or at least some food.

He entered an unpaved street, dusty, churned up by hooves and dirtied by scraps of animal droppings. The huts were of stone, with roofs made of sticks and grass. A few brown children peered at him.

By the far end was an enclosure of woven wattles, with animal pens and hitching posts. An open-fronted shed stood next to a drinking trough. Smells of hot food came from a hovel with an open door. A caravanserai. He dismounted and tied up his timalt.

He entered the hovel. "Help. Food. Water," he croaked. He slumped at a crude table in the bare room. Two peasants came through a doorway and stared at him with widened eyes and wrinkled foreheads. He must be a frightening sight, ragged, smeared with dried blood and carrying an unsheathed sword.

"Water," he mumbled, and found that his throat was so sore he was hardly able to speak. He gestured for food and drink.

One peasant glanced at the sword and stretched out a hand. "Pay."

Starsin fumbled without much hope in the saddlebag he had brought in with him and pulled out a metal object that looked to him like a spare stirrup. The peasant examined it with interest and accepted it.

Starsin waited, till a brown girl brought a large mug and a plate. He took a deep draught of weak, ill-tasting beer and applied himself to the meal of lentils, vegetables and fruit laid before him. The village girl stood watching him. He ignored her.

When he had finished, she reached for the mug and plate. "Want more?"

He shook his head, and then slumped over the table. The meal had eased his hunger and thirst. Now his face and back hurt.

He smelt sheep, mixed with her more intimate odours. She ran her fingers over the dried scab on his brow and the sword cut on his shoulder.

It was not good to sit here. He should either barter for more food and drink, or ask for directions that would help him find friends.

"Fella hurt?" the girl said. "We have shaman, fix this."

Starsin nodded.

The girl shouted, and the two men, clad in rough smocks, came in and stared at him.

After a muttered conversation, one hurried out.

Starsin waited.

A white-haired man appeared, dressed in a cloak of goat skins and carrying a cloth bag. Brown eyes peered at Starsin from a wrinkled and white-whiskered face. A hand tugged at Starsin's shirt.

Starsin gasped in pain. The cloth was stuck to his raw skin. The man rapped a series of commands. He poked at Starsin's nose. Starsin felt bone grate and winced.

"Nose bad?"

Starsin nodded.

The fellow sat down at the table and forced Starsin's head back. He peered up Starsin's nose and grunted. The girl arrived with a basin. The shaman sprinkled brown powder into it and dabbed at Starsin's back and shoulders. Warm liquid trickled down his skin.

The shirt came off slowly, and Starsin gasped in pain at each tug. He leaned on the table, bare-chested, while a dark paste was dabbed on his back and shoulder. It stung. Grunting to himself, the shaman sprinkled on a green coarse powder, looking like ground-up leaves, and then applied a long strip bandage around Starsin's body and shoulder.

The shaman stood back and inspected his work. "Hurting now?"

"Not so much."

"You pay?"

Starsin nodded. "Yes."

The two younger men came in. Starsin raised his head. "My friends have been captured by slavers. I need help." With difficulty he made them understand.

The two men backed away a step. They made rapid hand movements, their manner betraying alarm.

"We not like slavers. We not fight," said one.

"People here won't help you with fighting," the shaman said.

"Isn't there anyone here who can help? Your headman?"

He prevailed on them to fetch another man, older, with cropped white hair, who had a better command of the common tongue.

"Where did you see these slavers, fellow?" he asked, frowning at Starsin.

Starsin tried to explain.

"Long way for us to go. We have no weapons here. Those are bad people."

It seemed that he would get no help for a rescue here. He stood. "I need water. A bottle." With gestures he got his message across.

"No water bottle? Crazy," the headman said.

The uglier of the two younger men gave him a narrow-necked pot with a cracked lip. Outside, he pointed to where Starsin should fill it, in the stream that ran from the well. He untied his timalt before climbing onto its back. At a trot, he passed a dozen curious ragged children and headed for the stream. The ground was dark with recent irrigation. At the streamlet, he dismounted again and washed his hands and face, scooped up a few sips of water.

The distant folk at the edge of the village watched him in silence. Once remounted, he kicked the *timalt* in the ribs and urged it into a gallop.

#

When he had ridden a few hundred paces, he looked back and saw a *timalt* rider following him. He let the *timalt* carry on at the same pace. Let the follower catch up out in the desert, and then he'd see how to deal with him.

Out among the scrub and the slabs of rock, he waited.

The follower clopped closer. He discerned a hat, slim hands, a loose shapeless jacket, hairless face and soft boots, an earring. With surprise, he realised that his follower was a woman, and having established that, he recognised her at once. It was Lannaira.

She rode up at a trot, approaching in a curve, with a spear at the ready.

"Lanna?"

"Starsin! So it was you who was bothering the villagers."

He grinned with relief and put away his sword. "The mention of slavers put the wind up them."

"They're very poor. You were going to kill me, weren't you? Come closer; let me look at you." She took off her wide-brimmed hat, and the hot breeze ruffled her hair.

Starsin grinned. "If necessary." He dismounted and held out a hand. She slid from the saddle and to his surprise, embraced him. Her hair nuzzled against his face.

He winced as her arms pressed into his back, still sore from the slavers' disciplinary activities. He held her close, with his hands around her waist, more moved than he could say. Her body seemed small, slight.

"What were you doing in that village, woman?" he said at last.

"Looking for you. The rest of the patrol from Newhope is just over that hill. What happened to you? How are you still alive after six days?"

"I got turned around in the dust storm, couldn't find you or anything else. Then, a caravan of slavers found me, the bastards. I got away during another dust storm."

"How did you escape from a gang of slavers?"

Starsin described the attack by the giant lizard.

Lannaira laughed. She clutched her hands to her sides and bent her head forward.

"What's so funny?" he said, scowling.

"If lizards of such size exist, it's the first I've heard of them. What would they live on?"

"You mean - it was just a hallucination?" He felt foolish. "They still have Ussha and Rurnik."

Lannaira stopped laughing. "Ussha? Oh hell. I feared that. Have you any idea where they and the slavers are now?"

"Sort of. If I go back the way I came, I'd be near a village they planned to raid."

"Come on," she said. "It will take us time to circle round the village fields and rejoin the Newhope force. What were you trying to do here anyway?"

"I was hoping to get out of this hell and into somewhere half-civilised, and find a force to rescue Ussha."

"You were headed in the wrong direction."

Starsin flushed.

"Tell me more," Lannaira said.

Disjointedly, he described the slavers, their number, their brutality and their Vernal associate.

Lannaira swore. "You'll need to tell the others this. It'll motivate them to chase after these bastards and finish them off."

"You went back to the town?"

She looked at him and nodded. "They weren't very welcoming. And they were not impressed with me when I said I'd lost you. They were going to mount their regular patrol in any case, so here we are."

Eight riders were coming into view from behind a rocky hillock.

"Who's that?" Starsin said, heart thumping. He pulled out his sword from the right saddle-bag.

"They're ours."

Soon, Starsin was able to distinguish the faces of the riders. They nodded to Lannaira.

"Exalt Starsin? You look in a bad way," said the leader, a dark, sour-faced young man. He wore a protective leather jerkin with a few strips of metal sewn onto it, and had a sheathed sword at his belt.

Starsin nodded.

"This is Kayrem," Lannaira said.

They offered him water.

"Starsin has information on the slavers," Lannaira said.

"I can take you to them," Starsin said, in a low voice. "If we follow the trail towards the other village, that way, then past it beyond a stand of trees to the waste of sand, we should find them or their tracks. There were twelve of them, I think."

"And how far away is that?" asked the young leader, Kayrem,

"At least two deciurnals' travel."

"Tomorrow then," said Kayrem. "We'll need more men."

Starsin shook his head. "The sooner we move, the better. They have my friend, Ussha, and the other Northerner. They've already had nearly a day to lose themselves in the sands."

"You'll be trying to find them in the dark." Kayrem looked obstinate. "And I don't like the odds."

"How are they armed?" Lannaira asked.

"Most have curved swords, and they all have knives. Some have spears, I think. And they're all mounted."

"And we have?" she asked.

"You have a sword, Starsin? Then four swords, various knives, some pointy sticks and clubs. It's not enough," Kayrem said.

"We could free Ussha with a surprise attack," Starsin said.

"Surprise attack? You hope. You should have taken more care out here in the first place," Kayrem said.

Starsin stared at him, fists clenched. Lannaira bowed her head.

Kayrem looked away. "Our priority is to crush the slavers and release all the slaves. If it's as you say, we can't do it with this patrol group."

To Starsin's frustration, he was forced to agree to Kayrem and Lannaira's plan, which was to send a messenger at once, and camp till reinforcements arrived.

Kayrem sent one man who knew the dryland tracks well to ride at speed back to Newhope. The rest of the party agreed that they should scout towards the first village.

"We're going back to the village I passed yesterday? We should take care," Starsin said. "That might be the one the slavers meant to attack. I saw a group of riders near it."

"Are you sure that wasn't us?" said Kayrem.

Starsin felt confused. Had there been eight riders? "I don't know. Did you come that way?"

"I believe we did. Let's move up the track, so you can show us which way you came," said Kayrem.

Later, as they camped for the evening, Lannaira picked up the jar of brown pills, which lay among Starsin's few things. He snatched it back roughly.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, with one hand raised.

"I'm sorry - I really need it."

"What for?"

"I'm addicted to a drug called sennis. If I don't keep taking it, my mind falls to pieces."

Lannaira stared at him, wide-eyed, while her mouth dropped open.

"I see. Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Starsin. But how? When? I had no idea."

Canvas flapped as the Newhope riders erected a campaign shelter.

"When I was a prisoner in Ob. They said it would help me resist the cold, and maybe they put it in the food. It used to smell like these pills."

"How sadistic - and how clever," she said. "To make you dependent! And if people find out, they'll assume that, like the other *sennis* addicts, you acquired this addiction by your own depravity."

"Why would anyone willingly consume this muck?"

"You should know, if anyone does."

"Can I never be free of it?"

She looked at the sky. "That's up to you. You can try weaning yourself off it. Are you sure you're fit for tomorrow? You look a mess."

"I'll manage," he said. "I want to be there."

#

Early next day as they made breakfast Starsin was impatient to hurry Ussha's rescue. and planned their assault on the slavers. He had already watered his *timalt*, and was holding its reins.

"We should move off now," Starsin said.

"We need the reinforcements," Kayrem said. "We need to wait here for them."

The others were packing their tents and gear ready for loading onto the *timalts*.

Starsin motioned ahead. "Aren't they coming from that direction anyway?"

The trail led over a slight rise in the ground.

Lannaira faced them with her hands on her hips. "Boys! Why not scout that other village again, and while you're doing that, keep a look out for our people?"

"We should wait here," one man said. Others were shaking their heads.

Kayrem ignored her.

Starsin didn't want to wait. "Why don't we see if any of the villagers are fighters who might aid us?"

Kayrem shrugged. "Didn't you try that already?"

"Not at the first village, the further one."

The men lit a small fire, to prepare hot drinks. A cold breakfast of meat and flat bread was passed around. Starsin ate, gratefully. The hot *koosh* helped clear his head.

Waiting, the men sharpened their weapons, checked animal harness, and took their animals down to the village stream to water.

Starsin approached Kayrem. "When do you think your men might get here?"

Kayrem scratched his chin. "Hard to say. Depends if they waited for morning."

Starsin pressed his lips together. If the reinforcements were setting off around now, much of the day would pass before they arrived. To sit here so long would be intolerable.

Moments later, Kayrem called the men together. "Here's the plan. We'll ride eastward in open formation and keep a lookout for our comrades. When we reach the other village, we'll check it out and wait near there."

The men nodded.

Starsin glanced at Lannaira. Her expression gave little away. As he caught her eye, she shook her head.

"We ought to warn the villagers that there is a slaver band nearby," said Lannaira.

"Didn't Starsin warn the nearer one yesterday?" Kayrem said. "We can alert the other village when we check it."

They rode up the stony trail towards the first village; the one that Starsin had avoided the previous day. It felt odd to be approaching it now in company. A cluster of conical huts rose above the skyline as they rode closer. To the left were

trees, marking the site of a spring, and between the trees and the village were scruffy fields with emerging early crops. A few goats grazed.

Starsin and Lannaira entered the village with the *timalts* at a walk so as not to panic the villagers. A few people in long grubby grey robes emerged from the grass-roofed stone and mud huts. The other riders sat their animals a little way off, watching for the reinforcements.

A group of four men, brown-faced and weathered, met the riders. Women peered from hut doorways. Starsin was conscious of their stares and whispering.

"We have fresh word of slavers moving in this area," Lannaira said. "Have you seen them?"

The villagers conferred among themselves as they eyed Lannaira and Starsin. "No," one said at last.

"Do you have any fighting men here?"

The people made no clear answer.

"Can any of you help us hunt for the slavers?" Starsin asked.

"Why?" The speaker was a man with an injured eye.

"We mean to kill them," said Starsin.

Every villager stared at him.

This discussion went on for some time but made little progress. Starsin's hope of substantial reinforcements from this village, called Arlinoe, faded. But,

since the Newhope reinforcements had not yet appeared, he was not minded to give up.

"If slavers come here, they will carry off your women and children and abuse them," he said. "Would you not rather be men?"

Villagers stared at him in silence or looked away.

Kayrem and his Newhope fighters rode slowly into the village. Starsin broke off to speak to them.

"I don't know what their problem is," he said. "It seems they have a few fighters and enough mounts."

"Maybe they want to be offered money," said Lannaira.

"Typical bloody peasants," said Kayrem. "Oh! Someone's coming!" He pointed to the skyline.

A chill of anxiety swept over Starsin at the sight of the distant figures. *Slavers?* "Who are they?"

"Hide behind the huts till I can see who they are," Kayrem said in a loud voice. He pointed to the peasants. "You! Stay where you are!"

They hid, readied their weapons and waited. The approaching riders, seven in number, were dressed in jackets and trows, like the people of Newhope. One carried a small flag.

"They're ours," Kayrem said.

The reinforcements drew near and saluted them.

"Crap!" Kayrem muttered, as if disappointed by the small turnout.

"We outnumber the slavers now," Starsin pointed out. He hoped that now they'd ride on.

The fresh riders reined in, and there was a brief ill-tempered conference, in which Kayrem claimed the reinforcements were insufficient, and Starsin disagreed. Lannaira pointed out that the village might provide men.

"Can we get going now?" Starsin said.

"Has anyone got any money?" Lannaira asked the newcomers.

"She means to hire some of the goat-fuckers," Kayrem said, nodding towards the villagers.

The riders mustered a handful of coin, which Lannaira offered to the village headman. This produced a flurry of activity, and three men armed with bill-hooks joined them, mounted on two timalts.

Starsin led the way past the trees and northward into the drylands. Once out of the village, he hesitated. The landscape appeared less familiar when viewed from the reverse direction. He peered in dismay at the ground, a mixture of stones and dust.

"What's the matter?" Lannaria asked.

"I must have come this way, but I can't see my tracks. I'll need to find them to track back to the slaver's camp."

"I thought you knew the way," Kayrem said.

"Let me help," said one of the Newhope men. "The rest of you stay here and don't let your animals trample the tracks." The man rode ahead of them at a walking pace in a widening zigzag while the rest of the party waited.

Starsin watched him. If neither he nor the other man could find the trail, the result was likely to be an abject failure.

"Who is that man?" Starsin asked in a low voice.

"He's Agyet, their best tracker," said Lannaira.

Starsin turned his gaze to the other riders. The nearest was a mere boy, though he looked sturdy enough, and carried a long, bladed pole-arm. "What's your name, lad?"

The boy turned to look at him.

"How old are you?"

"Yoreig. I'm seventeen, I think."

"Have you been in a serious fight before, Yoreig?"

"No, master, but I'm ready for it. Farming is for losers. I want to be a warrior."

"War's not for everyone," Starsin said, with the weight of his second-hand experience. "Just do your best and stand by your comrades."

Starsin spoke to the others. A man called Virico carried a pole-axe. Grey-haired Deejan carried an old sword. Trimbar had a spear. Nyroon had a pike-arm. Another had an old sword. The unfamiliar-sounding names became a blur. Several, like Kayrem, had years of experience of riding out and skirmishing with nomads or bandits.

He didn't want to look afraid or useless in front of these men.

The tracker, Agyet, stopped some way ahead and beckoned them forward. When they gathered behind him, he pointed to the ground. "This is probably you, Master Starsin. See where the timalt hooves have rocked the stones in the dust. And there's part of a hoof print up there."

Hope warmed Starsin's mood. "Can you follow the tracks?"

Agyet snorted. "I could follow this with one eye in the dark. Just tell me, did you ride straight or weave right and left?"

Starsin felt the scrutiny of the others on him. "Straight, or so I believed."

The tracker sat upright in the saddle. "Shall I lead, then? The rest of you keep well behind me so you don't mess up the tracks."

After half a deciurnal, they approached an isolated rock that was as tall as a man. Agyet raised his arm. "Something happened here." The dusty ground was marked by many overlapping tracks that looped around the rock.

"This is where I killed the Virnal," said Starsin.

"So where is he then?" said Kayrem.

His tone irritated Starsin. Starsin pointed towards the base of the rock.

Kayrem rode over to the rock. Starsin saw him looking down. He straightened. "There's no body here."

Starsin shook his head. Either Barnhard had been merely unconscious, or others had moved his body. Perhaps he was a demon who could not be killed.

"Not dead, then?" Kayrem said.

Starsin pressed his lips together.

"Shall we look around?" Lannaira asked.

Starsin was reluctant to search for the Virnal. He wanted to press on. "Let's not waste time."

Agyet pointed ahead. "This way, is it, Master Starsin?"

Starsin kned his timalt forward. They were following a line of hoof tracks part filled with blown sand. As they rode on, Starsin found it harder to see the filled marks, till he could not make any of them out.

The tracker carried on for another half decurnal. At last, they came to a stretch of sand crossed by scores of human and animal tracks, heading in one direction. "This must be them. They're moving northwards."

"How far ahead are they?" Starsin was excited now.

"Couldn't say. This is today's track. Couple of decurnals?" the tracker said.

"Can we speed up?"

"If you like."

"Let's not over-tire the animals," Kayrem said.

They advanced at a trot, following the wide trail of foot and hoof-prints. At intervals of a few hundred paces there were animal droppings or odd bits of rubbish. Starsin was in the lead behind the tracker.

They approached a rise in the ground after a while.

"Halt!" Agyet called to Starsin.

"What?"

"Be careful as we cross the skyline."

"Right." Starsin rode forward at a walk, heart pounding. He rode up the slope until he saw the blurred shape of another low hill a league or two farther on. The ground ahead opened out below him. In the middle of the flat expanse was a mass of dark shapes. They had found the slaver column. His mouth was dry, and

his heart was thudding. He'd have to ride against the vile slavers now, face their curved sharp swords.

Starsin ducked out of the saddle and waved for the group of riders thudding along behind to stop.

Lannaira and Kayrem dismounted and came forward on foot.

"It's them!" Starsin said. "We can't take them by surprise. There isn't enough cover. But if we charge in a line, we can kill the ones who are herding the lines of slaves, and then wrap around each flank to trap the rest of them. Most of the slavers should be together at the head of the column." As the thoughts came into his head, the words spilled from his mouth with confidence. If he just thought about tactics, he could control his fear.

"And what qualifies you to plan an attack?" Kayrem asked.

"Calah Military Academy qualified him," said Lannaira. "Shut up, Kayrem."

Kayrem glared.

"At least, listen to him."

Kayrem scowled, but turned his attention to Starsin.

"Spread out in a line behind the crest of the hill, three paces apart," Starsin said. He wanted the spear-wielders on the outer ends of the line.

Deejan drew his sword.

"No, get your weapons ready but don't draw them till we are within throwing range. You'll just cut yourselves otherwise." He realised he was emphasising his patrician Calah accent. Part of his new identity, the rebel Exalt and leader.

"Deejan will, anyway," Virico said.

Starsin ignored him. He glanced at Kayrem.

"Like he says," Kayrem said. "No other way of doing it."

"Let's do it then," said one of the Newhope men.

"Are you up to this, Starsin?" Lannaira asked. "After all you've been through?"

"I have to," he said.

The riders shuffled themselves into a long line abreast. The men who had shields, six in all, passed their left arms through the straps. Starsin raised his arm and looked at Kayrem.

"Charge," Kayrem said.

Chapter 12

Starsin and the fighters from Newhope cantered forward, over the brow of the low hill, and down a slight decline. So far, it didn't seem much different from a training exercise. The line kept its formation. There was no reaction from the slavers. Surely soon they would realise what was happening and start to turn and take position. They rode closer. Still no reaction.

One rider, waving his pole-weapon, had pulled ahead. It looked like Yoreig.

Starsin yelled at him. "Get back in line!"

They had covered more than half the distance to the slavers before Starsin saw the paler blur of faces appearing as people looked round. The slavers still made no defensive movement.

"Draw!" Starsin shouted, pulling out his sword from the saddle-bag and waving it. "Charge!" he shouted again, and urged the timalt to its fastest gait. Hooves thundered.

"Kill! Kill!" Somebody was shouting. It sounded like Yoreig. The other riders with sheathed weapons had now drawn them.

#

Tracker Ayget let his mount drop back a few paces. He wasn't a coward, but he'd done all the work of leading them this far, and he was damned if he'd get himself killed or badly wounded, on some stranger's account. Hooves thundered, and dust stirred. They must be leaving a bloody big track. Lots of faces turned their way. Drawn curved swords in brown hands. He wanted a shield.

#

The gap between attackers and slaver column closed. The line of riders was more ragged now, but Starsin supposed it would serve. He picked out a slaver, on foot, with a drawn curved sword. The mounted slavers still appeared to be bunched at the far end of the column.

Slave faces turned to look at him, mouths open. To keep in line, he had to miss the rear of the column and ride up the side. A bill-hook swung down on a slaver a few paces to his right. He spurred on, galloping up the side of the column, past a line of bound men staring and shouting.

#

Lannaira steadied her spear and galloped along the side of the column. Slaves were looking and pointing. This was better than remaining in Newhope, waiting and being glared at. *Keep your head, woman, follow Starsin in and don't get slashed up in a melee. You can do this.*

Starsin wobbled in the saddle as he turned to attack, and his timalt changed gait. She overtook him.

She was at the head of the line. *Now.* She turned the timalt in, aimed the spear at a Mainyu and contemplated fear and exhilaration for a moment. The man raised his sword and twisted his face in a shout. The spear struck him and flipped from her grip. His sword missed her by a hands'-breadth.

She fumbled for her own blade as her timalt dug in its hooves and shied away. In the corner of her eye she saw the Mainyu tumble, but another was turning on her. Swords clashed. *Not fun.*

#

Kayrem held his sword in his right hand, and his reins in his left. The sword, point down, balanced well. He picked out a slaver, a tall hard-faced man on a black timalt, whom he meant to kill. He glanced over at Starsin. What did the fool think he was doing, leading the charge when he was almost too beat-up to stay on his timalt?

The slaver roared as he raised his curved sword. Kayrem held his shield across his body and aimed his sword tip at the man's chest, just as the curved sword smashed into his shield, driving the rim back to his face. The shield rim slammed into his forehead. His sword jumped in his hand and tore loose. A sharp

pain dragged at his wrist as the sword's tether cord snapped tight. The timalt trampled over a huddle of chained slaves. Fuck!

Kayrem wound the tether cord and got the bloodied sword back in his hand. Dark liquid was running into his left eye, but he felt no pain, just an urge for violence. A helmeted slaver, dismounted, was turning with sword raised. He struck the man over the head. A dent appeared in the pointed helmet. He swung at him again and hit the shoulder, opening a great gash with the glisten of bone at the bottom. The slaver howled and fell back.

The charge had wounded or downed the slavers at the back of the slave column, save for one tall man, who had bested several attackers. Three slavers were still resisting. Deejan was closing in. One of the relief party was lying face down in the dirt. Two townsmen clutched at slash wounds, blood running down their fingers. The uninjured slaver was fencing with a peasant from that village, Arlonoe, who jabbed at him with a bill-hook. Chips of wood flew out of the bill-hook shaft. The peasant looked to die soon, so Kayrem rode over and stabbed the slaver in the back. The blade jarred on bone but went in deep. The Mainyu groaned and slumped from his saddle.

Kayrem glimpsed Deejan hanging back, threatening a wounded Mainyu with his old sword. Two militia jabbed pikes at a desperate Mainyu.

"Get stuck in!" Kayrem shouted. He kneed his *timalt*, and took Deejan's opponent from the side. His men rallied, and suddenly there were no more Mainyu left to fight.

#

Starsin hauled on the reins of his *timalt* and waited for the flanking riders to come into position. A melee developed at the head of the column as a dozen riders including Deejan, Trimbar, Lannaira and Nyroon gathered facing the mounted slavers. Starsin's mouth was dry and his stomach cramped. He couldn't see Kayrem.

The slavers brandished their curved swords. Starsin looked for their leader, Yarcon.

"Get in! Stab them!" Lannaira was shouting at the spear-carriers. Trimbar, a big, long-haired man from the township jabbed a slaver in the shoulder. Encircled by attackers, the slavers screamed defiance in their language.

Starsin glimpsed Yarcon's dark face, twisted and shouting orders. A Mainyu spurred forward, breaking out of the encirclement. The sharp, shining blade swung across the man's body toward Starsin who ducked and made a jab, but his sword merely nicked the man's right arm.

A blond-haired man on a timalt rode at Starsin, raising a long curved sword. Dried blood and bruises marked the man's big-nosed face. With a shock, Starsin recognised the Virnal, Branhard. He had not died after all.

With a howl of rage, Branhard swung his blade at Starsin's head. "Die!"

Starsin parried. The blades met with a screech of metal. He pushed back with all his strength, till Branhard snatched his sword backward. Starsin swayed. Branhard struck again. Starsin parried, and the curved blade vibrated near his face. He held, metal scraping, while Branhard grimaced with hate. Branhard recovered, and Starsin attacked. A slash bloodied Branhard's left arm.

Branhard struck again, with less force. Starsin parried. Metal grated. He forced Branhard's blade back and thrust. Branhard grunted as the blade entered his body, and swung his curved blade at Starsin's head. Starsin ducked.

Starsin pressed his advantage. It would have been easier to fight on foot. He stabbed again, and slashed at Branhard's neck.

Branhard dropped his sword, and swayed in the saddle, then tipped to one side till he toppled, head striking the ground with one foot still trapped in a stirrup. It was over.

Lannaira was shouting again. "Get in! Stab them!" The flat side of her blade smacked a pair of town timalts' rumps. Starsin swung around in a melee of shouting, screaming, slashing and stabbing.

A slaver, dragged out of the saddle by a bill-hook, landed at the feet of Starsin's timalt. Starsin leaned low in the saddle and stabbed the man as he rolled in the dirt. A red stain blossomed on the once-white robe. Starsin had leaned over too far. He toppled from the timalt's back into the dirt. A hoof kicked him in the side, and pain exploded through his body.

A curved sword swung at his head. Desperate, Starsin blocked the blow with his sword. A spear-point appeared from behind and above him but jabbed into his attacker's body instead. All around were cries, screams and the clash of weapons.

Virico rode up from the rear and swung at a slaver with his pole-axe, missed and the slaver's blade caught him across the throat with a return slash.

Lannaira blocked the Mainyu slaver's escape and fenced hand-to-hand.

The ruckus around Starsin diminished. Kayrem and one of the Newhope militia had ridden up between the slave lines and attacked the mounted slavers from behind; a clever and well-timed move. Two more Newhope riders pursued an escaped slaver across the plain. There was nobody else left to fight.

Two of the rescue party around Starsin were wounded and Virico, with a slashed open throat, lay immobile with his lifeblood draining into the sand.

"What'll we do with them?" Kayrem asked, nodding to the wounded slavers.

Starsin got to his feet, holding his kicked stomach.

"We can decide that later. Let's free the slaves," said Starsin. He looked around for his *timalt*.

"Where's Ussha?" It was Lannaira.

"I don't know."

"We need to treat our wounded first," Kayrem said. "Who's got field dressings?"

It took time to release the slaves from their bonds.

Starsin saw the slaver leader Yarcon lying among the wounded slavers. He picked up a length of wood, part of the discarded slave-confining gear.

Yarcon's eyes fixed on him.

"So, we meet again," Starsin said. "What will I do with you?"

"Why you ask?" Blood trickled from a rent in Yarcon's mail shirt. "The weak and foolish deserve what befalls them in the desert. You were weak and foolish."

He hit Yarcon across the face with the wood with all his remaining strength. Yarcon spoke no more.

As if this was their signal, the freed slaves began attacking the wounded and dead Mainyu slavers with their bare hands. Starsin flung them Yarcon's curved knife, and the slaves made use of it. It was not a pleasant sight.

"Have you found Ussha yet?" Lannaira asked.

Starsin shook his head. He had already walked along the female slave lines as the unwounded men, Deejan, Trimbar and Agyet, worked their way along releasing the shackles and bonds.

"I don't know." He turned and walked with Lannaira to and fro in the straggle of freed slaves, who were laughing, sobbing, rubbing their wrists or sitting with lowered heads, and looked at each face in turn. They reached the back of the line, and he still had not found her. An ache pressed like a stone in his breast.

"Let's look again," Lannaira said. "They keep moving around." They turned back, and at last he saw Ussha's mass of dark hair. He ran to her, hugged her and held her hands, while she smiled with cracked lips.

Starsin's spirits soared in relief that he had found her alive.

But she did not speak.

"Ussha, are you all right? What have they done to you?"

She made a hoarse noise. Tears streamed down her face as she shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Lanna crouched beside Starsin.

"I don't know. They cut her." He gently pushed Ussha's curling hair aside. Both her ears were crusted with blood at the centre.

Her neck was bruised, and when he looked inside her mouth, he saw half-healed cuts.

Lanna gasped in shock. "What have they done?"

Starsin stifled a sob. "The bastards went for her ears and throat. Do any of those people have medical training?"

Lannaira looked around. "I think Agyet knows a little. Agyet!"

The rescue party's tracker approached. "Can I help?"

"Please, help Ussha." Starsin pointed at the wounded girl.

"What's wrong?" Agyet asked Ussha. He touched her arm.

Weeping, she looked at him.

"I don't think she can hear," Starsin said. "Just examine her."

The man peered at her ears and throat before taking Starsin aside. "I'm sorry, it looks like her ears have been destroyed internally, and her tongue has been injured, and probably her vocal cords too. She can't speak or hear."

Starsin struck the sand with his fist. He had expected this, but to have it confirmed filled him with anger and despair.

"At least she's alive and free," Lannaira said. "She has you to thank for that. And if she learns sign-language, she'll be able to lead some kind of life."

Starsin held Ussha in his arms. The weight of the world pressed on him. How could he have let this happen? The person he cared about most, and he couldn't save her.

Kayrem approached them past the line of female slaves, a few still begging to be untied. "How's your girl? You found her, then?"

"She's been maimed," Starsin said.

Kayrem glanced away and shuffled his feet. "Bad one. Sorry. Some of our people got hurt too."

Very light casualties, Starsin thought, mindful of the Northern war.

Kayrem turned to Agyet, the tracker. "What will we do with poor Virico? He's dead."

"His family and friends will want the body back," the older man said.

"We could bury him here. It would be less trouble, and we have to do something with all this." Kayrem waved a hand at the confusion, and the clamouring slaves.

"As you wish. There's no shortage of labour," Agyet said. "But his family might not like it."

"I'll think on it, Agyet," Kayrem said, and sighed. He turned to Starsin. "Should we take their heads?"

He thought of what the slavers had done. "No, their right hands."

"What will we do with these freed slaves?" Lannaira asked.

Kayrem drew them aside from the slave lines, while Agyet tended to Ussha's abrasions and whip marks.

"What the devil can we do with all these people? I wasn't expecting this. I can't take them back to Newhope," Kayrem said in a low voice.

"Why not?" Starsin asked. "We can't just leave them here. We have to take them somewhere."

"Can't feed 'em. Folk won't like it either."

"He's right. I can imagine the reaction in the township. They'd consider it an imposition," Lannaira said.

Starsin clenched his fists. "But we can't just abandon them. That would be like murder."

"I agree we have to do something," Lannaira said. "But what? Split them up?"

"We're not a charity. We're not monks," Kayrem said.

Starsin stared at him with dislike.

"Monastery?" Lannaira said. "Isn't there a monastery half a day's ride from Newhope?"

They looked at each other. "A monastery? That's an excellent idea!" Starsin said.

"Fine. Let the monks do something useful." Kayrem beckoned the tracker over and questioned him about the distance and direction of the nearest monastery.

Agyet scratched his chin. "I think I can get us there. It will take at least half a day."

"That'll be fine," said Lannaira. "Where's Rurnik?"

Rurnik? Starsin hadn't thought about the Northerner since reuniting with the Newhope group. "I'll go look for him."

"No, you look done in. I'll take one of the men and check the slave lines," she said.

Starsin's eye fell on a timalt that ambled by as if unconnected to the melee. Yoreig. The youth looked unhurt, but he sat his animal in silence, head down, with his bill-hook lashed to the timalt's rear harness.

"Are you all right, Yoreig?"

"Yeah."

"How was your first battle?"

"Okay."

Starsin turned back and sat beside Ussha. Fighters and freed slaves were milling around. Kayrem was shouting orders, but Starsin felt his strength was at an end. He needed to sit down.

#

Yoreig did not feel okay. He had nearly wet himself on coming face to face with the evil-looking slavers and their sharp shiny swords, and had not managed to land

a single blow on any of them. All he had done was to wound one of the slaves, who had been moaning for ages. Maybe getting a name as a warrior was not for him.

The others were freeing the last of the slaves but he didn't know how to help. Nobody asides from the Exalt paid him any mind, till Kayrem shouted for him to round up the loose timalts. He caught three and roped them in a line. He chased a camel, but it gave him the evil eye and he was relieved when Trimbar caught it.

Kayrem announced that they were going to trek the freed people to a monastery, but they were to feed and water them first. The older men sorted through what was in the timalt saddle-bags, then Kayrem told Yoreig to help hand out bread and water. Yoreig handed out flatbread and drinks of water to sunburnt ragged people who smelt bad, and who grabbed and jostled him, worse behaved than farm animals. He didn't like it.

#

Morning sun glared in Starsin eyes as he followed the direction of Agyet's pointing finger. Stone walls stood on a hill, in front of a few emaciated trees, with a monkish banner flapping above.

Ussha rode on the front saddle of Starsin's timalt. Rurnik, sunburnt and ragged, rode the timalt of the dead Virico. Starsin could barely stay in the saddle himself. He needed water, and rest. He hoped that the monastery would not make difficulties about feeding and repatriating the freed people.

They approached the monastery with caution. Starsin, for one, had no wish to find it full of Virnals. He rode closer under the shade of olive trees, noting that the high walls made it defensible. Gates of heavy timber stood open, and a dozen yellow robed monks were outside, sweeping the dusty roadway with brooms. He cantered up to them, and they pressed their palms together and ducked their shaven heads in polite greeting.

Kayrem, with Lannaira, spurred up to reach the gates ahead of the column. Starsin followed.

The monks outside the gates stopped sweeping and eyed their approach, taking a step or two back.

"We have people here who need your help," Lannaira said.

A monk looked up at her. "There appear to be many."

Starsin glanced behind, at the long line of people straggling up the hill on foot, over a hundred and fifty in all.

"Indeed," Lannaira said. "Can you help them recover and find their homes?"

"It would be our duty, but we would struggle to care for so many," the monk said in a regretful tone.

"We mean to donate money, jewels and things," Kayrem said.

"What are these people?" the monk asked.

"Freed slaves," Kayrem said.

"Bring them in," the monk said. "I will inform our spiritual leader."

Kayrem's shoulders rose, as if a weight had been lifted from them. By early afternoon, after they had rested and eaten, Kayrem was hustling them to depart on the ride back to Newhope.

Starsin, impatient to see what Newhope was like, made no complaint about being forced to ride on. Lannaira had explained to him that hundreds of years previously, indigenous people had built stone towns in the margins of the Eastern desert. Some towns were built against cliffs, others on hill tops, before the climate became drier, and they were abandoned, save as shelters for nomads.

Chapter 13

"We're coming into Newhope now," Lannaira said.

They were riding across dry country, with a scattering of thorny trees, scrubby narrow-leaved bushes, fleshy-limbed plants with spikes, and much bare dusty ground. Excitement banished Starsin's fatigue; this was the promised rebel settlement of Newhope at long last.

Ahead of them, smoke rose up into the sky from behind a slight rise in the horizon. When Starsin breasted it and looked onward, he could finally see the towers of Newhope atop the next rise. In the intervening dip a pattern of dry-land cultivation surrounded the settlement. Atop the hill, a stone wall fronted tall, narrow stone buildings.

"It looks derelict," Starsin said to Lannaira. "Asides from the fields."

The column of riders picked up pace, passing fields with parched crops. The long journey, the heat and weariness, were but a memory. Here, his future would begin.

At the monastery, they had fed and patched him up a little, but his back and nose still hurt, all his muscles ached and he had barely enough strength to stay upright in the saddle.

Ussha sat the other saddle in front of him, silent, and swaying with the timalt's motion. He was certain she suffered as much as himself.

They rode the easy slope up to the gate in the town wall. Watchers on the walls saluted their approach, and a small mob of people had gathered inside the gate to welcome them back. The low sun glinted from slit-like windows of the towers, behind their defensive wall. It was a welcoming sight.

Only when Lannaira led them up to the walls did Starsin see how the place had been repaired. The defensive wall bore patches of fresh masonry, as did many of the tower houses. Glass glinted in the slit windows while smoke trailed up from a place unseen. A few heads looked at them from watch points. They reached a gap in the wall, which was as tall as two men.

The faces of the townspeople showed a mixture of smiles and anxious frowns. Among them, Starsin saw a man standing a head taller than everyone else.

Kayrem, the leader of the township warriors, sporting a head bandage and a blood-splashed leather jerkin, raised his hand and tugged his timalt to a halt. "Big news, friends! We found a column of slavers and freed their slaves. And we have rescued the Exalt and his two companions."

Starsin did not much care for this young braggart, but the fellow had made it possible to rescue Ussha. So let him have his triumph.

Agyet the tracker spoke next. "I am sorry we have three wounded." He hesitated. "Virico and Nyroon have not returned with us." He hung his head. "They are dead."

The crowd groaned.

"Who's injured?" someone shouted.

"Jaro, Trimbar and Inis," Agyet said.

"Where are they?" a woman shouted. A hubbub of shouting diminished as the three wounded men raised their hands.

A woman screamed.

"We have brought back the dead," Agyet said, raising his voice.

Starsin stole a glance at Lannaira, who sat impassively on her *timalt*.

The very tall man stepped forward.

"Is that the Exalt?" he asked Lannaira.

She pointed to Starsin and nodded.

The stranger's skin was dark, and his greying hair was curly. He stepped forward and extended his hand to Starsin. He hardly had to reach up to where Starsin sat. "I am Ovlar, elected leader of our little community," he said. His face was stubbly, with thin lips and piercing brown eyes.

Many eyes focused on Starsin. He gripped the tall man's rough, dry hand, but clearly some further response was expected.

"Thank you for sending out men to rescue myself and my companions. I am humbled by the sacrifice you have made, and am sorry for your loss."

The crowd responded with a murmur of approval, and a few nods. He could expect no more.

Conscious of Lannaira seated on her timalt close by, he added, "I should also thank Lannaira Hajan for being so determined to get me here." He glanced at Lannaira, who made a nod.

"Indeed," Ovlar said.

A few of the crowd made a couple of hand-claps and muttered "Aye."

Ovlar glanced at Kayrem. "Did you take prisoners?"

"Prisoners?" Starsin untied a bloodstained cloth bag from his saddle and threw it to the ground before Ovlar's feet.

"What's this?"

For answer, Starsin pointed to the bag. Ovlar untied it and shook out the contents. It contained a dozen brown human hands. The onlookers gasped and murmured.

"You took their hands?" asked a man in the crowd.

"They're dead?" asked another.

"That's brutal!" said a third.

"We're not barbarians here," said a fourth.

"We exterminated the whole filthy gang," Starsin said. "A dozen of them."

"We don't approve of executing prisoners here," Ovlar said.

"Unless they're slavers," somebody behind him said in a lower voice.

Starsin looked at Ovlar, past the head of the silent Ussha, seated before him.

Idealists! Still angry over what had happened to Ussha, he didn't give a rat's arse what Ovlar thought, and he wasn't going to argue over the hand-taking.

"The freed slaves tried the Mainyu slavers, found them guilty and carried out capital punishment," Lannaira said. "Who better to decide?"

Starsin glanced at her.

The others digested this statement for a heartbeat, then Kayrem gave a harsh bark of laughter, followed by several of the others. "Fugging right! You want to know what those animals did to that girl?" He pointed to Ussha.

Lannaira shushed him.

Riders, whole and wounded, kneed their animals forward and reunited with their loved ones. Two women were wailing. With a word to Ovlar, Lannaira extracted Starsin's timalt and Rurnik's from the press and led them through a maze of narrow stone-paved alleys, hemmed in by the walls of tower houses and other stone buildings.

A gaggle of the curious followed. It turned out Lannaira had a tower of her own that faced onto one of the alleys. She dismounted and struggled to open the door of the stone edifice. Inside, a musty smell and a layer of dust showed the contents had lain undisturbed during her long months of absence. They carried the baggage inside while the animals, to Starsin's mild dismay, were handed off to the crowd.

As soon as the door had closed on the crowd, Starsin asked, "Who are these people? Are they Southlanders?" He had heard of hot lands where the people had dark skins.

"No. Who'd want to live in this dust-bowl out of choice? It's a place people are forced to flee to. Most came a few centuries ago. The researchers came in the past few years."

"Are we sleeping here?" he asked. The ground floor room was a living space, with a table, fireplace with pothook, shelves of books, chairs, and a single plate, cup and glass, all covered in dust. A ladder gave access to an upper floor.

"They might invite you somewhere else," Lannaira said. "Don't unpack your stuff."

A woman brought a bucket of water, and all four of the travellers used it to freshen themselves up. Lannaira and Ussha made a start on shifting the thin layer of dust. Most of it flew into the air. Starsin and Rurnik went outside, smiled at a

curious crowd, retreated inside and climbed the stepladder to the upper floor.

Starsin opened the shutters. Here was another bare room, plastered and whitewashed, with more books, a work-table, and a mattress, all covered with a thin dust layer.

Lannaira went to summon a healer, and Starsin found himself in the hands of a young blonde woman who tutted over his village-treated whip welts and other wounds. "I'll wash these again, dab on some spirit where it's inflamed, then I'll apply ointment and a leaf compress."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Shell."

The spirit burned, but the compress felt cool, and when she had finished, Starsin had endured enough for one day and lay inert on the bed. Lannaira climbed up the stair and stood over him with her hands on her hips.

"How's Ussha doing?" he asked.

"The same. The girl is treating her to ward off the risk of wound corruption. Then she'll be resting."

"There's no hope of restoring her speech and hearing?"

Lannaira shook her head. "Not without some magical power even spell-casters don't have. But if we teach her sign language, she can still communicate with us."

"Curse them. Tell me when they've done?"

Above him, thick wood beams crossed from whitewashed wall to wall, holding up the boards that formed the floor of the room above. They reminded him of whip-lashings.

Lannaira came up to the first floor again. "They're inviting us to a welcoming dinner. Can you be ready?"

Starsin groaned. "Do I have to?"

"It'd be rude not to. They know you were well enough to ride. Anyway, we need to eat."

He got up from the bed, wincing as various wounds twinged and tugged. In Lannaira's mirror, his face looked battered and wasted. With care, he made his way down the steep wooden stair. The thick-bodied woman who had brought the message led him and Lannaira along narrow alley-like streets, now shadowy in the evening light, to a long, low stone building.

"They're using the hall," Lannaira murmured.

Inside, under a roof supported by jointed pieces of rustic timber, a long plank-topped table was laid, with a score of plain chairs. Local worthies occupied most of the seats, but the two travellers were found seats at one end. Ovlar, the tall leader, had the seat at the head of the table.

The food, with root vegetables, greens and bits of unidentifiable meat, was not up to Calah banquet standards, but filling. He washed it down with water and sour wine. The diners wore shirts and jackets that were clean, but frayed by work. During the meal, they assailed Starsin with a variety of questioning. Folk on one side of the table probed what he knew of burning-fields, the relics on sale on Calah, and his military training while on the other side they wanted to know if he was married and how fast he could earth up vegetables, or if he could shoe a *timalt*.

Starsin told Ovlar and the other councillors about the blond man who had been present at the slavers' camp. "He was obviously a Vernal, from Calah. I've met enough of them to know one. He seemed to be encouraging the slaver rampage in this region."

"The bastard. Why would he do that?" asked one of the farmer-councillors.

"It's as I told you. They want to destabilise this region, so they can move in without opposition."

The meeting received this news with murmurings of anger.

Ovlar leaned against the cold fireplace. "And you killed this one yourself?"

"I did." Starsin touched the scab on his brow.

"We need to search for other Vernals and drive them out," Ovlar said.

"Right," Kayrem said. There was a murmuring of agreement.

Everyone here, as well as half the town and possibly the district, knew him by his real name and also his business. Lannaira, seated opposite him, was signalling him by nodding or shaking her head as he parried questions, to what purpose he failed to divine. He realised the folk asking the technical questions were better dressed while the others, on the other side of the table, were more dusty and sunburnt. It was if two factions competed for his attention. He was introduced but retained only impressions from the blur of faces. There were militia men, an ancient lady who still was as sharp as a tack, a farmer and several researchers.

The ordeal ended at last.

It was a relief to escape and attend a smaller meeting with Ovlar and Lannaira in Ovlar's tower house. The first floor was an austere place with rough-plastered stone walls, furnished with a bed, a desk and some cupboards and shelving; the desk was strewn with papers. Ovlar walked to his desk with his head brushing the ceiling, and sat.

"What was going on in there?" Starsin asked as soon as they were alone.

"There was some edge going on between the two sides of the table that I didn't understand."

"Oh, you noticed?" Lannaira said. "I was trying to stop you upsetting the rude labouring classes."

Starsin looked at Ovlar. Ovlar spread his hands. "You see, my friend, our community is divided into those who work with their hands at agriculture and building repairs and crafts, and have lived here for generations, and those who work on researches, and are often incomers. There is an ongoing tension between the two groups."

"By researches you mean ancient stuff? Ah."

Ovlar nodded.

"So ducking the question about marrying that farmer's daughter was the right thing to do?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. If I'd thought, I would have warned you beforehand,"

Lannaira said. "Both sides want to claim you."

"Whatever for?" Starsin asked. He did not want to be claimed and detained here.

Ovlar shrugged. "Another pair of hands."

"So what do you research in this dried-up place?" Starsin asked.

"I understand Lannaira showed you the Hill of Bones?" Ovlar said.

Starsin nodded, remembering the frightening and all too real visions of a terrible past.

"That saves me a lot of explanations. Our world was not always sticks, stones and mud. The ancients achieved great things, then they perished. We seek to understand, and to recover what we can."

"And to stop the Virnals getting it first," Starsin said, recalling Lannaira's words.

"Quite so." Ovlar stared into Starsin's eyes. "You understand the importance of this work? Everything leads back to the powers of the ancients."

"The dangerous old objects? The burning-fields? The *regers*?"

"All those things." Ovlar's eyes glittered in the lamplight. "We must know, before it's too late."

Back at Lannaira's tower, Starsin looked in on the sleeping Ussha. In the lamplight, her face looked peaceful and unchanged. Tears came into his eyes.

In the morning light, Starsin stirred with a sensation of nausea. His shoulder wound, and one of the scars on his back felt sore and inflamed, despite the efforts of the healers. The beatings by the slavers, his depression at what had happened to Ussha, and his battle against the *sennis* drug had taken their toll. He lay in bed all day, listening to faint sounds of Lannaira, in the room below, making better use of her time to pursue her cryptic projects.

Ussha came to sit with him, but they could only exchange smiles, touch and gestures. Guilt oppressed him. He was only relieved her spirit was not broken.

The blonde healer girl Shell came to visit Starsin as he lay in his sick-room, and made him drink a small cup of a nasty tasting potion.

"This will build up your strength," she said. As she leaned over him, he could smell her sweat, and see the cleavage of her breasts down the neckline of her dress. Straight blonde hair hung below her shoulders. She asked Starsin to describe life in a big city.

"If you are setting off for Chazu, I'd love to come too!" she said.

"Are you crazy? No sensible person would want to set off from here to Chazu after what happened to us a few days ago."

She shook her head. "I hear you'll be going when you're recovered, and Lannaira is to be sent with you."

"But I'm not a sensible person." He tried to stop looking at her bosom.

"It can't be that dangerous. Lannaira used to travel by herself. Anyway those horrible slavers were all killed."

"Lannaira's not you," Starsin pointed out. "From what I saw in that skirmish she can use a sword like a veteran."

Shell rose and went out.

By next day, it bothered him to be lying in an upstairs room alone, waiting for people to bring him food and drink. He got himself dressed and climbed downstairs.

Lannaira was working in the room below. She looked up at the noise he made descending the stair-ladder.

"Are you better?" She asked. A ray of sunlight illuminated papers stacked on the table.

"Some. I needed to get on my feet." His guardian would not have tolerated him lying in bed unless he was really ill.

"Ah."

He shuffled over to the lower stair-ladder and descended. One of Lannaira's sturdy woman friends was tidying up the ground floor room. Starsin didn't need anything other than a mouthful of mineral-tasting water. He decided to see how far he could walk in the street without falling down.

It was cooler outside, in the shade. He walked slowly, with one hand on the stone wall. At a sound, he looked up and found himself face to face with Rurnik.

Rurnik held an armful of dried sticks. They stared at each other. He hadn't seen Rurnik since the day of the rescue. The Northerner looked thinner, sunburnt, and there were healing weals on his bare wrists. He wore a sleeveless vest.

How did things stand between them? Those whip marks on Rurnik's shoulders could be Starsin's work, but he had also led the rescue attack. But the bastard had betrayed his identity to Yarcon in the first place. Rurnik's expression gave little away.

"All right?" Starsin asked. He was tired of hating Rurnik.

Rurnik grunted and gave a curt nod.

"They've not hung you for pilfering?" Starsin asked, in a friendly tone.

Rurnik shook his head. "No."

Standing was tiring work. "Rurnik, could you spare me a straight stick? About this long?" He indicated a half-span with his hands.

Rurnik grunted and looked down at the bundle of wood. He worked his fingers and one of the outer sticks fell to the ground. He made no move to pick it up.

Starsin looked down at it. "Thanks."

"How Mistress Ussha?" Rurnik asked.

"Not good. Not in danger, but she'll never speak or hear again." On saying these things, his eyes filled with moisture.

"Really very sorry," Rurnik said. "Liked the Mistress." His dark close-set eyes met Starsin's.

Starsin felt a shock. He hadn't thought Rurnik would have any feelings about Ussha's maiming. Who did he blame?

#

People hailed Starsin as he made his way along the stone street to Shell's tower and asked after the health of himself and the others. The walking-stick gave him an invalid air. He didn't mind that. It would stop them asking him to mind *timalts* or dig in the fields.

At a tower with a painted door, Shell let him in. The lower room was cleaner and tidier than Lannaira's and cluttered with herb jars and more feminine things. Ussha sat listless with a book on her lap. She brightened as Starsin entered and raised her face to look at him.

"How are you?" He knew she couldn't hear him.

Ussha smiled.

He kissed her on the cheek.

"How is she?" he asked Shell.

"Wounds have healed well, but no chance of getting her speech or hearing back." She made finger-signs at Ussha, who responded with finger-gestures of her own.

"What's that?" Starsin asked.

"We're all learning sign-language, so we can talk to her," Shell said.

"Then I should learn too. Who's the teacher?"

Shell explained. It was nobody Starsin knew.

He turned his head to look at the text of Ussha's book the right way up.

"What's she reading?"

"Some book of Lannaira's. I don't read much."

Starsin crouched and raised the angle of the book until he could read the cover. 'A Journey in the Eastern Lands, with an Account of the Peoples' looked like a Lannaira sort of book. He looked up at Ussha with frustration. There was so much he wanted to say. He asked Shell for a piece of paper, and when she found one and a pen, wrote on it, *"I will learn the signing too."*

Ussha smiled and nodded.

That evening, Starsin made a start at learning the signing, in the ground floor room of Lannaira's tower. The teacher, a plump woman with reddish hair, showed them the finger signs. Starsin had an urgent need to learn, but found the signing embarrassing and the task of memorisation difficult. Ussha smiled whenever he wiggled his fingers at her. To see the bright and articulate Ussha silenced had made him sad.

The effort of learning fatigued him, and Ussha too, and they had to stop and retire for the night to the upper floor of Lannaira's tower. The lessons would resume the following evening.

Next day, Starsin felt a little stronger and his wounds troubled him less. The *sennis* addiction was under control if he took a small dose every day. There was something he knew he had to do.

He walked with slow steps to the place outside the walls where the townsfolk buried their dead. There was a small rectangular field of small plots, marked with carved slabs or just with a large uncut stone. Several of the marker stones had red rags tied to them.

He returned to the town, wanting to speak with Ovlar, and found the town leader in his stone tower home, an untidy ground floor room littered with papers and a few old artefacts.

"I want to make a grave. I want a stone carver to carve a memorial slab."

Ovlar raised an eyebrow. "You'll pay him?"

"Yes."

"Who's it for? If it's for one of the militiamen, you don't need to pay."

"No, it's for someone else. Rukan, a man I knew in Calah."

Starsin told the stone carver what he wanted and then went out to the burial field to dig a grave in his allotted plot. The ground was dry and full of stones, which had to be pried loose before his spade would cut into the dry earth. It took most of a day

to dig the hole. Sweat ran down his face and soaked his shirt under his arms. Dust stuck to him. A few small boys watched him with curious expressions on their faces.

"Who's dead, mister? Is that for Virico?"

"No, for somebody I knew."

When he had made a sufficiently imposing hole, he put a scroll of remembrance inside a pot, sealed it and placed it in the empty grave. He shovelled back the dust and stones, setting the largest stones on top.

That evening, at the signing lesson after dinner, Starsin struggled to stay alert. Lannaira, with her interest in language, proved far more adept, and could soon communicate with Ussha quite well. Whenever they chatted silently with eloquent fingers, Ussha's mood visibly lightened. Starsin hoped she would be well soon, so he could pursue his destiny in Chazu.

Two days later, the carved slab was ready. Starsin had a labourer help him drag the heavy slab out of the town on a cart and set it up in position. Lannaira, a couple of councillors and a few boys came to watch as they made a shallow hole and manhandled the carved stone slab into position.

He pulled away the sacking that had wrapped the stone. The inscription read:
"R Rukan of Calah, officer, martyr for freedom."

"Doesn't he have a grave in Calah?" Lannaira asked.

"There's none known. This is his memorial."

They stood for a few minutes, remembering Rukan's protests, his summary execution and the disappearance of his body.

"Rukan was a brave man who loved his country but opposed the Northern war," Starsin said. "Many people have suffered since then. He died at the end of my innocence, and the beginning of the road that brought me here."

Wind ruffled Lannaira's hair. "You will be taking a new road now?"

"A new quest, and not alone." He lowered his head.

