

A Night with the Girls
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"What's the problem?" Starhawk of Wrynde swung down from her horse in front of Butcher's infirmary tent. Though she hadn't been in a mercenary camp in almost two years, she had a soul-deep sense of familiarity about the place, like the outhouse behind a familiar tavern: *Are we back here again?* Only the outhouse would have been quieter. Past the walls of Horran, the sun dipped toward the Inner Sea, red behind the squat black towers of siege engines. In front of the tents the meres sharpened swords and polished armor, repaired straps, chatted up the camp whores, or diced. Cook-fire smoke gritted in the eyes, profanity in the ears.

Be it ever so humble...

Butcher craned to look past Starhawk's shoulder. "Where's the Wolf?"

"And I'm so glad to see you, too," replied Starhawk.

The troop physician laughed, embarrassed. "I'm sorry." She made a show of checking her breeches pockets and the leathern purse at her belt. "I must have left my manners in my other clothes. I'm damn glad to see you, Hawk, but I meant it in my letter when I said we needed the Wolf here."

"Sun Wolves in the mountains, chasing down some woman who's supposed to be teaching magic." Starhawk ran the horse's reins through the ropes that wrapped one of the barrels piled outside the hospital tent, and pulled down her saddlebags. "Don't tell me you've got another wizard in the city." Two years ago the troop, of which Starhawk had once been second in command, had the misfortune to have a curse placed on it during a siege. The results had not been pleasant for anyone.

Butcher scratched her short-cropped graying hair, and led the way into the tent. Inside, her two apprentices were closing the flaps and lighting lamps. A slave came past with dishes of porridge on a tray. A couple of meres from one of the smaller troops, as well as those of Captain Ari's army, were sitting up in their cots; but nobody who looked like soldiers of the Prince of Chare, who'd hired them. Elsewhere a man muttered in drugged pain. Here on the Gwarl Peninsula, where the trade-routes ran from Ciselfarge and points east, there was plenty of access to opium.

"I don't think it's a wizard." The physician led the way through the aisle of cots to a curtained-off rear corner of the tent. "But sure as pox there's something going on. Take a look at this."

An enormous woman rose from beside the cot as Butcher led the Hawk through the curtains. Starhawk nodded a greeting.

"Battlesow here found him," explained Butcher. "They were on watch together, night before last. They usually watched together." She brought the hanging lamp down close, and twitched the sheet back.

Starhawk said, "Mother Pusbucket!" and stepped away.

"We don't know what did that." Battlesow had a small girl's sweet, lispng voice, faintly absurd in most circumstances. It was hard with anger now. "He was lying with his back against the roots of an oak-tree, with his sword in one hand and his dagger in the other."

"I have them in the other room." Butcher stepped forward, covered over the scabbed and puckered horror again. "We cleaned him up-he was still breathing-" Starhawk shuddered at the thought. "-But there was blood all over the weapons, old blood, like you find in week-old corpses. You've seen some weird things, since you and Sun Wolf left the troop and started mucking around with wizardry. You ever seen anything like that?"

"Sure." The Hawk gazed down at the outline of the distorted face, the sticky rings of dabbled blood visible beneath the sheet. "Last time I saw the bottom of a boat that had been bored through by worms. But those holes were the size of my finger, not my wrist."

"I've been asking." Butcher led the way along what had probably been a farm-path. The sheathed glow of her lantern bobbed on charred tree-stumps, burned and ruined hedges, and here and there the smashed-in ruins of a house or a barn. Horran was a prosperous little trade port, Starhawk recalled from her own mercenary days, the major source of income for the Prince of Chare. She'd heard in Kedwyr that the Prince had recently hired Ari of Wrynde-Sun Wolf's successor to the command of the troop-to help convince the Horran town fathers not to declare independence. These, she guessed, would have been the garden farms that supplied the city dwellers with fresh vegetables and milk. The Mother only knew where their owners were. Probably sitting in the hills waiting to see who would win.

"According to latrine rumor, five outpost guards have disappeared in the past eight days," Butcher went on. "This morning I made a little tour of the perimeter-nearly getting shot by both sides for my trouble-and found three bodies in the cellar of a farmhouse. They were too chewed-up for me to tell much. Rats, mostly, but some of the wounds didn't look like rats, or like any animal I've ever seen. They were jammed up under the floor-joists."

"That where we're going now?" Starhawk had her sword in her hand, watching all around her, only half listening to what Butcher said, and to the heavy scrunch of Battlesow's boots on the path behind her. It would help a lot, she reflected, if she knew what she was listening for.

It would help even more if Sun Wolf hadn't gone off to look for that little old lady in the Kanwed Mountains who was supposed to braid love-charms out of moonlight. They were clearly up against magic here, and even Sun Wolfs unschooled powers would be of more use than the swords of the doughtiest mercenaries. Love-charms were easily manufactured anywhere you just wrapped a piece of paper bearing the words "I love you" around ten or twelve gold pieces, and there you were. In an emergency you could dispense with the paper.

"There's going to be a sortie through here tomorrow night," explained Battlesow's breathless little soprano. "There's a watchtower right over that way, guarding a postern. You're taking your life in your hands anywhere in here by daylight."

"If there's something hiding out in these ruins," said Butcher, "I for one don't want to see it." She stopped, holding up her hand for silence.

Starhawk smelled the thing before she saw it. The stench of old blood and maggots, of dirt and burned hair; the stink of rat-piss and grimy beggar-rags. It seemed to come from everywhere, disorienting, drowning the night-if she hadn't been aware that the wind was onshore she would have thought it was only the stink of the city under siege. There was a sound, too, just briefly: a clicking, knocking clatter squishily muffled.

Then a whitish blur near a barn's broken wall.

Butcher brought her mouth almost to Starhawk's ear. "It's got someone."

Starhawk looked again, straining to see in the starlight. After a moment she signed the others two to stay close, and moved towards the place. Butcher generally didn't carry a sword but she could use one, and had strapped hers on for the occasion. Battlesow had, in addition to her four-foot broadsword Daffodil, a halberd with cross-guards on the blade like a boar-spear and an iron war-club that could have brained a horse. Before leaving Butcher's tent all three women had geared up with what meres called dogfight leathers, armbands and collars bristling with spikes, mailed gloves and scouting-weight cuirasses of leather and plate. Starhawk reflected uneasily that the outpost guard she'd seen at the infirmary had almost certainly worn something similar. It was unlikely he'd taken it off for a scratch and been ambushed at just precisely the wrong moment, oh darn.

The bam had been burned during the initial fighting around the walls; roof and rafters had fallen in. In the Gwarl they usually dug root cellars underneath the barns. If the thing was seeking a lair it-

They came around the corner of the wall and it was there.

It struck unbelievably fast, Starhawk slashing for the dripping pits where eyes had once been. It was worms, she thought: they burst through the curtain of filthy rags that covered the

squirming globby flesh, huge as serpents, their round reddish heads groping blind. She pivoted sidelong-the thing faced around and as Battlesow rammed it back with the halberd, it opened its mouth and extruded something that looked like a maggot the size of a hosepipe, snapping and reaching. It had hands, though, human or once-human, like the head. They grabbed the halberd shaft and wrenched it free of Battlesow's grip-Battlesow who could break a cow's neck with a punch-and lunged at the big woman. Nothing daunted, Battlesow waded in with a leather-wrapped and mail-shod right hook that sent the creature spinning into the night.

Starhawk and Butcher closed up on either side of their friend, fast, a triangle facing three ways out. Three swords, three daggers ready-not that swords or daggers had done the output guards a whole lot of good. Starhawk panted with shock and exertion, the adrenaline-rush of combat making her hands shake, but for a long time the dense blue-black shadows around them were still, chancy in the glimmer of the stars.

"Holy pox and cow-pies," said Battlesow, and leaned from the spiked defensive ring to pick up the lantern. Starhawk smelled the rank cheap oil and realized that the stench of the creature had faded.

"And Ari's still getting guys willing to stand perimeter guard out here?" Starhawk shook her head. "I underestimated his powers of persuasion-or overestimated the intelligence of some of the guys in the troop, I'm not sure which." She settled into flanking position behind Butcher and the physician followed the dribbled slime-trail the thing had left, back towards the barn. "Does Prince Chare know about this?"

"Ari brought him into the infirmary this morning, while the guy you saw was still alive. Chare kept talking about resistance fighters from the countryside and what horrible weapons they carried that could do that, and how we'll all just have to be more careful."

"Weapons my ass. Yike!" she added, as Battlesow slipped the lantern-slide and raised the lantern to throw yellow light into the root-cellar before them. "He can't be one of ours," she added, studying the youthful, snub-nosed face-what could be seen of it under the blood-and-expensive if tattered clothing.

Butcher shook her head. "Look at his hands. He was somebody's clerk, or a student. He's not even wearing a sword, look. Poor sap must have just been walking home." She looked around her at the darkness. "What the hell is it, Hawk? Sun Wolves been learning hoodoo for two years now, and that things hoodoo if I ever saw it."

"I'm guessing it's a wight of some sort," said Starhawk. "According to the books the Chieftain picked up in Vorsal they're usually hungry like that. When they meld into corpses they often have some kind of vague memories or thoughts picked up from the brain of the corpse, but they're not bright enough to take orders or anything. And if it is a wight, we'd better make ourselves scarce, because wights are-"

Her hand flipped up for silence and in the same instant, it seemed, Butcher rapped shut the lantern-slide. The three warriors pressed automatically back against the wall and slid along, getting clear of the boy's corpse, swords held low in the shadows beside them but ready again.

The stink of the wight was like drowning in rotting glue.

White movement where the starlight struck, in front of the ruined barn. A vast obscene wriggling under the filthy shroud. Bony hands groping over the ground.

Battlesow leaned to breathe in Starhawk's ear, starlight slipping over the shaved curve of her head, the glister of the five-carat diamond in her earlobe. "What's it looking for?"

"Probably," breathed Starhawk back, "its teeth." She'd seen several go flying when Battlesow decked the wight.

The bony fingers fumbled something up from the mud, traveled to the slobbery mouth. Then back to the earth, picking at pebbles, old nails, miscellaneous animal-bones and snail-shells. Looking more closely, Starhawk saw how the thing's head was wrapped in a sort of dirty turban, beneath which wisps of hair hung down, faded in the blanching light like frost-painted grass. Butcher raised her sword a little-she could amputate a leg in fifteen seconds-and Starhawk touched her hand, and shook her head.

"Cutting it to pieces won't help," she breathed. "It'll still come after us."

"If this situation gets any better I'll burst into song. Where's Sun Wolf when you need him?"

"Where's any man when you need him?" muttered Battlesow.

The wight froze.

Pox rot it, thought Starhawk, it heard us.

It was on its feet then and turning, not towards them but in the direction of the black crumbled debris of what had been the main farm building, as two figures emerged from the darkness. One stepped forward, lifting a halberd-a woman, the Hawk identified it, by the movement more than by the dim glimpse of trailing braids-and the wight fell on the newcomer, knocking her down and aside with the force of its rush. The second figure, also female though both were clad as men in breeches, tunics, and boots, sprang to her companions' defense, slashing with another halberd, a weapon whose length and leverage were often chosen to compensate for a woman's lighter weight and shorter reach.

Drawn off its first victim, the wight whirled upon the second, and by that time Battlesow, Butcher, and Starhawk had reached the struggling group. Disregarding all Starhawk's warnings about dismemberment Battlesow plowed in like a demented woodchopper on

hashish, Daffodil rising and falling in time to battle-cries like the shrill barking of a very snarling dog. Wriggling, serpent-sized maggots flew and splacked on the damp earth; one brown-gummed bony hand whirled away and crawled spider-wise into the ruins. Mewing and pawing, the wight backed off and fled; Starhawk and Butcher had to grab Battlesow to keep her from following it into the darkness.

"Stinking thing." Battlesow spit after it. "That'll teach it."

"It won't," pointed out Starhawk. "They don't learn. They just come back. Indefinitely. Whatever you do to them, they incorporate into themselves. Absorb it, and make it part of their next attack."

"I was married to a man like that once," remarked Butcher.

They turned back. The tubulate, serpent-like growths had already crawled away from the ruined dooryard. One of the two newcomer women gave over trying to help her friend to her feet and sprang up herself, grabbing her halberd and bracing herself for another attack.

"Relax," said Starhawk, crossing to them and stopping just out of halberd-range, not that she thought either woman capable of doing much damage. She sheathed her sword and her dagger and held up her hands to show them empty. "That thing yours?"

The two women-one standing, the other, whom the wight had first borne down, scrambling painfully to her feet-looked at one another, then at Starhawk and her friends. The older woman, scrawny as a cut-rate chicken a poor housewife would have to boil for most of a day, said in a length, "In a manner of speaking. Are you all right, Elia?"

"More or less." Her friend brushed filth and soot from her sleeves, wiped the spattered slime of the wight's mouth off her face, to reveal a plain, square-jawed, motherly countenance. She leaned her halberd against the wall near her and held out her hand to Starhawk. "I am Elia, representative to the town council of Horran from the Seven Streets district. This is Teryne."

"Starhawk of Wrynde. Butcher," she nodded back at the others who still watched, weapons ready, for the return of the wight, "and Battlesow. Why 'in a manner of speaking'? Did you know it into being?"

Teryne spat, a crones eloquence. Elia said, "No. I was not informed of the town council meeting at which the decision to-to create such a thing-was taken." She added drily, "From what I can learn, a number of us weren't."

"I could have told them," Teryne said in her harsh, surprisingly deep voice. "I did tell them Brannis Cornmonger, and Mowyer Silks, and all their merchant friends. Told them old Agatha Givna was so angry and spiteful in her old age that if they opened up her tomb and let the charnal-wight claim her body, the way that book of theirs told them how, she'd turn on anyone."

she could get at, not just the troops of the Prince."

"Book?" Like Sun Wolf, Starhawk was always on the lookout for the ancient lore of the craft, the only remnant of teaching left. "They had a book of magic?"

The old woman gestured like one shooing flies. "Brannis Cornmonger, that's Mayor-thou now he calls himself President of the Independent Polity, if you please." Her voice would burn burned holes in a linen shirt. "Only it's not a proper book, not thick, that'll tell you the why the wherefore. Like so be it's a cookbook, that'll just say how."

"Oh, great!" Starhawk rolled her eyes. Sun Wolf had a collection of such grimoires, picked up in his travels. He also had a collection of appalling stories about people who'd followed recipes enclosed therein, without inquiring as to what spells of limitation or protection might have been left out of those terse instructions to mix sea salt with human blood, or to repeat certain words in certain places at the dark of the moon. "So these idiots just pulled the ward-spells off a tomb and set up a drawing-circle..."

"To do Brannis Cornmonger justice," said Elia, wrapping her graying braids onto the back of her head and rearranging the pins that held them, "I personally would rather not have Prince Chare's forces take and sack the town. It isn't anything to me if Cornmonger gets fed hot coals by Chare's executioners, but having neighbors, and sisters, and nieces, and a mother who stands to be sold into slavery after being raped repeatedly, I do understand our mayors-excuse me our president's-attitude." She folded her arms, and regarded the three mercenaries with accusing eyes. "The only problem is that wights apparently don't prey simply on one side, no matter what kind of instructions get written in the circle of their calling."

"As I told him," Teryne said again. She tilted her head a little to regard her friend, then the mercenaries before her. "Not that he'd listen to me. 'Old wives tales,' he said; as if reading a scrap of a cookbook made him a wizard instead of just a man who used to live next door to the grandson of one. I notice the man who wrote that book isn't around no more."

"Well, the Wizard-King pretty much took care of all competition, good and bad, before he was killed," said Starhawk. She scratched the sweat and gore from her loose soft tousle of hair, and turned back to consider the starlit glimmer of wet ground and mucky shadows where the wight had been. "You'd think he might have had the sense to ask, though."

"People often don't want to know," Elia said, "when they think they see a way out of their difficulties."

"Particularly not if there's talk in council of dumping those whose stubbornness and greed started the trouble with the Prince in the first place," put in Teryne.

Starhawk was silent for a time, thinking. Thinking about matters she had read in Sun Wolf's books of magic-proper books, Teryne would have called them, that did talk about the why and

wherefore of such matters as wights. Thinking about the political situation in the Gwarl Peninsula, something she and Sun Wolf had kept up on through tavern gossip and merchants' reports with the professional curiosity of one-time mercenaries whose livelihood had once depended on knowing who was fighting whom and why. Thinking about the cities she had helped sack, back in her fighting days, and of why she had quit being a mercenary. Thinking about the men and women of those cities that she had met: who they were, and what they wanted out of life.

Thinking about the fact that the wight-stink was growing stronger again, thick and rancid in the night air.

"-book of his said that if the names of his enemies were written on the walls of the tomb when it was opened, the wight would go after those enemies," Elia was explaining to Butcher. "I asked him-and I wasn't the only one-what would happen if the wight started hunting, starting killing, inside the city as well as outside. Brannis said that wouldn't happen."

"Brannis didn't inquire," remarked old Teryne drily, "whether Aganna could read the names of Brannis' enemies or her own name, for that matter, which she couldn't."

"The council voted against Brannis' plan," Elia went on. "But two nights later the husband of one of my neighbors disappeared-the shutters of his room broken in, and the smell there..." She stopped and looked around her at the darkness, realizing that while she had been speaking, the smell had returned. Stronger, and growing stronger still.

"Give me that lantern, Butcher," said Starhawk. "And watch my back."

The four women formed up a perimeter around her, a moving circle that followed her out into the open patch of ground where the mud glistened with the foulness that had dripped from the wight's wounds. Starhawk slipped back the lantern slide and knelt, edging this way and that in the muck, searching.

"There's been three others taken so far, that I know about," Elia said. "That's just from my neighborhood, which is one of the poorest in the city."

"Your Mayor could have saved himself trouble," remarked Butcher. "I can't see Prince Chare turning loose one square foot of territory that belongs to him no matter how many soldiers get killed, his own or somebody else's. He's a stiff-necked bastard."

"Stiff-necked has nothing to do with it." Starhawk pulled off her mail-backed glove to rub her fingers over the greasy earth. "The council of Horran's got to be negotiating with the La Prince of Kwest Mralwe. Chare would be a fool to let Horran out of his-Ah!" She found what she sought and picked it up, crumbling, brown and slimed from the dirt. Deep in the darkness, beyond the orange-lit shoulders of Butcher's scouting-leathers, beyond Battlesow's thick tattooed neck and shaven head, a noise started, a low throaty growling, like a cat when

cornered by a dog.

"Tell me this," she added, searching more quickly now-there had to be more of these. "Did anybody on the council come up with articles of compromise? Here-No, dammit, just a dog's foot-bone. Articles are pretty standard in fights like this and I heard something about it when the Chief and I were over in Ciselfarge last month. Here we go." She picked up a second hunk of little chunk, wiped it off and stowed it in her belt-pouch. The growling in the darkness grew louder.

"Coriador Toth." Elia's voice sounded strained, but she kept it steady and quiet. "He's one of the greatest merchants of the town, but a good man. Neither Chare nor Brannis would sign-Chare because he said it gave away too much to the Council, Brannis because it didn't give enough."

"Idiots, both of 'em," said Teryne.

"Can you get us into the city?" Starhawk got to her feet. And, when Elia and Teryne looked at one another, she added impatiently "You must have gotten out somehow-she must have gotten out. I'd offer to turn over my weapons to you," she went on, annoyed, "except I think we're going to need them in about-"

The wight flung itself from the darkness.

It had grown. Where Butcher's sword had nearly taken one arm off, another had been grabbed in, raising the complement to three: a man's arm, bearing the gouges of the serpentine corpse-worms in its bleeding flesh and clutching a sword in its hand. Where Battlesow had hacked its body nearly in two, a head had been shoved like a plug, eyes staring, mouth leaking blood as it tried to speak. Elia screamed and Battlesow said, "Bugger me, it's Lieutenant Egswade!"

Starhawk, nearly borne down by the wight's rush, slithered out of the thing's way, slashing and cutting-the whole bulk of the creature seemed greater, swollen and fleshed out as if it had gorged to replenish itself after its defeat. With mindless rage it sprang after her, striking and clawing and grabbing. Battlesow and Elia intercepted it, halberd and sword flashing in the lantern-light.

"Bugger this." Butcher caught up the lantern Starhawk had dropped and made ready to throw.

With a yell Starhawk flung herself at the physician, wrenching the hot metal from her hand. "Don't do that!"

The wight hurled Battlesow to one side, hurled itself towards Starhawk and Butcher with a yammering hiss. Starhawk nearly dislocated her arm, dragging Butcher-and the lantern-out

the way. "It absorbs what it touches, dammit! You want to give it fire?"

"Oh." Butcher looked at the little vessel of clay, horn, metal and oil. "Got any flowers? jelly?"

Starhawk fell back again, slashing at the attacking wight with her sword. The blade-tip caught Lieutenant Egswade's face across the forehead; the bulging eyes stared at them and the mouth formed the words "I'll report that! I'll report you both!" without a sound.

Elia stepped in with a low clean sidelong slash, cutting the thing's right leg out from under it; it fell, and ran along the ground at them with its three arms like a spiders legs. Teryne cried "This way!" and flew back up the farm-path like a bundle of blown rags, the other women running for their lives in her wake.

There were tombs along the city wall, doors gaping, the black charnel-smell flowing for Teryne plunged unerringly up the steps of one, slipped through its half-open grille of iron bars and slammed it shut again as the last of the women bolted through. The lantern flung jolting shadows over low granite walls, niches filled with broken coffin-wood, cobwebs, nasty little messes of hair and cloth and bone.

"This way," the old woman panted. "It's the entry to the catacomb of the House Toth. The other end comes out in the ruin of what used to be their town house. This is how she's been coming and going. Her own tomb's near by."

Starhawk looked around. Every niche was barred with a line of silver spikes, every keystone written with warding-signs that she recognized from Sun Wolf's books, every corner surrounded by crystals of salt. "I thought so," she panted. "The whole countryside must be infested with wights, the way in some places tapeworms dwell in the water and the earth. You say you knew her?"

"Everyone in the Seven Streets quarter knew her." Teryne sniffed contemptuously. "She was always a soured and bitter woman, ever since Gillimer Cornmonger-Brannis' father-threw her over for someone prettier and with a bigger dowry. I was little more than a child myself in those days. But even after all these years, when Brannis Cornmonger spoke of making a wight there was only one person so poison-filled and spite-riddled in anyone's memory, that could stand its steed. All this..." she gestured at the ward-written tombs "... is for naught, really. The girls need not fear for wights inhabiting their bones."

"Well, there's two schools of thought on that one," said Starhawk, "but I won't argue about it now. Butcher, you go with Teryne. I think the wight'll come after me rather than her, but I don't think anybody should be walking around alone tonight. Those bars look pretty sturdy..." She sheathed her sword, and reached out to grip the iron grillework of the tomb door. "They should hold our girlfriend off for awhile, at least until Elia and Battlesow and I take care of what we need to take care of in town tonight."

As Starhawk feared it would, the wight attacked their party when they emerged from the again in the dead stillness halfway between midnight and morning, and they were hard put to drive it back. It had increased in size again, having killed, it was clear, another outpost guard-clear because pieces of the man were visible among the bones and rags and threshing, darting worms of its original form. "Holy Three!" whispered Councillor Toth, who had joined Starhawk's party after minimal argument when she, Elia, and Battlesow had roused him from his bed. "Is that the creature you were proposing to waken, and set upon our enemies?" He turned in outrage and disgust upon Mayor-Excuse me, thought Starhawk, PRESIDENT-Cornmonger, who had also been persuaded to accompany the expedition, though he had not, as Toth had, been given the option of refusing to come.

"Aren't we being nice in our choices of weapon?" retorted Cornmonger sarcastically. He was a handsome man in his mid-fifties who even in an expensive yellow silk bedgown, tasseled red slippers, and a velvet bell-rope tied around his wrists managed to look well-groomed. "Prince Chare will never grant our city the liberties we demand! He will destroy us, if we do not take whatever means we can to turn him away!" He had an orator's carrying voice and a demagogue's habit of speaking to multitudes, even when such multitudes consisted of only two or three. Starhawk suspected he made speeches to his servants and children over breakfast.

"The wight is a weapon of terror, to be used against his men..."

"Only it isn't going against his men, is it?" Elia's motherly face was grim under a mask of slime and blood. "It feeds on both sides of the wall. Mostly in the poorest neighborhoods, which lie closest to the wall and the tombs-I think that was my nephew Dal, whose body now lies out in one of its farm-cellar lairs tonight-but there have been wealthier children who've disappeared, haven't there, Councillor?"

Toth's eyes darkened with understanding, as pieces of things he had heard fit together, and he nodded.

"We all have to be ready to pay the price of freedom," insisted Cornmonger. He glanced around him nervously, for Starhawk had refused to untie his hands when the wight had attacked and the smell of the thing still hung rank and choking in the air. "It served to turn Chare's mercenaries against him, didn't it?"

"Not a hope, pookie." Battlesow grabbed a handful of the costly fabric of his shirt. "I figured where I sign on. But hoodoo like this wasn't in the bargain." Her piggy black eyes glistened as she moved her head, listening to the deathly, horrible stillness of the dark no man's land of burned farms between camp and wall. "Those faces in that thing's body and chest-I know some of those men. Like I knew the man it killed the night before last. And all I got to say is, you damn well better sign those Articles of Compromise or you're gonna be one sorry man when

we do break the city wall."

"You'll be sorry even if Chare doesn't," added Starhawk, holding his elbow to steady himself over the rough ground. "Once Elia and Toth tell the people about your summoning the wight-against the vote of the Council. Once someone sends word to your prospective allies Kwest Mralwe that you'll use hoodoo against your own people without a second thought." She glanced behind her, around her, in the sickly wash of late-rising moonlight, her hair prickling at the distant, guttural growling almost unheard in the sultry blackness.

"And what about you?" Toth hurried to keep up with Starhawk, for he was a short man, chubby and balding. He was armed with a sword which he handled like a man who'd had four lessons in its use, and had brought with him three of his servants, also armed. This was fortunate considering the increasing size and ferocity of the wight. "What do you get of this lady, for going against the man who hired you?"

"Chare didn't hire me." She scraped a goblet of gore off her neck-spikes, which had barely saved her from having her throat torn open. "I was just called in over this wight business, and my partner was, anyway. And what I get out of it is not seeing my friends slaughtered by a magic against which they have no defense. And the same," she added, "goes for the people within the wall."

They passed the outpost guards along Ari's part of the perimeter, soldiers who knew Starhawk and Battlesow and accepted their word that the little gang of armed men with the wight was under their protection. Butcher met them just inside the camp itself. "We built the pyre like you instructed," said the physician. "The wood's soaked in all the Blue Ruin gin I could find at short notice, and the things you told Teryne to fetch are laid on it. I take it," she added drily, "that they'll keep our agglomerative pal from taking the fire into herself like she takes everything else?"

"Well," said Starhawk, "let's hope so. But you know it's only a matter of time before some idiot pitches a torch at it anyway." She glanced over her shoulder. The smell of the wight had grown as they'd approached the camp, the bubbling, angry mutter of it clearly audible in the darkness all around them. It dogged them through the velvet black among the tents and tent-ropes, the banked watch-fires and the carts: angry, hungry, wanting.

She hoped she'd have time to do what she needed to do. Sun Wolf was a lot more convincing at this kind of thing than she was.

Prince Chare was no happier about being wakened in the smallest hours of the morning than Brannis Cornmonger had been. "Sign the Articles of Compromise?" he blustered. "Nonsense! The city is mine, to do with as I please. Who let you in here? Guards!"

"Your guards are taking a little nap right now." Battlesow touched a taper to the single candle Starhawk had lit at the Prince's bedside and went about the tent lighting lamps. Give

the cost of oil and candles-beeswax, not tallow-the Prince was as extravagant about lights he was about everything else. Gorgeous hangings of the bright-colored silks for which the Middle Kingdoms were famous covered the canvas walls; chairs of expensive inlay and enamel punctuated tufted rugs. Starhawk saw Battlesow pause by the dressing-table and pick up the Prince's emerald neck-chain and several of his rings.

"The city is not yours," said Councillor Toth indignantly. "You can't tax us as if we were a trading municipality and govern us as if we were a village of serfs. That recognition is all we ask."

"That's not all we ask!" retorted Cornmonger. "We demand-"

"I demand," said Starhawk, raising her usually soft voice to a cutting battle edge, "that you sign the Articles of Compromise-both of you-now. You, Cornmonger, summoned a wight, and you, Prince, knew of its existence. According to Butcher you've been covering up the disappearances of outpost guards for days. You don't care whether the people in the city or the soldiers who're fighting for your lands are being slaughtered by this thing, as long as you and I you'll each get your way. Now sign the Articles and end the siege, or you will both pay-personally-for the situation you're letting continue."

She fished in the pouch at her belt and held up one of the broken brown fragments she'd pulled from the mud: visibly a tooth. In the halo of candleflame her scarred, narrow face was stern and cold, anger and disgust at the waste and violence of war repeated a hundredfold, like the tongues of the wavering fires, in her gray eyes.

"By this I have summoned her," she said, in her best imitation of the Mother at the convent where she'd been raised when she told the girls why they had to be good. In fact it was only the native greediness of wights that would draw the creature, but these men didn't have to know that. "She's going to be here in about a minute and a half. What do you say?"

Prince Chare and the Mayor of Horran stared at one another in blazing defiance, two proud and wealthy men who had never had to pay personally for the consequences of their own actions. Chare opened his mouth to retort, then wrinkled his nose and said, "By the Three, what is that smell?"

Outside someone let out a yell, and the side of the tent billowed, sagged, and ripped. Brannis Cornmonger screamed. Battlesow and Starhawk sprang towards the wight-which had increased in size again-but before they reached it the Prince seized the iron lampstand beside his bed-

"NO!" screamed Starhawk.

-and shoved the blazing ring of candles into the things distorted face.

The wight exploded into flame and kept on coming, reaching out five mismatched arms and a writhing mass of snake-heads. Starhawk slashed, stepped back, the oily heat beating against her face. Battlesow caught up the inlaid night-stand next to her and hurled it at the thing, scattering combs and prayer books in all directions but breaking its first rush to let Starhawk spring clear. Chare and Cornmonger fell over one another in their scramble for the door, Corn wearing the shocked expression of one who believed that fire would discourage almost any kind of attack and Cornmonger yelling at him "You mammering dolt!" Elia slashed with her halberd at the burning bones within the whirling fire, then snatched up the Articles of Compromise a moment before the carved table on which they lay caught fire, and fell back, still guarding Starhawk, to the tent door.

Moaning and howling, the wight kept coming, trying to claim its stolen teeth. Warriors charging, running, half-armed and naked, from their tents, camp slaves rushed to hurl water on the Prince's burning pavilion, and Starhawk fell back, slashing now with her sword, now with a soaked hanging she'd pulled from the tent wall and soused in a horse-trough, fighting to keep the wight off her while she made a retreat. Battlesow and Elia followed her example, fending off the blazing attacker with pole-weapons and dripping rugs while Butcher, with what Starhawk thought astonishing foresight, retreated behind her towards the place where they'd prepared the pyre, clearing her way of tent-ropes, camp debris, cookpots and firewood. The wight was a twenty-foot tower of flame, dry bones, and dripping flesh devoured and absorbed, leaving only an armature of fire, and the fire strode through the camp's darkness howling and crying its rage.

This plan better work, thought Starhawk. She had no idea if it would and wanted to know together the heads of Prince and Mayor for getting her into this situation. Where the hell was Sun Wolf when you needed him anyway? He was the one who knew about magic, not her.

"We got it!" yelled someone-Dogbreath, she thought-"We got it, Hawk, we'll save you!"

She didn't dare turn her head until the last second, when her mercenary pals Dogbreath and Penpusher crossed the line of her vision hauling one of the wheeled water-butts from which they watered the mules. She yelled "Don't... !" too late as they levered the thing over, three hundred gallons spewing forth over the wight...

... which rose in a heaving column of animate liquid and poured over her in a wave.

She sprang sideways, coughing, drowning, water forcing itself into her nose, her mouth. Water surged around her, slowing her steps, dragging her back, water that shrieked in her ears and blinded her eyes and ripped and tore at her hands.

Battlesow yanked her out of the maelstrom by main force and dragged her in the direction of the pyre, a riptide heaving and pulling at their feet, slowing them while the cresting, thrashing waterspout pursued them through the camp. Coughing, Starhawk gasped, "Don't let anybody else help me! I know what I'm doing!"

Back at the convent I'd have been doing penance till Yule for a lie like that.

The pyre lay ahead of them. Teryne and a group of the mercenaries grouped around it, men and women dangerously quiet, muttering. Like Battlesow, they were perfectly willing to face war and weapons but not the vileness of black magic in the dark. Too many had seen the hell and faces of the dead the wight had absorbed, and rumor was running fast. Barely able to breathe and half-blinded by spray, Starhawk saw on the pyre the thing she had sent Teryne to get, a burlap sack containing what appeared to be a collection of rags and sticks. The unburned wood glittered in the orange glare of the flaming brand in Teryne's hand, and the smell of Buttered Ruin, the cheap mere gin manufactured by Bron the quartermaster and his wife Opium, almost drowned the charnel stink of the wight. Starhawk wondered what the hell Bron had charged them for the gin. Knowing Bron-or more specifically knowing Opium-she was certain it had been free.

The drag on her feet increased and she felt the spattering of spray on the back of her neck. She heard the rattling, metallic roar in her ears. She stumbled, the pressure of the water incredibly strong, dropped her useless sword to yank from her belt the two brown fragments of tooth, closing them tight in her fist against the cold suction. "Torch it!" she yelled, and Teryne threw the fire into the pyre's wood.

The alcohol-soaked tinder caught in a searing explosion of white heat, and in that second Starhawk flung the teeth. The waterspout roared over her, throwing her to the soaked mud. A second explosion as the water struck the superhot flame, and billowing steam, scalding, flame-colored itself in the glare. Printed incandescent on her eyes, Starhawk had a vision of a sorry little sack on top of the pyre being consumed.

Then there was only a mush of coals and embers, white scarves of steam floating sullen over the charred jumble of wood.

The sack was gone.

The wight was gone.

Starhawk got to her feet, covered with mud as if she'd been dipped in it and soaked to the skin. Her knees shook and she reached out, holding Butcher's arm for support. Elia, soaked also-all of them were wet as if they'd just been dragged up from the bottom of the sea-started to ask something, but Starhawk caught her eye and shook her head.

On the edge of the crowd of mercenaries, Prince Chare and Mayor Cornmonger stood staring at the steam-wreathed pyre, the sodden ashes in disbelief.

Starhawk wiped the goop from her eyes, and said, "Take a warning, pals." She fished in her pouch at her belt, and brought up the last brown-and-white fragment: a dog's footbone, she

guessed it was when she'd found it in the muddy farmyard. But at that distance, in the iron cold and flickering torchlight of pre-dawn, it looked sufficiently like the wight's teeth to pass for one. Her heart hammered so loudly she was sure Cornmonger and Chare must hear it. She turned the bone in her fingers, holding it up, molding her face into the expression of cold and enigmatic arrogance Sun Wolf assumed when he was bluffing, and hoped to hell they bought the story. "Take a warning, and sign those Articles. Because I can bring her out of that pyre, as easy as I sent her in, in a form you don't want to know about."

To her enormous surprise, they both signed. Elia and Councillor Toth made sure they signed all six copies of the Articles, and took them away the moment the sealing-wax was set to seal them to various allies, so that neither side could repudiate without severe repercussions. Then Chare went back to what was left of his tent to begin arrangements for paying off the mercenaries and to order his servants to clean up the mess, and Cornmonger headed for the walls of Horran to let the people know that the siege was over. If they hadn't won all of their independence, at least they wouldn't be sacked, or return to the absolute rule against which they'd rebelled.

Dawn was coming up, gray and thin above the hills.

Starhawk sat down on a wagon-tongue and started to scrape the mud off her face and hair.

"Sorry about the water." Dogbreath brought her a bucket. "You sure that thing's not gonna come back?"

"Pretty sure." Starhawk upended it over her head-she was past any consideration of delicacy. She wondered if the stink would ever come out of her hair. "She got her teeth-thats why she went into the pyre-and once she was there she incorporated what Teryne had brought from the city tombs. That's what she's been wanting all this time."

"What was it?" Butcher came over, wringing out the tail of her shirt. "Teryne dug around the public catacombs for half an hour looking for it."

"The bones of Gillimer Cornmonger," said Starhawk. "Brannis Cornmonger's father-the one who seduced and betrayed her fifty-five years ago. That's what she wanted, all those years. To have him all to herself. And now she does. Once the flesh and the will were at rest, the wight had no more power."

"And you learned that from reading Sun Wolfs magic books?" asked Battlesow wonderingly.

Starhawk looked off across the jumble of burned-out farmhouses and trampled fields, toward where the small train of mayor and councillors and their bodyguard had reached the city gates. A Cindery light showed the guards coming in from the siege machinery. Somewhere over the camp someone set up a faint cheer, answered, still more faintly, from the cheering in the city.

behind its walls.

"It was just a guess," she said. "I learned that from the people who live in those cities I need to help destroy." She unbuckled the spiked guards from her arms and neck. "It's not magic, it's not in books. It's not even logical. It's just what people do and are, and need to make the happy."

"Considering what it takes to make some people happy," said Butcher softly, "Brannis Cornmonger was lucky."

Starhawk sighed. "We all were lucky." She flung the chip of dog bone away into the dead ash of the pyre. "And Sun Wolf the luckiest of anybody. This is definitely the last time I open a message addressed to him. Now how about some breakfast before I head out?"

"That's right," the dragon explained to the man in the long brown robe. "If you ask Lilire she'll tell you that the dragon and its treasure were just gone when she arrived. Unbelievably really."

The man nodded appreciatively. "Well, you've both done wonders renovating the keep. Now there's talk of starting a university nearby?"

"Thank you," the dragon said, patting a stray wisp of hair back into the severe bun on the back of her head. "And yes. The distance knights are willing to travel for treasure seems to be nothing compared to the distance scholars will travel for books."

"So true," the man sighed. "So true."

"At any rate," the dragon continued, "the stacks are in the main hall over there. Copy room are upstairs, and we're happy to provide parchment, ink, and quills for a modest fee. Ask me or Lilire if you need help finding something."

The man bowed. "Thank you."

"And please remember," the dragon told him severely, "this is not a lending library. Books are never allowed to leave the building under any circumstances." She gave a feral grin almost too wide for a human mouth. "Violators will be eaten."

"I believe you," the man laughed as he headed for the stacks. "I believe you."

The dragon watched him go with a private smile.